

SAFETY IN WINCHING

The greatest potential hazard faced by the winch operator or crew is the very fact that such operations take place under some pressure. The vehicle is stuck; ground and possibly weather conditions are not the most favourable, thereby compromising concentration. A definite procedure must be followed to maintain safety margins.

Prior to winching:

- All rigging should be checked thoroughly.
- Ensure that all fittings are of the correct capacity and all shackles and hooks are secure.
- Protect the wire rope itself from any damage once its line – pull has been established by rigging.
- If the wire rope is likely to chafe over the ground (when the vehicle is being pulled up and over a ridge – place logs beneath it, remove any rocks it could be dragged over and, if required, clear its path with a shovel.
- Ensure that you (and anyone assisting) wear thick leather gloves at all times and never handle the wire rope without them.
- Check the rope itself for any damage along its length and ensure it will not foul once under tension.

Once satisfied with the rigging, inspect the path over which the vehicle will be winched.

- Ensure that there are no rocks or other obstacles which could seriously increase the loading on the winch, or that the vehicle will be winched into a terrain which is unsuitable.
- Make sure that you are not the operator who winches a vehicle onto a side slope which exceeds its limits, or the operator who hauls it over rocks and tree stumps to the detriment of its bodywork or suspension components.

Further checks:

- Next check the winch itself and ensure that there are at least five (5) wraps of wire rope around the drum. Failure to do this could result in the rope being pulled from its rfixture, possible under load, with disastrous consequences.
- Check the winch control unit and particularly its electrical cables. If this cable is badly kinked or damaged, it could result in a short circuit immediately upon plugging the control lead into the winch. This short circuit could operate the winch unexpectedly with disastrous consequences for operator and assistant.

Winching Procedure:

- Ensure that the winch is securely attached to the vehicle and the towing bracket on the stuck vehicle is secure and of sufficient strength to take the strain when being towed. The vehicle stuck in the mud may only weigh one to one and a half tons, but the suction action of the mud can easily double or treble this weight.
- If the vehicle to be towed does not have a towing bracket, attach the hook to the chassis.
- From the time the winch cable has been secured it must be considered to be “live”. From this point nobody should be allowed to step over the cable.
- Wrap a safety strap/rope or place a wet sack or other such item around the cable nearest the hook as a safety precaution in the event that the cable should snap or break away from the hook.
- If you are winching from inside the vehicle, raise the bonnet and squint through the top corner of the windscreen. This could prevent you from having your head taken off if the wire rope or towing bracket should snap or come adrift.

- Always pass the remote control wire through the open driver's window if winching from the driver's seat.
- Never trap the cable in the door and always have all the slack control cable at the switch unit end in the cab. Should slack control cable become snagged in the winch drum, it will invariably lead to a short circuit, again making the winch impossible to stop by use of the normal control unit alone.
- Take up the slack, check your rigging and make sure that everybody stays at least a cable's length away from the vehicle.
- Keep the engine running at all times – a winching operation can run your battery flat in minutes.
- The vehicle being winched out – even if it is winching itself out – can assist by engaged low range, second gear. Release the clutch slowly and avoid spinning the wheels.
- Avoid driving over the cable.
- Once the vehicle is free, wind in the winch cable and immediately disconnect the winch controls.

Environmental Notes:

- If you need to use a tree as an anchor point, use a tree strap and secure it as low down on the trunk as possible. A cable secured directly onto the tree causes unnecessary damage and by securing it as low down as possible will give you a more secure anchor and avoid strain on the tree.
- If your efforts result in a gully being formed, hunt around for a few stones to fill this to avoid a donga from forming when it rains.

NB When fitting a towing bracket, it is far safer to go for overkill than to skimp and save on time, equipment and money – by skimping you could endanger your own and other peoples' lives and possibly lose your vehicle into the bargain.