Training notes from the woods
& the classroom

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Reminder About Chainsaw Safety

By Lee Schauman

Each year we hear about a number of chain saw related accidents that result in serious injury, disabling injuries, and fatalities. And even though more and more chainsaw operators have been exposed to the dangers of "taking shortcuts", or 'being in a hurry to get the job done", they do it anyway. And the majority of the serious injuries and/or fatalities are a result of being "struck by" something. And the best way to reduce those injuries is to have a plan for the tree being felled. By having a good felling plan, you will stay in control of the tree instead of the tree controlling you. But do we remember what the elements of that plan are, and do we use it with such frequency that it is now automatic for us? Let's review it and then you decide!!!

There are 5 elements to successfully and safely felling a tree, and that's after you have decided which way the tree needs to fall in order for you to have a reasonable expectation that that tree will successfully hit the ground. If you pick a direction for the tree to fall that guarantees it will hang up, you have probably just created a much more hazardous situation than you realize. Picking the wrong way to get a hung up tree down can be disastrous, and potentially fatal. Things like cutting the tree down that your tree is hung up in, or dropping another tree on it, or climbing up on it and jumping, or reaching up over your head to cut a 100 inch piece of wood off are dangerous and potential accident makers. But do they sound familiar!!

Pulling the tree down with a skidder or other piece of equipment is the only way to get that tree down safely. Blocking it down in short blocks so that your saw doesn't get over your shoulders is acceptable if the sawyer has extensive chainsaw experience.

After that, the first element of the felling plan is to determine lean. Trying to drop a tree against its' lean is a specialized technique that requires training and experience. So based on your personal experience, you need to determine if you can accomplish the task or not. If you are uncomfortable with the amount of lean, get help or leave it alone.

The second element is to recognize all of the hazards associated with your project. Hazards such as widow makers, lean, brush and debris around and in your work area, weather conditions, dead stubs near the tree or in the path of the trees intended direction of fall, terrain, and anything else that might make you uncomfortable in the felling process. If you cannot eliminate or avoid the hazard, DON'T DO THE PROJECT. If your plan includes your intention to outrun a potential hazard, you need to rethink your plan.

The third element is to have a planned escape route. It is the best way to avoid potential overhead hazards. That route needs to be at a 45 degree angle away from the intended direction of fall. Clear the escape route before doing any other cutting on the tree. A cluttered escape route is like not having one at all. Tripping and/or falling as you escape puts you in real danger.

The fourth element is to make a proper notch in the tree. In addition to placing it in the direction you want the tree to fall, you also want it to function properly. Since we promote and recommend the plunge cutting technique, the proper notch cut needs two key requirements: that the notch be open to at least 70 degrees,(90 degrees is recommended), and that the two cuts match at the back of the notch to prevent bypass cuts. This will protect the hinge and allow it to do its' job A notch with less than 70 degrees, or having by pass (dutch) cuts will break the hinge prematurely, creating loss of control of the tree.

Finally, the fifth element would be to have a cutting plan to help make all of the other elements successful. A successful cutting plan has to allow you to set a hinge that will control the fall of the tree including when and where it will go. The plunge or bore cut is the one that will give the sawyer the best chance of success. It allows the use of wedges if necessary, it will give the sawyer the time he needs during the felling cut to continually survey the situation and then allow him to dictate when the tree will finally start to move.

By following the steps outline above, your ability to safely fell trees will be greatly increased. It will also increase the quality of the wood you cut.

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