

**Instructor Notes:** Most towing companies operate car carriers, tow trucks with wheel-lifts or both and sometimes they are on the same truck. Use this opportunity to review basic wheel-lift operations with your employees. Regardless of their experience level, every towing operator will be able to take something away from this meeting that they never learned before.

# Safety Meeting 2015 #3 – Wheel-Lift Safety – Back to Basics



BY PATRICK GRATZIANNA, pgratz@midwestfleetsafety.com

**T**he light-duty wheel-lift is the cornerstone of the modern towing industry. As cars evolved, so did the trucks towing them. When used correctly, the wheel-lift is a very efficient piece of towing equipment.

**Wheel-lift advantages:** easy to learn/use, faster and more productive than a car carrier, ability for tight turning radius (some can pivot 90 degrees), and there is a limited chance for damage since the only contact with the disabled vehicle is on the tires.

**Wheel-lift disadvantages:** the overhang causes poor leverage on the tow truck, there is no horizontal motion on the crossbar, reduced stopping and steering of the tow truck caused by a lightened front axle, and care must be taken to avoid damage to both vehicles during a tight turn.

## Know Your Vehicle

All towing equipment has limits. As a professional towing operator you must use the towing equipment as it was designed and within its safe operating capacity. All wheel-lifts are generally given two different ratings: their “lift” capacity and their “tow” rating. The lift capacity is the maximum weight the wheel-lift can lift vertically, usually at full extension, whereas the tow rating is the maximum weight the wheel lift can pull horizontally and most manufacturers list it with the wheel-lift fully retracted. For example, the wheel-lift on a Vulcan 804, Chevron 401 and Century 411/412 all have a

lift capacity of 4,000 lbs. and a tow rating of 7,500 lbs. If you don’t know your truck’s ratings, check the tow body’s data plate or operating manual. Don’t take a chance. If the disabled vehicle is too big or too heavy, use a bigger tow truck.

## Protect Yourself

Avoid using the wheel-lift crossbar to raise or “jack-up” a vehicle without the L-arms in place. The disabled vehicle may suddenly roll or slide off the lift causing damage to itself and possibly injuring you or your customer in the process. Even with the L-arms in place, never crawl or work under a suspended load without proper cribbing or putting jack stands in place. Lastly, avoid standing between your truck and the wheel-lift when in motion especially if you are using a “claw” style wheel-lift. You could be watching one thing and be hit by another.

## Securing the Disabled Vehicle

Most wheel-lifts require nylon tie-down or restraint straps to secure the disabled vehicle to the wheel-lift during the tow and they should be used on every tow, regardless of the distance. Wheel-lift securement straps are not to be confused with safety chains – both are required. Don’t forget to secure the steering wheel of the disabled vehicle. When towing from the rear, it will keep the disabled vehicle from straying out of your lane and when towing from the front it will keep the wheels from turning, causing the vehicle to drop onto the wheel-lift’s crossbar.

## Secure and Maintain Wheel-Lift Equipment

When not in use, safely secure all wheel-lift equipment. If equipped, tighten the slide bars to avoid losing them when taking a turn. Remove and secure L-arms. Store all ratchets and retainment straps in compartments to protect them from the elements and possibly theft.

## Check and Recheck

When you’re all loaded up, confirm that you have adequate clearance on the wheels in the lift (approximately 8-10 inches off the ground) and in the rear, especially if you are towing from the rear. On long tows, periodically stop and re-check your wheel straps, safety chains and the height of the wheel-lift. A minor hydraulic leak can cause the wheel-lift to slowly drop during a tow.

## Tow Safety Take-Away

Depending on your operation, towing operators should have some familiarity with every vehicle in your fleet and a good working knowledge of the trucks they are expected to operate on a day-to-day basis. A good idea is to have a copy of the truck’s operating manual available to employees in a breakroom or accessible from the front office. Make copies and use the manual as a training opportunity. Stay safe.

---

*If you need ideas on how to prepare and present this information to your drivers, please call me at 847-894-0042 or email me at pgratz548@comcast.net.*