

## **Ready to roll**

You've probably spent several weeks searching for the right tow vehicle and trailer combination. The bank approved your loan(s) and you've signed all the papers. You've put on those "break-in" miles on your new tow vehicle as quickly as you could so you can pick up your trailer. You've gone through the PDI (pre-delivery inspection) and noted everything that needed attention. And now you're ready to hitch it up and tow it off the dealer's lot.

Oh, boy!!! Are you sure you're ready for this?

Of course you are, but you will probably have that thought lingering somewhere in the back of your mind anyway. I know I did! Before purchasing our trailer, the biggest thing I had ever towed was my dad's 8' utility trailer. I was about to hitch up to a 28' long, 6000# plus trailer. Yikes! What have I gotten myself into?

Okay, it's not really that bad once you get used to it, and that doesn't take very long either. Here are some tips based on what I have learned and what I have found out from other sources. There are three basic things to remember regardless of what you are towing.

First, it will take you longer to get moving from a stop. This could impact your ability to merge into traffic.

Secondly, it will take you a little longer to stop when towing than it would when not towing. So it would be a good idea to increase your following distance at all times. Keep plenty of space between you and the vehicle in front of you. What is becoming the "old rule of thumb" used to be a minimum of 2 seconds following distance when driving your car (or truck). Well, that is being increased to a minimum following distance of 3 seconds. When towing, I would recommend a minimum following distance of at least 4 seconds in order to give yourself plenty of time and space to react and stop if necessary.

Finally, turning requires a bit of practice and a little bit of planning ahead.

Okay, let's get on the road.

### **Going straight**

This is obviously the simplest direction to go...straight down the road. But it helps for you to know where your trailer is in relationship to your tow vehicle. Before you get in the vehicle and after you've hitched it up to the trailer, take a look at the total package.

How much wider is the trailer compared to the tow vehicle? Don't forget to notice things that protrude out from the side of the trailer, like the awning that is stored overhead. Did you get additional mirrors for your tow vehicle so you can see down the sides of the trailer while driving?

How tall is the trailer? You'll need to know this sooner or later, like when you need to pull into the gas station and avoid the overhead covers. Write it on a piece of tape and stick it on the windshield post by the driver. That way you won't have to try and remember it.

Keep your speed down while towing. It takes a little longer in time and distance to stop a heavy load, so plan ahead. Your speed will also affect your fuel mileage. The faster you go, the more wind resistance you create causing the engine to work harder to overcome the resistance and use more fuel in the process.

Not only should you be planning ahead, but you should also be keeping an eye on the rear. Watch traffic along side and behind you at all times. You don't want to be surprised by the push of wind that a big rig might give you as it passes by.

If the tow vehicle's transmission should start "hunting" or shifting back and forth between gears, it may be best to manually downshift to the lower gear. This is usually caused by a hill or a headwind, when the engine needs to work a little harder. Some vehicles may be able to tow while using overdrive and other vehicles may not. Check the owners manual to see if there are any specific instructions for using overdrive while towing.

How far back are the trailer axles from the tow vehicle? Having an idea of where the trailer axles are will help you in planning making turns.

Speaking of...

### **Turning**

Making a turn requires a little bit of planning ahead. Do you remember where the trailer tires are in relationship to the rear of the tow vehicle? Not only does the side of the trailer need to miss any obstacles while turning, so should the tires. Avoid running up over the curb as this can dent the wheel rims.

For turning at street corners and the like, you may need to start the turn a little wide, or outside of your lane, to avoid any obstacles that might get in your way. It may be best to start a turn wide instead of hoping to finish the turn wide because you may not be able to see what is around the turn.

Regardless of the type of trailer, the trailer tires will track more to the inside of the turn than the tow vehicle tires will. Fifth wheel trailer tires will track even further to the inside of a turn than other types of trailers. On curvy roads, you will want to keep the tow vehicle more towards the outside of the lane since the trailer will tend to track more to the inside of the turn. The slower the curve or turn, the more the trailer will track to the inside.

When approaching a curve or turn, pay special attention to where your potential obstacles are so you can plan your turn accordingly, and miss the obstacles.

If possible, find a large empty parking lot to practice slow speed turning. But don't use any of the "objects" in the parking lot as your obstacles, make up your own. An inexpensive obstacle could be a paper or plastic cup. Fill it with water or dirt so it doesn't blow away. Sporting goods stores sell small cones similar to traffic cones that you could also use. Or maybe small pieces of scrap lumber like a 2x4 could be used.

Have someone go with you as a spotter so they can help keep an eye on things as well.

Parking lots work really well because they have aisles that you can use as a lane, or the parking spaces are arranged in such a way that they can be used as a lane as well. In either case, place your obstacle and see how wide you need to start a turn in order to finish the turn in the correct lane or how many extra lanes it will take to complete the turn. As you make the turns, have your spotter keep an eye on how far out in the opposite direction the rear of the trailer swings (known as "tail swing"). You need to be aware of this as well so that when making a turn, the rear of the trailer doesn't swing out and hit something you hadn't considered an obstacle. Hopefully you're getting the idea I'm trying to get across to you. If not, send me an email and I'll see if I can explain further (and then update this page accordingly).

### **Going uphill and downhill**

There are no special tricks for going up or down a hill, but there are some precautions you should take.

When going up a hill, it may be necessary to shift to a lower gear in order to maintain the desired speed. Some hills may be too steep and certain combinations of tow vehicle and trailer may be too heavy to maintain the desired speed. At these times, just do the best you can, you will get over the hill eventually. Stay in the right lane if there is more than one lane in the same direction. Try not to stop on an uphill...getting going again may take a lot of time.

When going downhill, shift to a lower gear and allow the transmission to help keep your speed down. (Diesel engine equipped tow vehicles may need to have an exhaust brake installed.) This will help minimize the use of tow vehicle and trailer brakes, which could heat up to the point where they would not be able to slow or stop the combination. If you feel like the trailer is pushing you down the hill, use the manual lever on the trailer brake controller to activate the trailer brakes and slow the trailer down.

A good source to find where the steeper hills are on the highway and interstate roads is Mountain Directories. But they do not list local roads that may be steep.

There is a saying about using the same gear to go down a hill as you did to go up it. That works most of the time. But what if you're on a trip or vacation and on a road you've

never been on before. What do you do? On the steeper, longer downhills, there are usually signs at the top warning drivers of the upcoming downhill that may also include a recommended speed. When in doubt, follow the recommendations on the sign!

There are more potential problems going down a hill than up it. Keep your speed down by using lower gears, and use the brakes as little as possible.

And finally, the dreaded...

### **Backing up**

Okay, backing up a trailer really isn't that hard once you get used to it. It's getting used to it that can take a little time. Here again, some practice in an empty parking lot could come in handy.

When backing up and a turn is required, it is usually easier to back up to the left (or driver's side). This way you can look over your shoulder and out the window and see what the trailer is doing and where it is going. Backing up to the right can be more difficult and dangerous, especially without the use of a spotter. Good campgrounds will be designed so that the back-in sites are to the left.

Before backing up a trailer, get out of the vehicle and check the area you will be backing up into so you have an idea of where you are going. Take note of anything sticking up out of the ground as well as things overhead.

If you have small children or pets with you, it would be best if they stayed in the vehicle until the trailer has been safely backed into position. Watch out for other children and pets while backing up as well.

A key to backing up is turning slowly and backing up slowly. This way you can avoid any obstacles easier as well as being able to see what is happening to the trailer as you back up.

Whenever possible, have someone help you (as a spotter) to see what is going on behind you.

## Spotters

When using spotters to help you back up, make sure you can see them at all times. If you can't see them, STOP! There have been stories of many spotters being hit and seriously injured by the RV they were trying to help back up. Using 2-way communications, like the popular FRS radios, can be a big help. Instead of yelling so the whole campground can hear you, you talk normally into the walkie-talkie. Don't forget to release the talk button when finished, otherwise the other person has no way of responding, except to stop moving. If you don't use the 2-way radios, you will need to come up with and agree to hand signals that will be used.

There are a few rules to consider when using a spotter:

Rule #1. No matter what happens, it's the spotter's responsibility.

Rule #2. The driver does exactly what the spotter says. After all, they are your eyes because you can't see what is behind you.

Rule #3. Only use one spotter. Or at least have only one spotter that communicates with you. There could be a spotter on each side of the trailer if you're in a tight spot, but have just one of them giving you directions.

## Techniques

There are a few different techniques for backing up a trailer and I'll present them here the best I can. It's up to you to decide which one will work best for you.

When using a spotter...

Have the spotter stand in front of the vehicle and say the direction the rear of the trailer needs to go. The driver then turns the steering wheel in that direction. If the spotter says to the right, the driver turns the steering wheel to the right. Do not have the spotter point in the direction the rear of the trailer needs to go because this may confuse the driver. It would be like facing someone, raising your left hand and telling them to raise their left hand. Most people will do a mirror image affect and raise their right hand, not their left. So if the spotter were to point to their right, it would be to the driver's left. If the driver turned the wheel to the left, the trailer will go to the right...the wrong way. Okay, are you confused yet? Just have the spotter say which direction the rear of the trailer needs to go and turn the steering wheel in that direction. If the spotter needs to move to check the other side of the trailer, it might be best to stop moving until the spotter signals that it's safe to move.

You can also have the spotter standing at the rear of the trailer, giving directions via hand signals or the 2-way FRS radios. Using this technique, the driver should place their hands on the bottom of the steering wheel. When the spotter signals that the trailer needs to move to the right, the driver takes their right hand and moves it to the right (in a counter-clockwise direction). If the spotter signals that the trailer needs to move to the

left, the driver takes their left hand and moves it to the left (in a clockwise direction). Remember, if you can't see the spotter, STOP!

When a spotter is not available...

You want to use the same technique as if the spotter was at the rear of the trailer. Put your hands at the bottom of the steering wheel. If you want the back of the trailer to go to your right, move your right hand out to the right (counter-clockwise). If you want the back of the trailer to go to the left, move your left hand out to the left (clockwise). When backing up without a spotter, it is safest and easiest to back up to the left, the driver's side. If you need to, it is okay to make several stops and get out to check the area and your progress to make sure everything is clear and you are backing up where you want to be going, especially if you are backing up to the right.

*Ready to roll*