



This winch lives on the front of one of our rescue trucks. Over the years this winch has many save to it's credit. (Courtesy/Mark Rackay)

A winch is not just a hood ornament



**Tips
from the Posse**

By Mark Rackay

As the sunrise was beginning to hemorrhage in the eastern sky, I found myself deep in the Florida Everglades at the Big Cypress Swamp, approaching Bear Island. Over the years, sunrise has found me at many strange places, and this one, while not the strangest, was certainly in the top 10. I am not sure why I was there but am certain it had something to do with the pursuit of game animals.

I was in my big Dodge 4-by-4 pickup truck heading down a two-track that cut through the very dense cypress swamp. It had rained a great deal the week before, so the trail was standing water. This trail was the only way in or out, if you wanted

to go to Bear Island. My coconspirator for the day was my old friend Big Joe, several decades my senior.

We plowed along the track until the front end of the truck suddenly sank to its axles. Yea...I did it this time. Clearly the truck was going to stay here because I doubt the auto club makes house calls in the Everglades. As I was breaking into the proverbial cold sweat, Big Joe remarked, "What are you worried about? You got that big winch on the front of this thing."

And it was on that day I learned the value of a winch. Joe and I slogged through the hip deep water, with cable in hand, and found a suitable cypress tree in which to wrap the cable around. Within minutes, we were back on our way across the swamp toward the happy hunting grounds.

I see vehicles running around all the time that have winches on there front bumpers. For most people, they are just an expensive decoration, but for the true outdoor person, a winch is the

cheapest insurance policy for off roading you will ever own.

A winch can get you out of a mudhole, snowbank, off a rock, or even out of a cypress swamp. The same winch can also help someone else out of a similar jam. If you off road with a group, and all have winches, you can accomplish just about anything.

As far as I am concerned, a winch is essential equipment for any ATV or side-by-side. With a winch on an off-road vehicle, self-rescue is not only possible, but probable. A winch should be considered an important piece of your survival gear.

When selecting a winch, go for a model that is waterproof. Just driving down the road in rain and snow exposes the winch to water. You don't want to find out that the water damaged the winch when you are stuck up to your armpits in mud. Also, a waterproof unit will help keep dirt, dust and mud away from the working parts of the winch.

Most winches come

with a steel cable. I gave up the steel cable years ago. Steel cable will kink, fray, and provide many little steel burrs that will stab and cut your hands as a punishment for your not wearing leather gloves. Steel is great if you are using the winch for chores, such as hauling timber or dragging an elk. Steel stand up to the abrasions of rocks much better than the synthetic ropes.

I don't generally use my winch for work so synthetic rope is what I use. The rope is just as strong as steel cable, but far more flexible, making it easier to handle without making your hands look like hamburger.

You want to have as much cable as your winch will allow. I also carry a spare cable and some chain, just in case I need more reach. The chain wraps around a tree nicely, giving me a good point to safely attach the winch hook to. Make sure that you buy cable, either synthetic of steel, that have a weight rating that exceeds the pulling power of your winch.

Power winches come with weight ratings. Be sure to get one strong enough for your vehicle. Remember that when the old jeep is mired in the mud, the pull weight is going to be much higher than the weight of the jeep. For my jeep, I used a 12,000-pound winch, and 18,000- pound for my truck. It seems like a lot, but better safe than sorry.

For a regular one-person ATV, a 1500-pound winch is plenty, but if you have a side-by-side, 2500-pound should be the minimum and 3500 is better yet. On an ATV, I especially like the synthetic cable since I can't get far away from the winch when it is pulling. You don't want to be on the business end of a steel cable if it breaks under load.

One other essential piece of gear should be a snatch block. A snatch block is simply a heavy-duty pulley inside a metal casing, that allows you to run the cable of your winch from another direction. Snatch blocks can also be used to

increase the pulling power of your winch, often times doubling the pull weight of your winch.

Big Joe passed on to paradise several years ago. I will never forget our friendship and the full day of activity in the Big Cypress we shared. It was near dark when we began the track back to the hard road. We had forgotten about that mudhole until it appeared in the trail in front of us. Once again, the winch slowly pulled our ride across the soggy bog the truck was mired in; once again saving the day.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a Director for the Montrose County Sheriff's Posse. For information about the Posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org

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