

HOW NOT TO LIVE TO NINETY

As I get older I notice more and more often that I am mortal and that, far from being the unlikely event it seemed ten years ago, there are myriad ways to meet your maker. Even if they don't drop the bomb, the car might slide into the river some January morning, a tree limb might fall at the wrong time, the knife might slip. Recently I almost found another way: mess with a running power take-off shaft.

Generally I am quite safety conscious. It is necessary for survival. I don't stick my hand in the baler while the engine is running; I don't move to the next cut until the saw-chain stops. Last month, while spreading manure I needed to change the speed of the apron chain. A simple operation; I do it all the time: stop the tractor, jump off, move the lever, jump on, drive away. Usually, being safety conscious, I do this with the PTO turned off. But the lever sometimes sticks, and besides, the label says to do it with the PTO on, so this time I did it with the PTO on, being mindful not to touch the spinning shaft. So I moved the lever and stood up, still being mindful not to touch the PTO shaft. Less than a second later I found myself sitting on the ground after having been lifted three feet in the air, carried over the PTO shaft, and hurled a few feet from the drawbar. For some reason it didn't hurt, and I expected the reason to be cuts so deep that the nerves were severed. But there was nothing worse than scrapes and cuts. It was easy to see because the entire left half of my pants had been removed from my body.

I still can't express how I felt at that moment. Most people don't live to talk about events like this. If I had been wearing new pants instead of threadbare ones, I might not be either. After I stopped trembling enough to walk, I shut off the PTO and unwrapped my pants from the shaft. It was ripped the entire length of the leg up and down both sides. It was two weeks before I was able to think about it without shaking.

How did it happen? Some years ago an unknown mechanic took a shield off and had to remove the rope you are supposed to pull the lever with. Then a few years after that the shield on the PTO shaft probably got rusty so they took that off, too. And then a bolt broke so they fixed it with a bent-over bolt that was four inches too long. And then I brushed against it and the bolt caught in the hammer loop of my pants, and the rest is history.

The lessons are obvious, but I'll mention them anyway: Don't take unnecessary risks around machinery. I didn't really need to change speeds with the PTO running. Fix dangerous things. I had been intending to replace that bolt for months. And leave your shields in place or make new ones.

This brings us around to a question that we all think about: Is insurance worth it? I have no new light to shed on the matter, but I'm very glad I wasn't hurt worse--having to sell my farm and lose all I hold dear to pay for one moment's foolishness is not my idea of good planning.

-- David Katz