

THE ANATOMY OF A WRECK



The classic horror story usually begins with “it was a dark, cold and wintry night”. But as you can see, it was a warm and sunny day as this horror story began. I was packing the Olympic National Park trail crew out of the North fork of the Skokomish River after they completed their work on the trail’s maintenance. I had an accumulation of tools and their camping gear on four pack animals, two horses and two mules. We stopped for water at a small stream with room enough for all to drink, at about a quarter of a mile from the trail head. All was going well until Moby, the second animal in the string, decided that he wanted to drink facing the rest of the gang and turned into Rosie the string leader, and the fun began. He managed to push between her and Lizzy the fourth mule in line, wadding them up together, (his ears are way to darn short.) As you can see in the photo, things got very cramped and

pulled tight together. I was surprised that no pigging strings, (safety breakaways between the lead rope and saddle of each pack animal), were broken. There were some pretty big eyes looking at me for a decision on what to do next. I took a deep breath, sat back on Maudie, waited to see where they would come to roost and what our world would look like then. I got very lucky, no skill, but lots of luck. They stopped without a blow up caused by trying to get out of the mess on their own volition. I slowly asked Maudie to walk down stream and across to the other side. This gave me a better position to command Rosie's head, ever so slightly, out from between Moby's head and Lizzy's behind. I called Rosie to me as I tugged on the lead rope from her halter. She responded by slamming into Mr. Knot head and



banging her way out of the mess. This lined the rest up in a good marching order, but as you can see, still thirsty. The loads had been knocked around some but they were still tight and in place and no one was injured. The only casualty was my nerves, "Oh! Happy Days!"

There is a term amongst packers "S##*# happens". It does not matter if it is your first pack trip or your one hundredth, it can still happen. In fact it is not,

if a wreck will happen, it is when it will happen. The nature of a moving live carrier and a potentially movable cargo will guarantee the inevitable. Avoid it at all costs by making sure your cargo loads are equally balanced for weight and location; always practice zero tolerance on these subjects. Be ever vigilant; continually check your loads traveling behind you. It seems as if a pack slips on me just after I have looked. Be aware of obstacles that may cause a load to loosen prior to it slipping, such as steep pulls out of water crossings, long steps or jumps, especially down hill. When the storm of a wreck begins or is going on, do not be in a big hurry to step off of your riding animal, unless a pack animal is in danger of injury. If possible, wait until the players in this story settle down. This is when they normally begin to look around and wonder what they can do to get out of this mess. This will



normally be at a moment of quiet resolution on their part; this is your queue to move. The most important thing to remember before entering their space is that, if you are not in one piece, you can not help your pack animals get out this mess. Control you emotions and move slowly with resolve, remember they are watching you, the herd leader. If you lose you emotional control, they will know you are not in-charge and they are on their own. Take on the

job of repairing the mess one step at a time. Eliminate exposure to more trouble by breaking up the string and tying them to separate trees or bushes. Reassure the wreckees that you are there to help them. If a load can not be lifted or shoved back into place, then it must be dropped on the ground and reloaded. Separate the cargo while checking for damage to rigging or containers that may need to be repaired on the spot. Do not reload a nervous critter until you are sure they are settled down and ready to continue on the journey. First aid is necessary; not only for physical injuries, but also for emotional ones a pack animal in a wreck may suffer. I suggest you move any animals that are stressed to a quiet spot, and calm them down with soothing conversation, stroking touches, before you put them back to work. Ask yourself, how I would like to be treated if I were this animal and had been through this miss-adventure.

Remember that worrying about a wreck is not going to stop it from happening, but planning for it will prepare you to safely deal with it, when it does. Gently train your pack stock to accept whatever comes along and in time they will be there working with you to get the job done. "A wreck will never be as bad as you can imagine or as easy as you would like."

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