

Safety



Think

By Donald Burr

PLC Safety & Training Coordinator
safety@maineloggers.com

The other day, I was sitting at my desk catching up on news and I read an article that touched a nerve. The article told a story about an experienced operator, who was operating a new machine, who got hurt. The part that hit a nerve was that the operator was in a place nobody should ever be in. I have two thoughts about this. One is that we, as operators, should never stop thinking about what we are doing. The other thought is that, far too often, operators put their bodies into places where they should never be because they don't fully understand the machine or the risk.

I am new at this full-time safety and training coordinator job, but the more I read and think about the injuries that loggers suffer, including the injuries I have sustained, the more I think the real issue when it comes to injuries is a lack of thinking.

Years ago, I got a piece of steel from a track pin in my lower leg. Why you ask? Because I and those I was working alongside were not thinking. Let me explain. We were pounding a pin into a track. I was standing on top of the track swinging the sledge hammer as hard as I could. Everything was going well, but twice I had seen pieces of steel breaking off and hitting the ground. We even said, "wow good thing that hit the ground." Three hits later, I had a piece of steel in my lower leg that managed to go through my coveralls, blue jeans, and long underwear. Soon, there was blood soaking through all the layers. Off to the hospital I went, where they attempted to remove the piece of steel for 45 minutes before giving me stitches and antibiotics and sending me home with the steel still embedded in my leg.

Now, if we had thought before we started, maybe we would have gone about the project differently. The next day, we did it a different way and all went well and quicker too. Unfortunately, the operator who was helping me that day had the very same accident two years later, but they were able to remove his piece of steel out of his knee. Did we learn anything? Well after the second injury we did, and we no longer pounded pins in that way. In the first example, we had two warnings (near misses) before it stung us and two years later stung us again. We did not recognize the potential hazard. Why, because we were focused on the goal and not thinking about the potential danger. Dr. Dobson from Focus on the Family wrote in his

book *Bringing up Boys*, "if a boy tries something and gets hurt it was *bad luck* and he will try it just the same way again." We, as adult logging equipment operators, need to look for the danger and do what we can to avoid it. When near misses happen, we need to readjust so we do not get hurt. Because getting hurt is not "*bad luck*" it is from "*bad thinking*."

The next point is we should always understand the machines that we are working on, and take a minute to investigate where we put our bodies and what the potential dangers are and where they can come from. In the article I was reading, the operator who was hurt stood in between the arms and rollers of a processor head while the machine was running to replace a bolt in a guard. The arms closed on him and the rollers started to spin. Fortunately, there was another operator who was close by and was able to release the entrapped operator before he was killed. Thankfully, the operator is expected to make a full recovery.

Now a lot of the focus in accidents is on the Lock Out / Tag Out procedure. My problem with focusing on LO / TO is that it often says if you do XYZ you will be safe, without any understanding if XYZ is doing anything to keep you safe in this situation. Often LO / TO instructions are words on paper written by someone who knows the machine very well, but they can then be given to an operator who does not. When an operator does not know the machine well, they may follow the LO / TO plan and still not be safe.

When I teach new operators, I teach them to think about what they are doing and how they can be hurt. In the example from the article that got me

thinking about this topic, standing inside the grab arms of a machine is almost never ok. Each machine is different, and in this article, we are not sure what the operator did to start the closing of the arms and the liming wheels turning. Unfortunately, the article gave no insights to this. But the truth is, the operator should have never been inside the arms whether the machine was on or off. This operator clearly did not understand that a processing head will go into automatic mode, regardless of what is inside the head whether it be a tree or a human.

The take away point from this is, when you are working on a piece of equipment, investigate (think) on where the potential energy and danger is and how it can hurt you before you start a repair. From there, LO / TO appropriately. If you don't really know how a machine operates, ask for help because no one is as smart as all of us. When I am working on equipment or teaching students to work on equipment, I often quote Aretha Franklin, "You better think..."

