Chain saw safety

There are times when we have to do some constructive trail maintenance to get where we want to go. It's pretty common to have to cut a few fallen trees that we find blocking the trail. Sometimes it's as simple as a single cut and pushing the tree out of the way or can be a multitude of cuts and winching a log.

I may not be an expert with a chain saw but I do have a bit of background that gives me an insight into safety: I paid for my College by cutting pulp wood on the weekend, then I worked for the USFS for a year both on a fire crew and trail crew. I spent 22 years on the fire department where we used chain saws for roof ventilation. Over the last 40 or so years I have cut something like 300 cords of fire wood to heat our house, plus I have commercially logged our property and several others.

So let's start out with the proper equipment.

Naturally we have a chain saw in good condition. It's important that the chain be properly adjusted and SHARP.

We also need a plastic wedge or even two, heavy leather gloves, leather boots, safety glasses, hearing protection and in all reality a pair of chaps. I will admit that I don't always have my chaps with me on the trail but I should. Yes there are repairs in them from chain cuts. Naturally I won't admit they were from me but when some one else was cutting for me! The chaps are the greatest thing going. If the chain hit the material, it cuts into a stringing fiber that instantly jams the chain to the bar and stops it.

Be aware of the types of chaps you buy, there are different standards. The Forest Service is limited to two brands of all that are available.

Leather boots and gloves may not stop the cutting action of the chain but they will slow it down and maybe prevent some serious damage.

Believe me when I say a chain saw will go through flesh and muscle a lot faster than wood and make a really nasty wound, and they also hurt a lot, a whole lot.

However all the protection gear in the world doesn't replace safety procedures.

Look the situation over before even starting the saw. Figure out what you're going to cut and how you're going to do it. Take into consideration footing, saw binding, and log movement. It may be necessary to secure the log with a strap or winch cable to insure that it goes where you want it to. However, you don't want a large log to pull your Jeep over the side of hill. If it's a Toyota, well no loss.

Talk over the operation, look at options, and consider several different ways to remove the log. If the situation warrants it, designate a safety person to watch over the complete operation.

Make sure you have a safe operation area and keep others away. Quality saws have a chain brake on them. Use it when starting and every time you move your feet. Treat the chain saw when it's running as if it's a loaded gun. The chain brake is your safety. And just like a gun, keep your finger off the trigger until your ready to use t. Always know where you feet are and where the saw bar will go after the cut is completed. Be prepared for kickbacks when making a plunge cut or when cutting brush or small limbs. Use the plastic wedge to prevent binding the saw bar. Never cut anything higher than your shoulders. You just don't have good control of the saw at that height.

When you are cutting don't let others distract you unless there is a safety issue.

Keep your mind on what you're doing, don't be thinking of your next cut, what the trail up ahead is like or anything else but the cut you're working on. Remind other people not to "bug" you while you're cutting.

Be aware of "widow makers", those dead limbs above you on a tree. If one should fall and land on you, well you can pretty much figure out why they are called that. It's best to be wearing a hard hat but generally not available on the trail. At least have a "safety person" standing back a ways and watching what you're doing. This safety person should apply to almost all cutting activities. If there is some kind of problem that the sawyer doesn't see, he can shout out a warning.

Be sure to give yourself an escape path if something should go wrong. When felling a tree double check for the proper notch and then walk your safety route before even starting the cut. I've seen trees twist 180 degrees from where you expected them to fall.

When cutting a tree that has blown over and the roots are exposed, make sure that the weight of the root ball doesn't cause the tree to spring back at you as weight is removed from the opposite end. You can put a strap on the tree to control the direction it will fall.

Trail injuries not only make for a bad day for the participants but most important, a really bad day for you.