"Mr. Truck" Helps Improve Handling On Gravel Roads

Kent Sundling, better known to many as "Mr. Truck", says he's driven a "few million miles" on gravel roads and considers them the most dangerous roads that exist. He has come up with a couple of ideas to make them safer.

One reason pickups and vans are hard to handle on gravel roads is that their rear axles are generally narrower than their front axles. He recently tested a rear-wheel alignment system called "Correctrack" that he says helps correct this front to rear tracking problem.

The Correctrack system, from Correctrack, Inc., is basically a spacer designed to go between the wheel and the hub. Sundling says the spacers are very easy to install. He tested them on a 1997 Ford F-250 4-WD crew cab diesel, which has a rear axle that's a full 3 in. narrower than the front axle.

"I could immediately tell the difference," he writes. "The ruts didn't pull the truck and the washboards didn't make the back axle jump from side to side. Turning corners was also different, with less rear sliding. With a trailer on the truck, I could feel the better control with less oversteer needed to drive straight. I was surprised at how dramatic the change felt."

Sundling also tested Correctrack on other pickups, and says the results were similar.

After adding Correctrack to the '97 F-250, he also tested Centramatic balancers on the front wheels (www.centramatic.com). Centramatic balancers automatically balance the wheels, and can even adjust for changing conditions, like ice, mud or snow built up in the wheels. They slip easily onto the hub behind the wheel and consist of round tubes filled with ball bearings in a dampening fluid.

"It's hard to keep heavy pickup, truck and trailer tires balanced, especially when they're used mostly on rough roads," Sundling says.

Besides continually balancing the wheel, which makes handling easier, the manufacturer claims its Centramatic balancers reduce tire heat by 8 to 10 percent and increase tire life by as much as 50 percent.

Centramatic balancers are available for pickups, straight and semi trucks, trailers of all sizes, buses, Jeeps, SUVs, and motor homes.

Sundling says whether you're driving gravel roads or highways, you'll notice the difference made by automatic wheel balancers in less handling and driving fatigue.

Both products are featured at his website, www.mrtruck.com, where you'll find a lot more information comparing pickups and products designed to improve pickup performance. A set of rear axle Correctrack spacers retails for about $350. You can put Centramatic wheel balancers on all your wheels for about $200.

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Rear-wheel alignment system puts a spacer between the wheel and hub (left). Auto balancing system (right) also slips onto hub.

Blade kit quick-taches to skid steer, tuming it into a mini road grader. Operator platform is located on grader attachment, providing a clear view of blade at all times.

Blade Kit Turns Skid Steer Into Road Grader

Using his Bobcat loader to level a road for paving didn't work very well for Lonnie Marquardt, Missoula, Montana. "I needed a grader and I already had the power and hydraulics sitting there in the Bobcat. Unfortunately, the attachments that were available didn't give me a clear view of the blade."

His solution was to turn his skid steer into a mini road grader. He started by taking all the dimensions from a full size grader.

His next step was to draw up plans using an AutoCAD program on his computer. With those in hand, he began building his prototype. The biggest challenge was operator seat placement, which he put on the grader attachment.

"By moving the operator platform out front of the Bobcat, I have a clear view of the blade at all times," says Marquardt.

Blade controls mount on either side of the steering wheel, which is connected by quick coupler linkage to the skid steer's steering levers. A hydrostatic foot pedal controls forward and reverse and throttle. The seat is a standard commercial skid steer seat with an electric safety switch. Once the operator leaves the platform, the hydraulics go dead, and the machine is inoperative.

The blade controls run off the skid steer's auxiliary hydraulics. All electronic and hydraulic controls are plugged in to the skid steer's system. The only change made was to add a hydraulic drainline back to the tank for those models without one.

"Most skid steers have back pressure on hydraulics, and you can't have that with a hydrostatic foot pedal," explains Marquardt.

The former equipment fabricator is now building the units full time. He uses 100,000-lb. strength steel, more than sufficient, he says, to handle the torque created when operating the unit.

A basic unit sells for $13,250. Installation kits run about $300, depending on skid steer make. He also offers an optional front scarifier blade for $2,600, a blade side shift for $1,800 and a 350-lb., front counterweight for $500.

The grader attaches like any other quicktach unit. A lock-down mechanism holds it until the attachment is in place, and a ratchet binder can be installed between the grader plate and the skid steer frame. Once the electronic and hydraulic connections have been made, the operator can move to his new seat.

"Once you put the weight on the skid steer, it ties it down, and you have a rigid frame," explains Marquardt.

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Steel blocks make it safe to work under a raised truck box, without fear of being crushed if hydraulics should fail.

"Safe Block" System Supports Truck Box

A new device called the Roger Block makes it safe to work under a raised truck box without fear of being crushed if the hydraulics holding it up should fail.

"A lot of people just stick a log or piece of square timber between the box rails and truck frame rails, but the force created by this wedge can cause that type of block to shoot forward, hitting someone, and the box itself can then come down and crush you," says Wilf Knitter of Kammec Mechanical Consultants in Whitecourt, Alberta.

Knitter operates a heavy equipment repair shop and says the general concept of the patent pending Roger Block originated with Roger Beaudoin, who is a welder. Working with Beaudoin, Knitter further developed the idea with another business partner, mechanical engineer Paul McGrath. By making some modifications to the original design, the three men have created a device that is capable of supporting tremendous weight.

The product is made from steel and requires no modification to the truck box. By placing one block on each side of the frame, the raised assembly is supported evenly to prevent twisting of the box frame.

"The block has a hook on its bottom plate and you position that behind the end of the truck frame rails. The hook keeps the block from sliding forward," Knitter says. "The block is also hinged in the middle because you never know what angle the box is going to come down at. The hinge allows the block to align itself so that all the force is distributed over a 16-in. area, instead of point-loading the frames and causing damage to the rails."

The Roger Block is meant to be used on an empty box and each block will safely support 6,600 lbs. With both blocks properly located, the system will support 13,200 lbs. with a safety factor of five.

The Roger Block was just introduced to the marketplace in April. Each block weighs 31 lbs. and has a handle on the front. The price is $350 (Canadian) for a pair, or $200 for one block (plus freight).

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