

MOTOR CAR + IMPROPER LIFTING = BAD BACK

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There is nothing like tooling down the rails on our track cars, on a warm summer afternoon. The 750-1500 lb. cars (depending upon what model we might own) are our "tickets" to full size railroading; however, if we are not careful, they can also be the bane of our life, by causing severe back/leg pain, if we lift and maneuver them incorrectly.

Unfortunately, I can speak from experience. At first, the pain was just a tingle, in the lower calf of my leg...it must be a pulled muscle, I thought. A pain in the leg *can't* be caused by something wrong in your back...can it? How wrong I was.

You see your back has spongy cartilage between your vertebrae, called discs. As one gets older, it seems that the discs become more fragile, and they are prone to rupture or "herniate" if we bend over and *incorrectly* lift something heavy or "abuse" our backs. Additionally, the ruptured disc can pinch nerves, causing severe pain. Well, lifting a heavy motor car definitely causes back abuse if the lifting is not done correctly!

Like most everyone, I thought "it can't happen to me." I'm in excellent health, and the thought of a bad back was the farthest thing from my mind. When I first restored my track car (a Fairmont M-9) it didn't have a cab on it, and I didn't consider it to be all that heavy.

Like many beginners to the hobby, I "made due" with a winchless snowmobile trailer for carting my track car around. Since I considered my M-9 to be somewhat "light" in weight (in reality it's about 500 lbs without a cab) I simply lifted the car, by the front lift handles, up onto the trailer the 18 inches from the ground. Yes, it was a strain, but it worked. Looking back now, I think that was the start of my disc problem.

After nearly five years of this method of loading and unloading, I finally got smart last Spring, and installed a winch and ramps. But, it was too late. The pain in the leg kept getting worse, and my doctor gave me the news I didn't want to hear...surgery was in order for partial removal of the disc. This would eliminate the pressure on the nerve that was causing the pain.

After having the surgery in November, I can happily say that I'm ready once again to hit the rails. Any future lifting of my motor car will be done very carefully. The doctor indicated that the key to lifting anything is the angle at which our backs are when we lift. Don't *ever* lift in a bent over position. Lift with your legs, with your back in a vertical position. This will minimize the risk of the disc "popping" out the rear of your vertebrae.

Also, don't try to lift beyond your physical capabilities. Most of us aren't built like Arnold Schwarzenegger. NARCOA member Ron Butler found this out when he ruptured his disc after trying to lift his 1000-lb car (from the front end) after being stuck in soft dirt after unloading. A single incident like this *can* cause you severe injury!

The bottom line to all of this is to use common sense when "horsing" your motor car around. For loading and unloading, use a winch. The \$40.00-\$50.00 for the winch is a lot cheaper than a \$6,000.00 hospital bill. Make sure that the lift handles are fully extended when maneuvering the car from the trailer over to the rails for seton. And, above all *never* try to play "Russian weightlifter" with your car. If you're in a minor predicament and need to move the car, ask for help from friends. If you are alone (such as was the case with Ron Butler) use a board or heavy tree branch as a lever, to avoid the back strain. In essence...use common sense, and you can continue to enjoy the railcar hobby without pain.
