

# What Happened To You?

By David Hawkins

“**W**hat Happened To You?” People have asked me that a lot since my accident. I initially would tell them I just fell down. But I could tell that explanation usually would not do because they continued to stare at my arms, specifically the steel contraction on my left arm (an external fixator) and the cast on my right arm. At this point I would give them a rundown of my last day of work, Sept. 28, 2005.

The alarm went off at 5 a.m. I was already awake because our newborn baby (future arborist Nate) was not yet sleeping through the night, but I figured I would be okay with two or three hours of sleep. After I got up I looked out the window and noticed that it was a little drizzly. Great – I knew this meant the trees would be slick and I would have wet feet all day. Oh well, it wouldn't be the first time.

The job that day was about two hours away. That's the price I pay for living in a rural part of Massachusetts and having clients in the metropolitan area of Boston. Due to unusually high traffic, the drive took about two and a half hours. So, I was tired, aggravated and late when I arrived at my client's home.

The day's task was to prune as much as I could in eight hours on a property that was over-planted with ornamentals and surrounded by a 30 foot high evergreen hedge – also overgrown. When I pulled up to the job I notice that the driveway was taped off because it had just been coated with a driveway sealant. This would mean no dragging or stacking brush on the driveway; I would just have to work around it. So, being tired and late for the job, I was now copping an attitude and wished I was back home with my wife and F.A. Nate.



*Trust your instincts. If something doesn't seem right, stop, look it over and, if necessary, take the time to fix it.*

Since I was already in a bad mood I figured I would start with the worst of the job first – the 30-foot-high hedge. I would begin at the driveway and work my way into the backyard. I set my 10-foot, three-legged orchard ladder next to a white pine; the step portion of the ladder on the driveway and the third leg in a planting bed. Halfway up the ladder, I noticed that the third leg may have been extended a little further than it should have been. No problem, I've done this hundreds of times – the ladder's sturdy. So, with my 14 foot pruner in hand I started knocking back long ends.

The last long end was beyond my reach, so I climbed as high as I could on the ladder, set the pruner head on the limb, slid it toward a whorl of branches in the interior of the tree, and pulled the rope. The next sounds I heard were the crack of the branch and that of my face hitting the driveway. I don't remember the actual fall. Apparently the portion of the ladder on the driveway slid out from under me as I made the cut. and wondered how bad the fall really was.

I saw lots of blood on the driveway and decided to get up and go to the client's door to see if I could get something to wipe my face. That's when the pain hit. I look at my wrists and noticed they were at very strange angles and there was a bone sticking out of the left one – a very bad day. My client's shocked face when he answered the door prompted me to have him call 911.

So, after an ambulance ride, two CT (computerized tomography ) scans, a dozen or so X-rays, two surgeries and a boatload of painkillers, I write this story four weeks later for these reasons:

- ▶ I have lots of time now to think about stories to write.
- ▶ It lets me practice with my new voice-to-text software.
- ▶ It's kind of therapeutic to talk about it.

More importantly though, as an arborist with 28 years of (serious) accident-free experience and one who routinely teaches safety and skills for arborists, I think it is

important for accidents to be brought out in the open, talked about and analyzed. So in hindsight (which I excel at), I offer the following advice:

1. When you show up to a job tired, pissed off or distracted, start the day with something simple and low risk. Sharpen a saw, spend some time assessing the job, start pruning from the ground – do anything to get your head into the job and to get warmed up before starting something a little risky such as climbing or getting on a ladder.

2. Know your equipment, know its limitations and use it correctly. Don't cut corners. In my case I should not have set the ladder on the newly sealed pavement, or at least I should have secured the third leg so it wouldn't have spread apart.

3. Trust your instincts. If something

doesn't seem right, stop, look it over and, if necessary, take the time to fix it (I should have reset the third leg so the ladder was in a more upright position).

4. For all you self-employed arborists, cover yourself with either workers' compensation insurance or a separate disability policy (I have neither). Like the TV commercial with the duck says, "It won't hurt when you get hurt."

5. Carry a good health insurance policy. Fortunately I had one. If I didn't, I may have had to go out of business

This advice may seem simple and based on common sense, but the easy jobs you take for granted and have done a thousand times before can take you down just as easy as the tough climbing job or nasty removals. Don't underestimate them.

As bad as the accident sounds, it could've been worse. Aside from two broken wrists and a broken nose, I have no head or back injuries and the doctors say I should have a full recovery. I still have about eight weeks of physical therapy in front of me though. Maybe by the New Year I'll be back into tree work.

I hope this article is useful. I know it helps me to write about it. Who knows, maybe the next time you get on an orchard ladder you'll remember reading about the poor schmuck who took a header off of his.

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