



The excuses for not wearing a safety harness are many, but it usually boils down to laziness and bravado, neither of which can save you when gravity's grip snatches you.

■ by *Mark Olis*

Much of the country eagerly awaits November for the whitetail rut, but most Alabama hunters keep an eye toward January for breeding season mayhem. Like any hardcore Southern hunter, Joe Hamm was perched high above the forest floor in his tree stand one cool January 2000 morning, waiting on a nosey buck to trot through.

The day before, Hamm had installed a hang-on stand some 35 feet up a tree in a hardwood creek bottom between two lush food plots. Hamm admits he likes to climb high in the stand. He used screw-in steps up to the platform for entry and was optimistic about his chances at a mature swamp buck.

Hamm has a knack for knowing where big bucks live and travel. The previous year, almost to the day, he killed a great buck from the same spot where he had the hang-on. At about 9:30 a.m., Hamm's fortune would again place a mature Alabama whitetail in his path. Hamm fired one shot, and the buck struggled through the tangle and out of sight. Feeling confident, Hamm sat for 10 minutes, after which he unloaded his rifle, tied it off to a rope and lowered it from his stand.

Then, Hamm stood up facing the tree to disconnect his lineman's belt, which he wore ascending the tree and while he sat in the stand hunting. However, while sitting in a hang-on stand, a lineman's belt must be unattached from the tree while the climber transitions off the platform and onto a climbing aid to get below the stand. When the hunter is below the platform, he can reattach the lineman's belt around the tree for a safe descent.

"Well, when I got ready to come down out of the tree, I swung around and grabbed a limb to step down onto the first step," Hamm said. "I got about halfway down to the first step and the limb that I was holding broke."

In an instant, Hamm was being pulled to the forest floor 35 feet below. His right hand slipped from around the back of the tree, and he desperately tried a last attempt to get his foot onto the step, which he missed.

"I knew then that I was gone," he said. "I knew there was no turning back from that point."

In a final effort to somehow better the outcome of the fall, Hamm kicked himself free of the platform in hopes that he would land on his feet. It worked, Hamm crashed to the ground feet first. His left foot hit first and took the full brunt of the crushing energy and trauma.

"I don't know if it knocked me out or if I was in shock for a minute or more — it felt like forever," he said. "I remember looking around in a daze, and then I remember looking at my leg. My leg was turned all the way around pointing back up toward my body, and my foot was awkwardly turned up on its side. I stared and then got my leg and turned it back around. I knew it wasn't good at all. I started screaming and hollering for help."

Hamm was far from the road, and no one knew where he was. A half-mile of woods and thicket separated him from his truck, so he began crawling. "I was crawling and screaming through the woods with my leg just dragging behind me," he said.

Somewhere along the daunting journey, another hunter showed up out of nowhere. Hamm said he didn't know who he was or where he was hunting, but the hunter yelled back to Hamm. When the man found Hamm, he quickly got his arm under him and helped walk him out to an old logging road. Hamm gave his truck keys to the stranger, who drove the vehicle to get him.

When Hamm was loaded into the passenger side, the stranger navigated out of the woods and onto the blacktop towards the hospital in Selma, Alabama. "They x-rayed it and said, 'We don't have the capability to do anything with this,'" Hamm said. "So they put me in an ambulance. They took me from Selma to Carraway Hospital in Birmingham, which was the trauma center back then. The doctor at Carraway said, 'I'm going to do the best I can do, but I'm not guaranteeing anything.' I was in surgery for four or five hours, and they tried to piece together what was there."

The doctor later told Hamm's wife there wasn't a piece (of bone?) larger than a dime from his knee to his ankle. Using cadaver-bone paste and a slew of treatments, doctors fought for a year to save Hamm's leg. However, six months into the recovery process, a staph infection set in and slowly began to grow up the leg. After trying months of the strongest antibiotics available, the doctor said it was time to look at different treatment options.

"The doctor said we needed to talk about amputation," Hamm said. "I went and got two more opinions from orthopedic surgeons, and their opinion was that they would have amputated the day I came in. I guess the doctor was trying to give me every chance. They amputated, and I had to do rehab and all that and get a prosthesis."

AVOIDABLE FALLS

The unfortunate part of most tree stand falls is that they're avoidable if proper equipment and precautions are taken. "Any height-related activity has a fall risk," said Jake Nelson, product manager for Summit Treestands. "There's no way to get around that with the use of a tree stand."

Fortunately, there have been many advancements in tree stand safety since Hamm's fall 23 years ago. Those advancements have been in safety standards and the advancement of the fall-arrest full-body harness now included with every tree stand sold. Summit Treestands began including a full-body harness with each stand in the early 2000s. By 2004, the industry adopted the practice as a standard for tree stand manufacturers. Those efforts have significantly reduced tree-stand-related accidents and deaths.

“There’s no room for error out there. And it happens really quickly, in the blink of an eye.” — Joe Hamm, tree stand accident survivor

In the mid-1990s tree stand manufacturers formed the Treestand Manufacturers Association, which created and implemented standards for the industry to follow. Those standards are now rolled under the American Society for Testing and Materials. With more than 30,000 members and 12,500 global standards in 140 countries, ASTM sets the testing, manufacturing and safety standards for the tree stand industry.

Those stringent safety standards further advanced the full-body harness. Around 2009, full-body harnesses began featuring a suspension-relief strap. A relief strap is typically anchored to the harness near the hipbone and neatly stored in a built-in pouch. It consists of a length of material that can be tied off to the opposite lineman’s loop on the other hip. When properly adjusted, it offers a support strap to stand on to relieve pressure from the legs and increase blood flow after a fall. This helps many fall victims recover and let them climb down or at least offer relief so they can

make a call or wait for help.

“One of the most critical aspects is knowing your equipment and being familiar with the equipment,” Nelson said. “It’s reading the manufacturer’s instructions and watching the videos referenced in the manuals.” In fact, there is a list of best practices to keep you safe while using a tree stand. Everyone who hunts from a stand should know and practice these.

TREE STAND SAFETY GUIDELINES ARE FOR YOUR SAFETY

Know: Read and watch manufacturer instructions and videos. This might sound like boring homework, but these materials show the proper use of climbing a tree stand. And only use certified equipment, too.

Connected: The only way to be safe while using a tree stand is to wear a fall-arrest full-body harness and have it safely connected to a tree or safety line from the time you leave the ground until the time you return to it.

Double connectivity: While using a hang-on stand, the climber must use a lineman’s belt around the tree and the safety harness tether to a tree strap before removing one of the safety aids when transitioning in and out of the stand. This ensures 100 percent safe connection even while climbing in and out of a hang-on, and it would have prevented Hamm’s fall. There’s also the option of installing a 30-foot safety line from top to bottom of hang-on and other stands. The climber connects to the safety line at the ground or from the tree stand via a Prusik knot, which ascends and descends with the climber.

Two feet: You want your safety tether, which is anchored to your full-body harness and attached to the safety tree strap, taut when you sit in your stand. The tether should always be above your head so you don’t fall more than two feet. This greatly reduces the shock in the body if a fall happens.

Use enough climbing aids: Use enough ladder steps to go above a hang-

The #1 Choice for Habitat Management Equipment

THE RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB

Whether it’s Big Game or Small,
Forest or Fields, We are the Equipment
Experts in Habitat Management.

CONTACT ONE OF OUR PRODUCT EXPERTS!

636.947.4457

info@wildlifefarming.com

@wildlifefarming8811

@wildlifefarming

**WILDLIFE
FARMING™**

Habitat Management Equipment

wildlifefarming.com



on so you can climb down onto the stand's platform instead of pulling up into it.

Practice: Always practice with your gear at ground level, and become familiar on how to use it and how to use your safety equipment properly.

"You don't want the first time using the equipment to be at 4 a.m. in the pitch black," Nelson said. "You can do that on a Sunday afternoon at ground level and familiarize yourself with the equipment before you take it in the field. With that familiarity, you can also inspect equipment and make sure all your components are present and in good condition."

Replace: Expired or damaged components should always be replaced. Full-body harnesses have a five-year expiration date, and manufacturers provide expiration dates for cables, straps and other components. If any parts are frayed or damaged, replace them immediately.

Remove tree stands at the season's end: Don't leave stands sitting in the woods during the off-season. UV light, critters, moisture, tree growth, contract-

ing cold and expanding work to accelerate the deterioration of your stand. Take them down, and store them covered or indoors if possible. Then inspect all stands and take care of issues before hanging them back up for the next season.

Have a plan: "Have some way to get in touch with somebody," Hamm said. "I didn't have cell service where I was that day. I could have stayed in there half the night and nobody would have known where I was. And by that time, I probably wouldn't be alive."

Always have a communication device when hunting, and show someone on a map or drop a digital pin with your location, and text it to them in case something happens.

Don't rush: One of the most common excuses for not wearing a safety harness is that it takes too long to get on and use. No one thinks they are going to fall until it's too late. Take the few extra minutes to climb into your stand safely. That's nominal insurance when it's guarding your life and livelihood. Climbing slowly and deliberately is quieter than rush-

ing up a tree, too.

Tree stand safety has come a long way and has helped save many lives. However, it's still common to visit hunting camps throughout whitetail range and find folks who don't wear a full-body safety harness while using an elevated stand.

"There's no room for error out there," Hamm said. "And it happens really quickly, in the blink of an eye. One minute you're in the prime of your life, the next minute you're hurt or maimed for life. Some people have a close call and just brush it off. But a close call is a warning for what's to come if you keep doing stuff incorrectly."

Don't let manliness, stubbornness or whatever "ness" keep you from learning more about common-sense tree stand use. Check out <https://tmastands.com>, where you can print out safety guidelines, watch how-to videos, take online courses and more. Safety isn't an accident.



The FIRMINATOR

By Ranew's Outdoor Equipment®



MAKE FOOD PLOTS EASY.



RT MODEL

G3 MODEL

Ranew's Outdoor Equipment offers the ideal equipment to make food plot planting easier and more effective. The Firminator is the best all-around equipment for hunting food plots and deer management. Ranew's is ready to serve all hunting and agriculture needs across the USA and abroad.