

Courting Disaster

Putting profits above worker safety can be costly

BY PHIL KIMBLE



Construction work, as an occupation, routinely falls into the Top 10 list of most dangerous jobs. One would think that construction companies, knowing the inherent perils of the job, would be stout advocates of workplace safety. First, it's the morally right thing to do. Second, it's the financially right thing to do. With workmen's compensation insurance premiums already sky high, it makes fiscal sense to try to ensure that everyone goes home intact at the end of the day. The truth is, most employers, construction companies included, value the safety and well-being of their employees.

But then, you find one that refused to prioritize worker safety—a company that values the dollar above all else.

The new hire, because of his experience, was assigned to the grout crew of a construction company that was building a new housing development. When they arrived at the site, the crew began

setting up the equipment. The new guy was staring at the pump and hoses with a quizzical expression on his face when one of his co-workers yelled, "Hey! Get those hoses connected now! The first load will be here any minute." The new hire turned and said, "I've been working with concrete for over 10 years and I've never seen camlocks used on anything but water lines." Another worker chimed in, "That's all we've ever used. Be on your toes. These things break a lot and it's real easy to get hurt."

"Yeah, the Boss don't care as long as the work gets done," added another worker. Uneasy about what he had gotten himself into, the new guy started connecting hoses.

Just as the first load of cement arrived, so did the owner of the construction company. The new hire saw him pull up in his pickup and went over and asked, "Hey Boss, what's up with the camlocks on the concrete

hose?" The boss turned to him and snarled, "My father did it this way when he started this company 20 years ago. I took over this business five years ago when he passed. If it was good enough for Pop, it's good enough for me. You'd better get over there and do some work if you want to get a paycheck. I've got a hundred guys lined up to take your job if you don't want it. Those fittings are cheap and easy to replace just like you. Now, get back to work."

Humiliated, he trudged back to rejoin the crew.

The crew was into their second load, pouring what would be the foundation slab for a new home. The new guy's job was to help move the bulky 3-inch hoses around when needed. One worker was at the end of the hose directing the flow. The two other crew members were tamping and smoothing the poured "crete." All of a sudden, the worker holding the end of the hose yelled, "Plug!" The new guy looked on in amazement as the worker holding the end of the hose dropped it and began sprinting away. The other two guys were running in the opposite direction like scared rabbits. In a flash, the camlock nearest him exploded. The hose whipped violently, striking him in the thigh. It snapped his femur like a twig.

In trying to save money, the construction company owner ignored the steps he should have taken to ensure his workers' safety: Fittings designed for the applications and the pressures associated with pumping concrete, as well as its abrasiveness, are the only ones to use. Always adhere to the STAMPED acronym (Size, Temperature, Application, Media, Pressure, Ends, Dixon) for proper hose and coupling selection.

All employees have a reasonable right to a safe working environment within the constraints of their particular occupation. Asking any component to handle more than five times its rated working pressure is a recipe for disaster. A dollar saved today can mean millions spent tomorrow if someone is seriously hurt or injured on the job. ■