Warn Drill-Powered Portable Winch

by Michael Springer

Whether pulling out old posts, dragging landscape boulders out of the way, or manipulating weighty structural members, moving heavy objects is a given on a deck-building site. Sometimes a truck or excavator can do the heavy lifting, but where there's limited vehicle access or when you must tread more lightly on the surrounding landscape, a winch might be a better choice. Not only can a winch provide the strength of several helpers, it can hold the weight for hours on end without complaint.

The compact, portable Warn Drill Winch (warn.com, $130) is about the size of a bowling ball and weighs about the same, at 10.7 pounds. With its 30 feet of cable and pulling capacity of around 500 pounds, think of it as a replacement for a cable come-along, but with a longer range, smoother operation, and greater precision—and of course, without the physical exertion required. Best of all, rather than requiring a separate motor and battery system like a regular portable winch, it uses any common drill/driver with a 3/8-inch or larger keyless chuck as its power source.

Drill Power

I tested the unit with both an old 14.4-volt tool and a newer 18-volt model. Since the winch has a mechanical slip clutch that limits its output, using a stronger drill/driver doesn't provide any more power, but it taxes the drill less. The winch has extremely low gearing, so long pulls require your drill/driver to run a long time under load—probably much longer than you run it for drilling and driving—and the tool can heat up noticeably.

Despite the winch's free-spooling winch clutch, reversing your drill allows the Drill Winch to back loads out with great control and is one of the unit's benefits over a come-along, which backs down with bouncing steps between each ratchet tooth. And when pulling forward, all types of manual winches do so with a start-and-stop motion that jerks a load along. Besides the obvious savings of muscle power using the Drill Winch, the fingertip control of a variable-speed drill/driver in low gear lets you move and stop items with great precision.

Cable

I found that the winch's cable tends to "bird nest" in the housing easily. Pulling a load with loosely coiled cable can cause minor slipping under load, but the real hazard is damage to the cable. When it spools in haphazardly, the cable suffers permanent bends and kinks. Keeping the cable under tension whenever spooling in or out, not running the winch in reverse without pulling some tension on the line by hand, and remembering to store the unit with the cable spooled in snugly minimizes this risk.

Warn says that the last 15 feet of cable will pull with only 400 pounds of force because of the increased diameter of the cable spool (and the corresponding decrease in leverage). Still, I was able to lift 540 pounds with the last few feet of cable during controlled testing, with the clutch barely slipping at all.

As with any winch, hoist, or come-along, it's easy to double the pulling strength with the use of a heavy-duty cable pulley or block. Even when double-anchored like this, the generous cable length of the Drill Winch means you still have 15 feet of pulling range. And having 1,000 pounds rather than 500 pounds of capacity at hand makes the tool much more useful. A block also lets you redirect the direction of pull between the load and the anchor to keep you out of harm's way or to keep the winch in a better position to reach while operating. ❖

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