

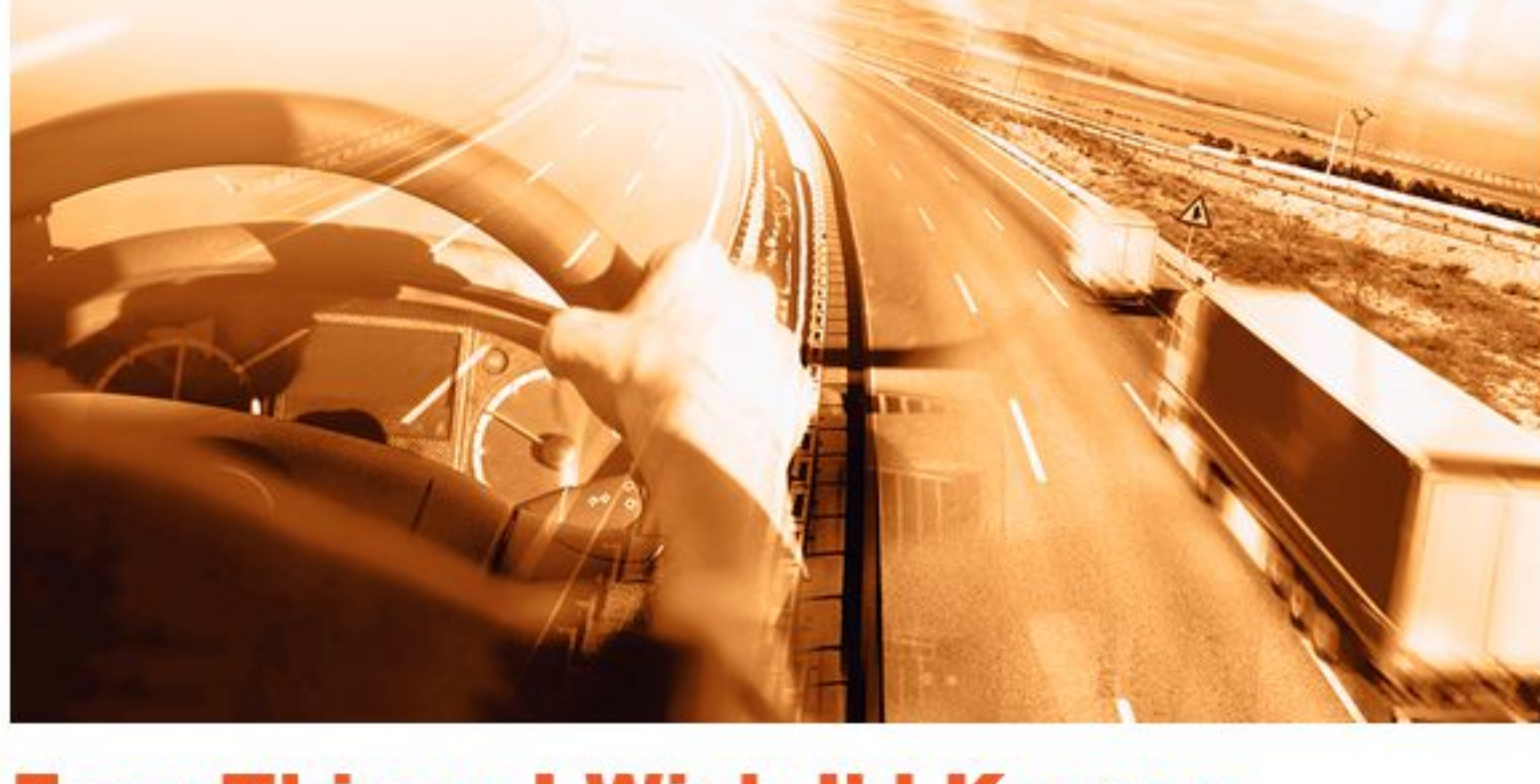
FIRST GEAR

NEW DRIVER NEWSLETTER

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Four Things I Wish I'd Known

A veteran trucker gives advice about four things he wishes he'd known before starting out over the road

By Paul Marhoefer

Twelve miles south of Rock Hill, South Carolina sits a spacious rest area on the northbound side of I-77. Like many of the facilities of its kind in the South, it truly is a thing of beauty, a testament to the prosperity of the region. Its thoughtful design boasts large diagonal parking spaces in the back for tractor-trailers, with scores of spaces for everyday motorists in front. Its well-manicured lawns are landscaped so meticulously that no Persian Prince could find fault were they the grounds of his estate. But thirty-three years ago, this rest area served another function. By night it was the veritable bathhouse of the South. I know this because I was accidentally abandoned there by my trainer, The Italian Stallion, for about three hours one Spring night.

It was 1987. Though I had been a regional straight truck driver since 1979, here, I was an OTR trainee, fast asleep in the bunk of a Builder's Transport cabover, when Sanchez, my trainer, had stopped there to use the restroom. Half Spanish and half Italian, he proudly donned the CB handle "The Italian Stallion." Ol' Sanchez would regale me day and night with detailed accounts of every female conquest he had known since the age of fourteen. I was his captive audience, his subordinate, and, as such, obliged to feign just enough interest in the balding man's reveries so as not to insult his fragile male pride.

Once I figured out how not to blow all my money on the road, I was finally starting to get my feet on the ground.

Maybe as a result of this, not to mention the fact that The Stallion himself had barely two years behind the wheel, we didn't talk that much about the little things one needs to know about running team, such as:

Axiom One:

If you wake up and your trainer has left the truck, always leave something on the steering wheel (a pillow, a notebook, anything!) to let him/her know that you too have left the truck.

All in all, Builders Transport was an alright company to get started with. But once I made it through training, I got in trouble there. They had this new-fangled thing called the cash advance. At least it was new to me. Never in my life had I worked for anyone who would just give you a hundred dollars on your fuel card just because you said you needed it. But for a rookie to the over the road scene, this threw me into a vicious cycle. It got to where I couldn't make a decent check because my advances were high. In turn, my advances were high because I couldn't make a decent check, which brings me to...

Axiom Two:

Don't be an advance junkie. So, what was my real problem? Well, I loved to eat. My mother was a trained chef. My father ran a meatpacking company, and nearly every week, we enjoyed Filet Mignon, Prime Rib, New York Strip. My wife was also an excellent cook. In short, I was spoiled rotten with too much high-end food. So, I would scoop up those advances and blow them on truck stop meals, eating two or three squares a day. I was paying other people to prepare my food, living too rich. How I finally broke that cycle was...

Axiom Three:

As much as possible, insource your own food preparation. It's much cheaper and healthier. Lots of drivers swear by the RoadPro 12-Volt Portable Stove. Stock up on good healthy foods, so you don't have to be solely dependent on truck stops for your nutrition.

There is nothing I regret more in my early career than borrowing money from the folks I worked for.

Once I figured out how not to blow all my money on the road, I was finally starting to get my feet on the ground. We had managed to buy a modest home in the country, and I was itching for the next level. I met a guy who was buying a truck through a carrier in Ohio. He was talking numbers, and everything about the deal sounded right. So I wound up buying a truck through that same outfit. They were decent people who didn't hold maintenance escrows or charge exorbitant amounts for their trucks. Still, about a year and a half into my truck note, I got a call from a union casket company, which was twenty minutes from my house. It was one of those outfits where someone would have to die or retire before you could get hired. You were home every weekend and home two nights throughout the week. The pay was double what anyone else was offering in the area. All you had to do was sling those caskets. One of their drivers had finally retired, and there was an opening. I had been trying for years to get on there. But my obligation to the truck note held me back. I didn't want to renege on my obligation. Truth be told, I had taken a short cut to ownership, and it had bitten me in the backside. If I had a strong cash position on an older piece of equipment like experts such as Overdrive's Gary Buchs and Kevin Rutherford suggest, I could have sold out and gone to work for the union outfit, which leads me to...

Axiom Four:

Avoid debt servitude like the plague. When you borrow money from a trucking company, your relationship goes from employer/employee to lender/debtor, and that changes things. There is nothing I regret more in my early career than borrowing money from the folks I worked for. I know people who spend years of their lives in debt to one carrier. They stay out months at a time trying to get out of the hole. I used to be one of them. But the wisdom of Solomon still echoes through the corridors of time "The borrower becomes the lender's slave." Don't be a slave, my friend. If you're a new company driver, and your carrier is pressuring you to buy a truck through them, you're not working for people with your best interests at heart. Get out there as soon as you can. Tough it out at least a year if possible, then get away from there.

I hope this story of my hard knocks in trucking may save you from some of your own.

I've tried to give you the good, the bad, and the ugly, so that you may avoid the mistakes I've made.

Which reminds me, the mistake I made that night in that South Carolina rest area was not calling dispatch immediately. I supposed I was embarrassed, and I figured The Italian Stallion would reach the Charlotte terminal we were headed towards, realize he'd forgotten me at the rest area, and return in about an hour. The kindly custodian, an older southern gent, who had witnessed me sprinting towards the departing cabover, shouting with arms flailing, offered me his grave advice. "You better hope he gets back here before them good buddies get here. They're thick as thieves once the sun goes down. You can tell who they are by the way they park opposite to the lines. They usually hang out right here around this picnic table where you're sitting."

I arose immediately as a feeling of desperation overtook me. I suppose I've evolved a bit since that night, but to the 27-year-old Paul, I was in the belly of the beast.

True to his word, once the sun went down, the alternative lifestyle community of Charlotte descended on that rest area like fireflies, and there I was, Little Bo Peep, waiting for The Italian Stallion to come to rescue me.

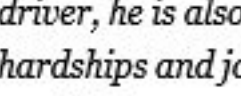
I finally picked up the phone and called dispatch. "We've been waiting for your call. Where are you?"

A half an hour later, the Stallion steamed through the parking lot like Dale Earnhardt. Glowering with indignation, he pulled no punches. "I hoped you learned your lesson!"

And I hope this story of my hard knocks in trucking may save you from some of your own.



Paul Marhoefer, known in the trucking community as Long-Haul Paul, has been trucking off and on since 1979. In addition to being a seasoned truck driver, he is also an accomplished musician whose gritty ballads reflect the hardships and joys of a career which spans four decades over the road. You can find out more about him at longhaulpaul.com



Courtesy PRX/Radiotopia

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A YouTube video player interface. At the top left is the "ROADTRUCK" logo and the text "Dezl OTR GPS". At the top right are "Watch later" and "Share" buttons. The video content shows three overlapping screens of the Garmin truck navigation system. The front-most screen shows a route to "95th Street" with a speed limit of 65 and an arrival time of 12:38. The middle screen shows a "Straight Truck" mode. The back-most screen shows a route to "South Kansas Tpke" with a speed limit of 85 and an arrival time of 1:09. A large red play button is centered over the screens. At the bottom left, there is a "Watch on YouTube" button. At the bottom right, the text "DÉZL™ TRUCK NAVIGATORS" is displayed.

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Winter is Coming

By Bob Caffee

It's hard to think about winter when it's warm outside, but it's coming, like it or not. There are a few things to think about to get ready. Is the truck ready? Is the cab ready? Are you ready? All great questions. Prepping the truck is different for an owner-operator vs. a company driver. I would hope a carrier would have a maintenance plan to prep the trucks for their drivers.



Owner-operators need to think about this stuff themselves. Fan belts, I replace them every year, late summer early fall. The same with shocks, they do help with traction, so start fresh before ice and snow. Check your owner's manual for any scheduled maintenance; I do it early if coming due before the cold sets in. Check coolant levels and have it tested for performance, drain, flush, and refill as needed. Keep washer fluid levels full of fluid that won't freeze and will help with deicing. Make sure to replace the wiper blades and always carry an extra set. Carry anti-gel; I wouldn't use it unless I knew I was going into an area that will be cold enough to need it, then treat as per directions on the bottle. Remember that if you are in the south and take a load to an area that is going to be very cold, wait to fill until you get closer to the colder area as the fuel will be treated for cold weather.

Winter is coming. Are you ready?

As far as tires, if you still have miles left on them but will need to be replaced soon, I would change them. You can save the old ones for next spring, put them back on and run them out. Then you can sell them for casings or retread them.

Prepping your cab for the winter months is also essential and applies to all drivers. Make sure you have extra blankets, warm winter clothing, including a good set of boots, gloves, and a winter cap. Carry non-perishable food items, just in case, as you never know if you might be stuck in a storm with no access to food options. Make sure that you always carry extra water, and keep it where it won't freeze.

As the winter months, approach, and really any time of the year, always check weather forecasts for your destination, be as prepared as you can, and remember to always slow down and take your time in snow and ice.

Winter is coming. Are you ready? Getting into the winter driving mindset now could be a challenge but well worth the time. ●



Bob and his wife Linda are members of the RoadPro Pro Driver Council and have been driving as a team since 2000 and started Expediting as team drivers owner-operators in 2005. Bob was a diesel mechanic before becoming a truck driver and performs most of the work on their truck and is always engineering something to improve life on the road. Bob and his wife are speakers at many events about trucking, expediting, and being an

owner-operator. They are both members of Freightliners Team Run Smart, where they write many blogs and articles regarding the industry. Other occupants of their truck are their dog Texas, a German Shepherd, and Squeaky, the cat.



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What's Your 20?

By Robert Greene, RoadPro Pro Driver Council

In today's trucking industry, there are many ways we have to keep in touch with family and friends, such as our cell phone, CB radio, and social media. As a driver who spends countless hours, weeks, and even months, I have also found that location apps are a great way to advise family and friends of my location at all times.

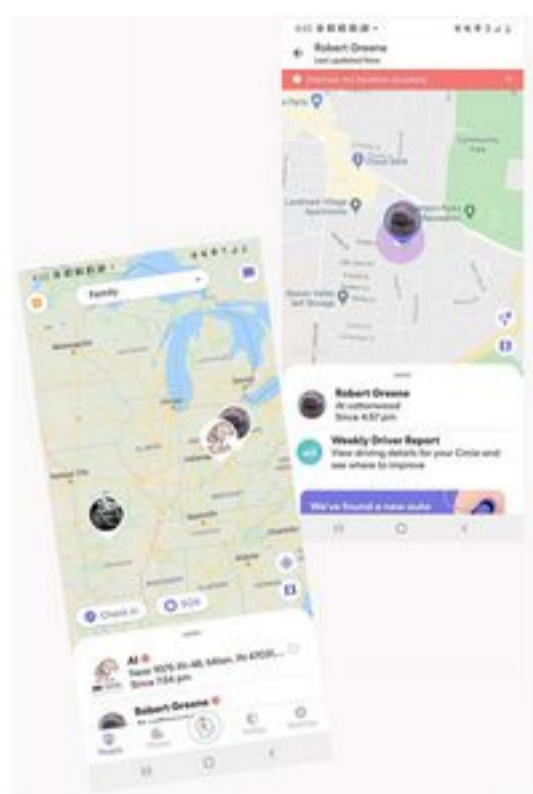


The one that I utilize is called Life 360, which was initially designed to show crime in your area. It can be found in any app store and is free unless you select the premium version. The premium version can show you more extensive detail, such as types of crime in your area.

As a driver, I use the location app daily. My fellow drivers and I have set up our own network and can track each other at any time. Anywhere. More than once, we have been able to zoom in to direct each other around traffic problems and helped each other find a safe haven to park.

On a personal level, a location app gives our families untold peace of mind.

By zooming in, we can pinpoint down to the parking spot where someone is, and this can be helpful if a driver hadn't moved when they were supposed to or not responded when contacted. Help can then be sent directly through the app to check on the driver. During severe weather outbreaks, you can see whether other drivers are in the path and give them a heads up and a route to get out of the way if they are still moving.



On a personal level, a location app gives our families untold peace of mind. Many nights I have still been driving when my wife went to bed. She was then able to check on me when she woke up. I had a serious accident a year ago and totaled my truck. I had a brief moment to call her before I was loaded into the ambulance. She was able to see I wasn't badly hurt by tracking the speed of the ambulance on the way to the hospital.

For that reason alone, I would recommend a location app as a must-have, not just for truck drivers, but for families as well. This app could also give parents peace of mind when their children are away from home. While my preference is Life360, there are many others to choose from that are available in your app store, and I would recommend this useful tool to provide that extra level of safety and security while out on the road, especially in today's world. What's your 20? ●



Robert started trucking in 1986 and has been an owner/operator for over 19 years. He has driven everything from oversized to flatbed drop deck, hazmat, reefer, and tankers and enjoys helping other drivers. He is the proud grandfather of 5 beautiful grandchildren who have him wrapped around their little fingers. He spends his time off with his family and friends making memories.

