

Towing the Car Trailer

By Chris Karras

What you need to know about towing capacity before you see flashing red lights.

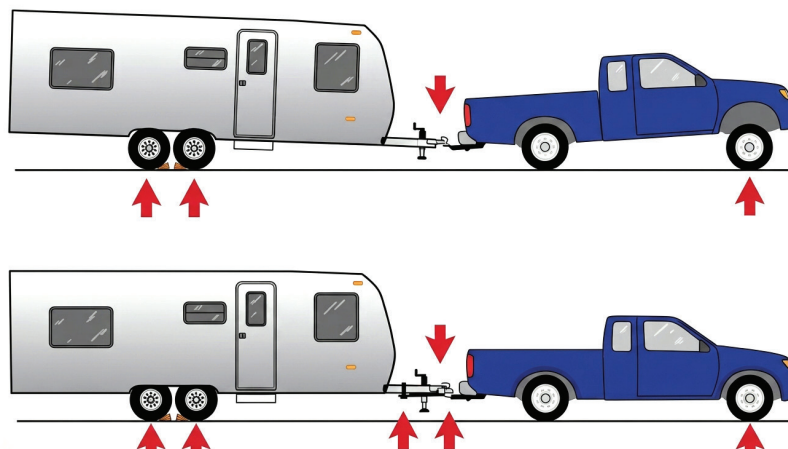
Dan stared in disbelief at the court judgment just rendered against him. He did nothing wrong, so how could the collision while towing lead to his liability? What happened? Let's start at the beginning.

Dan made the jump from driving to DEs in his 996 Turbo to a towing his car in a small enclosed trailer. It made it so much easier to prep the car for the track, bring R-rated tires and all the gear that is helpful to have at the track, including a portable grill and a big cooler. Dan is popular in the paddock!

He chose a reliable 2010 Tundra with the CrewMax cab, making it all the easier for the family to accompany him. Dan thought about one of those big diesel pickups that others in the paddock use to tow, but that seemed like overkill for Dan's needs, and his wife would not be happy driving a monster truck around town. With the optional tow package Dan's truck was rated to pull 10,100 lbs., and that would be plenty for his 20 foot trailer, car and gear. Dan estimated the weight of his new aluminum trailer with cabinets at 3,700 lbs., car at 3,400 lbs. and the rest of his gear at no more than 600 lbs. That gave Dan a comfortable safety margin of more than 2,000 lbs. He thought he was set. Was Dan ever wrong....

Dan's truck has a high towing capacity, but the payload limit on his 4WD truck is only 1,265 lbs., and the tow package on his truck actually reduced the payload. With the recommended 10-15 percent of the trailer's total weight on the tongue of the trailer, he had only 495-110 lbs. available to cover the weight of himself, fuel and his passengers. Dan only weighs 175 lbs., and his wife is a mere 120 lbs., but he had tossed a couple of sets of wheels in the bed of the truck for a friend. Dan's truck was overweight, but not by a lot. Dan's second mistake was the damning one.

What lead to the judgment against Dan was his failure to have the right hitch on his truck. With the tow package installed he had the right receiver on the truck and he chose a heavy-duty draw bar and ball, but he did not install a weight-distribution hitch on his trailer. The etrailer.com web site explains "Weight-distribution systems use spring bars to help combat the problems that often occur with standard hitch systems. Adding spring bars to your towing setup applies leverage to either side of your system, which transfers the load that is pushing down on the rear of your vehicle to all of the axles on both your tow vehicle and your trailer. This even distribution of weight results in a smooth, level ride, as well as the ability to tow at the maximum capacity of your hitch [emphasis supplied]." The illustration shows the differences between the two types of hitches.



Every full-size pickup sold today is required by the vehicle's manufacturer to use a weight-distributing hitch to tow trailers weighing above a certain weight, and that weight limit for the majority of pickups is 5,000 pounds regardless of cargo. The owner's manual for Dan's Tundra requires a weight-distribution hitch if the gross trailer weight exceeds 5,000 lbs., and Dan's trailer was well over that weight.

Even had Dan had chosen a Ford Super Duty F-250 diesel pickup to tow his trailer, the owner's manual would have limited the tongue weight and towing capacity to less than half of the headline numbers unless he had a weight-distribution hitch installed. Weight-carrying and weight-distributing hitch setups have completely different maximum towing capacities. Weight-carrying limits range from 5,000 to 8,500 lbs. for heavy duty pickups while weight-distributing limits are about double that and can top 18,000 lbs. The short answer is that, without a weight-distribution hitch, Dan could not tow his trailer properly, even with a very big truck.

Which takes us back to Dan, towing his trailer on I-81 en route to Summit Point. When the driver of the red SUV turned to chastise a child in the back seat and swerved into Dan's lane there was nothing Dan could do. The impact was not all that substantial, but it bent metal and several of the SUV's passengers sustained injuries. When the trooper wrote up the collision report he noticed the obvious absence of the weight-distribution torsion bars on Dan's trailer. The personal injury lawyer representing the SUV passengers made hay with Dan's error to comply with the requirements in the Tundra's owner's manual. Liability based on negligence was guaranteed—the only issue was how big the judgment would be.

Bad as it was, Dan's experience could have been much worse. Without the proper hitch, Dan may have not been able to control his trailer in windy or slippery conditions or during collision avoidance maneuvers. There are many stories of towing incidents told in the paddock, and not all are of close calls. Manufacturers specify requirements to promote safety. Please pay attention.

