The Learning Curve

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What if ...?

In March, *The Learning Curve* looked at things that can go wrong. This month we return to the subject of safety and look at other pitfalls that we should teach ringers to avoid.

Caught unawares

After an accident, you often hear '**I assumed that ...**'. Life would be very complex if we never made assumptions, but sometimes we shouldn't. For example '**I assumed that...**

... the bell was down.'

You are going to raise a bell and you automatically make coils. The bells are always down - but are they this time? Everyone else is making coils - but is your bell down? You were told to raise it - but have you got the right one?

Pull a bell off the balance with a fist full of coils, and at best you will get a nasty shock. If you are unlucky, you could inflict serious injury on yourself, and possibly someone else.

It is simple to check, and it only takes a couple of seconds. Bells that are up and bells that are down feel and behave completely differently in response to force on the rope. Pull gently and let go. If the bell starts to swing, even by an inch or so, then it is hanging down. Otherwise, assume that it is up.

This test works because when the bell is hanging freely it can swing a little in response to a small force on the rope. When it is up though, it leans against the stay, so a small force will not move it at all (apart from perhaps stretching the rope a bit) until you can lift the whole weight of the bell off the stay. And having failed to lift it off the stay, relaxing again simply leaves it where it is - at rest, leaning against the stay. If you do lift the bell away from the stay, then at the point where it does so, you feel it move. If you then relax you will first feel it move back to where it was, and then feel the stay take its weight without further movement.

But how small a force is small? The force needed to move a heavy Tenor half an inch when it is down, might be enough to pull a light-set Treble over the balance when it is up. Even so, the feel is different, and with care you should be able to tell which is which. Before applying this test, always assume the worst case (that the bell is up) and be prepared for the fact that you might pull it off by accident. That means you need the tail end in your hand as if you were about to ring it full circle, even though you suspect (but have not yet proved) that it is down.

... she had checked.'

Have your learners yet got the habit of checking that the bell is down? Keep an eye on them and if they make coils without checking first, then remind them. You might not be there when it really matters.

... the bell would set.'

If you let go of the sally hoping that the bell will set after it goes over the balance, you might be lucky (providing the stay is intact) but if it bounces back (or if you accidentally pulled it as you let go) then the next you know will be as the rope whips up out of control.

Only let go of the rope when you know that your bell has stopped moving and you can feel it safely resting against the stay. Then you know that it is safe to do so.

... it wouldn't get caught.'

You might see other people ringing with a tie hanging out and getting away with it - you might even have done it yourself - but it is dangerous to assume that your tie, necklace or belt end will never get caught in the rope. In the words of advertisements for financial products 'past performance is no guide to future performance'. Don't ring with anything hanging loose, or the next time you might injure yourself. Speak up if you see someone else about to ring with something dangling. You might feel fussy, but think how you would feel if you said nothing and the rope caught it.

... he could ring.'

We welcome both ringers and non ringers to our towers, but do you know which are which? Non ringers don't know what is or is not safe. Visitors have been known to walk up to a rope, take hold of it and start pulling. It is our collective responsibility to make sure that visitors do not harm themselves or anyone else. Whoever greets them should advise them, but if not, then other ringers on hand should be prepared to do so. If you are near to visitors, be aware of what they are doing, and be prepared to intervene to prevent any unsafe actions.

Not all visitors are competent ringers

Overheard

The Tower Captain (TC) holds a bell handling session before the main practice. One of the band, himself an Experienced Teacher (ET) arrives early for the main practice. To make best use of the remaining time, TC asks ET to look after a New Learner (NL). ET introduces himself to NL who is already standing by the bell with tail end in hand.

"When you are ready." says ET. NL reaches up to the sally and does a text book pull off. A few seconds later her hand tangles with the rope and ET intervenes to take the bell from her and set it. TC is annoyed. "Why did you let her do that? She's only ever rung backstrokes.". NL had a severe rope burn.

What can we learn from this? ET had not been involved with NL's earlier training, and so did not know how far she had progressed. He knew that she had been learning for several weeks, and saw no reason to assume that she was not making good progress. Had ET been teaching her, she would have been ringing both strokes long ago. Her text book stance and confident pull-off reinforced his perception that he was simply required to be on hand 'just in case' - but he didn't check, he assumed. It would have been simple and unobtrusive to ask NL 'OK, what are you doing at the moment?'.

What if ...?

Odd things happen, but knowing what to do reduces the problem. **So what happens if ...**

... a rope breaks? It can be alarming if you don't realise what is happening, but it is unlikely to be dangerous. The rope normally breaks when you pull it - the last straw that breaks the camel's back - whereas a slack rope is normally caused by not pulling. There can be a lot to come down, which takes quite a while. Things might seem to go into slow motion in the few seconds before it is in a heap at your feet. All you can do is try to get out of the way. If you are lucky the bell will keep ringing and ring down by itself. If it sets, then someone experienced has the risky task of dealing with it.

... the rope comes off the wheel? This can be really scary if you have never experienced it. Instead of wrapping round the wheel, the rope slips over the edge and takes a short cut, so that much less rope is taken up to backstroke and the rope hangs around unexpectedly. In itself it is not dangerous, but it is tempting to take hold of the rope, and you will get a nasty shock when the rope flips back onto the wheel next time and is yanked up out of your hands.

... the sally sticks? A fat sally can stick in a rope boss (or in the pulley block with a short draught). The symptom is that the rope goes up to backstroke as normal, but doesn't come all the way down again. Prevention is better than cure - ring with a tight rope all the way down, to keep the rope moving past the obstruction. If loose rope above the blockage loops and catches on something, then it might cause damage.

... your fingers go through the rope? In a soft rope with the tucks too far apart, the tail loop can hang open when your fingers go round to grip the tail end prior to the backstroke, and they go between the two pieces of rope. It feels odd, but don't panic. Ring the backstroke normally, and your fingers will come out when your hand moves to the sally again. Trying to untangle your hand on the way up to backstroke can cause more trouble than doing nothing. The best solution is to have the tucks in the rope closer together near where you grip the tail end.

... the rope gets round your elbow? It shouldn't of course if your handling is tidy, but if it did, then lifting your arm will allow the rope to pull away without catching.

... the rope sits on someone's shoulders? This is rare, but could be fatal. It should never happen of course, but if you are standing with someone who manages to do it, then just lift the rope clear.

Scaremongering?

You can ring for a long time and never experience any of the things described here, but any of them could happen at any time. Teach your learners good habits and they should avoid most of them, but if they also develop an awareness of the mechanics and what can happen, then they should be able to cope safely, even if things do go wrong.

Tail End

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