



SILAGE SAFETY:

ONE MAN'S STORY OF SURVIVAL IN SILAGE PILE COLLAPSE

By Ron Goble

VISALIA, Calif. – This month looms large in nutritionist Doug DeGroff's calendar of memories. Two years ago, DeGroff was pulled from beneath a 20-ton pile of silage, seriously injured, but blessed to be alive!

Like most nutritionists, DeGroff had sampled thousands of silage piles in the course of his daily routine. This one looked harmless. Face, shaved to near perfection.

But all too quickly – when the sun went out – he realized he had misjudged the stability of the towering wall of silage he was sampling.

“It was a normal summer day, Aug. 27. It was a Thursday,” he recalled. “I was supposed to meet someone for lunch and went by a dairy to grab a sample on my way from Riverdale to Visalia. I swung into the dairy pulled up to the silage pile in my pickup.

“I admired the face, first of all. This particular dairy had a silage defacer and I thought this is a great face. These guys are doing a great job.

“I pulled my truck up right next to the pile because the pile was mechanically shaven and the loose feed was moved closer to the feeding area so I knew I wasn't going to be in the way of the loader. The pile still wasn't very tall – maybe 11 or 12 feet – so I could use my pitchfork and do my thing.

“The feeder was a couple hundred yards away and I could hear the loader. I'd done it thousands of times. Just about done, taking a sample from the top.

“I didn't hear a thing. The only thing I saw was the sun going out. I knew what was happening before it actually hit me...It registered in my brain that the feed is coming down. Immediately it hit me, and I went to the ground.

“I remember thinking *I don't want to die here today!* While I was able to push silage away from my face with one hand, the other arm was trapped below me. But thankfully, I was able to brush the feed away from my head.

“It was like laying in a manger and having

a feed truck drive by and deliver feed on your head. From my chest down, however, there was a tremendous amount of feed on top of me. All I remember was my ankles were hurting and my back was hurting.

“Leo the feeder saw or heard it happen. All I know is that I was yelling at the top of my lungs and he was coming and I was still yelling because it was so painful. He dug me out with his hands until he was able to grab both my hands and pull me out.”

With the adrenalin rush that always accompanies such a traumatic accident, DeGroff immediately jumped to his feet; looked down to see if anything was broken.

“I was just walking in circles...in pain, but also thankful that I was alive. I was also worried what the owner might think when someone gets hurt on the dairy. It's a big deal and I didn't want to be the cause of the big deal.

“I laid down on the cement to catch my breath. I lost my shoes in the pile when they

Please turn to page 14

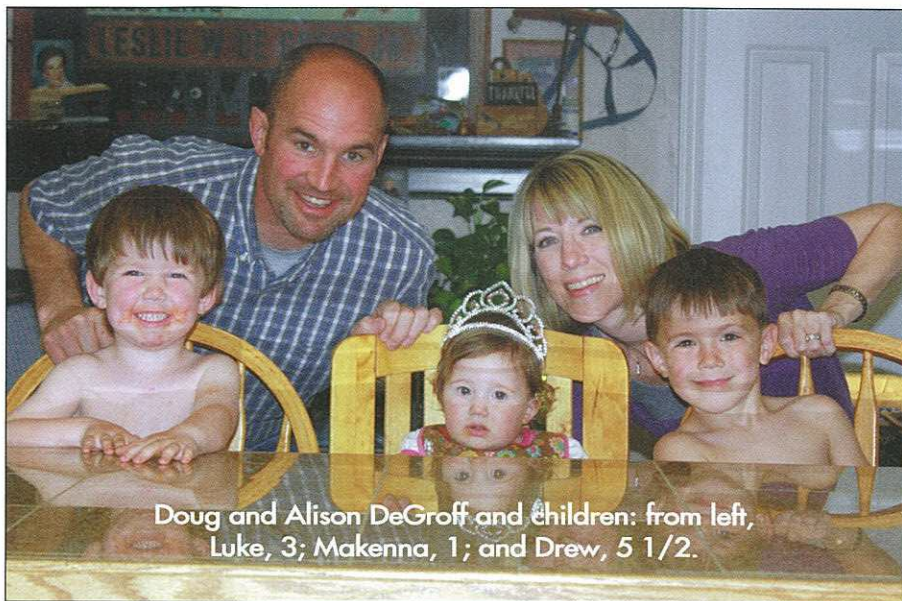
pulled me out. Lost my sunglasses. I was walking around in my socks.

"I looked at my truck – it (falling silage) dented in the side of the truck and filled the entire bed of my pickup with feed.

"By then the herd manager and owner had arrived at the pile and they were asking if I was okay. I told them I was. (Okay, I lied) I didn't want them to worry that I was hurting or injured on their dairy. I told them I was going to go home and get cleaned up. I got in my truck and called to cancel my lunch appointment and then called my wife to meet me at the ER.

"I knew I had done something very serious to my back when twisting to fasten my seat belt, I felt terrible pains shooting down both legs.

Once in Kaweah Delta Medical Center's Emergency Room, DeGroff was immobilized and x-rayed. The radiologist found one fractured vertebrae and he was admitted to the hospital for "uncontrollable pain." The next morning two MRI's, showed he actually had two fractured vertebrae in his back – one that didn't show up in the x-ray was "turned"



Doug and Alison DeGroff and children: from left, Luke, 3; Makenna, 1; and Drew, 5 1/2.

and applying dangerous pressure on his spinal cord. He also suffered torn ligaments and five damaged disks. He was told not to move from his bed until they could fit him with a custom back brace. DeGroff even had abrasions on his head from the force of the silage falling on him.

Months of serious rehab, which included walking five miles a day, has DeGroff healthy again and much wiser.

"I will never say it was a good thing that it happened. But I will say it wasn't a bad thing, in how it changed my perspectives. All the changes were good changes. Here I am today, everything works, and no pain medication. I am physically, mentally and spiritually healthier today than I was on Aug. 27, 2009," DeGroff declared.

Close call produces big changes

On his way to the hospital, DeGroff called the nutritionist that works with him and told him to suspend any silage pile sampling until they put new safety protocols into place.

So, what are they doing different since the accident?

"It's actually quite easy," said DeGroff. "It generates a better sample; takes a little more time, but is safer for everybody involved. If you plan ahead and have a little better organization, the sampling can be fairly quick."

DeGroff's dairy nutrition company – Diversified Dairy Solutions, LLC – now follow new silage sampling protocols:

1. Have the feeder clean out feed box thoroughly to prevent any contamination with leftover feed. The easiest and best way is to use some of the silage that will be sampled,

be sure not to sample the silage used to clean out the feed box.

2. Have the feeder load one day usage up to 10,000 lbs. in the mixer. This should represent silage face both vertical and horizontal. Have the feeder mix the silage in the feed box for approximately 5 minutes.

3. Have the feeder unload silage in a safe area.

4. Using a bucket collect 10-15 handfuls of the silage from different areas.

5. Mix the silage thorough in the bucket and then fill and label the sample bag.

We've all made poor decisions

DeGroff said he has sampled many piles that looked like they could fall down. This one that fell on him looked completely safe. He learned the hard way that there is no such thing as a safe silage pile.

"Whether it is the dairy producer, feeder, the nutritionist, or the feed salesman taking a sample...we've all be in areas where we were consciously aware we shouldn't have been there just based upon how the pile looked. Those in my profession have all walked up to grab a handful of feed and smell it, feel it, and inspect it. We all need to break that bad habit and put safety first." □

FYI

■ To contact Doug DeGroff, Diversified Dairy Solutions, call 559-280-7880 or e-mail him at doug@dairysol.com.

■ For more information on silage pile safety, e-mail Keith Bolsen, professor emeritus, K-State University, at keithboleson@hotmail.com.

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