

Hensley Arrow

PRODUCT EVALUATION

By Bob
Livingston

BUILDING A BETTER mousetrap is the kind of mechanical challenge that keeps frustrated inventors motivated. After all, if we didn't have inventions and discoveries, modern civilization would be less sophisticated. While most industries grow technologically, it has been quite awhile since a pioneering change occurred in conventional trailer-hitch design.

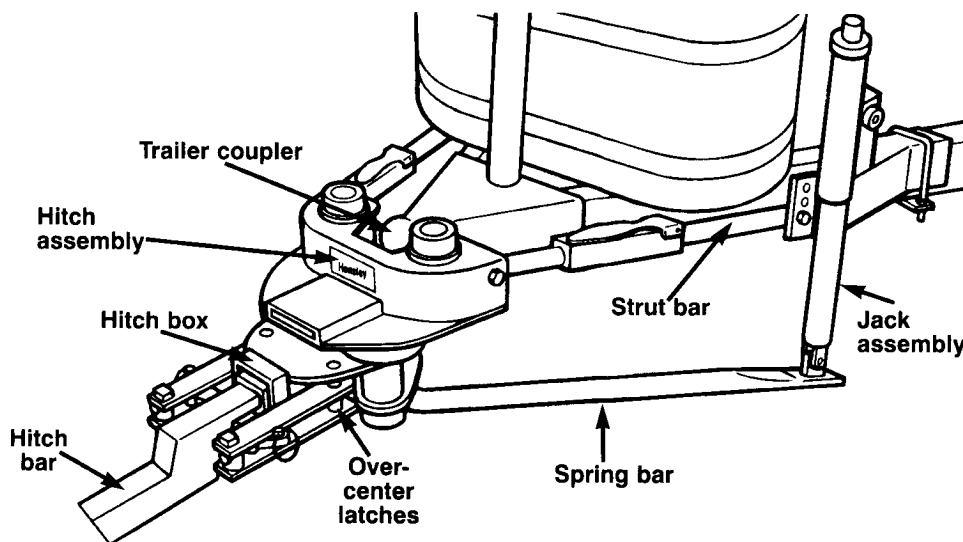
That doesn't necessarily mean the hitch industry is not progressive. Modern load-distributing hitches have passed the test of time; what worked yesterday still works well today. So why change something that isn't broken?

A new product, called the Hensley Arrow, may qualify as another pioneering change in conventional trailer hitching. At first glance, the array of hardware needed to make the Hensley

hitch function will have you sighing in disbelief. This hitch retails for \$2595, so the large number of parts might tend to justify the financial pain. More significant is the effect on towing stability. Sway will no longer be in your vocabulary. Those of you with marginally stable tow vehicles (short-wheelbase trucks, sport-utility vehicles and softly sprung cars) and larger trailers will certainly be smiling after your first jaunt with the Hensley Arrow hitch.

Hensley's additional claim to eventual fame is its simple hitching procedure. After the hardware is affixed to the trailer, everything stays attached to the trailer A-frame. The only removable part is the hitch bar (shank), which fits existing 2-inch-square receivers. Hitch bars are available in straight or drop-down configurations (2-inch increments). Of course, drop-

*Say
goodbye
to trailer
sway with
this unique
hitching
system*



The components of the Hensley Arrow, with the exception of the hitch bar, remain attached to the trailer A-frame. Tightening the jack assembly is the only adjustment necessary during the hitching process.

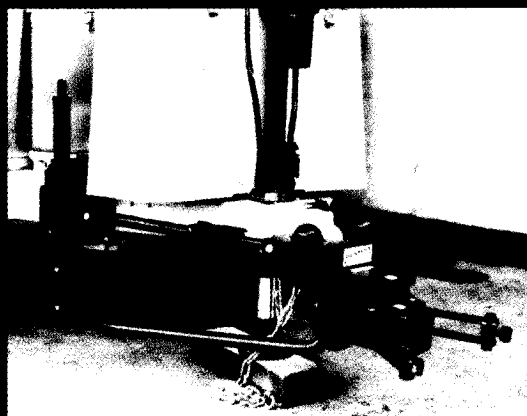
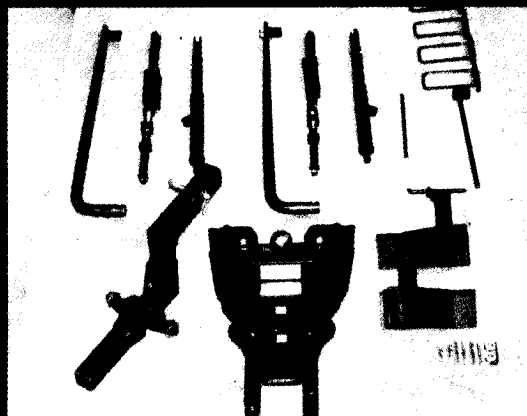
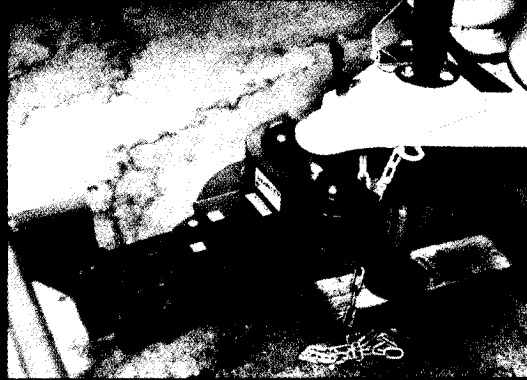
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down hitch bars are needed for vehicles with higher ground clearance.

Included in the hardware package are the main hitch assembly (designed for 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch balls; 2-inch ball assemblies are also available), the hitch bar (we opted for one with an 8-inch drop), spring bars and brackets, a tensioning jack and strut kit (new terms to the hitch world), a jack hand crank and a lock wrench. The weight difference between Hensley's Arrow and conventional hitches is approximately 79 pounds, according to the manufacturer.

The hitch assembly is one serious-looking piece of equipment, consisting of two main members. The lower piece includes the 3-inch hitch box that accepts the 2-inch-square hitch bar (the box is tapered to 2 inches in the rear) and the upper section that latches to the trailer coupler.

The design of the main hitch assembly is dependent on two links that are used to support the rear member on the front. These links allow the trailer to track behind the tow vehicle in a turn. In the first few degrees of the turn, the trailer follows as if the tongue pivot axis was near the rear axle, much the same as a fifth-wheel trailer. The links fold during sharper turns, and the hitch is restricted from moving in the direction of the turn. Therefore, the trailer can handle more like a conventional unit while negotiating sharp turns



The main hitch assembly attaches to the trailer coupler; locking is advised (top). Outside of the spring bars, hardware is unique (center). Struts (positioned along the A-frame from the brackets to the main hitch assembly) work with linkages to prevent sway.

and backing. The hitch will allow a 165-degree turning radius, comparable to 180 degrees for a fifth-wheel.

Since the linkage system creates the effect of moving the hitch point closer to the rear axle, the tow vehicle's steering input does not exaggerate the trailer's lateral movement; it behaves similar to a fifth-wheel, which is inherently stable. Sway control is a function of the linkage system and struts that prevent the rear member from turning on the ball. Pivoting occurs in the unit's linkages, not at the hitch ball. The trailer can move laterally only when it receives input from the tow vehicle. Therefore the effect of wind forces from either side or gusts blasted by passing 18-wheelers is blocked by the linkage system, and the trailer continues to track in a straight line.

Installation will require study for a couple of reasons: The instructions are somewhat vague (the manufacturer promises updated, clearly detailed revisions by the time this evaluation is published), and you're working with hardware that looks very different. Once you figure out what you're doing, plan on about one hour for the installation, using simple hand tools. Mounting the spring bar/jack assembly brackets requires a few measuring exercises, but once that's done, the rest of the hardware mounts nicely.

The main hitch assembly is attached to the coupler after it is mounted to the hitch bar and

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the over-center latches are secured. These latches are the key to subsequent hitching and are very easy to use. After the main hitch assembly is secured (locking the coupler is recommended) and the measurements are completed, the struts, the tensioning jacks and the spring bars are attached. Be sure you have adequate clearance between the top of the tensioning jacks and the propane cylinders. A-frames that are designed to accept the Eaz-Lift-type spring bars should have plenty of clearance.

Once you have completed the installation of all the hardware and the struts have been tightened, you'll need to tension the spring bars. Finding the proper tension follows the same procedures for adjusting a conventional equalizing hitch except that the ends of the spring bars are pulled by the tensioning jacks (using the removable jack handle). When the trailer and the tow vehicle are in the proper position, you can mark the stopping points on the tensioning jacks. The spring bars (Eaz-Lift compatible) are

jacks are adjusted. Attach the safety chains and breakaway switch, plug in the wiring harness and retract the trailer tongue jack, and you're ready to roll. Reverse the procedure to unhitch.

The hitch bar has a tendency to stick in the hitch box until the process is repeated a number of times. This may create some hitching troubles for timid drivers who are afraid to aggressively use the accelerator pedal. It takes some acclimation when hitching and unhitching on uneven ground. It's best to determine the height of the hitch box that allows the hitch bar to be loose in the hitch box, and fabricate some sort of a measuring device to facilitate returning to this position prior to inserting or removing the hitch bar. Marking this height with the over-center latch handle works well.

After a while—and after the bugs are worked out, including becoming familiar with strange equipment—the procedure becomes fairly routine. We eventually learned to appreciate the way most of the equipment stays on the trailer A-frame and requires no storage. Handling greasy spring bars and heavy ball mounts is a thing of the past with the Hensley Arrow.

It's mandatory to firmly chock the trailer wheels when hitching and unhitching.

rated for 1000 pounds; the hitch assembly has a 10,000-pound gross trailer rating and is rated for 1000 pounds of hitch weight.

The hitching procedure, in theory, is very simple, but requires some practice, especially if the driver is accustomed to attaching a coupler to a ball. We found that it is more difficult to line up the hitch bar with the hitch assembly box than lining up a standard coupler to a ball, if a second set of eyes is not available. This is especially true if the ground is not level. It's mandatory to firmly chock the trailer wheels when hitching and unhitching.

To hitch up, the owner inserts the hitch bar, attaches the securing pin and backs up into the hitch assembly box. When the bar is seated, the over-center latches are positioned using the supplied handle, and the tensioning

TESTING

We tested the Hensley hitch by towing a 27-foot Airstream with possibly the world's worst tow vehicle, a 20-year-old four-wheel-drive (4WD) Dodge Ramcharger with a lifted suspension. For comparison, we towed the same trailer with a 1994 Dodge Ram 2500 4WD pickup. Towing the Airstream with the Ramcharger, using a conventional equalizing hitch and friction sway control, was hell on wheels. There were moments when quick lane changes and strong crosswinds resulted in a death grip on the steering wheel. Of course, the new Dodge pickup exhibited nice road manners with the conventional hitch and friction sway control.

The Hensley Arrow made an unbelievable improvement in towing stability with the Ramcharger. The trailer tracked true, and lane changes were accomplished without fear. The Hensley hitch should make acceptable tow vehicles out of short-wheelbase trucks and sport-utility vehicles, and allow towing of large trailers with properly rated passenger cars without trepidation.

Using the Hensley with the Dodge pickup was a beautiful experience. Sway was totally absent, and we found that we could briefly let go of the steering wheel while traveling 60 mph in severe crosswinds (for test purposes

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only; don't try it with your rig). The only time we noticed 18-wheelers is when they came into view alongside.

Since the trailer follows more like a fifth-wheel, tracking to the inside on turns, we had to pay a little more attention when turning corners and maneuvering in campgrounds. This, of course, will become habit after awhile. Backing into campground spaces likewise requires a slightly different approach, especially if you've towed the trailer using a conventional hitch for any length of time. After acclimation, we appreciated the improved turning radius and maneuverability.

The Hensley Arrow is covered by a 60-day uncondition-

al guarantee and a lifetime limited warranty on parts and service. It is an expensive piece of equipment, but it works. If it postpones trading for a more suitable tow vehicle and taking a financial loss in the process, the initial cost may be justified. For those of you who are comfortable with your conventional hitch, but would like additional sway control and hitching convenience, the idea of using a better mousetrap just might whet your appetite.

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