

TOW and GO

PART 11: NEED A LIFT?

BY DAVID SWAIN

The next time you hook up your trailer, check to see how much the rear suspension sags as the load increases. Don't just eyeball it. Check with a tape measure. If your truck is a few years old and the springs are a little tired it's not unusual to see an inch or two drop.

This may not seem like a big problem but there are changes happening that will affect the ride and safe handling of your truck. More weight on the back axle will reduce the steering effectiveness not to mention having your headlights pointed into other driver's eyes!

"No problem," you say. "I'll just add some extra leafs to the springs or install heavy coil springs."

This would work, but the ride empty will be brutal.

My son had a one ton pick-up that was so rough when empty that it became the last choice to drive when it wasn't loaded. The truck felt like there was no suspension and normal roads would jar your teeth! What's the point of having a pick-up truck that you don't want to drive all the time?

Firestone Ride-Rite air helper springs came to the rescue. Firestone began developing air suspensions for cars over 70 years ago and has been a leader in the field ever since. Currently Firestone provides air springs to Ford, Land Rover, Range Rover and to large trucks such as Peterbilt and Freightliner.

There are kits available for virtually every pick-up truck on the market and most of these kits are pure bolt-on and something most backyard mechanics can do, providing they follow the instructions.

There are many approaches you can take to beef up your suspension, but the route I took was to



Ride-Rite air helper springs install without welding.

add Firestone air helper springs and air-assisted shocks on the rear and Level-Rite Air Spring and Bilstein Dampers on the front, all controlled by the Wireless Air Command Generation II controller.

The installation is straightforward and can be completed with regular tools. The rear air helper springs attach with no drilling and the air assisted shocks simply replace the existing shocks.

The front Level-Rite Air Spring and Damper take a little more effort because you have to get the old shocks out through the spring in the engine compartment, so it's a tight squeeze. Unfortunately, on

this truck, the captive nut that holds the bottom shock nut from spinning decided to break so a five minute job became a two hour job to figure out how to keep the nut from turning.

We finally got that problem resolved only to find out that the new Firestone Level-Rite combination shock/air spring will not fit through the hole on an aftermarket levelling kit! A new set of extra tall springs solved that problem and I was back in business. From that point on it's just a matter of hooking up the air lines which use push-to-lock fittings and wiring up the wireless control panel which only needs a couple of

connections to the battery and a keyed ignition source.

With everything hooked up and ready to go you just toggle to the individual corner or pairs of corners, front or rear or both together on the LCD screen and select the pressure (or lift) that you want and the frame mounted compressor turns on and up the truck goes. How cool is that?

There's no digging out a tire pressure gauge and air hose to change to height and you can make changes on the fly to get the results you want.

The first trailer I tried was a 5000lb travel trailer and, after



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measuring a 1.5" drop after the weight was on the ball, it was as simple as adding 25 psi to the rear air bags and the truck was level again.

The compressor can add over 100 psi, if you need it, but you'll have to watch you don't exceed your truck's load capacity. The air-assisted shocks are connected with a "T" fitting to the air bag, so the shock capacity will always match the load in the air bag.

I'm still experimenting with the front Level-Rite Air Spring and Damper to find the right balance and I think these units would be better suited to a truck that has a snowplow or a heavy slide-in camper.

With too much air these units become very stiff, so I run them with the minimum 10psi pressure.

You do notice the improved stability but at the loss of some ride comfort. For a heavily-loaded race truck with a trailer these would be ideal and would help with bottoming out and suspension fatigue.

The Firestone products are a definite plus for anybody that tows or hauls heavy loads.

Everything is well made and engi-

neered for a long life.

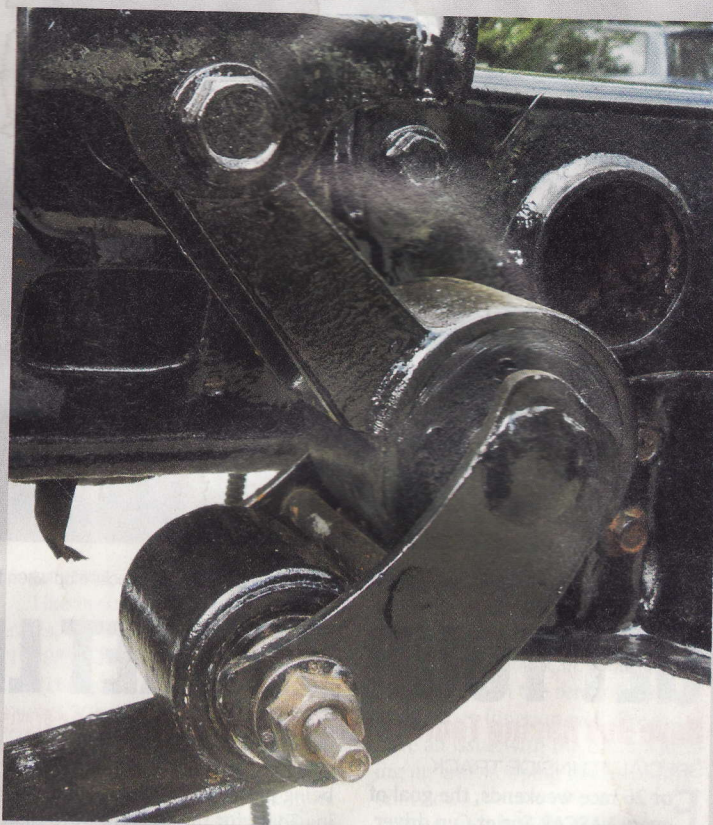
To try and remove road harshness and compliment the Firestone installation, I also installed a pair of Sulastic Rubber Springs which replace the rear spring shackles.

This product is designed to reduce vibration on empty and loaded vehicles while increasing vehicle stability and providing a safer, smoother ride.

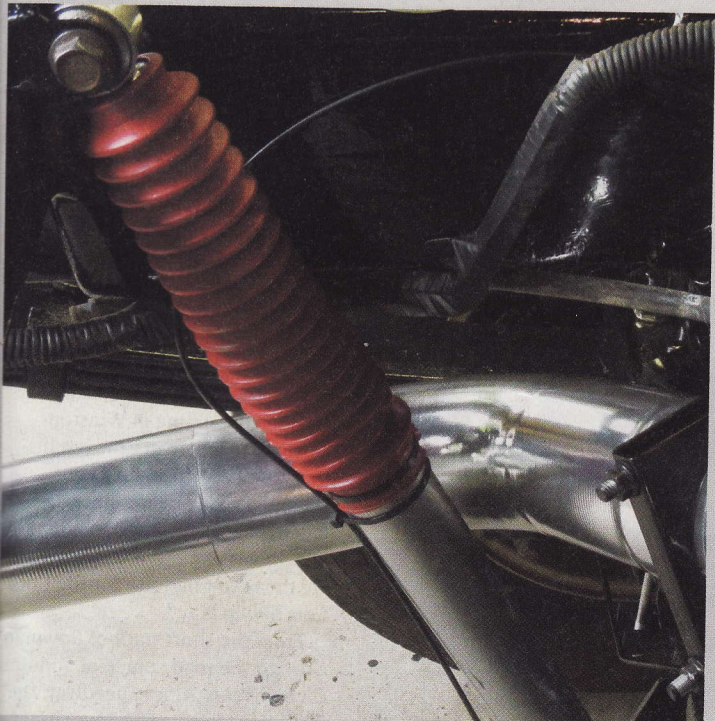
This is one of the easiest modifications you can do to a leaf spring type suspension to improve the ride in your truck as it only takes an hour (assuming you can get the old shackles off easily) to install. The ride improvement is immediately noticeable.

In a stock system there is a direct link between the rear leaf springs, road rumble and the seat of your pants, but with the Sulastic units you have a large rubber spring that cancels out most road noise and there is no loss of load capacity. The Sulastic units do not affect ride height and there are specific applications for most trucks.

As a bonus, these units are reasonably priced. If you're looking for a better ride in your truck this is the answer. •



(Above) Sulastic Rubber Spring replaces factory shackle.
(Below) Air pump and wireless controls mount on frame rail.



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