

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATHY BERGREN SMITH

# SAFE AND SOUND

## Coil-Tainer System Revolutionizes Transport of Steel

**T**he 20-foot container toppled the top pick moving it at Penn Terminals, careening into an adjacent box. The sickening sound of buckling metal left the top pick resting at a 45-degree angle on its front wheels and workers fretting about the condition of three stainless steel coils weighting 27 metric tons inside.

When the damaged container was opened, the contents

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BY PETE KERZEL





**Coil-Tainer President and CEO Michael J. Smolenski (left) says his company has never had a damage claim against it. Pictured with Smolenski is Randy Armstrong of Mediterranean Shipping Co., which uses the Coil-Tainer system to ship coil out of the Port of Baltimore.**

brought a sigh of relief and a sense of amazement. Two large coils were still firmly fastened, undamaged and ready for transport. A smaller coil had shifted in the collision, but only fallen on its side, stretching the limits of the guideline securing it.

Thanks to the patented Coil-Tainer shipping system, a disaster was averted

and steel worth more than \$25,000 was saved. Coil-Tainer President and CEO Michael J. Smolenski still smiles when recalling the happy ending to what could have been an expensive mishap.

"We've never had a damage claim against us," beams Smolenski, whose five-year-old company based in West Chester, Pa., has eliminated the uncertainty previously

associated with shipping steel coil.

Coil-Tainer was born out of round-table discussions in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1997. Representatives from steamship lines, steel companies, stevedores, loading system specialists and pallet designers collaborated to design a portable system for loading, transporting and unloading container-held coils.

**Why didn't anyone think of this before?**

"It's not that it's complex," says Allen Clifford, senior vice president of sales for Mediterranean Shipping Co., a Coil-Tainer client that ships steel out of the Port of Baltimore. "It's a good idea, a cool invention that creates a win-win for everybody."

The result, introduced in 1999, was a simple structure with revolutionary implications. Coil-Tainer features a broad based pallet capable of holding up to a 24-ton coil. Welded to its base are triangular supports that form a v-shaped cradle in which the coil rests.

Adjustable braces on each end of the

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*John Maszon (left photo), warehouse foreman for Cowan Intermodal Group, discusses loading specifications with warehouseman Leroy Forsythe. Once loaded into a trailer using the Coil-Tainer system (right photo), pallets of steel coil are locked firmly into place.*

structure block the galvanized or stainless steel in, while tie-downs over the roll are ratcheted tight with a winch. As an added layer of security, a strap through the coil's doughnut-hole middle fastens snugly over the braces.

If Coil-Tainer sounds like a common-sense solution to an age-old problem, it's with good reason.

"Sometimes, when you come up with an idea, the simplistic approach works



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best," Smolenski explains. "When people see it for the first time, they love it. The first question they ask is, 'Why didn't anyone think of this before?' And I guess that's a good question."

Transporting coil used to be a costly, inexact endeavor. But with steel coil a commodity in Europe, where it is used in the construction of Mercedes and BMW automobiles, as well as large home appliances, both shippers and those awaiting raw materials hoped for the best.

Coil sent breakbulk would often arrive broken, unrolled or unusable — to the point that it was valuable only for an insurance claim or scrap metal. Even steel that arrived safely could sustain damage by the elements during loading or unloading.

"The old way was to put the coil in a container and practically put a lumber yard around it — you braced it with pieces of wood," says Smolenski. "But when 15 or 20 tons of steel starts to roll with the pitch in the Atlantic, that wood's not going to stop it from moving."

"There's no block and brace with Coil-Tainer," says John Maszon, warehouse foreman for Cowan Intermodal Group. "So we don't have to worry about shifting."

Coil-Tainer's unique design spreads the weight over the entirety of the container, making damage to the container less likely. Excessive costs for ineffective shipping materials are reduced and it takes only a few minutes to load and unload containers, meaning increased shipping costs don't have to be passed along to the customer.

"This really makes my life easier," says Cowan Warehouseman Leroy Forsythe, as he prepares coils for shipment.

Because coils aren't damaged in transport, insurance claims are rare, resulting in lower rates and less time making claims and re-ordering replacements.

Smolenski says there are currently 550 Coil-Tainer units in use across the world, and the immediate need for more has ramped up production of the structures in the Czech Republic. The North Atlantic has been Coil-Tainer's primary market, but the company has recently expanded its reach into Italy and China.

The technology can be applied to "anything that's round," meaning pier-to-pier shipping could utilize Coil-Tainer for overland transport via truck. Rail shipping remains a future possibility,

pending government approval following safety crash tests.

"Bulk shipping rates have skyrocketed and the disparity between our rate and those rates isn't as huge as it used to be," Smolenski says. "But it's not all about rates."

Coil-Tainer has succeeded, Smolenski believes, because of people — those who developed it, those who have embraced it and those who continue to improve it.

It's not unusual for Smolenski to show up at the terminal with hot pizza and cold sodas in hand, and during these impromptu lunches, the company president picks the brains of laborers to see how Coil-Tainer can better meet their needs.

Already, these discussions have resulted in recessing the winches used to tighten straps and changes to the teeth on the bar that braces coils.

"The only way we're going to make our product better is by listening," Smolenski reasons. "And the best people to listen to are the ones who are using the product. If you listen to the people doing the work and give them a chance to communicate with you, you'd be surprised at what you find out." 🌐



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