



Nov. 16, 2023
For immediate release

Highway Department's Westphal is king of the Roadeo

Driving a plow truck isn't easy.

There is plenty to keep your eye on – from the mind-boggling number of control switches and different plow blades to the amount of material you're depositing along your route to often unpredictable motorists and hazards that pop up from time to time to Minnesota's wintry weather, which can be moderate in one part of the county and downright dangerous in another.

Driving a behemoth that's 54,000 pounds fully loaded is one thing. Navigating it through a maze of obstacles and being skilled enough to stop on a dime is quite another.

Maintenance Operator Josh Westphal knew he performed well at this year's Minnesota Roadeo held last month in St. Cloud. It wasn't until a couple of days later that he learned he placed first in the competition, earning himself the opportunity to compete at the 2024 national conference in Loveland, Colorado.

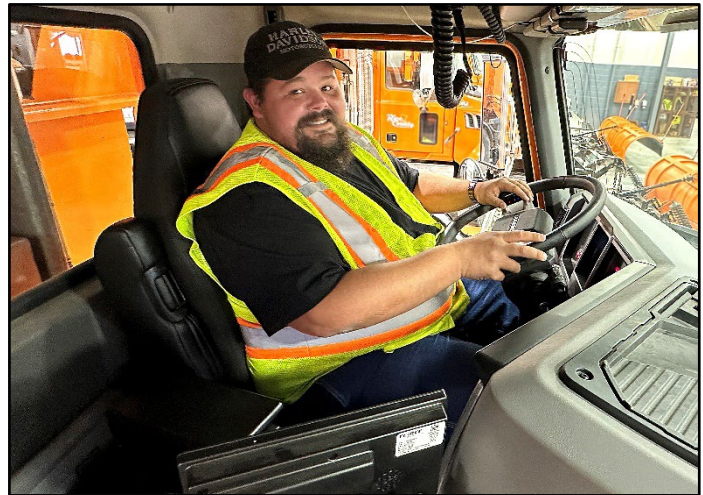
Rice County has a number of operators who've placed in the contest's top 10. Except for his first year, 2018, Westphal has never been lower than eighth. The number of drivers participating varies – anywhere from almost 70 to more than 90 maintenance operators from cities, counties and townships across the state.

Earning the title involves a written exam, a pre-trip inspection in which participants need to identify mechanical issues deliberately set for the contest and a road test in which drivers follow a course, which changes from year to year. The course involves driving single-axle plow truck provided by contest organizers and clearing a number of obstacles that includes mailboxes, an "S" curve, sharp turns and a roundabout.

It also required drivers to back up, stopping as close to a loading dock as possible without hitting it or the orange barrels that gave drivers the narrowest lane to maneuver. That was followed by a similar requirement, but in a forward direction so drivers had to stop the truck with a 10-foot plow blade attached to the front in a specific spot.

Westphal completed the course in about 6 minutes, and other than tapping a mailbox, which remained upright, with a wing (side plow), he had a clean run.

"I enjoy it," he said of the roadeo, "just to be able to test yourself, better your skills on some things."



Rice County Maintenance Operator Josh Westphal took first place at the Minnesota Fall Maintenance Expo Roadeo. In four of the last five years he competed, he's placed in the top 10. (Rice County photo)

A Rice County Highway Department team member since 2017, Westphal says he likes driving a plow but wishes motorists would understand what he and other operators contend with, and follow some simple rules such as not passing while they're plowing or spreading sand, keeping a safe distance – anywhere from five to 10 car lengths – and limiting distractions so they can focus on the roads.

"We want everyone to get home safe," he said.

Nationals aren't until next September, but when it runs there will be a twist: the first-place driver from each state runs part of the course, then switches places with the second-place finisher (this year it was Becker County operator Chris Ayers), so they can drive the second half of the course.

This year's Minnesota team set a pretty high bar, picking up first place.

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SNOWPLOW SAFETY

Driving too close to snow removal equipment can be extremely dangerous.

Snowplow safety tips

- Yield to snowplows. They travel slower than posted speeds.
- Give snowplow drivers plenty of room to do their jobs.
- Never drive into a snow cloud.
- Slow down! Never use cruise control on wet or icy roads.
- Stay alert. A snowplow weighs 17 times more than a car. In a crash, occupants of a car are much more likely to be seriously injured.
- Be patient. Follow at a safe distance. Allow five-10 car lengths between your vehicle and a snowplow.

For current road conditions

- Dial 511 or visit www.511mn.org
- MN Relay Service: 1-800-627-3529, TTY or ASCI

Source: Minnesota Department of Transportation