

AN 'AIR-AISING' STORY...

If somebody called Pat White came up to you and told you that he, alone, could move a couple of tons of machinery as far as you like without using forklift trucks, cranes or hoists, you'd probably wonder exactly which institution he'd escaped from. Because although Pat's no wimp, he's not the Incredible Hulk's brother either.

But Pat has something up his sleeve, and it's not huge muscles. He has recently designed a platform which functions much like a forklift truck but is a fraction of the size and has four air cushions instead of wheels on its underside. It also costs around R5 900 instead of the R80 000 you'd need for a forklift. The platform has labour benefits as well, as a completely unskilled person can use it with ease. Maintenance and running costs are almost nil.

All you have to do to use the platform is connect it to an air compressor with a length of flexible pipe, flick the air regulation switch and voila! the pads inflate. Once they are fully inflated, air escapes from their specially designed sides and lifts the platform off the ground.

"Only by microns," says Pat, "but it's enough to make pushing it — and a full load — across a smooth floor extremely easy."

Pat likens the effect to sliding something across ice. In various demonstrations in several factories, he has proved that one man can almost effortlessly move a two-ton load across the floor.

Unable to obtain a loan to finance his own company to manufacture the platforms, Pat discovered Aero-Go, a Johannesburg-based company which makes the air cushions he needed for his platforms. He had thought the cushions were only available from overseas.

"My platform is unique, but the concept of using air cushions to move heavy machinery and materials has been around in America since 1967," says Pat. "But I only discovered this after I'd invented the platform. It's a bit like an invention that's not really an invention but an adaptation of an idea that already exists."

Pat has already approached several of South Africa's biggest industrial companies with his concept and has been met with great interest by just about everybody. "In America, they use air or water-filled cushions to transport thousands of tons worth of ships and machinery. Even a section of a football stadium was moved forward using almost 200 pads. I don't know why we in South Africa haven't made use of this technology."

Recently, when a group of people got together in Durban to move a beautiful

Pat White gets a push on his air-cushioned platform. "I weigh 100 kilograms and you can push me with ease," he laughs. "My platform carries up to two tons and can still be easily pushed by one man."



Photographs by Zola Matthews