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Big truck mounts come of age



In recent years much of the new product development in the truck mounted platform market has been concentrated on models mounted on 3.5 to 7.5 tonne chassis where there has been considerable innovation and market growth. It is now the turn of the very largest machines.

Much of the innovation at the smaller end of the market has been spurred on by the need to redesign products every few years to accommodate heavier chassis as manufacturers installed new engines to meet the latest emission standards. It is said that necessity is the mother of invention, and the regular requirement to shave weight from an already efficient design, while maintaining platform rigidity, has resulted in a deeper understanding of how to get the most out of the latest ultra-high yield steels. Other innovations have included variable outrigger set up, complete with automatic sensing and working envelope adjustment, along with smoother controls, advanced telematics and hybrid power packs.



The use of large truck mounts continues to be on the rise

Over the following pages we take a look at models with working heights of 70 metres and above, which has seen substantial growth in the past two years, with the latest innovations making an impact in terms of new models and product upgrades. We take a quick look at the new 70 metre Ruthmann before speaking with UK based Blade Access, which not only runs a large fleet of truck mounts of 70 metres and above, but it also operates 90 metre models from each of the three major players: Bronto, Palfinger and more recently Ruthmann. Taking advantage of this, we survey three of Blade's 90 metre operators - one responsible for each manufacturer - to see how they compare.

Italian manufacturers Pagliero Multitel and Sogace also build

70 to 75 metre models that sell well in certain regions – mostly mainland and southern Europe as well as in the Middle East. Multitel manufactures more truck mounted lifts than any other European manufacturer and has a long history in the 60 to 75 metre market sector, but has tended to concentrate on small to mid-sized models, a strategy that has been highly successful. However it is now working on a new 77.5 metre model that will replace its now aging MJ 750 which it hopes will help it win a greater market share in the sector.



Multitel will shortly launch an all-new 77.5 metre MJ 775 to replace its MJ 750

Ruthmann has until recently left the top end of the truck mounted lift market to Bronto and Palfinger, due to the high development and testing costs for these machines, in what is a low volume market. However in 2017 it signalled a change to its strategy not to offer anything over 75 metres by announcing a 90 metre machine with the first delivery coming in July 2018. It highlights the strong growth in interest from end users for platforms of this height. More recently, it launched a new 70 metre model, the T 700 HF.

The new Ruthmann T 700 HF

Based on its 65 metre T 650 HF, the T 700 HF features a 3.5 metre longer upper boom to help it achieve up to 41 metres outreach as well as an up and over reach of 34 metres with a height of 47 metres. A higher boom elevation angle of 83 degrees not only helps provide the extra working height, but allows the machine to be positioned closer to a building for more usable outreach. Platform rotation is 440 degrees,

while the two metre jib has 220 degrees of articulation, allowing it to get up, over and behind obstacles. Maximum platform capacity is 600kg which is reduced to 100kg in order to achieve maximum outreach. Features include a heated platform, a material winch, a folding seat and the company's Dynamic Reach System (DRS) which it claims optimises the outreach depending on ground pressures, high wind speeds, platform capacity or outrigger positions. The following chart compares it with other machines in this class.



Ruthmann's latest 70 metre T 700 HF

How does Ruthmann's new T 700 HF stack up?

Manufacturer Model	Multitel MJ 685	Ruthmann T 700 HF	Bronto S70XR	Barin AP 73/35 J2	Sogace ForSte 75TJJ	Palfinger P 750
Max. work height	68.7m	70m	70m	73m	74.5m	75m
Max. capacity	400kg	600kg	700kg	400kg	600kg	600kg
Capacity @ max. height	400kg	320kg	360kg	400kg	300kg	320kg
Max. outreach	35.5m	41m	38m	35m	40m	39m
Capacity @ max. outreach	120kg	100kg	120kg	200kg	100kg	100kg
Outreach with max. capacity	29.4m	31.2m	30.7m	31m	28m	27.5m
Max. below ground reach	-16m	-17.5m	-11.5m	-14m	-20.5m	-15m
Chassis	32t	32t	32t	42t	32t	32t
Max. height	4m	3.99m	3.95m	-	3.99m	3.95m
Overall length	12m	11.9m	12m	-	-	14.1m

Taking it to the max

When we last interviewed UK rental company, Blade Access, back in 2009 it had just topped its second-hand fleet of truck mounted platforms with a new 70 metre Palfinger WT700. Since then the company has gone from strength to strength and now has more than 25 truck mounts of 70 metres and above, including the world's largest fleet of 103 metre Wumag/Palfinger P1000s. We caught up with joint managing director, Mark Bell, to learn more about its approach to the top end of the platform market.

Early days

Established as Blade Cleaning Services by Mark Bell and Jamie Bairstow in 2002, the company originally provided a residential window cleaning service using buckets and ladders. The introduction of the company's first truck mounted platform – an ex-services 1989 Simon S85 fire platform – soon led to the birth of Blade Access as it began to rent it out to others for a variety of applications. Following early successes, it steadily added more used units to the fleet, with working heights of between 25 and 34 metres, before taking its first steps into the larger end of the market with a 58 metre WT580.

Speaking of the company's decision to focus on larger models, Bell said: "The new machines we had

purchased were to initially support maintenance work for National Grid. This type of work led us into the larger platform market – at a time when there was not nearly as much competition. As such we soon became a 'go-to' for people who had requirements over 45 metre working heights, which then in turn led us in to industrial, wind energy and other specialist applications."

Specialist solutions

Fast forward 10 years and the company now operates a fleet of more than 56 truck mounted platforms from three locations in the UK and one in the USA. Bell explains how, even early on, the company decided it wanted to be more than "just a hire desk" and more of a specialist solutions company. This saw the company develop a number of innovations and attachments for

The purchase of an ex-services Simon S85 led to the birth of Blade Access



Mounting an inspection trolley on the new T-Pylon power lines

its truck mounted platforms, ranging from its 360 degree CamPod camera cage to its latest Sky Shield divider screen which provides a protective barrier between the operator and other platform occupants. One of its earlier solutions was designed for the energy sector to create a more efficient method of installing inspection/maintenance trolleys for power line conductors and introducing a safe method of transferring from the platform to the trolley.

Bell said: "We knew we could support the sector in a different

way to other rental companies. This was achieved by introducing other working methodologies with large truck mounted platforms which subsequently lead to further innovation work for the National Grid and the Electricity Alliance. Ironically, the innovation work we did five to 10 years ago has come full circle, to the point that we can use the same methodology to provide access for the new T-Pylons as they get rolled out in the UK over the next 20 years."

Overseas expansion

It was this type of thinking which helped the company succeed in the tough US market. It originally entered the market in 2012 with the intention of setting up an access rental business based in Wilmington, Delaware, but quickly decided on a different approach.

Bell explains: "Within six to eight months we quickly realised that there was an opportunity to develop





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Blade has seven 103 metre units working out in the US



a hybrid company which combined our truck mounted platforms with the services of a wind turbine repair and maintenance company."

So rather than just renting out truck mounted platforms to wind turbine maintenance companies, Blade went one step further, employing its own wind turbine blade technicians and training them on getting the most out of its truck mounted platforms. While it was not the first to do this in the US, it was quick to spot the logic and benefits of such a strategy and fully exploiting it. It was also the first platform rental business in the US to introduce and operate the Palfinger and Ruthmann truck mounted platforms in that market.

"Having multi-skilled personnel who individually could complete the work of two people made us far more efficient compared with the traditional rope access teams who could take anywhere up to a week to do a single turbine upgrade. In fact, we were so confident in our ability, we submitted a proposal to GE stating that we could upgrade a minimum of six turbines a day. They had said that this would be completely impossible but by the middle of our first day on site we had already completed four of the six turbines. The rest is history!"

Subsequently, Blade was awarded a contract to upgrade more than 12,000 turbines. In order to cope with the demand, it expanded its fleet from a single 103 metre Palfinger WT1000 to more than 20 truck mounts in the US with working heights ranging from 54 to 103 metres – which includes seven 103 metre WT1000s, providing Blade with the largest fleet of them in the world.

Expanding the European business?

Having perfected the service delivery and commercial contracts side of the business in the US, the company established Blade Wind Services in the UK in 2016 to support onshore wind farms. Although the UK market for wind energy is significant, Europe as a whole is expected to add a further 320 gigawatts of wind power by 2030 – which equates to around 130,000 new turbines! Looking to capitalise on this market Blade has outlined plans to open its first outlet in mainland Europe next year using a similar business model. It was unable to say exactly where that might be, but given that Germany is projected to add the most capacity - adding around 80 Gigawatts - this might not be too bad of a guess? Bell said: "I can't say where we will





The 112 metre Bronto S112HLA is currently the largest truck mounted platforms on the market

base the operational hub just yet but essentially we will spiderweb out from that point to serve the rest of Europe. A significant amount of works will be longer durations and it is our plan to execute these works remotely. We have the technology and infrastructure in place to remotely monitor the workforce and the standards of work they are doing. This will all be controlled from our central operational hub. Part of this venture will see us invest in a large number of truck mounted platforms to support this venture as well as other work we have pipelined in the UK."

First 103m in the UK

Perhaps as part of its preparations for this influx of wind power work, the company decided to test the waters by taking delivery of the only 103 metre truck mounted platform currently in the UK. Ireland's Windhoist/McNally had originally taken a Palfinger WT 1000 into its fleet back in 2009, and based it in the UK for a while, but it was probably too early for such a machine and the company struggled to keep it busy. Blade has also employed one in the past but not on the same basis.

Bell said: "We will see how demand evolves for this size of machine now that people know there is one operating in the UK. Blade can now be much more cost-effective for our clients as we won't have the same mobilisation costs of those having to bring such equipment to the UK from Europe. Next year will be very interesting, because we will see if we can start to create enough demand in new applications for that type of machine to warrant bringing a second unit into this market."

In addition to wind power and other applications, the company is looking to win work away from larger

scaffolding installations that are still regularly used to work at heights of more than 70 metres.

"There is still a lot of scaffolding being used unnecessarily. We have seen projects where contractors are receiving quotes in excess of £750,000 for a large scaffolding installations and Blade has subsequently supplied the access solution for an absolute fraction of the cost."

Going higher?

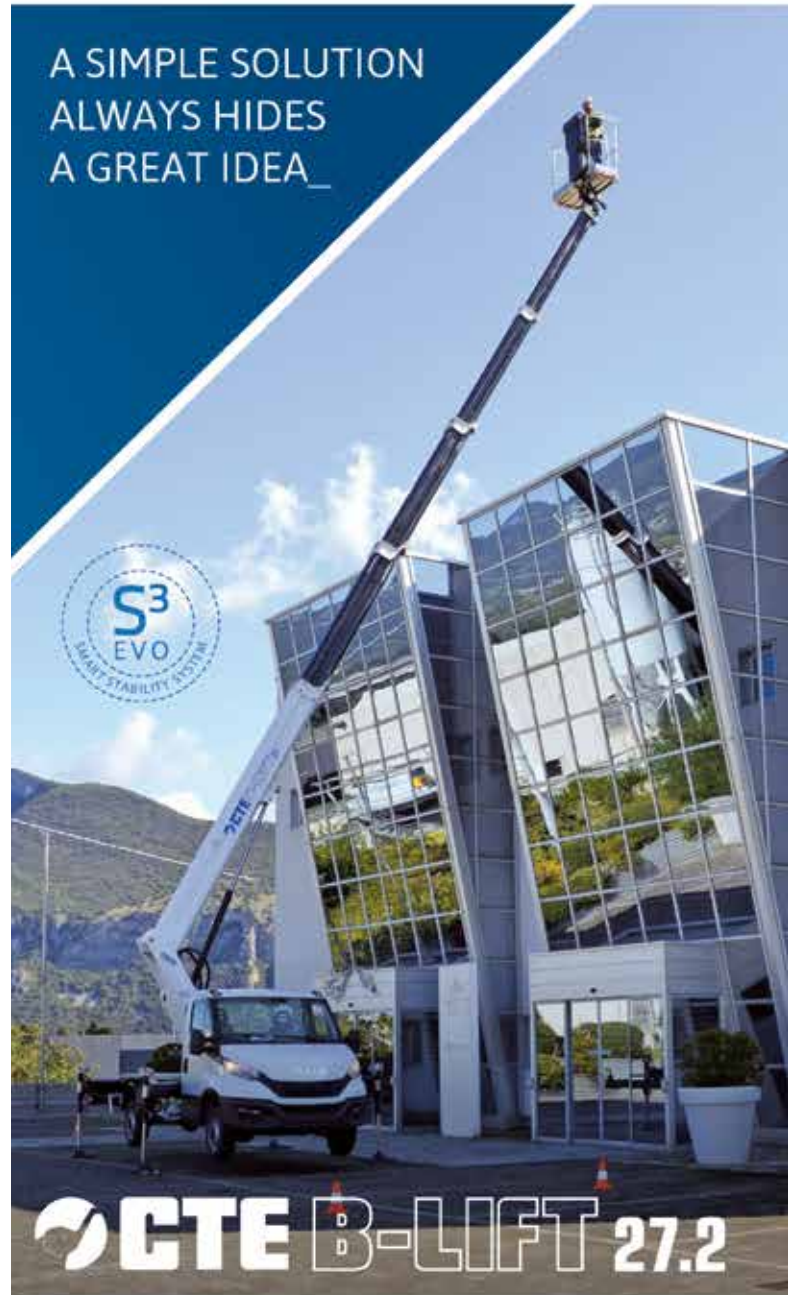
When asked for his thoughts on whether truck mounted platforms will continue to increase in size, Bell says: "As buildings and structures continue to get higher, people will no doubt have to go higher as well. There are larger models in the market than our 103 metre units, but personally I think we are getting to a point where if you go higher than this it will be just for very, very specific applications. With this in mind, I'm not convinced at this moment in time that demand for such equipment would make it viable to operate in a European hire fleet. In places like America it could work, but so far we have never had a requirement to go higher than 103 meters in the UK."

"For now though, in my opinion the 103 metre model currently offers the most stability and reliability at that height range. It also provides the most versatility when accessing sites with challenging terrain thanks to its carrier chassis. Some of the alternative larger models are still mounted on an adapted conventional truck chassis with very restricted inclination clearance when being driven.

"If the manufacturers do go higher, then I believe additional consideration should be given to the improvement of the emergency decent systems. All Terrain crane



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chassis would also seem to be the best overall option at present and the manufacturers should seriously consider the sites these platforms typically work on when developing equipment with even greater working heights."

Other markets

At the other end of the spectrum, the company seems to have changed its view on the 3.5 tonne self-drive market. In 2009 it was keen to build up a fleet of self-drive platforms but is now less enthusiastic. "Self-drive hire was something that we dabbled with, but we found that the margins were much greater if we supplied them with an operator. In the end the self-drive models became a bit of an



ugly sister internally. People started falling out over machines coming back damaged, and every time - no matter how thorough the handover - we would get a call within the hour, saying 'it won't do this' or 'it won't do that' with 99 percent of the issues down to operator error."

While it still offers some self-drive lifts for long standing loyal customers, Blade is not focusing in this area, preferring instead to concentrate on the operated and larger end of the market. More recently it moved into the self-propelled market offering boom lifts of 30 metres or more. "We will continue to add self-propelled 'super booms' to our fleet but currently have no intention of purchasing anything under 100ft as we can confidently rehire this equipment as part of association with the Access Alliance."

Rental rates

"When we first started buying large truck mounted platforms there were not nearly as many of them in the UK. There are a lot more now, making it more competitive. Surprisingly rates on the larger kit

overall has not really taken much of a dip, however we do tend to see 'seasonal desperation' during the winter months where fewer jobs above 70 metres seem to take place. It's at this time of year when less experienced companies seem to have kit sitting in the yard and then through desperation offer ridiculously low hire rates just to try keep the wheels turning. What they don't seem to realise is that this only makes the market more turbulent and ultimately restricts their future growth opportunities. Fortunately for Blade, we rarely need to get involved in the cat fight at the bottom and our long-term strategy has proven to stand the test of time."

Monopoly market

When it comes to truck mounted platforms of 70 metres or more, Palfinger, Bronto and Ruthmann are on their own. Asked whether any other manufacturers have products that have grabbed his attention, Bell says: "The Italians manufacture workable cost-effective machines up to the 30 metre range but after that I'm not currently convinced



they can compete with reliability, performance and overall build quality. Some are pushing the higher 70s now but I'm still yet to see a product that I believe could perform consistently in a credible rental fleet when compared to the three manufacturing leaders. Customers are used to the high standards set by Bronto, Ruthmann and Palfinger and if you turned up to site with an alternative substandard product it could quite likely cost you customers."

Battle of the 90s

As part of a £7 million investment in 2020, Blade Access took delivery of both a 90 metre Bronto S90 HLA-X and a Ruthmann T900 HF, making it one of the few companies to run 90 metre platforms from all three leading manufacturers: Ruthmann, Bronto and Palfinger. We took a closer look at each model and asked the operators on how they compare.

Blade's Mark Bell explains: "The decision to get a 90 metre from each manufacturer was to ensure we had the most versatile fleet at that height," explains Blade's Mark Bell. "The Palfinger is a great all-rounder with good outreach and capacities throughout the working envelope. It also has a simple configuration and its controls are hard to get wrong. Even though the Bronto is an older design - which is reflected

in its working envelope - 'it does exactly what it says on the tin' and from a reliability perspective it's up there. The Ruthmann offers some 'Rolls-Royce' features as well as the greatest outreach with fantastic up & over capabilities. They are all very, very good products in their own right and by having all three we have the right product no matter the application."



All three of Blade's 90 metre platforms working on an offshore jacket

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Manufacturer	Palfinger	Bronto	Ruthmann
Model	P 900	S90HLA	T 900 HF
Launch Date	2013	2005	2018
Max working height	90m	90m	90m
Max outreach	32.5m	32m	42m* /38m
Max capacity	530kg	700kg	600kg
Capacity @ 90m	530kg	400kg	600kg
Capacity @ max outreach	530kg	400kg	350kg
Height @ max outreach	48m	18m	24m
Max outreach @ max capacity	32.5m	28m	36.5m
Up & Over/capacity	59m x 29m x 530kg	52m x 25m x 400kg	59m x 38m x 350kg
Below ground reach	-9m	-12.5m	-25m
Max outrigger spread	8m	8m	8.8m
Overall length	16.2m	15.5m	14.99m

* limited range only

Operator:	Chris Gilling = P	Adam Kinsville-Lloyd = B	Danny Leonard = R
Machine operated	Palfinger P900	Bronto S90 HLAX	Ruthmann T900
Experience	9 Years	5 Years	10 Years
First platform:	20m CTE	48m Ruthmann	20m CTE
			

How important is having the longest outreach for a 90m Platform?

P: Outreach isn't so important, it's more about how high the actual basket will go.

B: Outreach does play a part, but I don't think it is one of the more important features for a 90m based on the work I have done.

R: It is important for up and over applications so can be important but the 90m at mainly used for vertical reach.

How important is a high platform capacity?

P: Normally the works are already surveyed so the operator doesn't really need to consider the capacity too much.

B: Very important with more industrial type applications

R: A larger capacity just provides more flexibility on site, especially if additional equipment needs to be lifted up.

How noticeable is it to be driving a 16m long vehicle instead of 15 metres?

P: No difference at all in my opinion

B: No real difference at all

R: No difference really. Having less boom overhang is easier at road junctions.

How often are you required to use the below ground capability?

P: I have only used negative reach twice and that was on a 48m - I have never needed it on a 90m.

B: Never had to.

R: I can't remember the last time I had to use negative reach.

What is the best feature/s on your 90m?

P: Although I mainly operate the Palfinger P900, the Ruthmann wins hands down for features. The fact it can be used as a T750HF and narrowed jacked to 25% on the non-working side gives it great versatility.

B: The control functionality is the best feature on the Bronto in my opinion.

R: Fantastic outreach, fantastic upper boom length, 90m and 75m working envelopes, full cage rotation and a comfy bed in the cab!

What would you say makes your 90m better than the other two?

P: P900 wins this with its emergency lowering systems, easy and simple to use. Rescue plan is the most important thing in my opinion, something a lot of operators in the industry aren't familiar with.

B: The stability and speed of operation. It feels safe and is quick during operation.

R: Its working envelope. It just outperforms everything else.

Which features would you say you use the most on a daily basis?

P: The simplicity of the basket controls, when you're in a tight spot it's good to know easy to use controls inside out

B: The platform capacity

R: The unique functionality of the upper and lower boom

Which feature is used the least?

P: The jib

B: The cage jib

R: Overall... the fly jib

How easy to use are the emergency decent systems on your 90m?

P: Palfinger, wipes the floor with Ruthmann and Bronto. The gravity decent feature is exceptional. You can even slew using this. The computer override is good too, if used correctly, hydraulics are extremely simple to use.

B: It can be a bit fiddly and takes some getting used to. Not the best.

R: I find them fairly simple but the Ruthmann does have very limited

emergency decent controls from the basket, and lack of basket self levelling on your machine makes it a two man job to fully pack away using the hydraulics.

What would you like to see improved on your 90m Platform?

P: It's my favourite 90m platform and I'm happy with the way it is.

B: The 'Home Function' from the platform, the quality of the outrigger pads and should be mounted on a Scania chassis, not a Volvo.

R: The packing and unpacking of the platform should be quicker. The platform doesn't even come with an anemometer as standard!

How different is operating a 90m compared with say a 50 or 70m?

P: Lots, size, weight, operating the controls at such a height. Higher skill levels are required for 90m platforms.

B: Big difference. Less boom manoeuvrability when working at height compared to normal 70m for example.

R: I find my 90m easier to operate but that could be because I have operated the same one for such a long time.

Do you think platform heights will continue to increase?

P: Yes

B: I hope not. I like my 90m

R: Yes

What do you enjoy most about the job?

P: The variety do work and different jobs you can do using the machines. Also enjoy the tricky set ups and when a customer says, "can you get us there?" - Of course I can.

B: Working with big boy's toys. A lot of travelling and I get to see some fantastic scenery in some nice places

R: Working with lots of different people in different places/countries.

What was the most impressive project you have worked on?

P: I really like all the work I go on to be honest

B: Offshore jacket manufacturing in Scotland

R: Wind farms in Texas and Scotland

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