Who Is Liable in a Tractor-Trailer Crash?

A crash involving a tractor-trailer often has more than one responsible party. The driver, the trucking company, the owner of the trailer, the company that loaded the cargo and the manufacturer of a defective part can each play a role. Identifying every responsible party is an early job for a truck accident lawyer, because each party may carry its own insurance.

The truck driver

The starting point is usually the driver's conduct, such as speeding, following too closely, unsafe lane changes, distraction, impairment or fatigue. Commercial drivers must hold a commercial driver's license (CDL) under 49 CFR Part 383 and follow the driving rules in 49 CFR Part 392, including restrictions on texting and hand-held phone use. A safety violation does not prove fault by itself, but in many states it can serve as evidence of negligence, and some states treat it as negligence per se. A truck wreck lawyer compares the driver's conduct against these rules.

Why the trucking company is usually a defendant

If the driver is an employee working within the scope of the job, the trucking company is generally answerable for the driver's negligence under vicarious liability, sometimes called respondeat superior. The company can also face direct claims for its own conduct, such as negligent hiring, negligent retention, negligent supervision and negligent entrustment. The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Regulations require a driver qualification file under 49 CFR Part 391, drug and alcohol testing under 49 CFR Part 382, and systematic inspection, repair and maintenance under 49 CFR Part 396. Missing or incomplete records can support a direct claim against the company, and for a truck accident lawyer the driver qualification file is often one of the first documents requested.

Leased trucks and owner-operators

Many owner-operators lease their trucks to a trucking company. The leasing rules in 49 CFR Part 376 require the lease to give the trucking company exclusive possession, control and use of the equipment during the lease, which can matter if the company says the driver was an independent contractor. The USDOT number and company name on the cab, along with the bill of lading and the lease itself, help identify which company was operating the truck. A truck crash attorney will usually request these documents early.

Cargo loaders and freight brokers

Shifting or falling cargo can contribute to rollovers and jackknife crashes. The cargo securement rules in 49 CFR *semi truck accident lawyer* Part 393 set requirements for tiedowns and securing loads, and in some cases a shipper or loading company that controlled the loading may share responsibility. Claims against a freight broker that arranged the shipment raise separate questions, including federal preemption, and the answer depends on the claim and the facts.

Product defects and maintenance

When brakes, tires, steering components or an underride guard fail because of a defect, the manufacturer can face a product liability claim. An outside repair shop that did faulty work may also be named. Telling a defect apart from poor maintenance usually requires inspecting the parts before they are repaired or scrapped.

How fault and insurance fit together

Federal financial responsibility rules in 49 CFR Part 387 require at least $750,000 in public liability coverage when for-hire interstate trucks with a gross vehicle weight rating of 10,001 pounds or more haul nonhazardous property, and certain hazardous materials require higher minimums. Most states use comparative negligence, which can reduce damages by the injured person's share of fault, while a few still apply contributory negligence. A semi-truck accident lawyer looks at every party because one policy may not cover the full loss. This article is general information, not legal advice, and no result can be predicted from it.