BSR Teen Accident Avoidance School

Before it's too late

BY DAN CARNEY Photos by the author

Decrying the poor driving skills of the average American is practically a sport among drivers. Everybody knows that nobody in this country (except the people doing the complaining) can drive. As George Carlin used to say, anyone going faster than you is a maniac and anyone going slower than you is an idiot.

There is probably little hope of convincing many of the adult drivers on the road that they are in serious need of some remedial defensive driving instruction, but we can try to get the next generation started on a better path.

Traffic fatalities are the number-one cause of death for Americans between the age of 4 and 33, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In 2001, the latest year for which there are numbers, 8,137 15- to 20-year-old drivers were involved in fatal crashes. Of those fatalities, fewer than half—3,608—were the young drivers themselves. So it is in our own best interest to teach these kids how to drive properly, because the lives we save may be our own.

The solution is rigorous driver training courses, such as the ones offered by Bill Scott Racing at Summit Point Automotive Research Center. The BSR course is representative of similar kinds of schools offered throughout the country, so if a trip to Wild, Wonderful West Virginia isn't practical, closer tracks probably offer similar training for your freshly licensed youngster.

Some opportunities, like the Mazda Rev It Up performance driving school, will even come to you. The touring Mazda school employs professional racers teaching the same basic car control techniques as other schools for a bargain price of $40. Because of the school's limited seat time for students, its best benefit may be to illustrate to drivers how much more there is to know, and perhaps some of them will subsequently enroll in more comprehensive schools. It is worth noting that the Mazda school is limited to drivers 18 and older.

"I wanted any tools I can give my son to help him along," explained parent Richard Morse when asked why he'd brought his son to the BSR class. Students split time between classroom briefings and driving exercises in the school's Chevy Caprice ex-police cars. A crop of new Crown Vics is being prepared for use in the near future, according to the school.

BSR offers its Accident Avoidance courses for students of all ages, but it has dates that are dedicated to teen students, giving them cohorts their own age. The school encourages parental involvement, too, inviting parents to sign up for the course at the same time as their children. And even parents who spend the day heckling from the peanut gallery are welcome to ride along for their child's "final exam," a rigorous driving test filled with surprise obstacles on strings that instructors pull across the track in front of the car.

"Did you hit the box?" whispered one girl to a classmate after her test. "Didn't you see that cone?" asked an instructor of another student. "Yeah, I saw it, I just didn't expect it to move," replied the surprised driver.

The BSR AA class has started about 3,200 teen drivers with such tricks over the years, and it handles about 375 kids a year now. Apparently a lot of people realize the importance of high-level driver training, because both the BSR and Mazda Rev It Up events sell out every class. BSR's capacity doubles with the completion of another race course at Summit Point this year, so twice as many kids will have the chance to learn how to save themselves, and maybe us, too.

While the overall philosophy of the BSR AA school is to encourage drivers to expect the unexpected, they spend ample time learning how to respond when the unexpected occurs. A good way to reduce the incidence of unexpected events is to have a better understanding of what can go wrong when driving near the limit—a popular pastime for teenagers since the days of the Model T. "I hope the class makes a cocky driver realize that you can't be cocky," said parent Len Shapiro, expressing a sentiment echoed by most of the parents on hand.

Mazda instructor Carlos Velez said he sees that problem all the time. "Teenagers don't have a respect for the speed," he said. "The car is like a loaded weapon."

Even parents who participated with their kids were surprised by the exercises they practiced. "After driving for 37 years, I have done stuff today that I've never done before and I hope I never do again," observed Lorna Kort. She had been a reluctant student in the morning, attending with her kids at her husband's insistence. By the afternoon, she was glad to have participated. "I think it is an excellent experience," Kort marveled. "It should be required for everybody."

The classroom presentations focused on the fundamental dynamics of weight transfer and traction, then moved on to the importance of looking ahead and concentrating on where you want the car to go instead of staring at the obstacle you hope to avoid.

On the track, young drivers found the braking exercises the most challenging—apparently their young reflexes weren't strained by the lane change or other steering maneuvers. My guinea pigs, 19- and 16-year-old younger brothers Lewis and Liam, made similar comments regarding the difficulty of the braking exercises at both the Mazda Rev It Up school and BSR AA school. "I got a feel for how to brake when it is slippery and when to just take your foot off the gas and steer out of it," said Liam.

"The hardest part was definitely threshold braking properly into the hairpin turn," said Tailor Shapiro. "If you over-brake, you slide too far."

By the end of the day there were relieved grins all around, as students and parents alike enjoyed the final test where students demonstrated their new skills. The $295 tuition seemed like a bargain for the experience, parents said. "I think it was worth it just for the classroom briefings," said one dad. The kids would probably disagree, because they all obviously enjoyed the wet skidpad and lane-change exercises that required them to pitch the mammoth Caprices around.

Now, we can only hope, they'll be better able to keep their own cars pointed the right direction. •