

NISSAN



Photos by Bob Riha Jr., USA TODAY

Slick anticipation: Teens practice driving on wet pavement at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway as part of the Driver's Edge free, half-day educational program.

Driver's ed gets turbocharged

'Crash avoidance' classes put teens on fast track



In control: Barbie Walden, 16, gets safety advice from Driver's Edge instructor Brian Leib. Traditional driver's ed courses are being replaced by more challenging programs.

By Marco R. Della Cava
USA TODAY

LAS VEGAS — Ford's muscular Mustang is Barbie Walden's favorite car. But chances are the 16-year-old's dream drive does not involve being at the wheel as the car skids wildly out of control while she belts out an eardrum-shredding "OH MY GOD!"

The car stops; Walden is practi-

cally hyperventilating. The man next to her shakes his head and . . . smiles.

"Great job," says instructor Brian Leib, whose matinee-idol looks aren't lost on his student. "That was a nice controlled slide. You won't leave here Barbie Andretti, but you will be a more confident Barbie."

Behold a radical new approach

to traditional driver's ed: using hip young instructors to coach teens through hair-raising maneuvers on a track so they can survive the unexpected on the road.

Typical of this breed is Driver's Edge. Tucked into the infield here at this city's mammoth motor speedway, the free half-day course is the brainchild of a former race car driver who felt teens

needed his help.

Such clinics are shifting into overdrive nationwide, fueled by the disappearance of high school courses and the fact that car crashes kill more 15- to 19-year-olds than murder and suicide combined.

But opponents of the programs say teaching new drivers aggressive maneuvers instills false confidence and leads to video-game-type antics. And like other programs, it puts inexperienced drivers on the road earlier; states grant autonomy behind the wheel sooner if kids attend a driver's ed class.

"The problem with crash-avoidance courses is they can backfire by encouraging kids to go out and be unnecessarily aggressive," says Allan Williams, former chief scientist with the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, an insurance-industry-sponsored non-profit that studies accident data.

Williams acknowledges that hands-on programs, especially ones that stress hazard perception, "can serve as a good foundation," but overall, "the studies on driver's ed come to the same conclusion: It doesn't make kids safer drivers."

Driver's ed hit schools in the 1950s, a product of the great highway building boom. But a 1980s study found few beneficial effects of formal instruction, and an inexorable move away from funding such classes began. Today, most states do not pay for driver's ed, requiring instead that parents log 40 to 60 in-car hours with their kids as a prerequisite for a license.

The market is filling the void. Safe Smart Women, a non-profit group in Silver Spring, Md., will stage clinics for female drivers in 12 cities. Florida-based New Driver Car Control Clinics will roll out to 10 states; its \$150 half-day seminars place teen drivers and one parent inside a car while experts radio over instructions on how to brake at the vehicle's limit and swerve while retaining control.



By Bob Riha Jr., USA TODAY

Scared straight: A video about three teens killed in a crash opens the program. It has an effect on Paula Diaz, 16, left, and Daniella Silverstein, 16.

"Driving isn't about taking written tests. It's a real psycho-motor skill, like making a jump shot or hitting a curveball," founder David Thompson says.

"We take drivers and make them athletes. There's a hunger for this teaching."

Micki Byrnes offers proof. When the marketing director for Cleveland's WKYC decided to trumpet a series of TV reports on teen driving deaths by offering viewers a chance to take Thompson's clinic, it booked up in 3 1/2 minutes, and the station's voicemail system crashed. This year, WKYC will sponsor 25 clinics; TV stations in Atlanta and Washington are following suit.

"Of course, one clinic isn't enough," says Byrnes, a parent of a teen driver. "But it helps you have broader conversations about what it means to drive a car safely."

Driver's Edge also is expanding; last year's 14-city tour grows to 25 this year. Nearly 10,000 teens have taken the program since it started 2 1/2 years ago. The non-profit company reports that 1,000 graduates surveyed one year after their course had 54% fewer incidents than a control group of 1,000 Las Vegas 16- to 18-year-olds who did not attend the school.

"Not that it's easy to get to these

kids, because some come with a lot of attitude," says founder Jeff Payne, 37, who raced open-wheel cars in Europe and Japan. "But hopefully both the timid girl and the cocky jock walk out of here with a greater awareness of what driving is all about."

At 8 a.m. on a Saturday, bleary-eyed teens shuffle into a racing paddock. A video plays images of a baby growing into teenhood. The mood is ominous, but it turns out the boy on the screen didn't die in a car crash; he killed three of his best friends when the car he was driving wrecked.

As soon as the video ends, that very teen shuffles in wearing handcuffs, a prison-issue jumpsuit and no trace of a smile. The classroom is silent as the teen sobs through his fateful night. When his mother urges the group to learn from her son's lesson, the gasps are audible. This scared-straight opening, complete with Nevada troopers, sobers up the crowd.

"I know bad things can happen," says Natosha Walden, Barbie's mom. "At the same time, there's only so much time my husband and I have to drive her around parking lots. That's why we're here."

The teens clearly revel in the amusement-park-like excitement of the setting. Fast cars on a fast track. But judging from Walden's reaction on the skid pad — a water-soaked patch of asphalt meant to simulate a rain-soaked road — there also is a growing awareness that cars can be made to behave if drivers have the right stuff.

At first giddy and nervous, Walden finally reins in her last spin and bolts over to her mom. A day with her favorite pony car has gone to her heart.

"Did you see me?" she says. "I love that Mustang, Mom!"

Pushing safety over sexy, her mom replies, "That's nice, but you're getting a used Volvo."

Safety twists and turns

OK, so your teen has a freshly minted license. But does he really know his automotive stuff?

A number of driving schools hope to give teens the inside track on good driving habits before they hit the road, including Driver's Edge (driversedge.org), New Driver Car Control Clinics (teen drivers.com) and, for girls only, Safe Smart Women (s2w.org).

"You'd be surprised what kids think is proper driving technique," says Jeff Payne, former pro race-car driver and founder of Las Vegas-based Driver's Edge, which, like its counterparts, conducts teaching clinics across the USA.

Payne offers up these prime driving myths:

**Myth #1
ABS makes your car stop faster.**

"Actually, it doesn't. Anti-lock braking systems are safety devices that keep your tires from locking up during panic braking, and they allow you to maintain the ability to steer the car while braking."

**Myth #2
Turning the steering wheel hand-over-hand is the best way to steer the car.**

"The best way to steer a car and have the most control is to engage in what's called shuffle steering, a process by which both hands stay on the wheel by shuffling the steering wheel through your hands instead of taking a hand off the wheel."

**Myth #3
Air bags make seat belts unnecessary.**

"Air bags are designed to work in conjunction with seat belts. Always wear a seat belt, no matter what other safety devices are installed in your car."

**Myth #4
To recover from a skid, steer in the direction of the skid.**

"It's true, but it's confusing to most drivers. If you simply steer in the direction you were originally going, then you don't have to figure out which way is 'steering into the skid.'"

**Myth #5
The only way to place your hands on the steering wheel is at the 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock positions.**

"It is also proper to place your hands at 9 and 3, or 8 and 4."

STOP

DISCUSSION

What radical new approach to driver's ed do programs like Driver's Edge offer? Why are driving clinics becoming more popular? What are the drawbacks of crash-avoidance courses? Why are schools moving away from offering driver's ed? How does the Driver's Edge program begin? Why do you think teens are exposed to this sobering lesson before the training session? What are some popular driving myths? Can you think of any others that should be added to the list?

APPLICATIONS

- ✓ analysis
- ✓ comparison
- ✓ decision making
- ✓ responsibility
- ✓ safety

ACTIVITY

David Thompson of New Driver Car Control Clinics says: "Driving isn't about taking written tests. It's a real psychomotor skill, like making a jump shot or hitting a curveball. We take drivers and make them athletes." Define the words "driver" and "athlete." Next, explain how drivers and athletes are similar and different. Finally, list the pros and cons of telling teens that drivers are athletes. For example, does the comparison imply that driving is a sport? If so, how could this view of driving be dangerous, especially for novice drivers? Finally, explain whether you believe driving is an athletic endeavor. (See the graphic organizer on the following page.)

Are drivers athletes?

Driver

Athlete

Similarities

Differences

Differences

Pros of telling teens that drivers are athletes: _____

Cons of telling teens that drivers are athletes: _____

Is driving an athletic endeavor? _____
