



FOCUS ON TEEN DRIVERS BEARS FRUIT

Death rates are still too high, but innovators are stepping up

BY KEVIN A. WILSON

ALERTED THAT CAR crashes are the leading cause of death and injury among young people, Americans are stepping up to address the issue. While governments, regulators and insurers focus on making graduated-driver-licensing (GDL) laws more rigorous and widespread, individuals aren't waiting on the safety establishment but are taking action in independent and innovative ways.

A year after the first *AutoWeek* Teen Driving Safety Summit (TDSS) in August 2007—an event the magazine plans to reprise in 2009—a survey of the field finds much activity, despite restraints imposed by the national economic downturn.

A few examples of what's new since last year at back-to-school time:

- A California company aims to establish European-style driver training at dedicated facilities in the United States.
- In Ohio, Cincinnati-area dealers and Toyota are backing a competition for high-school students to improve driving attitudes, knowledge and skills.
- In New Jersey and Pennsylvania, regulators and hospital researchers have organized to improve licensing laws.
- The national AAA has increased efforts to alert teens and parents to the dangers of distractions at the wheel, especially cell-phone text-messaging.
- New technology helps parents track a young driver's activity at the wheel.
- There is broadening appreciation for the responsibility that society places on parents of new young drivers.

The most ambitious of these initiatives is that of Drive RSTC in Burlingame, Calif. The company's goal is nothing less than the widespread application of European-style driver training in the United States.

The distinctions are significant, and company founder Rob Cole details them in a 20-page paper available as a download

at www.driverstc.com. *AutoWeek* reported on many of the differences between the European and American models for driver training last year (Aug. 27, 2007), but Cole's analysis is more extensively researched and detailed.

The issues are complex, but Cole says the key is that European researchers discovered 20 years ago that instruction centered on driving skills alone (such as skid control) resulted in new drivers who were either overly confident in their car-control abilities or overly fearful. This 1988 research, often cited by opponents of such skills-centered instruction in the United States, did not lead Europe to abandon such training, Cole asserts, but instead led to a refinement discussed in more recent safety literature as the "postrenewal" period.

Newer research, Cole says, shows a 34 percent reduction in accidents among students who learn the same skills but within the context of a curriculum that sets a priority not on car control for its own sake as much as on safe on-road behavior and the understanding of the limits of car, driver and road. That's a 34 percent gain, mind you, among young drivers who experience much lower rates of crashing, death and injury than are typical in the United States.

"This is radically different from what you find in the United States. But after years of research," says Cole, "I am confident that there is no other way."

The classes he takes as a model, typical of Germany, Luxembourg, Austria and Norway, among others, take place at dedicated facilities—road safety training centers, or RSTCs—using water jets as obstacles (rather than traffic cones) and wet, slippery road surfaces, all computer-controlled from a central station, with students driving alone (with no ride-along instructor).

These tracks allow students to experience a total loss of control, analogous to the experience of students learning to fly airplanes who must master the "dead-stick" powerless landing and recovery from a spin. Cole says most U.S. skills training does not allow for this total loss of control and thereby teaches students either that they can always be fully in control of the car or that they may never be, which has profound implications for the psychology of the young driver and how he or she approaches the task.

Pushing for Awareness

» A MAJOR CONTRIBUTOR to the reduction in drunk-driving deaths and injuries in the United States during the past 20 years was a widespread public-relations push to make the behavior socially unacceptable. There was a similar push against smoking. Teens and young adults are still among those who most often take these risks, but it is hoped that similar peer and social pressures can be used to address unsafe driving.

To that end, insurance company State Farm and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia lobbied Congress and got the third week of October designated as National Teen Driver Safety Week. Although the bill was passed barely in time for last year's effort, the designation will apply this October, and advocates will have had a year to gear up their programs.

Also, Bridgestone Firestone North America, a primary sponsor of the Driver's Edge training program, ran its second-annual Safety Scholars event, awarding scholarships to



young people ages 16 to 21 who developed public-service commercials promoting auto safety. Social-networking Web sites YouTube, Facebook and MySpace were used to distribute these messages, which you can view at www.safetyscholars.com.

Winners of the \$5,000 scholarships this year were Danny Belkin of Rockland, Md., a film buff attending New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, whose video warns about the dangers of cell-phone use at the wheel. Ryan Massey, an 18-year-old from Laguna Niguel, Calif., was critically injured in a car accident that claimed the lives of two of his friends—none was wearing a seatbelt—and Massey's first-person account reaches out to peers to explain the impor-

ance of belt use. And a video by Sarah Wilson of Tampa, Fla., a junior at the University of South Florida, features a group of teens discussing a crash they attribute to cell-phone text-messaging; the camera pulls back to reveal that the teens are actually ghosts in a graveyard. A special Critics Choice Award went to 17-year-old Angel Rosciolo of Bethlehem, Pa., whose video features a girl writing a farewell letter to her parents detailing the decisions that will lead to a fatal crash.

All four winning videos will be used as public-service TV commercials by Bridgestone Firestone. The winners also will attend the 2009 Chicago auto show to display their work to auto journalists covering the show. —KAW

This approach led Marland Townsend, a former U.S. Navy pilot who made the proposal that led to the Navy's "Top Gun" flight school, to sign on as a member of the Drive RSTC board of directors.

The curricula at the European schools lead students to take the wheel with a goal of arriving safely at the destination without excessive risk. Students taught only the skills without the goal-setting context, Cole argues, may set their own inappropriate objectives, such as speed, high g loadings or peak fuel economy, all of which are inappropriate substitutes for safety of both the driver and other road users.

All of this skills training, crucially, takes place *after* students have done enough training and testing to have acquired their probationary licenses, so that they can place the skills in the context of their on-road experience. Laws vary by nation, but generally, a driver earns a probationary license at age 17 or 18 and then must attend skills and attitude training within two years to obtain a full license.

Such centers, typically on 20 to 40 acres of land, are not cheap, though colocation with test facilities used by automakers or suppliers or at racetrack sites may spread the cost of building and operating them.

COACH IN A BOX

ELECTRONIC
UNIT MENTORS
YOUNG DRIVERS

» WHAT, YET ANOTHER black box that uses GPS to let parents monitor their teen drivers? Yes, but the new Tiwi from Inthinc boasts several key differences. First, it's a smart computer that talks to the driver, mentoring much the way parents did from the passenger seat in the learning phase. Second, it's smart enough to know local speed limits. It also can be used as an emergency alert system, notifying authorities in the event of an accident.

Unlike other GPS-based systems marketed for parents of new young drivers, the Tiwi not only watches speed but also matches the car's speed against the local limit.

"Lots of units can tell you that the kid exceeded a preset speed," explains Robert Oosdyke, Inthinc's vice president for consumer sales. "Say you set a limit at 70 mph. Whenever the car goes 70, you get notification. Everybody in this business does that much. But what no one else does yet is tell you the car was going 70 in a 45-mph zone."

The Tiwi will do that, which also allows it to perform the mentoring task.

The box sits on the dash and plugs into the car via the OBD II port. It can be set up to issue a warning: "You're exceeding the speed limit; please slow down." At best, it's a coach in a box. At worst, it's like having a little sister in the back seat saying, "I'm telling Mom if you don't knock it off."

The Tiwi has been endorsed by Ronn Langford of Master-Drive, a driver-education company, one of the presenters at



AutoWeek's 2007 Teen Driving Safety Summit.

The Tiwi allows parents to set their own limits (via the company's Web site) and choose their means of notification—phone, text or e-mail.

Parents can call the unit and talk directly to the teen without the young driver needing to answer a cell phone. If parents get an alert that the car has been speeding or exceeding cornering or braking limits (accelerometers measure these), they can call and say, "Knock it off and bring it home" or "Stop the car and call me; we need to talk"—whatever the parent, not a preprogrammed computer, deems appropriate.

You may have seen the circular green Tiwi logo on the dashboards of NASCAR race cars. Inthinc has made crash-data recorders under the Independent Witness trademark for 10 years and the "black boxes" that have collected crash data for NASCAR since the death of Dale Earnhardt in 2001. It also is working with the stock-racing body on new

GPS-based timing and scoring systems.

Parents will want to know, though, that the Tiwi has limited memory (just enough to retain data through a lapse in cell-phone network coverage) and no separate plug that authorities can use to extract data for analysis. Whatever information it records and reports goes to the owner and only when it determines that the owner-chosen limits have been exceeded.

The units went on sale in July for \$549. The business model includes a monthly subscription fee (\$24.95 to \$34.95, depending on the level of communication desired), but during the launch period, there's a "race fan" \$100 discount on the unit and one year of free service. Visit www.tiwi.com for more information.

The company also has initiated a Teen Driving Council to unite the efforts of those concerned about these issues. To learn more, visit www.teensafety.com.

—KAW

Drive RSTC has signed an agreement with a German firm, IngenAix, which has built more than two dozen such facilities around the world. Cole says he also is developing a proposal that might involve getting a government grant to build a demonstration facility to prove that the concept works.

The European model typically involves government subsidies and licensing regulations that require students to complete such programs. With that kind of impetus behind them, 40,000 students might attend at one facility in one year.

But Cole says he believes the programs could work in a free-market environment in the United States without subsidies or regulatory forcing.

"In the United States, I think you'd find that insurers are some of the biggest opponents of skills training," he says. "In Europe, insurers are often sponsors and supporters of these facilities. I think there's opportunity there."

Getting from dream to reality for Drive RSTC will no doubt take years. The evidence from Europe suggests that it could prove to be the ultimate long-range answer for improved driver education in the United States. Meanwhile, however, millions of newly licensed teens take to the roads annually.

David Thompson of Florida-based New Driver Car Control Clinic (www.carcontrol.com) has long operated at the other end of the cost-complexity spectrum, striving to teach as many teens—and their parents—as he can possibly reach with the message that car-control skills, attitude and knowledge can dramatically reduce crash risks for new drivers.

Since April 1 of this year, Thompson has been running a new variation on his program in the Cincinnati area that aims to encourage safe driving practices using some time-honored and very American-flavored incentives: competition, scoring and prize money. With sponsorship from Toyota and its Greater Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky-area dealers, the Toyota Car Control Challenge culminates on Sept. 7. The grand champion wins a Toyota Matrix and \$10,000, while those in various categories divided by

age (including one mom and one dad) and by region can win \$1,000 each.

As of press time, the points leader going into the final round is a 16-year-old girl who has scored near the maximum in a written test about safe attitudes toward driving and a behind-the-wheel demonstration of car-driving skills but below average in the “knowledge” test, the only portion that aligns with traditional driver education and state licensing exams (asking questions such as “What does a yellow triangular road sign mean?” and “A car going 60 mph needs how many feet to stop?”).

In the skill challenge, competitors demonstrate car placement, emergency braking and visual skills in several exercises, including a crash-avoidance maneuver and running over small cups of sand on command.

“It’s an old cliché, but this is really where the rubber meets the road,” says Thompson, who, along with his instructors, times, measures and scores the drivers as each passes through two laps of a course. All of the exercises are performed at 25 mph or less.

The purpose is to honor and promote successful young drivers who demonstrate safe attitudes, valuable knowledge and driving skills.

Thompson doesn’t train teens without also training parents, who are key elements of the GDL schemes now operating in most states. Typically, parents must sign off on any program their minor children participate in, and few are fully cognizant

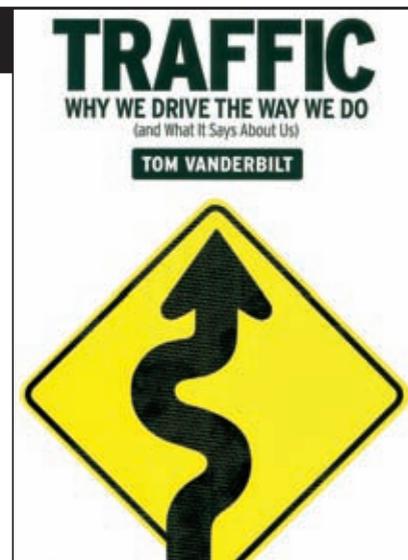
of the legal liability that may entail (see story on page 26).

Many of today’s parents got their licenses during a period when driver education was on the wane in the United States and lack the skills and knowledge that would give them greater insight into what their teens are learning today. Working with the New Jersey Teen Driver Study Commission reviewing that state’s GDL system, the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia has recommended improvements that were found to be worthwhile in other states, such as expanded education of parents.

Related measures include limits on unsupervised night driving during the probationary period, allowing only one passenger younger than 18 and expanding the amount of time teens must drive with adult supervision from 30 hours to 50.

The group did not address the issue of distraction, but AAA has launched a campaign recommending that parents step in—even if the law doesn’t—to forbid the use of cell phones and text-messaging during a teen’s learning period. That would include parents modeling the desired behavior by not using electronic devices themselves while driving.

While we continue to pursue the sort of comprehensive reform of driver licensing that *AutoWeek* has advocated or that Cole envisions, individuals can take actions to enhance roadway safety not only for new young drivers but also for the rest of us who share the road with them. 🚗



For Extra Credit Recommended reading

» **TRAFFIC: WHY WE DRIVE THE WAY WE DO (AND WHAT IT SAYS ABOUT US)**, by Tom Vanderbilt, Knopf, 416 pages, \$25.

The entire book is fascinating, but we can wholeheartedly recommend *Traffic* for a single chapter: “Why You’re Not As Good a Driver As You Think You Are.”

Vanderbilt does not directly address teen-driver education and licensing, but his insights into driver psychology are worth the cover price.

Most drivers rate themselves as above average. Driver’s Edge founder Jeff Payne noticed this when he asked parents and teens attending his program to rate their own car-handling skills on a scale of one to 10.

“They inevitably average eight or nine,” Payne says. “Really? There’s, like, Michael Schumacher, Mario Andretti and then you?”

Vanderbilt finds that not only do drivers not recognize their own unsafe behaviors, but they also are unaware that such behaviors are risky.

Most people, he says, regard driving as an easy task compared with, say, juggling. They can drive repeatedly without failing—their definition of failure being a monumental crash—but always drop the juggled objects. Many say that operating a computer or even a car-racing video game is harder than driving a car, because they often crash the electronic device but have never totaled a real car.

There’s an opening here to expand the awareness of drivers regarding the complexity of the task. The understanding of failure to perform at the wheel might include forcing other drivers to make emergency maneuvers, impeding traffic flow and frequent near misses that only avoid becoming tragedies by dint of luck, not driver skill.

Brilliant stuff, highly recommended. —KAW

PARENTS BEWARE!

WHEN YOUR KIDS STRAY, YOU MAY PAY

BY J. P. VETTRAINO

IF YOU THINK your son or your daughter has demonstrated enough skill and responsibility to drive your Corvette Z06 to the homecoming game, think again.

Along with laws creating graduated-licensing programs ("License to Die," *AW*, Aug. 27, 2007), most states have adopted statutes that make parents legally and financially liable for what their minor teens do behind the wheel of a car. Even if your straight-A student is a model citizen and president of the Glee Club, one inappropriate jab at the gas pedal could put at risk everything you've worked hard to build.

Of course, keeping teens out of your high-powered dream machine probably isn't enough. If your 16- or 17-year-old is involved in an accident resulting in injury or damage beyond the scope of insurance indemnity, it may not matter whose car he or she was driving. You could be liable for the consequences, up to and including punitive damages.

"The fundamental reasoning is that you make the person who is in the best position to prevent a potential injury in the first place liable for that injury," says Millie Anne Cavanaugh, a former insurance defense attorney in Los Angeles. "When you are dealing with minor teen drivers, it's pretty easy to identify that person. It's the parent. Even parents who don't care what kind of adult they raise may pay more attention to the raising if there is a financial risk for doing a poor job."

By many accounts, Nick Bollea was not a model citizen, and his recent misdeeds have focused attention in sensational fashion on laws that make parents liable for teen drivers. The son of wrestler-entertainer Hulk Hogan (born Terry Bollea) and a primary subject of VH1's *Hogan Knows Best* reality-TV series, Bollea recently passed his 18th birth-

day in jail. His incarceration, in Pinellas County, Fla., stemmed from an incident in August 2007 at the wheel of his 1998 Toyota Supra.

Bollea had spent most of that day on Hogan's boat, then headed home through the streets of Clearwater in the tuner-modified, 700-hp Supra he owned with his father. En route, he allegedly began stoplight racing with friend Daniel Jacobs, who was driving Hogan's 2003 Dodge Viper. During one sprint, Bollea lost control. The Supra hit a median curb, slid 100 feet and slammed into a palm tree. Bollea suffered only minor injuries, but passenger John Graziano, a 22-year-old friend recently returned from his second tour of duty in Iraq, suffered massive head injury and hovered near death.

In May, Bollea pleaded no contest to felony reckless driving. He was sentenced to eight months in jail, five years of probation and loss of his driver's license until age 21. Yet those consequences are only the beginning for him and Hogan and their celebrity family.

Graziano lived, with a severe brain injury that will require constant supervision and medical care for the rest of his life. His family has accumulated more than \$1 million in medical expenses, and he will require millions more, with no potential for income.

The Graziano family has sued Bollea—and Hogan—in Florida for compensatory and punitive damages.

The lawsuit alleges that Bollea wanted to be a professional drift racer and practiced his technique on public roadways, with his parents' encouragement. He had been pulled over on several occasions for driving in excess of 100 mph—at least twice with his father in the passenger seat. The suit also alleges that Hogan bought beer on the way to his boat that day and watched as his young guests drank it. He then sent them home, aware of his son's proclivities, in megahorsepower cars that he owned. In short, the suit claims, Hogan knowingly laid the groundwork for disaster.

If the allegations are proved true, Hogan could be held responsible for his son's behavior on several counts. Yet even if they're proved false, the liability Hogan assumed when he signed his minor son's license application remains. If Graziano's injuries are attributed to Bollea's negligence, Hogan's signature exposes him to punitive damages,



which aren't covered by insurance. In Florida, that liability is potentially unlimited.

All but a handful of states now require parental consent at the driving-permit or permit-to-license stage for applicants who are younger than 18. Not all states requiring consent delineate parental liability, but case law can quickly turn consent into liability in the absence of specific statutes. Bottom line: If you allow your minor to get a license, you're potentially on the hook.

"It's not a federal issue, so all states are different," says Cavanaugh, who is licensed to practice in California and Massachusetts. "In California, the statute that requires parental consent caps the amount of financial liability for signing for a license.

"The idea is that parents are in the best position to prevent driving disasters, and that's understandable and appropriate with kids who have demonstrated irresponsibility or substance-abuse problems. The problem, for me, is the instance where a kid has never demonstrated any sign of trouble."

The codification of parental liability has come with the movement toward graduated licensing, which expands a teen's driving privileges in stages, typically extending the requirement for adult supervision over a longer period of time. John Draneas, a Portland, Ore., attorney who is also a club racer, a vintage-rally participant and president of his local Porsche club, agrees that the movement is probably well intended.

"My sense is that these statutes are coming from state legislators who are concerned about the consequences of teen driving, with a lot of input from the usual suspects," such as educators, highway users and the insurance industry, Draneas says. "They're a reaction to statistics that suggest poor driving habits and accidents are age-related."

Some suggest that the idea of parental liability is a product pitched by the insurance industry, but Carolyn Gorman, vice president at the Insurance Information Institute, insists otherwise.

"We've never taken a position on parental liability one way or the other, as far as I know," says Gorman, whose New York-based organization is funded by insurers. "We have advocated the idea of graduated licensing and appropriate education to protect teen drivers."

Some argue that the trend behind parental liability—graduated licensing—has done little to improve teen-driving habits. Jim Baxter, CEO of the National Motorists Association, a for-profit company that advocates road users' rights and helps fight speeding tickets, draws a distinction between "appropriate education" and legitimate driver training.

"We are not proponents of some of the graduated-licensing programs, simply because they've moved the burden of driver education to parents," he says. "In many instances, parents are not the purveyors of good training. They may keep their teen's foot out of the gas in their presence, but they don't necessarily improve overall driving skills. We'd prefer that training begins younger than most graduated requirements allow, starting with simulation.

"The insurance industry is the biggest antitraining proponent out there, because they continue to give appropriate driving skills like car control little credence."

Draneas agrees that graduated licensing isn't what it's cracked up to be. "Accident rates correlate to age, but they are really a

function of skill and experience, so what we're left with misses the point," he says. "We're just turning the bad drivers loose when they're 18 rather than 16. The problem is not that drivers aren't old enough. They are not skilled enough, and the only way to address the problem is more effective driver training."

Nonetheless, graduated licensing and parental liability for teen drivers are facts of life, which might leave rational parents wondering not only how to protect their teen drivers but also how to protect themselves.

"Do not sign for your teen's license before they are 18," says Cavanaugh. "Period."

While she realizes that most parents will find that approach inconvenient, and probably inappropriate, Cavanaugh says it's the



AP PHOTOS (2)



Hulk Hogan and his daughter, Brooke (top), watch as Hogan's son, Nick (above), then 17, is sentenced to jail for causing a crash. Father and son both face a lawsuit in the incident.

ultimate defense against the consequences of a teen's behavior behind the wheel. Parents who have signed for a teen's license should be able to withdraw that support at their state's motor-vehicle department.

Cavanaugh also recommends that parents not allow a teen to drive a car registered to or owned by the parent. Providing a car as a gift and registering it to the teen might provide a layer of protection. Parents should provide the best driver training and the most liability insurance they can afford.

Yet all the insurance in the world won't cover punitive damages, which can't be dismissed through bankruptcy. So, if you think your teens are experimenting with alcohol or other controlled substances, don't even let them into the garage.

"My advice is a zero-tolerance policy for anyone under 18," says Cavanaugh. "You need to show that you've done everything you can. If someone can demonstrate you could have done something and didn't, you are going to be liable." 🚗