

Take a few tips from the winter driving pros

How many accidents would not have occurred, how many people would still be alive, if the drivers involved had previously encountered the same situation in a safe practice setting and learned how to get out of trouble?

Renny Grant, Road Commission of Oakland County equipment instructor, has championed training for RCOO drivers at the only place of its kind in the U.S.: the Michigan Center for Decision Driving, funded through the Michigan Truck Safety Commission.

Conducted on a special track and an ultra-slippery, 10-acre, 524-foot-long skid pad at the Eaton truck proving grounds near Marshall, the intensive training combines classroom work with actual, behind the wheel maneuvering through situations that have been known to have caused accidents.

"The cost of the training itself is nominal, since it is supported by the Michigan Truck Safety Commission," Grant said. "The larger cost is that of paying our drivers while they're taking the training and the loss of their services for a day."

Road Commission officials fully support the training. "Thanks to them, I now have a commitment to see that every RCOO driver will get this vital training," Grant said.

"This shows, quite tangibly, that we really mean it when we say that safety is our number-one priority," Grant said, adding, "After all, what price could be put on a human life, whether it is one of our drivers or a member of the general public?"

The center trains about 2,700 drivers a year, whose driving experience ranges from six-month rookies to 39-year veterans.

Instructor Ken Post told drivers that driving too fast for road conditions is perhaps the top cause of accidents. Post made his point by showing a video in which a Lansing TV crew just happened to be on hand to tape a crash between two trucks. Miraculously, no one was killed or injured, but luck was in the driver's seat.

Post has logged hundreds of thousands of miles behind the wheel of long-haul semis before becoming an instructor.

Post said every driver — whether of a truck or a car — ought to know it takes time, good reactions and lots of distance to stop. But even the statistics that measure stopping distances are based on 55 mph, which few people drive — and often faster now that speed limits have been increased. They're also based on a normal level of alertness. But how many drivers are tired or, like Road Commission people, may be in the second half of a 16-hour shift?

Not only that, but Post explained that "typical" stopping distances of about 350 feet for a tractor-trailer going 55 mph could be much longer if truck tires or brakes are worn or the roads are slippery.

"Life doesn't give us too many second chances," Grant said. "What's so important about this training is that it gives drivers just that. They learn how a big rig acts, what it takes to get out of trouble, and what a big difference as little as two more miles an hour faster can make."

Here are some facts and statistics Michigan Center for Decision Driving participants receive:

Common errors in two-thirds of highway accidents include following too closely, driving too fast for conditions, overdependence on brakes, driver inattention and inability to control skids.

23,198 persons died in tractor-trailer crashes in 1991, of which 13 percent were truck occupants; 89 percent of the tractor-trailer crashes with cars resulting in fatalities, the dead people are in the cars.

Tractor-trailers have higher ratios of involvements in fatal crashes than passenger vehicles: 4.1 per 100 million miles traveled, vs 2.6 for cars.

The stopping "cushion" truck drivers need must be extended by one second per 10 feet of vehicle length for adverse driving conditions and another second for night driving.

These are the things that go into stopping — perception of the need to stop, mental and physical reaction to the perception, braking and finally, beginning to stop, which will be influenced by speed, weight, road condition,

brake system condition and the traction footprint of the vehicle.

As speed doubles, braking distance quadruples.

Given the importance of braking, it is no wonder that the MCDD training involves a lot of braking actions, in both a trailer-less tractor and a full tractor-trailer rig. Each driver makes 15 and 30 mph wet and dry stops.

To see how to dodge a poten-

tial accident and return to the roadway without creating a head-on collision in the incoming lane, drivers go off and back on the road at 18, 20, 22 and 25 mph. They learn, as only actual practice teaches, just what a difference these seemingly small differences in speed make in both their reaction times and how the truck behaves.

Then each driver practices

making panic lane changes, on wet pavement, with incremental speed increases.

The training has a two-part grand finale. First, in a tractor with no trailer — that's a "bob-tail" to insiders, "Good buddy" — to spin out of control and do a "doughnut."

Finally, the nightmare of truck and car drivers, thousands of

pounds of truck and trailer are intentionally caused to jackknife and then work to pull out of the slide.

All the while, Michigan Center for Decision Driving trainers are in radio contact with each truck, offering tips, critiques and pointing out when they did well or "just killed somebody."

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