

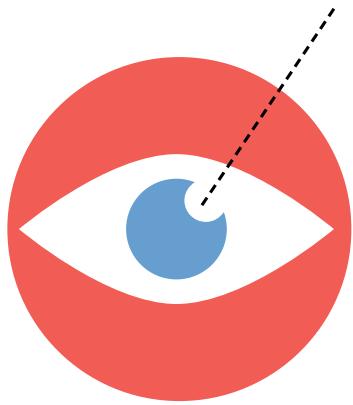


HIGH- PERFORMANCE SAFETY

THE **6** MOST IMPORTANT
DRIVING LESSONS THAT I LEARNED AT PACIFIC RACEWAYS

BY **ROB BHATT**

ALMOST ANYONE CAN OPERATE A MOTOR VEHICLE, but driving is an art. This became clear to me on an overcast day last fall, when I attended the One-Day High Performance Driving Clinic at Pacific Raceways in Kent. Throughout the session, school founder and veteran sports-car racer Don Kitch Jr. emphasized the importance of maintaining your hands in the 9/3 position on the steering wheel. In almost any other setting, the sentiment might have come off as overly pedantic, particularly to the 14 mostly male, 30- and 40-something car enthusiasts/adrenaline junkies gathered for our session. Coming from someone who has raced a Ferrari at Le Mans, however, the advice was well received. The experience, which included classroom instruction, “street-survival” exercises on an empty lot and laps around the track, proved educational and inspirational. In addition to (#1) making me a devotee of the 9/3 position, here are the other five most important lessons that I learned about driver safety—on public roads or in a racing environment. While some of these might seem like common sense, you only need to take a quick glimpse at the motorists around you to realize that too many drivers fail to practice such vital fundamentals. >>



#2

AIM HIGH WITH YOUR EYES

ONE OF OUR street-survival exercises required us to accelerate to about 25 mph and drive through a slalom course marked by orange traffic cones. The rub? When the instructor at the end of the course held up his flag, we were supposed to straighten the wheel and skip a cone. This forced us to pay attention to activity farther on up the road while simultaneously maneuvering through obstacles directly in front of us. “The biggest benefit to this exercise is looking through the world you are in to the world you are coming to and dealing with both at the same time,” Kitch explained. “That’s the high-aim vision part of it—knowing what’s going on way up ahead.” Doing so allows you to identify hazards before you reach them—and gives you more time to avoid them. (Editors’ note: AAA’s national driver-education team recommends scanning the road and the surrounding area at least 20 to 30 seconds ahead of you to watch for approaching vehicles, pedestrians or animals that might enter your path.)

#3

KNOW YOUR SITUATION

IN THE CLASSROOM, Kitch explained why he eschews using the word “accident” to describe a traffic collision. “They are not ‘accidents,’” he says, “They are ‘avoidables.’ If we can find an extra five seconds before impact, we can find a way to avoid most collisions.” ¶ This is where situational awareness, an extension of high-aim vision, comes into play. Properly adjusting your mirrors and constantly monitoring the traffic around you allows you to not only recognize potential hazards, but also plan your escape route—before a hazard arises. According to Kitch, your side mirrors should face outward far enough so that you can only barely see the side of your own car in a normal glance from your seat.



Keeping tabs on surrounding vehicles is a key to safety.

#4

GET A FEEL FOR YOUR BRAKES

ANOTHER OF OUR street-survival exercises required us to accelerate up to about 60 mph and then slam on our brakes, releasing the pedal only after coming to a complete stop. After doing this a couple of times, those of us with antilock brake systems (ABS) were asked to repeat the exercise while steering around a traffic cone placed in the braking zone, giving us a feel for steering our cars with the ABS activated. ¶ “When do people have the opportunity to go, ‘I need to find out how quickly I can stop this car?’” Kitch says. “What we are trying to do is develop a skill set so that when a situation requiring these skills arises, you’re able to deal with it.”



Pro drivers use the 9/3 for maximum control.

#5

THE STEERING WHEEL IS YOUR FRIEND

IN REAL LIFE, if a person, animal or object popped out in front of you, you’d only have a split second to react. Maintaining your situational awareness gives you the best chance to avoid such a hazard by allowing you to instantly decide whether to stop or steer around it. To help us practice steering around hazards, Kitch had us drive toward a row of traffic cones with an instructor on either side. As we approached, one of the instructors held up a flag, signaling us to steer to the other direction around the obstacle represented by the cones. ¶ “It is almost always much safer to steer around something you don’t want to hit than it is to stop in front of it,” says Kitch. “Now you might have to use the brakes and steering wheel at the same time, but 99 percent of the time, the steering wheel is going to be your best friend.” (On narrow roads with no shoulder and in other settings where you would not be able to safely steer around a hazard that entered your lane of travel, AAA recommends increasing your following distance from the car ahead of you.)



➔ Visit teamseattle.com to learn how Don Kitch Jr. (left) is raising funds for Seattle Children’s Hospital through his Team Seattle endurance racing team. Learn more about his driving clinics at proformanceracingschool.com.

#6

BE PATIENT

AFTER LUNCH, we worked on our turning and acceleration skills on Pacific Raceways’ 2.25-mile road course, a meandering loop consisting of nine turns—a mix of hairpins, switchbacks and a few broader curves. Each of us was accompanied by one of Kitch’s instructors in our passenger seat, and we each completed about 20 laps at speeds topping out in excess of 100 mph. Thankfully, none of us had to use the collision-avoidance skills we had practiced earlier in the day. ¶ From a Porsche with a tail fin to a Lotus to BMW sedans, my fellow students drove a wide range of high-horsepower rides. Needless to say, my Subaru Outback was not the fastest car on the track. I was reminded of this every time the cars queued up behind me whizzed by in the designated passing zones. Duly humbled, I no longer get annoyed when I find myself behind an excessively slow driver on any road. I just retain an awareness of my surroundings and wait for a safe opportunity to pass—all while keeping my hands in the 9/3 position on the steering wheel, of course. ¶