



Students learned to detect when they are skidding and how to recover on a wet skid pad at the safety center.

Program creates safe drivers

SCSU safety center opens skills classes to public for first time



TIMES PHOTOS BY PAUL MIDDLESTAEDT

After being involved in a car accident, Brittany Nelson-Cheeseman, 17, of Minneapolis enrolled in the advanced driving skills course at the Minnesota High-

way Safety Center to get comfortable being behind the wheel again. Read more about her story on Page 5A.

By John Molene
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Two truisms about Minnesota drivers exist, noted Dave Schultz, director of the Minnesota Highway Safety Center's advanced driving facility.

1) No one thinks they're a bad driver.

2) A lot of them are wrong.

Indeed, driving instructors at the St. Cloud facility aim to show students they're not the great drivers they think they are. One try at the evasive steering course at 32 mph usually does that.

"Ah, he killed a little cone who never hurt a soul," said Larry Ouellette, driver improvement program coordinator, as one student plowed over a plastic cone during sessions now open to the public for the first time.

The students, however, are learning more than how to steer around a cone or avoid a skid. They're learning how to save lives. Their lives. While the number of Minnesota highway accidents has dropped the last two years, the number of fatalities has increased.

Creating safe drivers

Part of St. Cloud State University, the highway safety center has been teaching advanced driving skills to law enforcement officers, as well as fire depart-

UPCOMING CLASSES

The advanced driving skills class will be held again from 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Aug. 19, Nov. 13 and Dec. 11 at the highway safety center.

Pre-registration and a non-refundable deposit of \$50 are required, with the balance due at class time. To register call 255-2185 or (888) 234-1294.

John Molene

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Safety

ment and ambulance personnel for years. Instructors estimate they have trained 7,000 police officers in the last three years.

Students from the public now pay \$196 each for the advanced driving skills class, or \$354 a couple. Cars are furnished. Drivers are made.

"If you like to drive, you'll love this class," Ouellette said. "If you don't, you need this class."

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Drivers

After the initial session, where the drivers often are taken down a peg or two, the instructor's next goal is to teach them how to be better-than-average drivers, often much better, and quickly.

"We drive so much, we get complacent behind the wheel," Ouellette said. "Then you buy a new car and you don't even realize how fast you're going. You're driving faster, in more traffic, but your reaction time is still the same.

"But it isn't the speed that kills people," Ouellette said. "It's inattention and reflex and reaction time."

Striving for safety

Ouellette and fellow instructor Nito Quitevis offer a list of horror stories about inattentive drivers.

"They eat. They read. I've seen 'em do crossword puzzles," Quitevis said.

Kelly Breit of Plymouth took the advanced driving class to become a better driver.

"On a scale of 10, I'm a seven or eight. I think I'm more conscientious than the average driver, but I'm not perfect ...

"I see a lot of bad drivers. And I want to make sure I'm not one of them."

In the classroom and on the driving course, the students learn evasive steering, maximum vehicle control, how to react in pitch-and-roll and emergency situations, proper seat and hand positions, how to develop good visual habits and the correct use of anti-lock braking systems.

Traditional driver's education is sometimes inadequate and easily forgotten, Ouellette said.

"One of the things about driving is once you learn how, it's too easy," Schultz said. "Physically there's only three things to do. But mentally it's probably one of the most stressful things you'll ever do.

"People don't realize they are the guidance system for a 4,000-pound mis-



TIMES PHOTO BY PAUL MIDDLESTAEDT

After going through a braking exercise, students had the option of testing their skills on a row of cones as they made their way

sile. So we have to give it more thought than we do."

Brushing up

Almost all drivers could benefit from a refresher course every two or three years, the instructors said.

"If I had a young daughter, I would want to know she had something more than driver's education," Ouellette said. "Just because of the driving public."

There's also an evolving system of informational signs and procedures.

"The information doesn't get out to the driving public," Quitevis said.

Not surprisingly, the really bad drivers don't take refresher courses.

"The people who need it the worst never show up," Ouellette said.

Cathy Westerberg of Blaine, who took the class with her son, Dave, is a fairly typical example of the kind of student the course attracts. She is a good driver who wants to get better.

"I've never had an accident. I never had a ticket," Westerberg said. "And I don't drive in rush-hour traffic. I wanted to learn what to do in a skid and how to be a better driver in every situation. And I thought he would like it."

Dave Westerberg is following in his mother's driving shoes.

"I drive defensively," Westerberg said.

How they learn

In the advanced driving course, drivers first are given classroom instruction on air bags and anti-lock brakes. Then they move to the driving course for behind-the-wheel training, usually two to a car. The instructor rides along on some drills. On others, they monitor their students from a distance using hand-held radios.

Drivers start with the serpentine exercise and advance through skid control, evasive steer, control brake and steer

around the course at the Minnesota Highway Safety Center in St. Cloud.

and brake.

In the skid-control exercise, the car is put into a deliberate skid and students are shown how to recover and regain control of the vehicle.

In the control brake exercise, drivers learn the proper use of both brake-threshold braking and ABS braking. Drivers also learn how to steer and brake at the same time, which sounds easy, but isn't given the nature of the training runs.

Extra challenge

In the evasive steering exercise, drivers set out in a straight line, drive their cars over a trip cord, watch for an overhead signal for whether to turn left, right or go straight, then make a split-second decision for the correct course. The students start at a mere 20 miles per hour, but few can handle the course at much past 32 mph.

"We're going to take it up to warp speed at 32," Ouellette said.

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"The light, where is the light?" Breit implores as his car hits the fail-safe point at 32.

"Wrong," Ouellette says. "You're guessing and you guessed wrong."

Drivers soon learn that the faster they go, the harder they have to pull to steer, and the less time their eyes, brains and muscles have to respond.

"Your peripheral vision shrinks," Ouellette explained. "For every 1 mph, you lose 1 1/2 percent of your peripheral vision. At 30 mph you lose 45 percent. The faster you go, the more tunnel vision you have."

And as a driver's field of vision shrinks, the chances for an accident increase.