

Concentration >> The Most Critical Element of Driving Safely

by Greg N. Brown

Safety isn't the first thing that comes to mind when I climb into a car (unless the sunvisor is flipped down so I can read that "Warning! Death or injury..." label the lawyers think needs posting all over the cockpit). So immersed am I in the anticipation of enjoyment with the automobile—as both a comfortable form of conveyance and a tweak to that side of the brain which hungers for g forces—that thoughts of surviving the trip are subsumed by such sensual inputs as engine sound, shift lever vibration or the comforting chemical-compound odor wafting from the upholstery.

This selective amnesia doesn't last long. As soon as the car leaves its parking spot, I notice signs of mayhem everywhere: retaining walls rainbowed with slashes of car paint; streets striped with panic-produced rubber; medians ornamented by exploded plastic and bent chrome; tarmac tattooed by scorch marks. It's almost enough to make me turn back home and pull the covers over my head.

What keeps me going is the confidence—however shaky at times—that unless something extraordinary occurs, I'm prepared to avoid that accident. And if the fates conspire against me, chances are I'll probably survive it without too much harm.

The cars I routinely drive are considered paragons of modern automotive safety—airbags in every corner, crumple zones ready to crumple, and CAD-designed chassis and body structures set to absorb the forces which, if they reached me, might end in bodily trauma.

Even with all that technology, however, I don't feel really safe unless I'm in total command of the car. And that means using all the resources at my disposal: intelligent use of tire grip, brakes, throttle and mirrors, and a level of perception which goes deeper than mere acknowledgement of the other vehicles surrounding me.

A critical factor of the safety equation is attentive driver involvement. This active safety is crucial to insulating oneself as much as possible from the potential of harm—which can mean anything from backing off the throttle when it rains to staying out of a semi-trailer's blind spot on the freeway.

Some years ago I was treated to a couple days of "perceptual training" from a pair of Brits who'd retired from the police force to establish a driving school in England. Dubbed "Drive to Survive," the training was aimed at increasing a driver's ability to recognize and deal with the challenges of the road. Taught initially to the cops which patrol Britain's highways, the technique begins with a simple exercise, and it's one which I recommend to all who are learning how to drive or to those trying to improve their driving. It involves "seeing" everything happening around the car and simultaneously keeping up a running commentary as to what is going on.

A few moments of this exercise might go something like this: "Red car ahead slowing; bicyclist on the right;

street light green; bicyclist approaching intersection, his head swiveling to the left; car ahead signals to turn right; bicyclist signals left..."

Which by then should have had the driver braking in anticipation of the car and bicycle grabbing the same patch of pavement at the same time. Observation made; action taken. Simple, no?

This technique seems terribly silly at first, but once you get rolling, it becomes clear that much of what happens in front of us on the highway is perceived subconsciously while we fiddle with radio controls, talk on the cell or just daydream about the blond in the Ferrari. And when that occurs, you've just cancelled out the most important safety element of the car—the driver.

A similar process goes on at the race track. Hurley Haywood, race driver non pareil, told us that the most important element of driving at a high rate of speed is concentration. It's not so much that a race driver's brain "slows down" the incoming data; instead, the best drivers are able to perceive everything that's happening around them, analyze the data quickly and then react to it—right now! Simple, no?

Without this key component of concentration, all the crumple zones, airbags and seatbelts are there simply to minimize injury—or worse. I'd prefer to avoid that possibility altogether.

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