

THE PLIGHT OF THE NAVIGATOR

by Cory Farley

Among AutoWeek readers, I suppose I am about an average driver. But I take pride, take pains, above all take an interest in moving down the road as smoothly, safely and sometimes as quickly as I can. I imagine you do the same.

This puts us several laps ahead of the mass of motorists. We are better, if only because we know there are right and wrong ways, and we try to do it right.

But how do I convey this to the 15-year-old navigator who is in training to become my co-driver?

I have been thinking about this for years. I hope to produce an intelligent driver who has some skills to build on. This stage of his motoring career is the equivalent of Little League baseball: If somebody says, "Farley, play third base," he won't have to ask where it is.

I have planned his learning curve carefully. I know where he will learn to control a skid: a huge parking lot that has no cars but frequent ice. I have my eye on a dirt road where he can explore cornering limits safely. We've started doing what meager troubleshooting modern cars allow.

But how do I teach him to hear the inner voice that says, "Uh-oh?" I heard it last week. Matt was driving as we approached a Chevy pickup apparently parked on the right shoulder.

"Watch this guy," I said, and two seconds later the truck lurched into traffic.

"How did you know that?" Matt asked.

It was a combination of things: Jacked up four-wheel drive and earth-mover tires suggesting a king-of-the-road attitude, rock-band stickers on the blacked-out windows indication oblivious teenagers, for starters. Maybe I saw a puff of exhaust. Maybe the backup light flashed as the driver shifted out of park. Nothing registered, but something sounded an alarm.

Recognizing these warnings is not a physical skill. It's mental, and I don't know how to explain it to a kid.

We've made a pact. I have promised I won't tell him any lies. ("If you go over 60," my mother said years ago, "you'll blow out the tires.") In return, he has promised to listen to what I do tell him. ("This is grown-up stuff. If you hit somebody, it won't go away because you didn't mean to do it.")

But I am in my fifth decade, and he is in his second. I see potential disaster. He thinks he is immortal.

Moreover, I am afraid I have not been such a good role model.

He has ridden with me at 100 mph, and he has seen me double the speed limit on mountain roads. Does he know, though, that I do it only in selected areas, in cars that were built for it, and that years of training and experience preceded the day I carried my firstborn at that speed?

It took me a long time to learn that sometimes 85 mph is safe, and sometimes 30 mph is asking for tragedy. I took some lumps, and lumped some cars, along the way. I want him to know what I know without doing what I did. Which is probably impossible.

But my belief may be wrong, since I seem to be the sole local subscriber; my friends, who are putting their kids to sleep with admonitions to observe posted limits, think I'm certifiable.

"As soon as you turn him loose, he's going to tear up the road," they say.

Could be he will. Nearly everybody does, including me. But at least if he does, he'll be thinking about what he's doing instead of waiting for those tires to blow.

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