

Skid school

Take five gallons of oil, multiple water jets and a slightly battered automatic car sorely lacking tyre tread and you have got the makings of one hell of a driving lesson. Sarah Aspinall tries out the Met's skid pan at Hendon Police Training College

According to police staff instructor Arthur Shelley, there is more than one way to negotiate your way around a road skid. In the wrong conditions, a routine car journey to the shops and back could become a nightmare for the driver who decides to brake excessively at the wrong moment.

For police officers to avoid an accident, Mr Shelley explains it is essential to master the art of anticipation. In fact, he values this core skill over and above that of any other, and claims it is the key attribute of an effective roads policing officer, especially on the busy roads in the city.

"It's all about making sure that it doesn't happen before it happens. As far as we are concerned here, the fastest way to driver internship is [to drive] as smooth as you can. Obviously speed is still the number one killer; if you don't drive fast you won't have an accident."

The majority of officers coming through the school get at least two hours with Mr Shelley or his colleagues on the skid pan, with advanced courses comprising a further five hours training.

The skid pan driving is a part of an intensive training course made up of

theory and on and off road driver training. Mr Shelley explains that the skills gained on the track save lives, and he has letters from previous pupils to prove it.

The lesson begins with Mr Shelley demonstrating the ease with which a previously controlled move can turn into a skid. Then he pulls over to enable me to take a turn on the skid pan. The lesson does not get off to a good start, with my colleague leaping out of the vehicle to enable her to get as far away from me and the car as she possibly can. The students at the school gather on the balcony to watch.

Mr Shelley is clearly unimpressed by the way I hold the steering wheel. My offending thumbs, resting on the spokes inside, prompted him to suggest that a bike falling under my front wheels would result in me gaining two broken or dislocated digits - weeks later and I am still terrified by this prospect.

My flashy wheel-turning technique did not earn me any points either as he told me in no uncertain terms that it is much safer to feed the wheel, not to use a one-hand move they call the 'window-wash'.

Feeling rather like an errant schoolgirl, I made my way around the track, building up to a not very impressive speed of 15 mph, braking hard and skidding towards the concrete bumpers at the side of the skid pan. At one stage, even Mr Shelley looks concerned. He discusses the dangers of losing control even at such a low speed:

“How much steering-wise would it take to kill someone? It is literally just a little touch. So it all depends on how slow, how fast and what type of road. That covers all speeds from five miles an hour to one hundred miles an hour plus.”

The actions a driver chooses to take in any given situation can also be analysed. Be it acceleration, excessive or sudden braking, what is the instinctive response may not be the right response when you lose control on an icy stretch of road.

There can be many reasons why the car wheels lock and skid. Passengers in the car can affect the balance, the surface of the road could be worn and polished at points and a manhole cover or surface dirt can also be the cause of many an accident.

Mr Shelley provides an example: “So there we are driving down the high street; sun is shining on the road surface; little girl runs across the road and falls over; we slam on the brakes and all four wheels lockup and we are sliding straight towards her.

“Alright that guy at the driving school said leave them locked up it’s the quickest way of stopping. I can stop in seventy feet, not a problem. Until you realise she’s only sixty feet away then what do you do? If you take your foot off the brake the car should veer left.

“If we can try and think about acceleration points we can help to stop the car. Come around here and brake, brake, brake. Go into the turn exactly the same but instead of accelerating in the bend we get the wheels straight then accelerate. It’s going to be quicker and safer”

After a bit of practice I pull over and Mr Shelley shows me how it’s done. Screeching around the track we mounted the metre high concrete

bumper. The students – who had previously vanished, clearly bored by my efforts – returned to the balcony in force as we got all four wheels back on the skidpan, skilfully gliding into skids as we navigate around the cones on the track.

So how do you brake on a slippery road surface? Mr Shelley advises: “Gently, smooth and slow.”

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Sarah Aspinall gets a taste of driver training

