

Skid-car training at PIR provides vital skills for driving in snow

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The back of the Toyota slowly swings to the right as the rear wheels lose traction on the pavement.

Turn the steering wheel toward the right. Give the car a bit of gas to shift the weight to the rear tires. Slowly gather the car back up so both ends are moving in the same direction.

Todd Harris sits in the passenger seat, watching how the driver's hands and feet work in concert to bring the car back under control, softly making suggestions as the car circles a course laid out with bright orange pylons.

During the past 11 years, Harris and his team of instructors at Pro Drive at Portland International Raceway (www.prodrive.net) have schooled about 10,000 drivers in the skills needed to drive in less-than-ideal conditions. Students range from teens with freshly-minted learner's permits to senior citizens, and from firefighters and cops to the men and women who drive delivery trucks.

"A lot of what we teach here is vehicle dynamics," he says. "If people understand how their car works, about traction and how it changes and what they can do to make it work for them, they become better drivers."

Best braking techniques

Instructors also spend time on defensive-driving maneuvers and how to get the most out of a car's braking system, both those with and without an anti-lock feature.

Harris says that television images of cars in ditches or sliding across the highway during the area's first hit of winter in December only reinforce his belief that drivers need better training. He says studies and anecdotal evidence indicate the program results in a significant reduction in accidents, especially those that occur during bad weather.

"In America, 89 percent of drivers consider themselves either 'excellent' or 'above average,' " he says. "Somehow I always seem to be on the road with the other 11 percent."

"We all cultivate bad driving habits," he says. "We work on trying to change them."

The bulk of a three-hour lesson is spent in a Toyota Skid Car. The car begins as an off-the-lot, four-door sedan, which is then fitted with a steel frame and hydraulic rams that can raise the car on a separate set of wheels to reduce traction at one or both ends.

Harris points to his feet, and explains that at any given time, the amount of tire in contact with the road surface is about the same as the footprint of an adult male. And that's the total for all four tires.

"You don't have to raise the car much to really reduce the amount of traction you get on one end or the other," he says.

Lifting the car allows the system to replicate the amount of traction a car would get on glazed-over snow or black ice. By raising either the front or rear of the car, it simulates how it would react if one end or the other skids.

He says much of the classroom time is spent on teaching students how to avoid a skid, by braking before they enter a corner and anticipating problems.

It is the same type of information he gives to drivers who attend his summer high-performance driving school to learn to become better racecar drivers.

A difference in speed

"The knowledge and skill set are the same," he says. "The only difference is the speed.

"The same things I do at 180 miles an hour in a race car are valid in the skid car at 18 miles an hour," he says. "What the skid car does is magnify the traction issues, but at much lower speeds."

He adds that the skid car class humbles most drivers, many of whom attend not convinced they need the lesson.

"But in the skid car, everyone spins," he says with a grin.

Some insurance companies offer a discount on premiums for graduates of the school.

Skid School costs \$299. That's less than the price of four hours of repair work in most local auto body shops.

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