

## Street Beef: Skid Shop teaches life-and-death lessons



Tribune/Steve Hanks

Driving instructor Phil Liggins works to correct a skid in the simulator at Lewis-Clark State College's Driver Development Center.

Cody Bloomsburg

Posted: Monday, January 9, 2012 12:00 am | *Updated: 9:23 am, Mon Jan 9, 2012.*

**Street Beef: Skid Shop teaches life-and-death lessons** By Cody Bloomsburg, of the Tribune | 4 comments

When the Tahoe's tires broke loose, the 5-acre asphalt pad went into a counter-clockwise blur like a bad time-travel sequence in a made-for-TV movie.

There is a soft spot in the American soul for spinning out in a parking lot.

There are also white crosses dotting the sides of our highways and interstates, because losing control at the wrong time kills people.

The former is what makes Philip Liggins' job fun, the latter is why he does it.

He works at the Lewis-Clark State College Skid Shop and teaches people how to not to get into a skid.

He does it on the pole-free expanse of asphalt with a Chevy Tahoe and an International truck outfitted with \$50,000 worth of hydraulics to lift the rigs off their tires, replicating slick roads.

The retired Washington State Patrol detective investigated crashes in the Seattle/Tacoma area for six of his 20 years on the force. He's recreated more than 300 of them.

After he retired, he worked as a day-route truck driver and now commutes from Grangeville to Lewiston.

Even with his years of windshield time, unraveling and rebuilding wrecks, Liggins said he doesn't know anyone who's an expert at pulling out of a skid. There are too many variables; avoiding them is the only safe bet.

With the Tahoe safely at rest, Liggins told me to take my foot off the brake and start following the figure-8 course again. That's when the lesson started.

After students lose control, Liggins talks them through what happened. They know what it felt like, and he tells them why it happened. They spend the rest of the time learning what it feels like to make it never happen again.

His gospel is calmness. Think about the Fonz - be cool. No panic braking, no quick jerks on the wheel, no stamping on the gas pedal. As he put it: The accelerator is nobody's friend.

In this case, I was going too fast into a turn and went into a skid. We did a 360 and came to a stop. I was going all of 20 miles per hour.

The feel and the experience is the heart of the class, Liggins said. But there is another thing that happens when he gets a family into the skid car. Parents talk about their close calls with their kids and vice versa. These are conversations that don't happen often enough, Liggins said, and they should.

Liggins isn't in the story business, though. All he says of the accidents he's dealt with is, "I've seen a lot of them."

It's debatable what my business is, but here's my story:

Midway through November 2010, a broadcast student and I were going from Missoula to Helena to cover the state Legislature caucuses.

The first real snowfall came late that year, and the roads were covered with a greasy 1-inch skiff as we left in my Toyota pickup with fairly bald tires and no weight in the back.

Preparedness has never been my thing. I drove about 65 mph, though - a safe, I reasoned, 10 under the limit.

After driving for about an hour without incident, we crested a rise, crossed a bridge and then the truck was sideways.

I let off the gas and turned into the slide. It took me a decade of driving and a handful of pretty scary near-misses to get that into muscle memory.

When I first started driving I was a vicious over-corrector.

It didn't work. I held the wheel there and waited for the back bumper to hook the guardrail and sling the passenger side into it like a triphammer.

The broadcaster must have been thinking the same thing because he was hanging on my arm trying to pull himself away from the door.

The tires caught a ridge of slush. The truck shot away from the rail across two lanes of interstate.

Sliding again, I tried to stay turned into it. We blasted toward the deep median ditch.

"Here we go," the broadcaster said.

It's funny how trained talkers can even make terror sound dignified.

"No roll, no roll, no roll," I mumbled like a hillbilly witch doctor.

Our front tires hit snowy grass. I tried to match the tires with angle of momentum. No rollover. No words. Snow and mud thudded up from under the truck. The wheels bounced. We cooked full tilt through the big ditch.

The rig nosed into the oncoming lane. Just as the tires hit pavement, the truck wheeled back around. We stopped. Staring at the lanes where it all started; the whole truck was parked peacefully in the median.

"That," I said, "was (expletive deleted) awesome."

The broadcaster said nothing.

Two tractor trailers drove past.

I looked at my silent passenger, shrugged and shifted into four-wheel drive and pulled onto the interstate behind the trucks.

The broadcaster battled a panic attack the rest of the way to Helena. I wrote a story about it in my head to make it seem less serious and hummed "Don't Fear the Reaper," under my breath.

If I would have taken Liggins' class before that, I probably wouldn't have that story.

It's a story that my mom hates to hear, my dad calls me an idiot for having, and one I think about every time I see a white cross on the side of the highway because someone else's son wasn't as lucky as I was.

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