

A Line in the Sand



DrivingMBA teaches teens critical driving skills



Not too long ago, Molly Miller was driving down Route 23, an idyllic country road. A new driver, Molly was excited to show off her new little Toyota. As she made her way down a straight portion of Route 23, she barely noticed the grill of an oncoming RV approaching from the other direction. The road was a flat, two-lane country road with great visibility, and the RV was the only other vehicle around—or so she thought.

As Molly drew closer to the RV, she saw a quick flash of red. Before she had time to react, Molly crashed head-on into a red Viper whose driver was too impatient to wait behind the slow-moving RV. The collision force was immense, with a combined energy of more than 120 mph.

The reality: Molly was a 15-year-old newly-permitted student at one of the most advanced teen driver training facilities in the world, DrivingMBA, in Scottsdale, Ariz. The Toyota, RV and Viper were elements in a complex scenario played out on the screens of an L3 PatrolSim IV Driving Simulator. Only her ego was bruised, but Molly's ability to handle real-world hazards hit a big learning curve.

Although driving simulators are not new to police agencies, what makes DrivingMBA so unique is its use of the L3 and several other simulation-based technologies to teach

DrivingMBA's L3 PatrolSim IV Driving Simulator allows teens to experience real-world driving scenarios without the dangers of being on the road. The program offers the most comprehensive civilian driver's training available.

teens driving skills that simply aren't possible to duplicate in the real world.

So why teen drivers, and why are we talking about it in this magazine? First, chew on this: Since the war in Iraq started, the United States has regrettably lost more than 4,000 soldiers in combat operations. In the same amount of time, more than 27,000 teenagers have been killed on American roadways. Our kids are dying at a rate that makes motor vehicle crashes the number one cause of death for U.S. teenagers (*Source:* NHTSA 2006).

Second, as a former state trooper, I learned that the majority of crashes are caused by a few simple factors. Add immaturity, distraction, limited or no driver instruction to the mix and it's no surprise officers end up dealing with the devastating consequences. But most motor-vehicle crashes can be prevented through proper preparation, awareness and training.

Taking a Stand

Richard and Maria Wojtczak felt the same way. After a series of devastating teen driving fatalities in 2003, they decided to take advantage of their decades of technology and training background to help put a stop



to the carnage. They first examined what the State of Arizona was doing and discovered that Arizona, like many other states, has no formal driver training requirement. At the time, the only rules were that once a teenager reached the age of 15 years and 7 months, they could obtain a permit from the Arizona Motor Vehicle Division (MVD). During the next five months, the newly permitted driver had to accumulate 25 hours of driving experience with a licensed driver aged 18 years or older. There were no free-way requirements. These requirements left room for a lot of interpretation as to what constituted good driver input.

At the end of the five-month period, the only remaining MVD requirements were a simple written and square-the-block road test before a teen received a license that was good until age 65. To the Wojtczaks, these rules were unacceptable.

The result: In 2003, the DrivingMBA, a driver training facility that incorporates state-of-the-art simulation technology, was born. The advantage of simulation technology is that it exposes students to numerous hazardous situations without risking life and limb, and it teaches the basic skills teens need. DrivingMBA incorporates a tiered simulation process that allows students to learn in a structured environment, but it's not the only component.

Charlie Sobczak, a partner in DrivingMBA, says, "The simulators are part of an overall training process that involves everyone, including the parents. We recognize it has to be a total training experience for it to be the most beneficial."

Every DrivingMBA student starts off with the Level 1 simulation program. The 10-hour course uses an interactive modular driving simulator that teaches new drivers everything they need before they get in a real car. For those of us who've been driving a while, it's easy to forget that simple things, such as starting the car, must be taught at some point.

The Level 1 simulator features three screens, a steering wheel, a dedicated driver's seat, a seatbelt, a transmission lever, turn signals, an ignition key and a parking brake, just like a real car. According to Maria Wojtczak, students practice pulling to the side of the road more than 500 times. Such repetition ingrains the proper skill sets, and makes the transition to the real world much easier.

In fact, although DrivingMBA is also an MVD-licensed school for obtaining a permit or license, students who get their permit from DrivingMBA must attend Level 1 before participating in structured, behind-the-wheel training with a DrivingMBA instructor in one of the company's vehicles. Once the student completes a six- or eight-hour module of DrivingMBA's behind-the-wheel training, they're eligible to take DrivingMBA's rigorous driving test to see if they're ready for a license.

Maria Wojtczak points out that although a student can fail the road test, it doesn't affect their ability to take Arizona's official MVD test. "I can only tell parents that their child isn't ready to drive on their own yet," she says. "They can still take their child to the MVD and [have them] take their test. I can't control if they pass that test." Of course, the fact that parents of DrivingMBA students care about their child enough to

enroll them in the first place means they generally heed Maria Wojtczak's words and those of her professional instructors.

Level 2

As unique as it is in offering simulation technology for a new driver, DrivingMBA elevates its training regimen even higher with its Level 2 training platform. The training is only available to licensed drivers and permitted drivers who have at least 25 or more hours of experience on real roads. Level 2 places drivers in the seat of the MPRI PatrolSimIV for a series of intensive driving scenarios. But before that occurs, each student attends a 1.5 hour classroom orientation and has their skills measured on a computer simulation called the Profiler.

The Profiler features a steering wheel, pedals and shifter setup, but it isn't designed to measure driving ability. According to co-founder Richard Wojtczak, "The Profiler was originally designed for law enforcement to evaluate an officer's ability to multitask while behind the wheel. As students drive, it measures directional scanning, decision-making skills, reaction time and field of vision. At the end, it compiles a matrix readout that delivers an overall score



Before progressing to Level 2, students must complete a 1.5 hour session on the Profiler, which is designed to measure a driver's decisions-making skills, reaction time and field of vision.

for the assessment, which is used as a baseline of the student's abilities at the beginning of Level 2. The Profiler system is also used at the end of Level 2 training as a post-assessment tool.

During Level 2 training, students experience a series of graduated exercises that focus on hazard recognition, vehicle handling, space management and speed control. And although the program doesn't replace real-world driving dynamics, Richard Wojtczak says its biggest asset is that it "teaches people to think." He also adds that it provides a controlled environment in which just about any scenario

can be created in a safe, repeatable manner, allowing students to learn from mistakes.

DrivingMBA also realizes that the process of teaching teens to drive is a family experience, so they offer both a parenting class and a car maintenance class. There's even a class for mature drivers that assesses perception, reaction and vehicle-control skills.

Students who complete the entire DrivingMBA training regimen will have more than 30 hours of structured, professional training that prepares them for a lifetime of safe driving. Of course, such training isn't cheap. A complete course costs approximately \$1,350. But Maria Wojtczak says, "I tell parents that they've spent 15 years of their life raising their child and ask them what it's worth to make sure they live to see the next 70. That usually makes the point very clear that we are here to teach driving skills, but most importantly to help keep these kids alive to enjoy a full life."

Conclusion

The company has trained more than 2,500 teen drivers, and analysis shows that graduates have a fraction of the amount of crashes their untrained peers have. Furthermore, the company has developed numerous trust relationships with Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD), Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), the media and others. DrivingMBA currently has locations in Scottsdale and Chandler, Ariz., and plans to take this comprehensive driver training program nationwide. The program has had students from China, Mexico, Singapore, Russia, South Africa, Japan, England and other countries. Many of these students needed to literally learn to drive on the right side of the road. DrivingMBA recently introduced SAVE, a fully certified, validated and legally defensible driver training program for commercial and corporate clients seeking to reduce operating costs and liability. In addition to classroom and simulation training, SAVE also offers closed-course skills training, ala EVOC, as an option.

So, why is this so important to law enforcement? It's simple. Can you imagine if all drivers had this sort of training prior to traveling our roadways? Can you imagine the many senseless deaths that could be prevented? As it stands, government licensing programs either can't or won't do anything to make roads safer in a nation spoiled by the concept that driving is an inalienable right everyone should have. As law enforcement officers, we know the dangers of such beliefs. Companies like DrivingMBA are our greatest allies in making our roads safer and decreasing the amount of motor vehicle crashes, ultimately making our jobs less difficult. **LOM**

JP MOLNAR is a former state trooper and has taught EVOC since 1991 for various agencies. He has also raced cars for 24-plus years and has taught at numerous high-performance racing schools.

DrivingMBA

For more information, contact DrivingMBA at 480/948-1648 or visit www.drivingmba.com.

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