

Teen Driving Troubles

By ERIC PETERS



The Iraq war has cost around 2,500 Americans their lives so far -- but that's peanuts compared with the mayhem being attributed to teenage drivers. According to a recent study by the American Automobile Association (AAA) 30,917 fatalities over the past 10 years were the result of crashes involving drivers ages 15-17 years old -- a body count about two-thirds as high as the total number of U.S. soldiers killed during the entire Vietnam War.

A third of those killed were the teenage drivers themselves -- while another third were passengers riding with the teenage driver. But a third of the fatalities were occupants of other cars -- or pedestrians who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

AAA says that makes teen drivers are the single most dangerous group of motorists on the road - - to others as much as to themselves.

The most lethal combination of all is a teenage driver with a bunch of his (or her) teenage friends along for the ride. According to AAA President Robert Darbelnet, the risk of a potentially fatal accident involving a teen driver more than doubles when there is a teenage passenger in the car - - and quintuples with the presence of two or more teen passengers.

Any former teen that made it safely to adulthood probably understands the connection immediately. Most of us can remember being 16 -- and the sense of liberation that accompanied access to a car. For a lot of us, the first thing on the agenda was to pick up some of our friends and do what comes naturally to teens -- go out and have a good time. Some of us also liked to impress our friends with our driving prowess -- which often as not led to our first fender-bender (and sometimes worse). And if we weren't hot-shoeing it, we were talking or eating -- or talking and eating (and driving) at the same time -- with many a close call the result.

This is common knowledge -- and part and parcel of being a teen. What's lacking is common sense to protect teens (and the rest of us) from the natural consequences of being a teenager -- and an inexperienced new driver.

Several states have tried passing laws forbidding teens from driving other teens (inconvenient for them, but with solid reasoning behind it) as well as curfews and other limitations. AAA also wants every state to require a 6-12 month probationary license for all teen drivers (which could be revoked for bad behavior) as well as at least 50 hours of adult-supervised driver training during the learner's permit stage.

This is a step in the right direction but really, just a baby step. It's not teens, per se, who are the cause of so much trouble. It's inexperienced teens allowed onto the road before they've been properly trained -- and adequately tested. A great many of the accidents reported by AAA, for example, are single-vehicle crashes resulting from driver error such as over-correcting after an outside wheel inadvertently dips off the road onto a gravel shoulder. Instead of smoothly maintaining control and easing the car back onto the pavement, an inexperienced teen driver will

more often than not jerk the wheel hard to the left, which in turn causes the car to skid back onto the road, over the double yellow line -- and right into the path of oncoming traffic.

Teen drivers are also just beginning to develop their sense of spacial relationships (the ebb and flow of traffic around them) and often have not yet come to appreciate their own limits behind the wheel or the physical limits of the car they're driving, including such basic things as how much time/room it needs to come to a complete stop, its grip threshold -- and how it will behave when traction is lost, as on snow or ice-slicked surfaces.

The car "feels" perfectly safe at 85 mph (or going into a turn posted 45 mph at 60-something) so it's easy for a teen to get way ahead of himself before he has any idea he's pushing his luck.

And by then, of course, it may be too late.

Unfortunately, many parents aren't prepared, willing, or qualified to properly instruct their own kids. And the rest gets into money. Either from the state (through public school training) or in the form of private driving schools such as those run by former race car drivers like Bob Bondurant, Skip Barber and others -- both which entail someone ponying up. A good 2-3 day accident avoidance course costs around \$300-\$500 or so, depending on where you go. The superb vehicle dynamics/handling courses offered by former race car drivers such as Bob Bondurant and Skip Barber can cost significantly more -- but confer potentially life-saving skills on the new/teenage driver.

In Germany and some other countries, this type of intensive (and expensive) new driver training is absolutely mandatory -- because in those countries, the up front costs are justified by much-improved public safety. Unskilled, marginal drivers (teens and others alike) are kept off the road -- until they've proven they can operate a motor vehicle at a certain (and much higher than our own) level of skill. They view a driver's license as a hard-won privilege -- not an entitlement.

We, however, apparently don't think it's worth the cost. And so long as that's true, we can continue to expect teen drivers to be a looming danger to themselves -- and to everyone else on the road.