

Safe investment: Unique car creates icy conditions, profits drivers seeking skid control, parental peace of mind

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Most of us went through driver training as teenagers and can generally recite how to react when our car starts to slide: "Turn into the skid," our teachers taught us.

So how is it that so many cars end up in ditches when winter weather arrives?

Well, in reality, there's more to driving than reciting a simple phrase. And, besides, many Portlanders don't get much practice driving on icy roads.

However, I bring good news.

There's an innovative school in Portland that offers hands-on instruction on how to control an icy skid - even in the heat of summer.

"You're going to find how your input to the gas, steering and brake affect the stability of a car," says Todd Harris, owner and chief SkidCar instructor of Pro Drive Driving School, headquartered at Portland International Raceway.

The SkidCar is an ordinary Toyota Camry outfitted with hydraulic "training wheels" controlled by the instructor from the passenger seat. Adjusting the car's front or rear wheels enables the teacher to simulate snowy or icy road conditions.

"No matter what time of year you come, the instructor sets the car up so that the experience is the same," Harris says.

With the car's normal traction reduced, the student can practice controlling and avoiding skids in a perfectly safe environment.

"We're not making sudden adjustments. There's no surprises," Harris says.

Pro Drive sets up a course on the raceway's infield pavement simulating normal road turns a driver may encounter. The instructor works with the students to help them understand the dynamics of car control and how to respond, rather than react, to changing conditions.

"We teach students to understand the principles, so they can go out and apply them to their day-to-day driving," Harris says.

For me, the class was humbling at first. And apparently this phenomenon is normal, as the average driver typically overestimates his or her skill level.

Fortunately, I was lucky enough to experience the SkidCar alone with Harris, so there are no witnesses to my shame.

However, when the instruction was finished, I was better at controlling the SkidCar, which was encouraging. More than that, though, the class was a lot of fun.

“If you can get the SkidCar stable, it’s a lot easier to drive safely,” Harris says.

Most importantly, the class emphasizes safe driving. This is not a course on power slides and burnouts.

“The idea isn’t that students leave here to go out and skid around. The biggest key is keeping the car from skidding. Nobody ever seems to leave here feeling cocky,” Harris says.

OK, so now that I have the undivided attention of every parent with a teenage driver, here’s the best news of all: As a holiday present or any time of the year, you can give a SkidCar class to your teenager, your spouse, yourself or the whole family.

“The majority of people we see are young drivers. We take people at 15 (years old) with a learner’s permit,” Harris says.

But this training is not just for new drivers. Professional drivers and police officers are regular customers of the SkidCar course, too. They are convinced it works.

“Police, bus drivers and a multitude of companies come through. This class is for everybody. It’s not a niche,” Harris says.

SkidCar classes are available by appointment almost any day between now and March.

“A gift certificate is good for an entire year. We hold classes year-round on weekdays, and we hold weekend classes October through February,” Harris says.

It’s a practical investment in safe driving technique that runs about \$200 per person.

So this year, instead of a new car stereo or set of wheels, why not give your favorite drivers something really useful that could save their lives?

For more information on SkidCar and the class, visit www.prodrive.net, or call 503-285-4449.