

Driver's Ed. Education
A Series of Specifics for Success
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Article # 10 - "Be a Visionary!"

Vision. Sighted people take it for granted, but 70-80 percent of the information necessary to drive effectively is derived from it. We've already spoken of Car Feel and its importance to the mix. The other major component of your sensory arsenal is sight. Everyone out there can see, but it's what, when, and how you see that determines your response effectiveness.

The importance of vision begins right off when you are moving through the paddock at the track. Helmets, neck or head restraint systems, and harnesses restrict your normal vision levels. You must be aware of everything in your vicinity or risk a most embarrassing faux pas. When you get on track, the first thing you will be looking for is where the safety and flagging personnel are; a most important task. Then you will be scanning the horizon for where it is that you are going, and where you should be within the barriers.

You will begin learning "the Line" right away. Your instructor will tell you where you need to be at first, and to aid you in developing some consistency will likely offer you some visual reference points to mark where you should be braking, turning, etc. This is a time when your brain is very busy and stimulus overload is at its peak. You may note at this juncture that you are likely looking little farther ahead than your front bumper, and it should occur to you that this is not quite helpful, let alone prudent. Closing speeds will be higher than you are accustomed to on the street, and you need to make certain you allow yourself the chance to adjust your reaction time accordingly.

It is natural early on to be focusing to a high degree on your turn-in point or your apex. This can tend to create a jerky "connect-the-dots" situation and does not allow you to look far enough ahead to drive smoothly, let alone safely. It is never too early to begin learning to look at nothing in particular, and everything in general. By that I mean that you should not be focusing on any one thing to the exclusion of everything else. Your visual reference points should be such that they can eventually be relegated to your peripheral vision, and mentally "checked off" as you pass by, all the while looking up the track to where you want to go.

As a driver, your eyes should be scanning the road up ahead as far as you can see, and your vision should never drop below an imaginary horizon line in

front of the car. If you are in traffic, you should not be looking at the rear bumper in front of you. If a "situation" develops, it will likely not be initiated by the car in front of you, but up the line a few cars. If you are not looking through the windows of the car in front of you to scan the traffic up ahead, you risk being caught in a surprise "Slinky effect" moment. Each car in line has to brake progressively harder, and you may be the guy caught out if you are not anticipating this.

Alternately, you should be glancing in your mirrors often. A good time for this is actually before setting up for a turn so as to anticipate faster traffic approaching and plan for their overtaking you. Failing to learn this technique creates a situation where students are surprised by faster cars "suddenly" pasted to their rear bumpers! This is how "traffic slinkies" begin. Very frustrating! Be aware, and anticipate.

In order to drive effectively at the limit, whether in the wet or dry, your eyes need to be scanning the track surface for bumps and seams, slick spots, grainy areas, etc. Your cornering grip depends on that track surface. If you hit a bump or slick spot mid turn, you will likely lose adhesion or upset cornering balance. Don't wait for the car to get away to be scanning for potential trouble spots. Again, good vision leads to good anticipation.

Students and instructors have a lot to do out there, eh? Well instructors, once the student has started to learn the line and is responding well to your distilled list of verbal commands, here's a good drill to accelerate learning of proper visual timing. Instruct the student to look where you tell them at the precise moment you utter the command. As they begin braking, call out "Turn In." A few car lengths before they reach the turn in, call out "Apex." Just before the apex, call out "Track Out." This drill will set a concrete sequence in the student's mind that will eventually become second nature. When skill has reached sufficient levels, calling "Track Out" shortly before turn in will really get the student looking up the road.

Ever notice how when you turn your head to look at something, you seem to drift off the road in the direction you're looking? We can learn to harness this tendency to help our driving. Like the one mentioned previously, here's another excellent exercise that you can, and indeed should, practice on the street. Find a sweeping curve of 90 degrees or more (tighter freeway on-ramp's are excellent). You will be practicing looking far ahead to where you eventually want to end up, even if this means looking out the side window. Although it feels unnatural and even dangerous at first, you will see that it can be done rather easily and quite effectively.

Some tracks offer turns where this is necessary; Turn 2 at Laguna Seca, Turn 2 at Lime Rock, the infamous Turn 2 at Mosport. Turn 6 at Watkins Glen forces you to look nearly perpendicular to your direction of travel! We can use this natural tendency to our advantage: Remember, the hands usually follow the eyes.

Another excellent exercise when one is becoming more familiar with a turn or entire track is to choose a point in the corner entry zone where the driver feels that the car is slowed, stable, and ready to intimate the turn in. At this point either the instructor can verbally (or the driver can mentally) call out "freeze." At this point, the driver would freeze their hands in position to keep the car going straight in the last few feet before turn in, but the eyes will then scan through the apex and onto the track-out point.

You might be amazed to find that you that this exercise allows you to nail your turn in point and clip your apex perfectly, all without physically looking at them. The hands follow the eyes and the car arcs cleanly through the turn. This also gets the driver looking farther up the track to be scanning for possible problems ahead.

To look, and not to see, means to drive poorly. Open your eyes. Feel the rear bumper of the car ahead of you with them. Feel the road surface. Feel every nuance, every dip, crack, undulation. The more you learn to feel, with all of your senses, the more effective you will become!

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by John L. Hajny

I have striven to make this an extremely well written and accurate series on a subject that is not to be taken lightly and can obviously be dangerous. To maintain the accuracy and proper presentation of that message, I would ask that absolutely no use whatsoever of any text herein be made without my express written consent.

I ask you to please abide by this request.

Thank you.