

The Navigator by Dave Farnsworth

It will happen to you do so be ready for it.

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As every driving school attendee student or instructor knows, incidents do happen - and by now, every driving school attendee should also know the error that most often accounts for these incidents.

Unlike the old days when folks discussed Weber jets instead of computer chips and Ferodo DS 11 brake pads instead of various colors of carbon fiber, the problem is not trailing throttle oversteer - even Porsche has managed to tame that beast. Short of slamming on the brakes in the middle of a turn, with a car fully loaded on its suspension, you'd have to be pretty ham-fisted to get bitten by TTO.

Recently, I reviewed over 50 driving school incidents and found one continuous thread running through over 80 percent of them. Interestingly enough, there wasn't a single incident attributable to any type of mechanical or tire failure. Instead, the common scenario was this: a driver enters a turn too hot, attempts to negotiate the turn anyway, puts and least one front wheel off outside of the turn, and cranks the steering wheel to get back on track - at which point the front tires find traction and a car heads to the inside of the turn like a rocket.

You generally don't want to be blasting to the inside of a turn at warp speed because that's where the track has placed most of the immovable objects such as trees.

The second most common scenario - and most frequent rollover situation - begins like the first with a too-quick entrance into a turn. In this instance, however, instead of one or two tires going off, the entire car slides off the track sideways. The outside tires bite into the dirt or sand or pea gravel and sink in; the car, trying to dissipate all that lateral energy but no longer able to slide, vaults over the planted tires and rolls over.

Since we know these predictable scenes, prevention is a common topic of discussion among driving school organizers and instructors. Logically, some argue, we should incorporate some way for people to practice putting wheels off so they don't panic when it happens - and trust me on this, it will eventually happen if you attended of schools. Developing an instinctive response without actually practicing it, the argument goes, is nearly impossible; talking incessantly about the physics and techniques, while possibly helpful, has certainly not significantly cut into the number of inappropriate reactions to off-course excursions.

There are three major problems with the practice approach. First, a lot of car enthusiasts are shall we say fastidious (as opposed to the neighbors' assessment of "excessive compulsive") about the appearance of their cars, and would probably not take kindly to a suggested that they deliberately drive off into the gravel and dirt. Second, practicing at a low speed is unlikely to develop the kind of quick reactions necessary when the occurrence happens at ten tenths. Finally, practicing at a high enough speed to be really useful runs the risk of inducing the very thing you are trying to avoid. I can almost hear the lawyer asking "And you actually told your student to drive off the road?"

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So developing the right instincts isn't easy, and you certainly don't have enough time to think once one of the above to scenario starts to unfold. What else is left?

We're dealing with a relatively simple problem, and there is a relatively simple solution: anticipation. Too often, the last thought going through a driver's mind is "Whoops I think this is too fast...oh well, let's turn the wheel, hang on, and hope for the best." What should actually be going through the brain is: "Whoops, I think this is too fast! How can I shave off the most speed before I leave the track – and what's the safest route to take once I do go a-mowing?"

What this thinking-ahead process does is to put the driver back in control of the situation. It forces the driver to realize that there are far worse things than leaving the track, and to think about escape route that's least likely to cause damage to himself and his car. Let's look at this step-by-step.

First you have to realize you're going too fast to negotiate the corner. How do you do that? Well...guess – but be conservative. If you've underestimated your car's ability to save your butt, so what? That marvelous chassis keeps you on the tarmac and you haven't hurt anything. If you overestimate, however, the stakes can be high. Remember, driving is a science, not a religion.

Now that you've realized you're going too fast, you need to shave speed off in a hurry. Don't ask your tires to do anything too radical, like change course more than a few degrees; you need to use their traction for one job, slowing down. If you can eke out another 10 or 20 feet by apexing early, do it. You've already decided you're not going to turn, so at that point an early apex or some other bizarre line doesn't matter. All that matters is applying the brakes while on the track surface as long as you can, while still maintaining directional control.

Then, of course, you're out of pavement; What now? At this point you have, we hope, cut your speed considerably, and you have your front wheels pointed within a few degrees of straight. This maintains some control and can guide your car to the safest path, which may be a pea gravel pit or between some mature oak trees. Either way, you are still driving, and that's what's important. If you're headed for the pea gravel or a sand trap, hit it straight on and wait for the stuff to perform its magic. It's there to save you and it will – but only with your help.

Now you know what to do in the critical moments after it dawns on you that you're about to go into the corner too hot. It shouldn't be dramatic, or even exciting. And it will earn you the respect of your instructor much more than turning the fastest lap of the day.

There is one more helpful hint. It's one I dispense during every Saturday morning student meeting, and now it will make a lot more sense. I always tell the students to use the first few familiar laps their instructor takes behind the wheel of their cars to scope out escape routes for every corner. If a particular corner has absolutely no safe runoff area, that, too, should tell you something: "Treat this corner with respect, and never, ever, get in too hot."

There you have it: Basic Driving School Survival Techniques 101. So go out, learn a lot, enjoy yourself, and don't forget to anticipate.