

FEATURING THE BEST SELLER, WHISTLE, BY JAMES JONES

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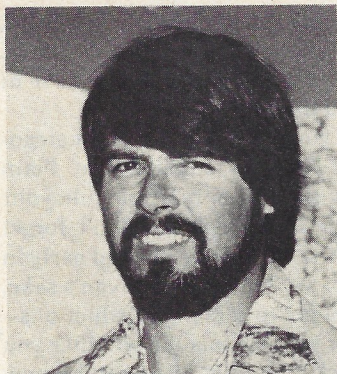
CITY EXERCISING, WILDERNESS ADVENTURES, THE BIKING BOOM

PLUS: CAMPING ON LAND AND WATER



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KEEPING OUT OF CLOSE SCRAPES



One day on a busy street outside an office where I once worked, a man was sitting in the left-turn lane, blinker on, wheels cocked to the left so he could dash across quickly when traffic cleared in the oncoming lanes. Suddenly someone skidded into the back of his car for no apparent reason, sending him careening head-on into the onrushing

traffic. Moments later, after being bounced around by car after car in the ensuing melee, what was left of his car came to rest against the curb.

The driver emerged from his car shaken but unscathed. Happily, he had been using his car's restraint system.

If you have an older car your belts may not be as convenient or as comfortable as those in most newer cars, but use them anyway—and not just on trips but every time you drive, even to the corner store. A seat belt will almost always save you in a serious crash, and a shoulder harness adds extra protection for your face and the upper part of your body. In addition, belts will help you to control—and perhaps even avoid a wreck—by keeping you firmly in front of the steering wheel and brakes.

Our hapless driver might have gotten home with his car in one piece if someone had only told him never to have his wheels turned while waiting to turn left. If someone hits you from behind and your wheels are turned, you're bound to get in everyone else's way. If your front wheels are pointed straight ahead, straight ahead is where you will go.

The key to good driving, whether you are stopped or in motion, is good technique with the automobile's principal controls: the steering wheel, the brakes, the accelerator. You'll never see a race driver cruising down the track with one hand on the wheel; but you do see drivers on the freeway, their car locked in "cruise control," steering with a finger or two, sometimes even with their legs stretched out so far that they couldn't possibly reach the pedals in a hurry if necessary.

Race driver Bob Bondurant, who heads up the Bondurant School of High Performance Driving in Sonoma, California, teaches his students that two hands at the "three" and "nine" position on the wheel, with the thumbs lightly hooked over the spokes, is best for handling any sort of situation that might arise. He also emphasizes proper seating position (straight up, not slouched over, with maximum contact between body and seat) and proper use of the other controls, including the gearshift in a manual transmission car. This should be pushed and pulled, not yanked, with the fingers and the palm.

In this issue, Detroit-based auto writer Gary Witzenburg begins a regular column for Mainliner.

Perhaps the most abused control in your car is the brake pedal. Brakes ("your own worst enemy if improperly used," says Bondurant), should be gently "squeezed" with the ball of the foot for the "best feel." This pumping action, he tells his race-driving and street-driving students alike, helps prevent skidding into an emergency.

The point is that too hard braking locks up tires, and a skidding tire has no traction at all. A skidding front tire can't possibly steer, and a skidding rear tire can't roll to keep the back end of your car going in a straight line. So, the next time you're faced with an emergency and you find yourself jamming on the brakes and skidding toward disaster, it may be all you can do to go against your natural impulses, but ease up on the pedal enough to get the tires rolling again. Drive around the emergency, then steer toward the biggest empty space or the softest target.

An excellent driving course given by the Navy dwells on a single principle: avoiding other peoples' mistakes as well as your own. This means keeping your eyes moving, checking out what everyone around you is doing and anticipating what they may be about to do. Expect people to run traffic lights and stop signs, to pull out of driveways in front of you, to change lanes without looking or to stop suddenly for no apparent reason—and then leave yourself some room to react. Keep alert, and as soon as you've avoided one potential accident, start looking for the next one.

Consider "decision time" as well as reaction time and stopping distance when following another car. When those brake lights go on in front of you, how do you know at first whether the driver is braking hard or easy? That other car might stop a whole lot quicker than you can anticipate simply from seeing the brake lights—say, for instance, if it runs into the car in front of it, which has already run into something else. And if you haven't left room, you're likely to be in a rear-end collision by the time you realize he's stopping hard.

If you're wondering how much room you should leave, consider the following. At sixty miles per hour, a car travels eighty-eight feet per second. That means that it will take your car half a football field or more to halt—and that's assuming that you were paying attention in the first place instead of reading a signboard or looking for a better station on the radio.

And never leave anything heavier than a magazine on your so-called rear package shelf because if you do have to brake hard or even hit something, it could become a lethal missile. People have been knocked cold by pocket cameras flying off that shelf at sixty miles per hour when the car suddenly decelerates.

Play it safe and keep your speed down. While no one has ever died in a car from speed—injuries result from collisions—speed does increase your chances of losing control. Incorporate these tips into your driving repertoire, if you haven't done so already. Prepare yourself for an accident, and you may never have to deal with an accident at all. ■