

BLACK INK

THE ART OF EXTRAORDINARY LIVING • SPRING/SUMMER 2013

ISSUE No. 28

DRIVE

To move in a desired direction; to carry on energetically; to progress with strong momentum, as in classic-car collecting, racing and tactical driving, buying sexy supercars, restoring retro moderns, designing the future

HOW TO DRIVE IT



LIKE YOU STOLE IT!

*It's called evasive and protective driving.
It's aimed at law enforcement and the drivers of high-value targets.
And it's perfect for anyone who's ever watched
a TV car chase and wished he were behind the wheel.*

*By STAN PARISH
Photographs by BRIAN FINKE*



When I was in high school, my uncle offered to take me to the country's most prestigious racing school. It was a thoughtful gesture; I was the kid waiting for someone to unlock the DMV on the morning I turned 17, having taught myself to drive a stick three years earlier, in Mexico, on a car borrowed from someone's sleeping parents. But I never made it to racing school, mostly because the idea of driving circles on a closed course just didn't do it for me. The Indy 500, with the exception of pileups, bores me to tears. But the car chase in *Bullitt*, in which Steve McQueen tears up the streets of San Francisco with no help from CGI? That's another story. I want to drive like someone's after me. I wondered: Do they teach that?

I found what I was looking for on YouTube, in videos tagged "Tactical Driving." I watched Crown Vics and hulking SUVs

Autera survived two armed ambushes during his years as a bodyguard. The second was directed not at the high-value target but at him. I asked if his Tony Scotti training came in handy under attack. "I am alive because of what he taught me," Autera said. "No doubt in my mind."

VDI's primary training site is based in Englishtown, New Jersey, but the courses it runs there (Protective and Evasive Driving, Accident Avoidance, Surveillance and Detection Tactics and Techniques) are a fraction of the business. It has trained everyone from security to royalty in Colombia, Nigeria, Guatemala, Greece, Australia, Russia and any country you'd care to name in the Middle East. Within the lower 48 states, VDI will come to you with cars, cones, traffic lights, radar guns—everything but pavement—and tailor courses to your needs. Clients are mostly corporate-protection and government agencies, with a smattering of ultra-high-net-worth individuals who like to drive themselves.



You use about 20 percent of your car's handling capability while

as they skidded through turns and slalomed through obstacle courses in reverse. These were programs aimed at law enforcement and the drivers of high-value targets. I'm not on any hit lists that I know of; to me evasive driving just looked fun as hell. I combed through defense-contractor message boards, on which one program came up again and again: Tony Scotti's Vehicle Dynamics Institute (VDI). What sounds like a lab full of wind tunnels and men in white coats is arguably the world's premier tactical driving school. Scotti, an engineer and amateur racecar driver, founded a racing school in 1974. He started seeing more and more military personnel in his classes and realized they were less interested in racing than in the kind of driving that would save their lives in an attack. Scotti shifted his focus, studying kidnappings and assassinations to understand the skills a driver would need to successfully flee the scene and the complex physics behind those maneuvers. The country's first evasive and protective driving school was born.

Today VDI is run by Joseph Autera, who was a student and a client before he came on to relaunch the storied program.

Our group (my brother, my cousin and myself) falls into another category: People who have always wanted an excuse to drive like this.

It's 8:45 A.M. in the classroom of Englishtown's Raceway Park. Our instructors, Janine Paul and Dean Simko, greet us in matching Blackhawk combat boots, utility pants and tactical-looking jackets. My brother, a pastry chef, is wearing Tod's calfskin driving loafers, which he's rechristened his "security slippers" for the occasion. We don't exactly blend.

Paul, the lead instructor, complains that she needs coffee, which I never would have guessed. "She's self-winding," explains Simko, a stoic, friendly ex-Marine with a dry sense of humor. They're a perfect pair; she's a spunky, no-nonsense former Secret Service officer who has a way of mixing *Star Wars* references with kidnapping case studies to remind you that she's traded in life-and-death scenarios for most of her career. Paul holds up a toy Crown Victoria for an elementary physics lesson. The center of gravity, she explains, is right behind

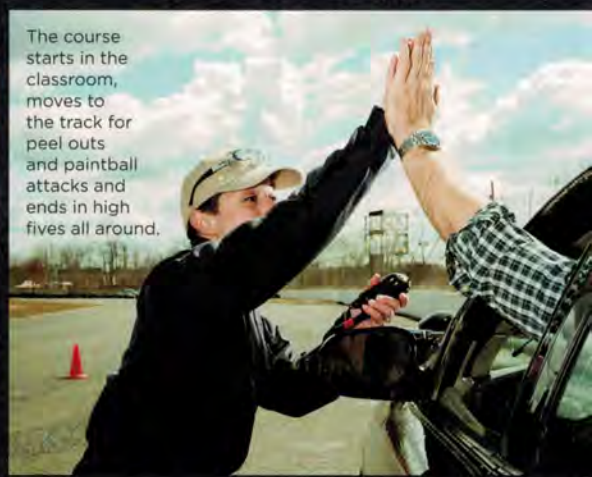
the driver's seat. When you transfer the load by slamming on the brakes or stepping on the gas or cranking on the wheel, the feedback comes, in her words, right to your ass. How you experience and react to that feedback determines how well you can drive. "We're going to recalibrate your ass chip," she says.

In order to recalibrate, you have to know your limits. Your average errand uses about 20 percent of your car's handling capability. One hundred percent is Danica Patrick qualifying for a pole position at Daytona. According to a study conducted by the Society of Motor Engineers, the average driver gives up once he experiences 40 percent of a car's potential. Forty percent is when things start to get shaky, thanks to understeer (when your front wheels start to slide), oversteer (when you lose the rear end) or just the machine-gun stutter of the anti-lock braking system doing its job. But at that point, the untrained driver will take his hands off the wheel and his foot off the pedal and pray. This is what VDI seeks to remedy; you

slicing the pie." My brother nails this exercise, swerving like he means it, flying through the final gate. His shit-eating grin fills the windshield on his way back. This is how I've felt all day.

Day two begins with an evasive lane-change exercise: You throw the car through a lane of cones shaped like a lightning bolt, braking hard and quickly letting up before you flick the wheel. Afterward, we learn to drive in reverse using only side-view mirrors. We learn to scan the road by turning our head instead of just our eyes, because fine motor skills are one of the first things to go under extreme stress. Eye movement is a fine motor skill; head movement is not. It's a universal principle: Steer with your arms, not with your fingers. Work the pedals with your whole foot, not your toes.

The final exercise is a combination of everything we've covered laid out over a 1.3-mile track. You start out with a reverse slalom, after which you execute a J-turn, smack the gearshift into drive and take off down the obstacle course.



The course starts in the classroom, moves to the track for peel outs and paintball attacks and ends in high fives all around.

running errands. At VDI you learn to drive four times as hard.

don't "graduate" until you can push a Ford Crown Victoria Police Interceptor to 80 percent of its limit.

The first driving exercise is a simple slalom: four cones in a straight line with a two-cone "gate" at either end. You drive through one gate and, after 120 feet of weaving, out the other. Braking is forbidden—the point is to maintain stability by feathering the gas pedal as the car dives into the turns. We start at 28 miles per hour and work our way up. I'm recalibrating more than my ass chip here; every time the tires lose their grip, the angel on my shoulder tells me to hit the brakes and come to a full stop. Thanks to VDI, I finally get to listen to the devil and go faster.

Next we run an exercise designed to imitate an unexpected obstacle: a car-sized box of cones between another set of gates. Paul refers to the obstacle as a soccer mom driving while on a cell phone, or a carload of bad guys with guns. It doesn't really matter—either way, you need to get around it and be gone. And you really don't want to brake while you swerve. "The car," Paul says, "can do 100 percent of one thing at a time." You have all your steering capability until you hit the brakes, "at which point you're

"Don't move until a threat presents itself," Paul says and then disappears.

I sit there, the engine running, my hand on the wheel, my head turned over my left shoulder, waiting for I don't know what. Nothing happens. I turn to look out the driver's side window, and there's Simko, ten feet away, squinting at me from behind the sights of a gun. The orange paintballs are inches from my face when they hit the glass and splatter. I burn out in reverse, and suddenly another car is glued to my front bumper. Paul is behind the wheel, chasing me down, leaning on the horn. She continues the chase after I flip around and take off down the straightaway. Halfway through the first slalom, she starts shooting at me through her open window. Two days ago I would have taken out every single cone. I'm burning rubber and my heart is beating hard enough to hear, but I'm also driving fast and doing fine. ♦

VDI classes start at \$425. To book or for more information, call 732-738-5221 or go to vehicledynamics.net.