

SAVING YOUR LIFE: EXECUTIVE PROTECTION DRIVING SCHOOL

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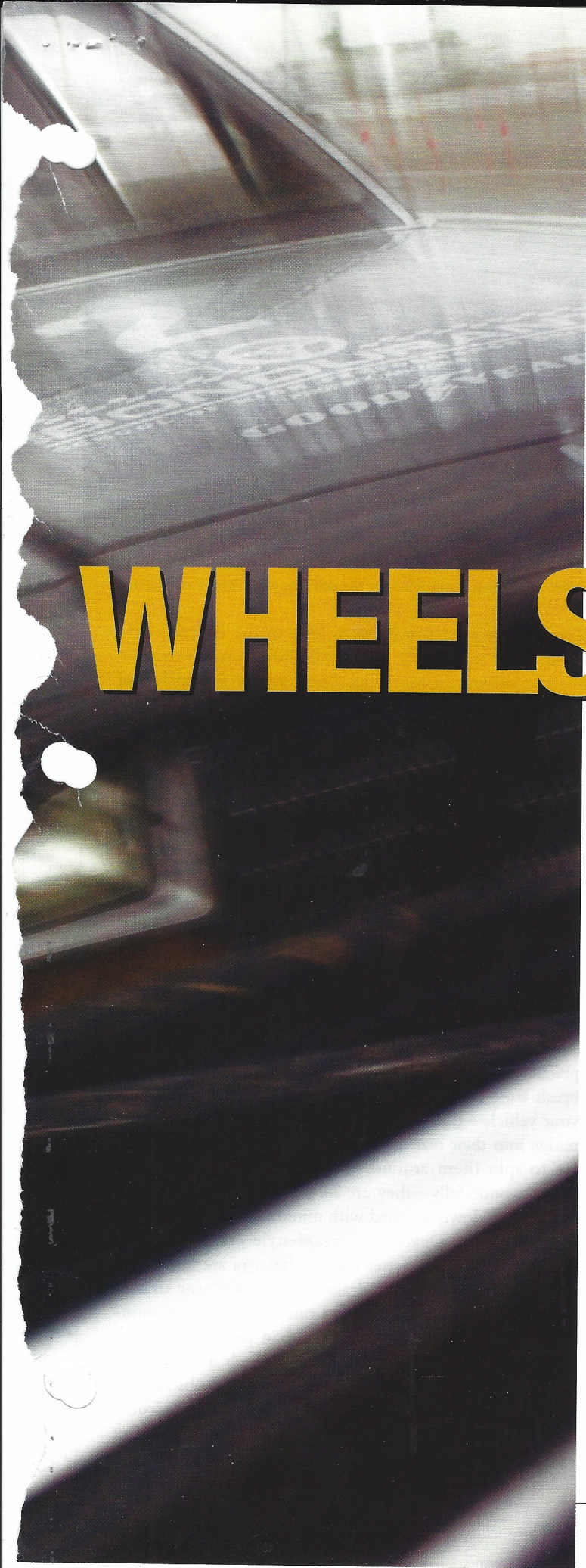
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TRAINING

More than just a driving lesson, Bondurant's Executive Protection class prepares you to make the right choices in life-or-death situations.

BY GARY WITZENBURG



WHEELS

KNUCKLES CRACK, PENS CLICK, AND fingers drum tabletops on this sunny Monday morning, day one of the Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving. The couple dozen students sitting in the air-conditioned classroom near Phoenix have grown fidgety, anticipating what the next few hours—and the next few days—will bring.

There is no typical Bondurant pupil. This group ranges from a high school senior who enrolled so that he can follow in the footsteps of his father, a professional racecar driver, to a Detroit adman who would like to learn how stunt drivers practice their profession. A Z06 owner who just crashed his car wants to avoid any more expensive mistakes. Some are here on friends' recommendations. Two received their places in the class as gifts from their wives. An Army captain, a driver and personal security guard to one of America's highest-ranking military officers, is brushing up on some of the skills he learned in an antiterrorist course that he took several years ago. Fresh from Iraq, he also may be here to unwind.

Of Bondurant's one- to four-day courses—Intro to Racing, Highway Survival, High Performance Driving, Grand Prix Road Racing, and Advanced Road Racing, among others—the elective for which we have signed up, titled Executive Protection, carries the highest tuition at \$5,645. Despite the relatively expensive fee (prices generally average \$1,200 per day), demand for a course that includes antiterrorist training has increased in recent years.

Regardless of their purpose for enrolling or their prior experience, all Bondurant students hone their driving skills by beginning with the basics. Proper braking, steering, and shifting techniques are standard lessons that are new for some and good review for others. These are followed by sessions that address driver smoothness, vehicle weight transfer, and skid control.

The instructors also spend time teaching all students how to look and think ahead—how you should point your eyes in the direction you want to go. "Your eyes tell your hands and feet what to do," explains chief instructor Mike McGovern,



IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE

Bob Bondurant, president of the Bondurant School of High Performance Driving, was once a fine racer himself. Bondurant drove GM's Corvettes to victories in California and went on to perform on the world stage in Shelby's Cobras and Enzo's Ferraris before injuries from a crash ended his racing career in 1967. Having trained actors James Garner and Yves Montand for the 1966 movie *Grand Prix*, Bondurant opened his own driving school at Orange County raceway near Los Angeles in 1968. The first week, he had three students. The second week, only two: Paul Newman and Robert Wagner, who were training for the movie *Winning*.

His growing operation moved to nearby Ontario Motor Speedway in 1970, then to Sears Point Raceway near Sonoma, Calif. in 1973. Following 17 successful seasons there, Bondurant achieved his longtime dream of opening his own purpose-built driver-training center at the Firebird sports complex, just south of Phoenix, in 1990.

Now an energetic 72, Bondurant has instructed and befriended so many top drivers and celebrities through the years that you never know who might be around on any given day. At this most recent visit for Executive Protection training, I found him working one-on-one with former Cobra racer turned author and poet Dan Gerber, who has recently resumed racing Cobras in vintage events. Gerber's latest book of poetry, *Trying to Catch the Horses*, takes on new meaning when you watch him chase Mustangs around a track. —G.W.

the heavier, engine-anchored front end, and you may end up with a smashed radiator, immobilized.

The itinerary for day three has us running the Mustangs around a timed autocross circuit in a coned-off parking lot; and then around a larger, faster oval; and finally on a full road course. Aside from being terrific fun, this also is relevant antiterrorist training. The more adept you are at driving safely on twisty roads, the better your chances of escaping less-skilled pursuers.

On day four, having learned the road course in Mustang GTs, we are turned loose by Parker on the same track in big Ford sedans. But we drive in the opposite direction we had grown accustomed to the previous day so that the roads are unfamiliar to us. Then Parker and another instructor initiate terrorist scenarios, approaching from ahead or behind and blocking the roads with their cars. This forces us to quickly decide on and execute the best escape technique: brake, accelerate, or 180-degree turn.

Years ago, as an overconfident novice, I regularly and foolishly challenged the limits of control. I was lucky to survive my youthful mistakes, but too many do not. At a minimum, skid control and accident avoidance training should be mandatory for all drivers, from beginners to veterans. By the end of the four-day course, with graduation certificate in hand, I was satisfied to have learned new skills that with any luck I will never find reason to use. ☐

Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving, 800.842.7223, www.bondurant.com

Orange Peel-Outs: Though most Bondurant courses make use of new Corvettes and Cadillac CTS sedans, previous-generation Mustang GT coupes still take the occasional thrashing.