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THE LURE OF SAILING

AT HOME

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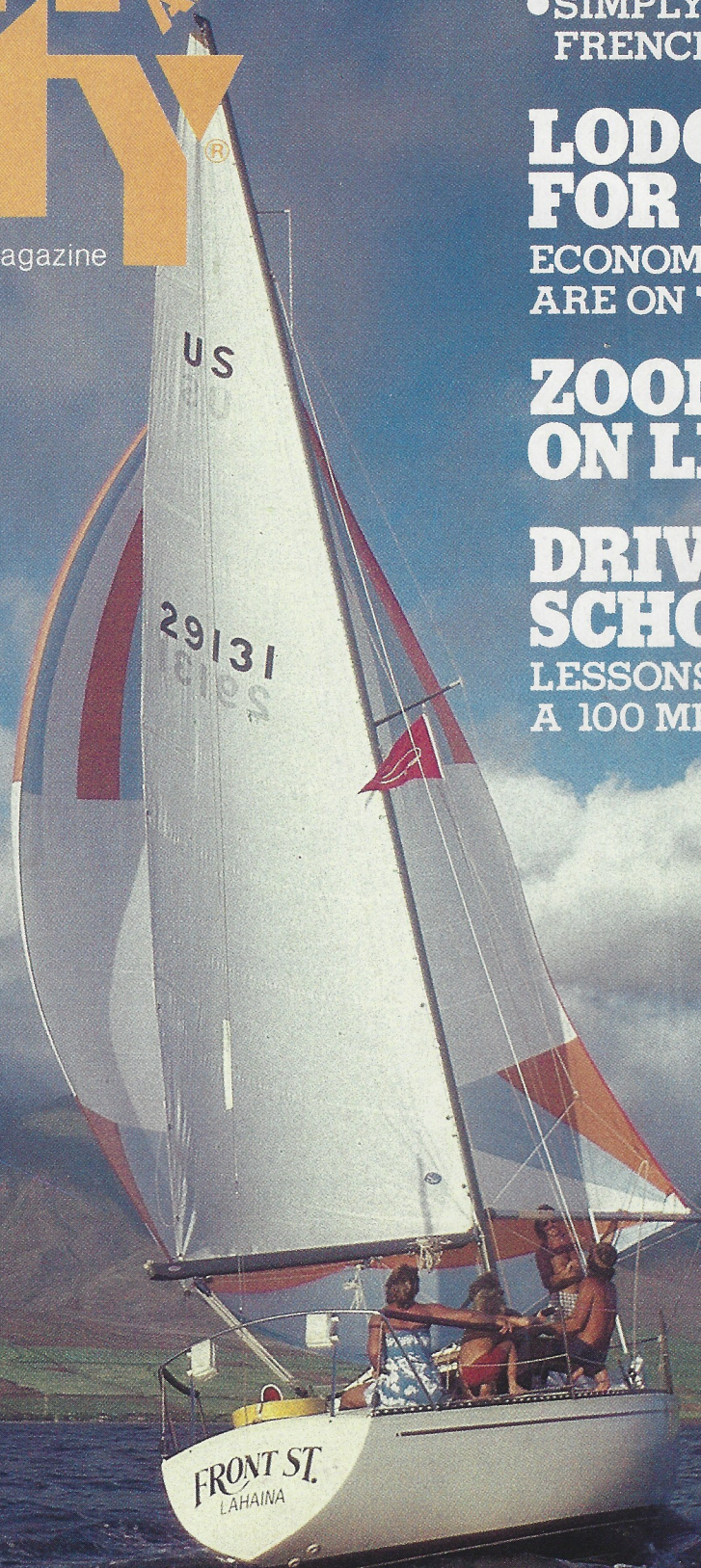
LODGING FOR LESS

ECONOMY MOTELS
ARE ON THE RISE

ZOOMING IN ON LENSES

DRIVING SCHOOLS

LESSONS IN
A 100 MPH CLASSROOM



Most of us think we're terrific drivers. Most of us are wrong.

We turn a certain age, take a written test, drive a few blocks with a nervous examiner, and—*presto!*—we're licensed drivers, with virtually no training, little experience, and no developed skills.

We go off onto the highways with our shiny new licenses, learning by our mistakes. Too many (because they don't bother to use their seatbelts) don't survive those mistakes. Or they end up in wheelchairs, or wipe out innocent passengers, pedestrians or other motorists; tragedies they'll have to live with the rest of their lives.

People cruise at 60 or 65 miles per hour, one hand draped loosely over the wheel, the other balancing a Coke or a hot cup of coffee. The windows are up, the stereo's at brain-numbing levels, and there's little sensation of speed,

almost like watching the world go by on a giant TV screen.

Even if they're paying attention, most drivers haven't a clue what to do if their car goes into an unexpected skid; or some idiot suddenly shoves them off the road, or slams on his brakes, or spins out in front of them. Most often, they stand on their brakes and skid helplessly into what should have been somebody else's accident—instead of dodging skillfully around it.

High-school driver education, with classroom training and some behind-the-wheel experience, is certainly better than nothing, but how many high school or private courses offer actual emergency braking, skid control or accident avoidance training? How many instructors have had such training themselves? Precious few.

Such training is available, however, to virtually anyone who wants it. The country's five major professional driv-

ing schools operate out of more than a dozen locations, and four of them offer street and highway, as well, as racing courses. And smaller schools can be found, usually at racing facilities. One example is racer Jim Fitzgerald's driver training school at the Road Atlanta race course north of Atlanta, Georgia. Another is the specialized ice-driving school at Steamboat Springs, Colorado, sponsored by Renault, Michelin and Anco Wipers.

SCCA (Sports Car Club of America, headquartered in Denver) sanctions hundreds of low-level competitive events throughout the country, and there are dozens of other schools specializing in everything from parking-lot slaloms ("gymkhanas" or "Solo IIs") to rallying to all-out racing. Single-Marque (Corvette, Porsche, RX-7, Trans Am, etc.) car clubs hold similar events and occasional schooling, usually with experienced racers or top-flight

BY GARY WITZENBURG

LESSONS AT 100 MPH

Professional
driving schools
go beyond driver
education.



CROCKER COMMUNICATION



DAVE GOOLEY

professional instructors.

For everything but the all-out racing courses, the cost of such experience and training is very reasonable—from a few bucks for a rally or gymkhana to \$250-\$300 for a one-day professional school—a fraction of what just one minor accident might cost, let alone a major one.

Although there are differences among the five major schools in approach and methods, all are excellent.

All teach the basics: sitting up straight, arms out, elbows slightly bent, hands somewhere between "three and nine" and "ten and two" o'clock on the wheel, thumbs lightly hooked over the spokes for proper feedback and control, plus smoothness and concentration.

All teach how and why a vehicle reacts the way it does to various inputs, and how to sense those reactions and properly react to them. All discuss and demonstrate understeer (front-wheel skid) and oversteer (rear-wheel skid) and how to prevent and deal with them, plus proper shifting, braking and cornering techniques and emergency maneuvers. Some also cover slippery-road driving, and most offer dual instruction where the expert rides with you so he can spot your mistakes and demonstrate how to correct them.

At the Bob Bondurant School at Sears Point Raceway near Sonoma, California they offer one-, two- and three-day highway courses, as well as racing, advanced racing and other specialized courses, including a four-day anti-terrorist school for corporate chauffeurs, executives and (occasionally) military drivers.

The other big West Coast school is Jacques Couture's Jim Russell British School of Motor Racing, with locations at Riverside Raceway, east of Los Angeles, and Laguna Seca Raceway

For the most fun learning you've ever had, spend a day driving with a pro.

near Monterey, California. JRBSMR has no street or highway courses, but does offer outstanding beginners' racing instruction in open-wheel "formula" cars. Whether or not someone has any interest in racing, such a course is not only a great thrill, but also sends anyone home, no matter how experienced, a far better driver than when he or she arrived.

For those who *do* want to try some serious competition, both California Russell locations also offer instructed "lapping" days in their Mazda rotary-powered "Formula Russell" racers, which look like smaller versions of winged Indianapolis cars, plus a season-long series of weekend races open to anyone who has successfully completed the three-day school and two lapping days.

Similar to JRBSMR in format but larger in scope is the excellent Skip Barber Racing School, which is based in Canaan, Connecticut, but continuously travels to a number of locations including: Lime Rock, Connecticut; Mid-Ohio (near Mansfield, Ohio); Road America (Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin); Indianapolis Raceway Park (a road-racing course, not the famous Speedway); Sebring, Florida; Pocono, Pennsylvania; and Summit Point, West Virginia. The school offers three- and five-day competition, one-day skidpad and "Introduction to Racing," and two-day advanced competition courses in addition to weekend racing series at some locations.

Another good bet for street and highway (as well as racing) training is the Bertil Roos School at Pocono Speedway in the hills of eastern Pennsylvania. Swedish-born racer Roos uses a unique and exceptional teaching tool (of his

own invention) called a "slidecar." A slidecar is a front-wheel-drive sedan with its suspension specially modified to simulate driving on ice. It magnifies the effect of every control input (steering, braking, acceleration). Practicing in one is great for developing smoothness, concentration and car control. Roos also uses modified Formula Ford racers and unmodified Volvo sedans in his various courses, and his textbooks are among the best in the business.

Still another good eastern school is the Bill Scott Driving School at Summit Point, West Virginia, about 70 miles northwest of the Baltimore/Washington area. Scott recently discontinued his introductory racing course (Skip Barber now offers one there) to concentrate on advanced highway and anti-terrorist training, but still offers advanced competition training on request. His highway course, which uses high-performance "Police Package" Chevrolet Malibu sedans, is a bargain at just \$245. Even more reasonable are the periodic \$75 "Solo I" schools, which give students a chance to practice competitive (against the clock) driving in their own cars.

There are also schools of defensive driving, like the one operated by Tony Scotti in Somerville, Massachusetts, where you can take courses in anti-terrorist driving security and high-speed escapes.

Scotti keeps a computerized data bank of vehicle ambushes throughout the world, constantly studies and analyzes them, and develops his programs accordingly. "Military people overseas have a unique problem," he explains. "They are usually in marked government cars, American cars, very easy to identify. The techniques to combat identification are simple," he says, "beginning with simply staying alert and keeping a close watch in your mirrors."

But most of us are more likely to be "attacked" by impaired or incompetent drivers than by gun-wielding terrorists, and the techniques to combat that sort of attack are not easily learned without expert training. Do yourself a favor: find the time and money to attend some sort of professional driving school. Bring your friends and your wife and your driving-age kids, if any. It may be the best investment you'll ever make.

Knowing how to drive *really* well makes driving a lot more enjoyable, not to mention safer. Armed with that experience (and securely buckled in), you and your loved ones will be just about invulnerable on the road. ■