

Training at the limit: Are we teaching officers to drive too fast?

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<https://www.police1.com/driver-training/training-at-the-limit-are-we-teaching-officers-to-drive-too-fast>

Several years ago, when I was working as a full-time Emergency Vehicle Operations (EVO) Instructor, one of our part-time staff suggested a new exercise for our driving course. This had been a period of exciting changes and our program coordinator, and I were energized and innovating constantly. At the time I recently attended the ALERT International conference and heard so many great discussions and ideas about the shifting of EVO exercises as new vehicles and technologies continued to emerge. Luckily, the program coordinator, who was also a good friend, recognized that my enthusiasm for change was unstoppable and necessary and he let me run with it.

This was a period where we were quickly starting to phase out the old workhorse of the training fleet, the Ford Crown Victoria and were primarily utilizing the newer platforms like the Ford Interceptor, Ford Interceptor Utility and Dodge Chargers. This shift into new training vehicles really required that we give thought to how these cars differed from the Crown Victoria. Our program did an excellent job of informing recruits what these cars were doing for them with technology like traction control and electronic stability control (ESC). This was a huge shift from vehicles that did not utilize this technology. This was likely overlooked by many police agencies and some training centers.

Switching from a Crown Victoria to an ESC-equipped vehicle without explaining how the technology works would be a serious oversight. These systems are so effective that some officers may have thought their driving had improved when the vehicle was actually correcting mistakes such as rear-tire grip loss. In reality, they were likely making the same errors, but the newer cars were compensating for them and likely preventing many collisions. This technology is valuable and potentially lifesaving but failing to understand how it works behind the scenes can be dangerous. Although I have had the benefit of training with both older vehicles and newer technology, I am not sure I would have fully understood what the system was doing to correct my mistakes if I had still been working patrol. ESC is a major safety benefit, but in high-speed driving, physics still wins—and the consequences can be devastating.

Now, back to the part-time Instructor with the great idea. Our program has always taught recruits to drive at 75 percent of their ability, always leaving room for errors and unexpected events in the real world. The problem was, we never really explored what that was and it varies with every person's own ability. Now that our training fleet consisted of newer

technology equipped vehicles, we could explore this more safely with far fewer trips off the roadway on our driving course. The idea was to take a lap or two at the recruits own perceived 100 percent level then a lap or two at their 75 percent. This obviously required in-car instructors to function as safety officers and either push the driver a little harder or reign them in when their 100 percent was more like 120 percent. This turned out to be a fun exercise for the recruits, a sometimes-terrifying exercise for the instructors, but a great lesson in the impact on the driver's safety when pushing themselves to the limit of their skill and the vehicles' ability. We had surprisingly few incursions off the pavement, mostly occurring with front-end push, or plowing which ESC is not as good at fixing as it is with rear slide. The discussions with recruits really showed that they understood how driving without a cushion for error could be quite dangerous and have potential catastrophic results in the real world.

The exercise disappeared for a while, mostly due to time constraints and other exercises, but recently has returned in a new format which evolved from an instructor development session we had during my fulltime tenure as a trainer. During the instructor development session, we drove three timed laps: one at 100 percent staying in our lane of travel, one at 100 percent utilizing the entire roadway surface and one at our 75 percent. The time difference between our 100 percent runs and our 75 percent runs in the approximate 1.3-mile loop was consistently less than ten seconds. Now toward the end of recruit training, we run recruits on two timed laps, one at 100 percent and one at their perceived 75 percent. The times differences even for these inexperienced emergency vehicle drivers is also negligible, varying generally from five to ten seconds. This is eye opening for them and leads to some great and thoughtful discussions during the end of session debriefings.

When you are running "code-3" to an emergency or responding to assist another officer, how close to your limit are you driving? Are you operating at 100 percent, or are you leaving room for error, unexpected traffic, unpredictable reactions to your lights and siren, and unknown road conditions? How much time are you really saving? In most city responses, with traffic, intersections, red lights, stop signs, and other safety concerns, the answer is often only a matter of seconds. It may feel as though those seconds could change the outcome, but in my experience as a patrol officer, few calls would have ended differently if I had arrived 30 seconds—or even a few minutes—earlier. What will affect the outcome is not arriving at all because you were involved in a collision and now need help yourself. Officers in rural areas may point to the longer distances they must cover, but the same principle applies: you have to arrive safely in order to help. The next time you push your patrol car at high speed, take a moment to consider what your true 75 percent looks like—and make that your target.