

When Pride Puts You In the Wall

by David Ray, Hooked on Driving

published in Ross Bentley's *Speed Secrets*, Feb 2014

Folks, this is written in first person, because it happened to me. I'll try to keep it to the point, but what I'll describe is a very close call that could have been very serious for me - the coach in the car - and the driver.

I hopped into a GT500 Mustang with a driver who needed a coach - no worries... I fill in as needed. I'll call him Brian (which is not his name). Brian introduced himself; he was a bit flustered, and commented that he'd just gotten the car backwards more than once in the car control exercise.



I chuckled, thinking this was interesting - that doesn't happen very often in our very mild car control exercises.

We quickly discussed the GT500, which was bone stock, and I knew the car pretty well. Good car, big HP, but the stock brakes wouldn't handle it on track. I proceeded to explain this to Brian. "Please let me know if the pedal starts getting soft," I said, thinking I was really being bright. He agreed. "No problem," he said. Then, we were on track.

First session: Brian was one of the worst drivers I'd ever ridden with - and that's in 20+ years of instructing. He somehow had the concept that if he jerked the wheel, that meant he was fast. He literally jerked the car from the left side to the right side of the 5/8 mile straight, thinking that was the fast way. I had never been alarmed at a transition from one side of a straight to the other, but there's a first time for everything! I could not get him to use a consistent, proper vision on the track. He would seem to fixate, and I had to remind him regularly to look up, or over, into an approaching turn. But I was getting the sense that he really wasn't "seeing," but glaring at spots ahead. "Another coaching challenge," I thought. So as the session went on, I settled in and worked to challenge my coaching skills at their highest level. Saying to myself, "Stay ahead of the car, use clear simple language, reinforce any good behavior, be sure to add emphasis if needed, like "Brake, *Brake*, BRAKE!!" We got to where we could make it around the track, then the checkered flag mercifully flew. I had a supportive conference with him back in the paddock and picked just a couple of items to focus on.

"Brian, you have to smooth out....soften your grip on the wheel and you MUST stop jerking the wheel." He admitted to being a drag racer and a "bad driver" according to his friends, and this just gave me more incentive to work hard with him.

Second session: More of the same. Jerky wheel, but now he was learning the track, so we could carry a bit of momentum. Even though he was not on the line, I got Brian to where he wasn't holding up the momentum cars. Once, during this session, he got a head of steam on a short straight on the back of the course and was full throttle, glaring ahead. I hesitated, just to see if he had a sense that he was now approaching a braking zone on his own, found that he did not, which resulted in the emergency "BRAKE, BRAKE, BRAKE." He got it wound down, but I did wonder what would have happened if I hadn't been there. Surely, he would have had his self-preservation instinct kick in!

Third session: Brian was still extremely inconsistent, but making very slight progress. I'm an optimistic guy, so I was really taking on the challenge. He was starting to get used to my "brake, turn, gas." In fact, he had reacted well to the decision to just not shift at all, as the Shelby has plenty of torque. So, with me coaching my butt off, we started making progress. We passed a couple of cars. He was pleased. Then I realized that the pace was picking up, so I was on my toes. We really got Turn 9 pretty good - an over the hill bender that leads downhill with a pretty quick straight. We got good speed and we braked early and did okay. Then, we turned in at Turn 11 - a slow, late apexer that leads onto the back straight. He got it right. Even in 4th gear, the Shelby started building pace and he was boogeying down the straight. I realized too late that we were traveling 20 mph faster than we should have been, so we needed brakes NOW and BIG TIME. But when I called "Brakes!" there was no reaction. The car did not slow. I now screamed, "BRAKES!!!" and nothing. At this point, I knew we were in trouble with a capital "T." He finally yells back, "NO BRAKES!" Then he tried to turn in, which may have saved us. We were headed at a full, head-on K-wall stop, but the partial turn got him off that line and into a spin - a spin that seemed to last forever. I lost track of where we were off the track, but I knew we were far from where we wanted to be. And then, SWACK! The rear of the car slammed into something, then elevated. We landed on top of a 30" K-wall, after having knocked it over. Oh yeah...we went through a tire wall like a straw through a margarita. We looked at each other and realized we were both okay. We had the good fortune to hit almost dead-on backwards. And maybe the tire wall got us up in the air, so we knocked the K-wall over, rather than being smashed in to it. We dodged a very big bullet.

This is what will blow your mind. Brian, to his credit, admitted in the group download that he had gotten excited, noticed the fading brakes at T8 but didn't say anything. He then decided to go for 100 mph, since he'd done T11 so well. He

was looking at the speedometer when I gave the first brake command, and he must have been just short of 100....

The lesson? I should have parked Brian after the second session - he was a driver not intended for this sport. First, he lacked the physical skills. And second, for his funny perspective on why he was there, his lack of focus, and his lack of reasonable goals.

But my pride and competitive nature had me really going for it to make Brian a good and safe driver. It was not meant to be. Joe Zazueta, our grid marshall for the day, reminded me of what I'd said before I put my helmet on to get in with Brian for the third session. I apparently told him, "I'm coaching for my life with this one." I said it not to be disrespectful to Brian, but to express obvious concern for the risk.

This story - to be clear - is to make a point. If you need to park a customer, please do it. We must do this with care and sensitivity. It will be a BIG deal. And maybe you could have a senior coach or Group Leader do a "check drive" before the final decision. But use your instincts and your brain, not your pride in your coaching skills, to make this very important decision!

- *David Ray*

Website: <http://www.hookedondriving.com>