

Serious fun



Advanced Driving School is about much more than speed

Stories by Mark Maynard, WHEELS EDITOR

A Corvette Z06 will do 0 to 60 in four seconds and I was feeling the power at Rupert Bragg-Smith's track in the desert near Pahrump, Nev.

Nose up to the start line, raise the engine revs to 2500 rpm and let out the clutch for a 385-horsepower hole shot. Bang through four gears, then heel-toe downshift back to first, make a U-turn and

do it again.

"Lemme hear those engine revs between shifts," called out the trackside instructor. And I replied with a good hard push on the throttle before grabbing another gear.

I'd made so many passes on the back straight that my right arm was starting to ache—but that's not a complaint.

Practice makes perfect, and that's what the Bragg-Smith Advanced Driving School teaches in

his advanced driving school of two- and three-day courses.

Participants spend hours behind the wheel in new Corvette hatchback coupes, the higher-performing and lighter Z06 fixed-roof coupes and Camaro SS coupes. Camaros are used in the two-day or Level One programs, Corvettes in three-day or Level Two.



Instructors at the Rupert Bragg-Smith Advanced Driving School get a driver lined up for the slalom course, top left. Above, Bragg-Smith leads a morning classroom discussion. "If you can control your eyes, you can control the car," he tells students.

SEE **School**, PAGE 2



The Bragg-Smith school uses new SS Camaros and Corvette coupes. Classes are offered in two- or three-day sessions, and students will put in more than 350 miles and 4,000 gear shifts.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

It's not about speed, it's about training the eyes

Advanced driving is serious business for Bragg-Smith and serious fun.

Nobody enjoys a tire-squealing, brake-smoking romp around his course more than he, but his school's philosophy isn't racing but precision. And before he allows students to let out the reins, he brings their performance up to the cars'.

"I'm not the most patient person in the world, and I don't like to sit for long listening to someone talk," says Bragg-Smith. "The curriculum is an evolution in how we as people drive and how we use the new intervention systems, such as traction control and anti-lock brakes."

He believes in learning by doing. A Level One, three-day course includes:

- Brake control, including skids to learn car control, visual skills and accident avoidance.
- Skid pad.
- Heel-and-toe downshifting.
- Shadow-lapping and open track time.

The Level Two three-day course builds on Level One, but has a maximum of eight students, which allows more time at every segment.

Bragg-Smith is charismatic, not arrogant, and he is a natural teacher.

"We never use the word 'speed,'" Bragg-Smith says. "This school is not about speed, but to train your eyes. And if you can control your eyes you can control the car."

"If we look where we want to go, our hands will follow our eyes," he says. If your car is skidding, never look in the direction the car is going, he says, look where you want to go.



On the skid-control course, drivers use an Impala with a hydraulic frame that the instructor can manipulate to reduce front or rear traction to show what causes a skid and how it can be controlled.

Everything we do inside a car is governed by our eyes. Your eyes tell you when and how much to stop, when to throttle, when to shift. The hands are controlled by the eyes, until they are distracted. Then the eyes stop and the hands stop—but the car keeps going.

You don't have to look at everything, but 'see' everything, learning to use your peripheral vision.

"If you are rushing (at the wheel), you are not looking far enough ahead," Bragg-Smith says. "We don't 'hit' the brakes, we don't 'stand' on the gas." All movements are progressive — "we squeeze on the gas and we squeeze on the brakes."

The 2.2-mile race course has twists, turns and straights all in contour with the rolling desert terrain.

On the back straight, the group practices accelerations to 70 mph and smooth heel-toe downshifts. And those are just the warm-up shifting exercises. Slowly, the mantra of the instruction begins to sink in: consistency, consistency, consistency.

"Smooth is traction, smooth is control, smooth is business," Bragg-Smith says. "You always drive a car for the passenger—who does not want to be thrown about."

Unlike some advanced-driving courses, Bragg-Smith's instructors are not twenty-something hot shoes looking for a "ride" with a race team, filling

the gaps between paychecks as instructors. The three instructors I got to know were calm, patient and supportive.

The classes are small, about 10 students to an instructor, and each car has a two-way radio for immediate one-on-one instruction. Failure is not an option, they will tell you.

To achieve a mechanical ad-

vantage of our bodies to control a vehicle, hands are at 9 and 3 o'clock on the wheel, almost level with the shoulders and with a good bend in the arms. Bent arms mean you are not using arms to support your body, which takes less time in an emergency to correct your position. Shoulders should be square on the seatback, which gives control in cornering—and to hold up your head. Always keep your head up.

Grip the wheel with the palm, not the fingers, and push—don't pull—the wheel for leverage. Steering the car is constantly giving the driver feedback, and palms receive the feedback better than fingers.

Heel-toe downshifting is a race technique that isn't necessary for street driving, but the technique allows smoother shifts and less confusion in a panic stop.

Think about that when you are making an urgent stop in a manual-transmission vehicle. The right foot is on the brake, but it must be lifted so the clutch can be engaged, which leaves a moment of free pedaling

and a flurry of movement as the driver makes the shift.

A heel-toe downshift allows the driver to use the right foot to maintain brake pressure and also roll it onto the throttle for a blip of acceleration. Matching engine rpms to mph prevents sudden engine compression, which can be unsettling to car and driver.

In a three-day course, students will put in about 350 miles and 4,000 gear shifts. You can bring your own vehicle, but it's discouraged.

The school is sponsored in part by Chevrolet and uses new, unmodified vehicles.

"If you drive a car properly you don't always need a lot of performance upgrades, such as competition pads or brake discs," Bragg-Smith says. Even with the desert heat, he says, he's never had problems with the transmissions or brakes on the Vettes or Camaros.

The school is also particular about the fuel and maintenance of the students. So to maintain some control over your body, the school provides a light breakfast of bagels and cream cheese, juices, water or coffee.

Lunch ranges from salads and grilled meats to sandwich-makings with hearty breads. Beverages are lemonade, iced tea and water. No sodas, which are high in sugar and, Bragg-Smith insists, contribute to a crash in energy later and too often an incident on the track.

"Put the correct fuel in your car—and the correct fuel in your body," he says. "We want you to be able to perform—to think and concentrate."

Mark Maynard is driving in cyberspace at mark.maynard@uniontrib.com.

Driver's ed

Level One

- 3-day Corvette program \$1,895
- 3-day SS Camaro program \$1,595
- 2-day SS Camaro program \$1,195
- Insurance \$50/day
- Oct. 22-24
- Nov. 5-7, 12-14, 26-28
- Dec. 3-5, 10-12

Level Two

- 3-day Corvette program \$2,395
- 2-day Corvette program \$1,995
- Insurance \$50/day
- Nov. 19-21
- Dec. 17-19

Insurance covers all accidental damage after the first \$2,000 for Level One programs and \$5,000 for Level Two programs.

The two-day Camaro schools consist of attending the first two days of regular three-day schools, with the option of purchasing the third day.

Information: Bragg-Smith Advanced Driving School, 3601 S. Highway 160, Pahrump, NV 89048; (800) 391-6691 or (775) 727-5363 or www.braggsmith.com

