

The Star-Ledger

WWW.NJ.COM

THE NEWSPAPER FOR NEW JERSEY

Monday, September 8, 2008

NATIONAL

“It’s about what keeps people alive.”

JOSEPH AUTERA, CEO AND INSTRUCTOR, VEHICLE DYNAMICS INSTITUTE

The art of driving dangerously

N.J. school’s evasive techniques help students keep VIPs out of harm’s way

BY VICKI HYMAN
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The smell is undeniable: burning rubber on hot asphalt. The sound is unmistakable: screeching tires, shrieking gears. The sight is something else entirely. Whipping across the blacktop at Old Bridge Township Raceway Park are boxy, by-the-book Crown Victorias. And they’re going backward.

There is no shame in retreat at Tony Scotti’s Vehicle Dynamics Institute, the Englishtown-based school that trains security, law enforcement and military professionals in advanced evasive driving tactics.

The idea, says company CEO and instructor Joseph Autera, is to put as much distance between the vehicle and the kill zone as possible. Don’t think in miles per hour, he tells the small group of men gathered in the raceway parking lot on a recent afternoon. Think in feet per second.

Studies have shown it takes about half a second to 1.2 seconds to recognize a problem and decide what to do about it. At 45 mph, you’re going 66 feet per second. Each second you take to react to a problem, you’ve gotten that much closer to it.

For a real-life example, in Peshawar, Pakistan, gunmen recently staged an ambush of consul-general Lynne Tracy near her house, blocking her vehicle and spraying it with gunfire before her driver quickly reversed back into her home. Tracy and the other consulate workers in the car weren’t injured.

Scotti, who serves as a management consultant, is a pioneer in the field of evasive driving, developing his methods after researching the spike in politically motivated kidnappings and assassinations of the 1970s. His theories cover the



PHOTOS BY ROBERT SCIARRINO/THE STAR-LEDGER

Above, from left, instructors Joseph Autera and Larry Side ambush a student driver with paintball guns as he tries to maneuver through an obstacle course at the Vehicle Dynamics Institute in Englishtown. Below, Autera explains offensive driving moves that will help the trainees negotiate an ambush.

physical and psychological dynamics of attacks, but he emphasizes the physics of vehicles in motion — essentially, the kind of stresses you can subject a vehicle to before you lose control of it.

For example, vehicles aren’t designed to be driven in reverse, explains Larry Side, the institute’s operations vice president and chief instructor. The design element known as a caster that straightens out the front wheels after a turn destabilizes a car traveling



backward. Too much gas, and the rear tires start to spin.

"You're losing time," Side says. "You're getting killed."

Pretend there's an egg under the throttle and ease into the gas, he instructs. Hang onto the steering wheel, and don't move your hands more than one hand's width in either direction.

Then the men head out to asphalt, where Side positions a Crown Vic between two rows of orange cones and instructs the students to reverse in a straight line, stopping between two green cones positioned about 250 feet away.

The first guy runs over one of the green cones on both tries; the second man is about to hit one of the cones, then over-corrects and smashes into the other.

"You really find out what you can and cannot get away with," says Cody, a former soldier who did tours in Iraq and Kuwait and who now works in executive protection in St. Louis. (He and other participants, who pay \$1,850 for the course, did not want their last names used because of the nature of their work.)

Admission to the workshop is restricted to bona fide security professionals, chauffeurs and law enforcement officers, but a few applicants interested in pursuing a security career are allowed to attend — though they must submit to a comprehensive background check, provide a letter of good standing from a local law enforcement agency and have a clean driving record. Most students have attended at least one other driver-training program prior to the workshop.

Business is booming, Autera says. Good news for him; bad news for his clients, which include security details for multinational Fortune 500 corporations, bodyguards for celebrities and the wealthy, and agents with the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Autera says an economic downturn often coincides with an increase in targeted attacks on individuals and corporate interests abroad.

Dick Hildretch, a senior vice president and manager of the kidnapping program at Corporate Risk International, a Reston, Va.-based international security firm, confirms that, though he says there are other roots of trouble. In



ROBERT SCIARRINO/THE STAR-LEDGER

A student throws it into reverse as he learns high-speed retreat. "You really find out what you can and cannot get away with," says one trainee, a former soldier who now works in executive protection in St. Louis.

Mexico, many kidnappings are related to the narcotics trade; in Nigeria, U.S. and European oil and gas concerns have been targeted; in Iraq and Afghanistan, terror is the major motivator.

"We have a more real-world view. The cool factor really doesn't mean much to us. It's about what keeps people alive."

JOE AUTERA,
instructor

But in truth, these security professionals are much more likely to employ these tactics in the event of a car crash — for example, avoiding a deer leaping into their headlights on a country road.

"It can kill you," says Nick, a security driver from Montreal. "That's the worst thing. To die with something furry inside you."

Autera and Side start their three-day workshops with lectures on vehicle dynamics, but soon enough the men are behind the wheel, working on their reverse driving and braking from high speeds, trying out evasive lane changes and negotiating blind corners. Mock ambushes employing paint guns cap the course.

Late on the second day, Autera and Side let them try their hand at a J-turn, a flashy maneuver you've probably seen in countless action films. Side reverses quickly in a straight line, then lets up on the gas, cuts the wheel, and snaps into drive, so he's now going forward along the same trajectory. Very cool, Autera admits. And pretty impractical.

"If you have enough room to do a J-turn — a great move, a character builder — if you have enough room to do it, you can back straight up," which can save the seconds that take the target out of the range of a handgun.

"We have a more real-world view. The cool factor really doesn't mean much to us. It's about what keeps people alive," Autera says.

Vicki Hyman may be reached at vhyman@starledger.com or (973) 392-1712.

(#17851) Copyright © 2008, by The Star-Ledger. Reprinted with permission.

For subscriptions to The Star-Ledger, please call 1-888-STARLEDGER. Visit us online at www.starledger.com.

For more information about reprints contact PARS International Corp. at (212) 221-9595.