

"We're from the bank. Your car payment is late."



HIGHER EDUCATION

CAR TROUBLE

Ever wonder what you'd do if a team of assassins tried to run you off the road? Neither did we, until we got schooled. BY JOSH DEAN

We're doing a comfortable 40 down the back straightaway when a streak of black appears in the rearview. I lighten up on the gas and fixate on the mirror.

"What's the problem?" my passenger in the front seat asks.

"We have company."

The black streak lengthens and becomes two; the second black car pulls from behind the first and speeds up alongside, giving us the once-over from behind blacked-out windows before racing past my window and veering hard in front of us.

"Take it easy," says Danny, my passenger, sensing my uncertainty. "Think about what our options are here..."

A half-dozen things race across my mental replay screen: 180? Reverse 180? PIT maneuver? Remming? *Shit, I don't know!*

Suddenly, the black car behind us pulls into the other lane and hits the gas as the car in front slows down, setting up to box us in. I have nowhere to go. Beside us a tinted window slowly descends. There, over my left shoulder, is a masked man, and in his hands is a gun.

Thwap! A splatter of red paint hits my driver-side window, followed by three more—*thwap,*



Next time on *Roadhead Gone Wrong*...

thwap, thwap!—that join to form a tidy Rorschach pattern at precisely head level.

Just like that, it's over.

"Well," Danny says as all three cars slow to a stop. "Looks like you're dead."

Basic training

"The purpose of the attack scenarios is to put the skills we've taught you into practice under stressful conditions," Danny says, standing at a white dry erase board. "It's easy to do these things in a controlled environment, with me screaming instructions in your ear, but in the real world you just have to act."

Danny is Danny Bullock, a 33-year-old driving instructor with five years under his belt at the Bob Bondurant School of High Performance



"Ray Charles taught me this one."

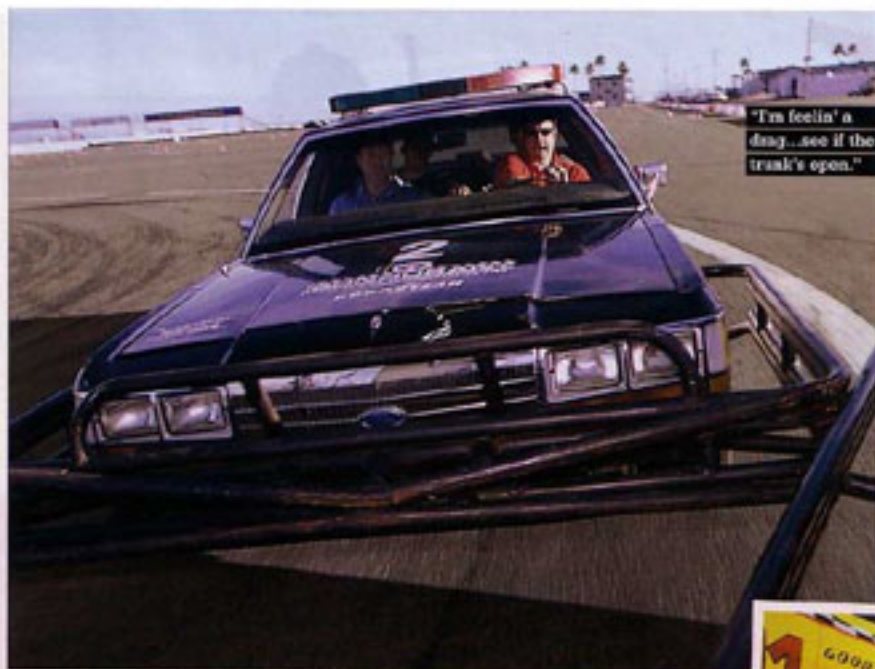
Over my shoulder is a masked man with a gun.

Driving, perhaps the country's best spot for race instruction. Bondurant's is parked on a paved patch of desert a half-hour or so south of Phoenix and consists of four full-road racetracks, a seven-acre parking lot known as the skid pad, and a huge fleet of Corvettes, Mustangs, Cadillac CTS's, and Ford Crown Victorias free for the taking. Well, free for the taking once you've ponied up a few grand to come here.

For four days Danny has been teaching me and my two classmates—an excitable, buzz-cut Arizona cop named Kevin and a gruff, seen-it-all former NYPD officer named Bill, who now protects top execs at a Fortune 500 company—to better understand the capabilities of our cars and how to use them to our advantage even under adverse conditions. They call the course Executive Protection/Anti-Kidnapping.

The guys in the ski masks? Other instructors, borrowed to help make the "scenario" part of our program even more insanely stressful.

"We've taught police departments, top exec drivers for large corporations," says Danny. "We had a major politician's driver. I've had ▶



"I'm feelin' a day...see if the track's open."



"Hey, a little water over here!"



"Taxi! Hey, taxi."

Colombians, Israelis, the head of a South African firm—South Africa is the world capital of car-jackings—and a bunch of government agency guys. Man, those were some crazy dudes."

For all the talk of automotive carnage—ramming, skidding, and balletic spin moves—the bulk of the ECP course (as it's known) focuses on making us so attuned to a car's handling, braking, and weight transfer that we're easily able to push it seemingly beyond its limits, even in the most stressful situations.

That means hours of throttle steering (learning how the accelerator affects turning the car), high-speed brake exercises, emergency lane changes, and racing through an ultratricky autocross course that seems to have been modeled after someone's large intestine—all in a powerful Mustang GT that will never be accused of being nimble.

Then Danny puts us in a Crown Vic. You know the Crown Vic as the cop car du jour—and now that I've attempted to use one as a high-performance vehicle, I have both a hearty

respect for police driving capabilities and a fresh understanding of how easy it would be to run away from the cops.

"OK, Kevin," Danny says, buckling his lap belt (the Vics have four-point harnesses, but we surprisingly aren't using them). "Here's the deal. Roll forward like you're patrolling. Say you see something up ahead that makes you uncomfortable—maybe someone pointing a gun at your vehicle—and you want to get out of there as soon as possible. What do you do?"

"Reverse 180," Kevin says.

"Let's see it."

Kevin lurches to a stop, pops the car into reverse, and puts his left hand at five o'clock on the steering wheel.

"Fix on a spot," Danny says. (This will help him keep the wheel, and the car, straight—important on an actual road.) "And punch it!"

Kevin floors the heavy gas pedal, and the car lurches backward.

"Count it off," Danny says. "One, two, three, four, five—now!"

At the five count Kevin whips the wheel left, sending the car into a violent skid and whipping the front end around 90 degrees. As the front moves past sideways—and it will do this quickly, having a ton of momentum thanks to that heavy V-8 up front—Kevin spins the wheel a full rotation back the other way, completing the spin. As the wheel passes the gearshift lever, he pops it into drive, the tires squeal, and we're off heading safely, we hope, in the other direction.

A cloud of atomized tire rubber fills the

car, settling into my eyes, nose, and mouth. I can hear Bill coughing.

"Right," Danny says. "Next time you might want to roll the windows up first."

Ramming speed

By Thursday, the final day, I'm beginning to realize why this class is so expensive; for four days we've done nothing but beat the crap out of Bob Bondurant's cars. Danny hasn't once asked any of us to back off, no matter how much tire rubber, brake pad, or clutch we're burning in a particular exercise. "This is high-performance driving," he tells me. "You are here to push the limits of the car."



And trashing a car costs a certain sum of money, even if you're dealing with total jankers. Bondurant's school trails police auctions and junkyards for cars that are still structurally intact but, for whatever reason, are never going to pass even the laziest DMV inspection. These are the ones we get to demolish.

Out on the back oval of the track, a Saturn sits sideways on the road, its glass punched out to minimize cleanup. A tow truck idles nearby.

"Everything we've done so far, you can do without contact," Danny says, squaring his sleek shades. "But if that's not an option and you're in a situation where you have no way out..." He taps the side of "the Shark," a gold Lincoln ▶

A cloud of atomized rubber fills the car.

HOW TO...

Execute a precision immobilization technique (PIT).



Step 1: Position your front side bumper against the enemy's rear quarter panel. Step 2: Turn toward the car and accelerate through as they spin out. Step 3: Let AAA hot cleanup.



"Mo-o-o-o-vel Gilmore Girls is on its 10!"



He only ate
because he
was lonely



Sure beats
wearing Inke
mustaches

Town Car with a cowcatcher on the front end and a fin welded to the middle of the roof. "If you decide there's no other choice, you ram him. But you want to ram him, if at all possible, where the engine's not." This is why police cars, during roadblocks, park nose-to-nose in the center of the road. A typical criminal, panicking, will strike the cars where they come together, putting the heaviest part of his car against the heaviest points of two other cars—giving him little chance of busting the roadblock and a lot of chance of fucking himself up.

"You want to line up the strongest point of your car to his rear axle," says Danny. "A good indicator of the strongest point is the steering wheel, which roughly lines up with the frame rail."

"Can I bust the cherry?" Kevin asks.

He pops off his DC Shoes cap, straps on a helmet, and crams his bulky 6'2" frame into the sagging velour seats of the Shark. He buckles the seat belt, smiles, and backs up.

"OK," Danny yells. "All you need to do is roll forward a bit at idle and, when I give the sign, floor it. If you're going to ram someone, you need to keep your foot on the throttle! It will throw him farther and keep you going straight. Because that's where you want to go—away as fast as possible."

Kevin rolls forward, not exactly at idle. Though 15 was his target speed, he's probably already there when Danny gives the signal, and so the car is up near 30 when it bashes into the side of the Saturn, sounding like a car bomb and sending fender shrapnel flying into the sky.

"The noise is a lot scarier than the hit," Danny says to the assembled crowd, a bit late considering we've mostly ducked for cover like participants in an air-raid drill.

As the Shark rolls back to the starting point, Kevin is shaking his head. "Ouch," he says. "That hurt. That wasn't as fun as I thought it'd be."



The tragic
life of a
red-headed
step-Saturn

Later, during the classroom wrap-up, Danny gives us the requisite warnings that these are all dangerous maneuvers; that, in the real world, pulling them off puts you, your car mates, and bystanders at risk; and that we should only use them "as a last resort." Blah blah.

I can definitely see Kevin, who kicked both of our asses on the track and seemed to have more fun than any of us, pulling a high-speed 180 the first chance he gets.

Bill, well, he's a bit more realistic. He's also got 20 years on us.

"You know what?" he says to me, as we're walking back to our boring old rental cars, with their insurance and less-damage waivers. "You're never gonna do a reverse 180 in your life. Even I probably won't. But it gives you confidence in your skills and shows you how much you can do with a vehicle."

"Yeah," I tell him, "you're probably right." Then, on my way out, I do a 180. ☐

HOW TO...

Ram a car—without busting your own!



Step 1: Line up your steering wheel with the enemy car's rear wheel. **Step 2:** Accelerate slowly, keeping your foot on the gas as you strike. **Step 3:** Press butt cheeks firmly against rear window.

CAR OF THE MONTH

MERCEDES-BENZ CLS55 AMG

SPRUC CHECK

PRICE: \$90,000 MSRP: 409 hp

ENGINE: 6.9-liter supercharged V-8

0-60: 4.5 seconds TOP SPEED: 155 mph

We say: Mercedes debuted the 2006 CLS500 to prove they could design a sedan that wasn't boxier than Jennifer Aniston's jaw. With the CLS55 (a limited edition with only 1,500 available), they're just showing off. The highlight is a monster

V-8, but the engineers at Benz über-tuner AMG didn't quit there. The manual SpeedShift tranny lets you rip through all five gears via the stick or toggle switches on the steering wheel, and the AirMatic self-leveling air suspension system has three

modes: sport, comfort, and a combo of the two. But be sure to Scotchgard the nappa leather seats before freeing all 516 lb.-ft. of torque.

Drawbacks: The CLS has a portly 4,050-pound curb weight. You'll have to save the sport mode for playtime, and expect some understeer on the twisties.



EXEC
MUST-
HAVE!