

Winter roads magnify car response

By Jim Williams

My first introduction to the subtle nuances of winter driving came just a few months after getting my driver's license. Headed down the snow-covered hairpin a few blocks from my house, I tried to slow by stepping on the brakes.

My 1968 Falcon responded by whipping into a three-quarter spin and coming to rest against a curb about two feet from a new Riviera. It was a thought-provoking experience.

Winter is a sort of car-response magnifier. Funny things happen at 20 m.p.h. that usually appear in the more exclusive neighborhood of 90-plus on dry pavement. You need to think ahead when roads get slick—way ahead.

Slick tricks—Think of yourself behind the wheel of a wild 300-h.p. firebreather, maybe a Ferrari Daytona. Now picture yourself blasting around your local roads at about 150 m.p.h. You know you're going to have to make adjustments.

That stop sign ahead—get on the brakes a lot earlier than you're used to. But not too hard, or they'll lock. That tricky corner—take it easy turning the steering wheel—too much and you'll skid. And watch the traffic very, very carefully!

Just keep the Italian-supercar image in mind and you know what you're up against. The key word in winter driving is finesse.

Change of plan—You need to re-train your reflexes to cope with the different needs of winter driving so emergencies don't take you by surprise.

This means giving your car a lot more space in traffic. The traction of an icy road is about eight per cent that of a normal road. A stop from 70 m.p.h., to pick an illegal example, would take about 2,500 feet—unless you hit something.

To slow down, pump brakes gently, beginning well in advance of where you need to stop. Sometimes it helps to shift into a lower gear. Simultaneously braking and turning is just asking for a spin.

Once you're spinning, there's not much to do but take your foot off the gas and hope you don't hit any parked Rivas. If the car in front of you spins, racing writer Paul Petersen suggests you aim right at him—he probably won't be there anymore when you get there.

Steering efficiency diminishes drastically on slick roads. Turn too sharply and the car's front "plows" straight ahead. When starting your trip, it pays to test yourself on a quiet street to see just how far you can turn the wheel.

Un-sticking—No matter how careful you are during the winter, you're bound to get stuck at least a few times.

The emergency stuff mentioned in the car-preparation section can help. Scoop away snow from all four wheels with the shovel. Spread out the kitty litter or sand for traction. Broken twigs, dry leaves, cardboard—anything you can stuff under the wheels is probably better than snow.

Then drive forward, applying just enough power to spin the tires slightly. If you can't force your way out, try rocking the car—shifting into reverse and backing as far as possible, then powering forward "on the rebound." But don't do this for over a minute or so, for your transmission may overheat.

Failing all else, there's no substitute for manpower, unless it's a tow truck.

The bright side—Now I've told you how lousy winter driving is. In fairness, it has some advantages.

Do you know how to get out of a skid? Really? Have you ever tried it? Sure, practically everybody knows that you turn in the direction the rear wheels are skidding. This is a reaction only practice can train.

But it's hard to find a safe place to practice in the summer—a place where you can toss your car sideways at 50 m.p.h. and not hit anything if you goof. A snow-covered parking lot is an unbeatable "skid pad" where you can swing the car into the most bizarre attitudes at 10 or 15 m.p.h.

It's a great way to practice skid control—and if you choose a place free of obstructions like light poles, cars and pedestrians, it's quite safe.

A drift is a high-speed cornering technique involving the controlled sliding of all four wheels. The car is steered into the turn. Then the driver steps hard on the gas pedal, swinging the rear wheels out into a skid.

Still applying power, he steers the front wheels away from the turn—"opposite lock"—and slides through under perfect control, with the car's nose pointing down

the road at the turn's exit.

It's difficult, challenging and not every car has enough power to perform on a dry track. But on the snowy skidpad you can while away hours practicing it.

Then there are the maniacs whose favorite sport is bundling up in drafty sports cars on freezing days, then driving from nowhere to nowhere on rotten secondary roads according to a strict schedule and route directions.

This is winter rallying. It's also called a lot of other things, particularly when the contestants take a wrong turn into a ditch full of ice water. Winter rallies are silly and ridiculous, and I'd sign up to participate in one tomorrow if I could.

If this appeals to you (ya weirdo!), you might write to national headquarters of Sports Car Club of America. Their address is P.O. Box 22476, Denver, Colo. 22476.

And if that's not challenging enough for your winter-driving skills, there's still the Trans-Nebraska Open—enter at your own risk.

State Patrol service

Tapes report on roads

If you plan to drive in Lincoln or state roads this winter, rest assured the people in charge of informing you of the conditions of those roads and of trying to help motorists in trouble are preparing to do their jobs.

If you travel state highways between Nov. 1 and April 1, but are not sure of road conditions, dial 477-9202 (or 553-5000, in Omaha) and a one-minute, recorded message will give you current road conditions, said Capt. D.W. Schamp, director of communication for the State Patrol.

The messages "change as conditions change," he said and are based on information collected from troopers on the road.

Schamp said the tapes, in the third year of use, free State Patrol personnel from answering the same questions that callers often ask.

The phone number in Lincoln can handle three callers at a time and the Omaha number can handle 20, he said. The American Auto Association (AAA)

Emergency telephone numbers for motorists' purse or wallet:

- American Automobile Association nationwide road condition report and 24-hour towing service 477-8991
- Emergency road conditions, November-April 477-9202
- Emergency road conditions 477-8012
- Weather forecast service, 24-hour 432-9211
- Towing services:
 - A-1 Wrecker Service, 24-hour . . . 475-8441
 - AAA Truck Service Inc., 24-hour 477-7188
 - Above Standard Service 468-9927
 - Auto Ambulance Co., 24-hour 477-8340
 - Glenn Hillhouse auto body and towing, 24-hour 475-8441
 - Hickman Motor Co., 24-hour . . . 752-2025
 - Inselman Garage 435-2739
 - Kear Service, 24-hour 464-7471
 - Lewis Service Center Inc., 24-hour 475-8471
 - Misle Chevrolet Co. 483-2261
 - Owen's Red Horse Mobil Service 477-6765
 - Pierson's Texaco 475-0384
 - Royal Motors 435-2138
 - Scanlon Crash Service 432-1810
 - 70th and Adams APCO, 24-hour 464-9917
 - Van's Auto Repair 475-9947
 - Ward Body Shop 432-5069
 - Wedgewood Conoco 488-9854
 - Whitney's Commercial Wrecker Service, 24-hour 432-4413

also helps inform drivers of road conditions as well as those who may have trouble with their automobiles.

AAA, a non-profit motor club, distributes pamphlets, brochures and notices in monthly billings to inform members of procedures for winterizing their cars, said Larry Erdkamp, Lincoln's AAA branch manager. But members are not the only ones who can benefit from AAA services, he said.

Like the State Patrol, AAA also has reports on road conditions, as well as surveys on gasoline availability which are broadcast frequently on local radio stations, he said.

Lincoln's AAA pays local service stations which have towing services to assist motorists, especially during winter months, he said. AAA members receive free towing and starting services in most instances, Erdkamp said, adding that long distance towing or special repair services may cost more.

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