



# ACCIDENT AVOIDANCE

Young drivers participate in a two-day class where they learn the limits of their vehicles and themselves.

**B**ristol Motor Speedway may be known for destroying a few cars in March and August, but on four other weekends during the year, it is the home of a program designed to teach teen drivers how to avoid the same fate.

BMS, along with Wellmont Health Systems, hosts the Accident Avoidance Workshops (AAW) each spring and fall after the race teams have made their visits to the "World's Fastest Half-Mile." Jeffrey Stillwell, a Minnesota native, is the owner and lead instructor for AAW. A passion for everything automotive led Stillwell to his current occupation.

"Racing runs in my family," he explained. "In fact, my mom and dad both raced sports cars back home. When most kids got a job at Burger King, I was driving a tow truck. I spent 18 years in retail auto parts, and

then went to work for Carrera Racing Shocks."

During this time, Stillwell, a self-described "big kid," transformed the basement of his Atlanta home into one of the largest slot car facilities imaginable. Among the tracks is a recreation of his favorite speedway, BMS. He even rents the tracks to parents interested in

## Students practice braking in their own vehicles



BMS Archives Photo

hosting birthday parties for their speed-obsessed kids.

"Stillwell Racing Enterprises started as one slot car track in my basement," he said. "But even then it was teaching kids about gear ratios and stagger. At that time, I worked in advertising and marketing for Home Depot. I figured out the view at the top of the corporate ladder was not what I wanted, so I went back to school."

"In 1995, I decided to put together a teen driving program. I had no idea how it would work, but I was tired of hearing about four teens in a car wrapped around a tree."

After he started back to school, Stillwell would sit down after class and work on lessons that could teach teens and serve as a supplement to driver's education courses.

"I started collecting things," he said. "I wanted to put

## Students listen as Jeffrey Stillwell explains the driving portion of their training



together a classroom to teach about things that you and I take as second nature, but that doesn't enter the thought process of a kid. Never mind that you are staying between the lines and know what all the signs mean."

While finishing up his degree, he enlisted the help of his friend Robert Barrett, an 8<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher, who now serves as his assistant during AAW events. Stillwell was a student teacher in Barrett's classroom, and the two developed a close relationship. Because of their background with youth, both men are able to connect with the students.

"You have to be able to engage kids," Stillwell acknowledged. "I turn into a 16-year-old when I'm out there, and they really respond to it. At the end of the class, I tell the parents they don't

really need me for these exercises, but I had one father tell me, 'you validate everything we tell these kids. Now they hear it from you and they listen.'"

In the AAW, new teenage drivers, or anyone interested in learning defensive driving techniques, take part in a classroom session on Friday night at BMS. The session provides real-world information presented with Stillwell's unique sense of humor.

Students are divided into four groups and return to BMS for one four-hour session during the weekend. For the driving portion, students drive their own vehicle through a series of exercises designed to help them feel the limits of

**"The best part about operating at the SMI facilities is finding people who share my passion and want to help..."**  
**– Jeffrey Stillwell**

their car. For many, it is the first time to feel anti-lock brakes bring their car to a stop, while others learn the capabilities of their car in a panic situation.

"There are two types of driving situations," explained Stillwell. "Regular driving and emergency situations. Emergency situations only happen when everything goes horribly wrong in front of you. Driver's education does a competent job of teaching normal driving, what the lines and signs mean. But normal driving conditions aren't the ones that kill. Only when things go horribly wrong are you at risk of losing your life. That is the part I focus on.

"I recommend they do the workshop before they get on the road. By being out there with no idea how to react when everything goes wrong, you endanger everyone else. It makes sense to study the material and go through it before you actually get in a bad situation."

While helping teens learn to be safe is his main goal, teaching his class at BMS, and its sister track Atlanta Motor Speedway, is a dream come true for this gear head.

"The best part about operating at the SMI facilities is finding people who share my passion and want to help," he said. "They

don't charge me to rent the facilities; we just want to get the kids trained. That is the biggest plus.

"Of course, being a car guy, BMS is the greatest place on the planet to come. I've said it over and over. I mean look at this facility. I'm thrilled. It is exciting, the list goes on and on. I'm losing my thought process because I'm so excited about it," he added with a laugh. "The passion here is at an overload. Standing in victory lane, can you imagine 160,000 people, 320,000 eyes looking at you? One person. The center of the world. How cool is that?"

While his surroundings in Bristol are spectacular, nothing matches the feeling he gets after a student completes his course.

"By the end of the weekend," he said, "I've

eliminated the communication barrier between the parents and the kid and driving. That carries on long after the class. They can say, 'remember what Jeffrey said,' 'remember when he talked about that.' They now have a common ground.

"No parent wants to be the one to teach their kid how to drive. Some of the situations I've been put in, the relationship between the parent and student wasn't healthy, it was almost argumentative. You can't learn when you are arguing. By the end of the workshops, they are my biggest advocates. That meant more to them than the kid learning how to drive. All of a sudden they can talk to their child again." 🇺🇸



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