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## Race Course

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A close-up, low-angle shot of a BMW M wheel. The wheel features a multi-spoke design with a polished silver finish. The center cap displays the BMW roundel logo. A blue and white racing livery is visible on the wheel's spokes, including a blue cap with a white 'M' logo. The tire is a Continental, with 'VIBRANT' and 'ADAL' visible on the sidewall. The background shows a blurred blue car with 'Continental' branding.

The Comeback

# Race Course

*BMW Driving Performance School*

BY DAMIEN PIERCE



**T**here are many things to fear in this fragile world—the American political divide, *Game of Thrones* spoilers, a new Nicholas Sparks novel. But the most terrifying? The South Carolina driver.

One study after another has shown that Palmetto State drivers are among the nation's worst. The latest, conducted by CarInsuranceComparison.com, found that South Carolina has the highest mortality rate per miles driven. Our drivers are careless, easily distracted and slow to respond. The self-driving car can't get here fast enough.

So how does one adapt when the roadways resemble something out of a *Mad Max* film? I decided to learn how to drive.

To be clear, I have no interest in relearning how to parallel park with a handful of pimply-faced teens. However, if I'm being honest, I'm no Steve McQueen. I don't have a clue how to drive in icy conditions, and view the use of a turn signal as divulging secret information to the enemy. Accident avoidance? By the time I've registered what's happening to the vehicle, I'm already on the phone with the insurance company. Simply put, I could be a more



### SLIPPERY WHEN WET

On the wet skid pad, drivers are encouraged to lose control—so they can learn how to regain it.

responsive driver. I need to learn how to control my vehicle when things go wrong.

For such an experience, there's the BMW Performance Driving School. Located in Greer, South Carolina—a quick drive from the Furman campus—the performance center is part of a series of automotive manufacturing and research facilities that have transformed Interstate 85 into the American Autobahn. BMW, Michelin and Porsche—to name a few—have their North American headquarters located between Charlotte and Atlanta. BMW's manufacturing facility is the largest car exporter in the United States, building more than 1,200 vehicles every day. If you ever find yourself in Germany, that X5 M whizzing by at 120 mph wasn't built in Munich. It was put together in the Upstate.

The drivingschool offers one- and two-day courses for weekend racing enthusiasts, teens and inexperienced drivers like me who want to survive South Carolina's mean streets. Yes, you can drive a BMW as fast as you want. The center is a playground for motor heads. However, the school's real draw is that it teaches drivers how to react when the roadway around them is in chaos. That's how, on a drizzly Saturday morning in December, I found myself enrolled in BMW's One-Day Car Control School.

### Drive to Succeed

There are nine other drivers signed up for the class, and we're paired off to share two toys for the next eight hours: the M240i coupe and the 340i M sport sedan. Our instructors are BMW-certified professional drivers who have spent most of their lives racing cars, go-carts and anything else that moves forward. Their task is to push us beyond our comfort zone and teach us how to handle our machines in real-life situations—and maybe even convert a few

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## The Comeback



### ON THE TRACK

Our writer takes the M240i Coupe for a timed lap around BMW's autocross course.

of us into BMW owners. Turns out, one out of eight people who take a course at the performance driving school purchase a BMW.

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"We don't sell cars here," says Laura Hayes, one of the center's instructors. "But we sell cars."

Following classroom instruction and a short drive through a slalom course to get acquainted with our vehicles, our first lesson is in emergency braking. This involves taking the 340i M sport sedan to 55 mph and engaging the car's anti-locking brake system (ABS) upon entering a corner.

Who needs practice applying the brakes? We all do. If every driver used the capabilities of ABS, body shops would have more free time.

"We're a nation of wimpy brakers," barks instructor Paul Mazzacane. "Put your foot through the floor."

Of course, there are circumstances when braking isn't an option. For our next tutorial, we're told an imaginary trac-

tor-trailer is parked in our path as we come through a bend in the road at 50-plus mph. There is a small window where we can swerve our M240i coupe into the left lane before colliding into the trailer and avoiding the traffic following us to our left. Traffic cones represent these hazards.

This short course is meant to drive home something the instructors preach throughout the day: Look down the road. As drivers, one of our most common mistakes is we lock our eyes on our immediate surroundings or the large obstruction we're about to plow into. However, if our eyes are up, we have a better chance to utilize our peripheral vision and find an escape route.

Five tries through the hazard, I've come close to mastering the maneuver. The key

is taking your foot off the gas, and weaving through the empty space with your eyes on the back of the opening. I just can't seem to avoid the cone that represents the back left corner of the tractor-trailer.

"Nice job," says instructor Andy Van Cleef. "But you lost another side view mirror."

If this had been a real accident, the joke would be on my instructor: It's not my BMW.

Still, that minor detail is the least of my worries as we steer our vehicles toward the skid pad. Since signing up for the class, this exercise has been the one I've been looking forward to the most. It's also the one I've been dreading. For the past two hours, our instructors have drenched a 360-degree track with sprinklers, turning the pavement into a Slip'N Slide.



## The Comeback



### PRO TIPS

Paul Mazzacane (left) and Laura Hayes provide instruction before turning drivers loose through a series of obstacles.

When I get behind the wheel, Mazzacane prompts me to speed up, even though everything in my being is telling me this is a bad idea. I grip the wheel and I feel my body tense up at the mere thought of going into a spin. Once the car reaches somewhere around 45 mph, the instructor tells me to take my foot off the gas. Inevitably, the car's back wheels slide to the front of the vehicle.

The first time we try it, I nearly take the car off the track. I react too slowly and accept my fate on the merry-go-round that I never wanted to be on. A few more attempts, more of the same. I start to feel dejected.

"Relax," Mazzacane says. "Where are your eyes? You're too tense. You're thinking too much. Feel what the car is telling you."

His words are an epiphany.

Rather than reacting to my conditions, I've been anticipating. My eyes have been focused on the muddy grass—not the road—and I've been gripping the wheel as if it were a handlebar on a roller coaster. Worst of all, I've never actually felt the car begin its skid.

As we start our final laps around the pad, I loosen my shoulders and release my grip on the wheel. When the time comes to take my foot off the gas, I actually feel the back tires begin to get away from the vehicle. Within a moment's notice, I steer out of the skid and pull the car back on course. I don't have to think about what to do. It's a reaction. Imagine how many opportunities I might have had to get this maneuver right without this driving program.

Our driving experience ends with two competitions, including six timed laps around the facility's half-mile autocross course. Driving the nimble M240i coupe, I complete my best lap in 28.49 seconds—not terrible for the day's rainy conditions, but

not fast enough for any of BMW's professional instructors to be concerned about their job security.

More importantly, I left the driving performance center with one less thing to fear. Now, if we could only get Nicholas Sparks to stop writing. ●

