

# **A PRACTICAL PRECISION DRIVING PROGRAM FOR WILDLIFE ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS**

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*Abstract:* It is very difficult for wildlife enforcement officers to navigate wilderness patrol areas without occasionally incurring damage to their patrol vehicles. This is especially true in pursuit situations. To respond to this need, the Training staff of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission developed a method to minimize vehicular accidents by directly increasing wildlife officer woods driving proficiency through a precision training program.

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In 1975, the Training staff reviewed accident statistics of the Division of Law Enforcement and found that 92 vehicle accidents had occurred. Repair costs for damage to vehicles amounted to \$23,000. This figure does not include the "down time" of a vehicle for repairs or the fact that many officers involved in accidents were incapacitated for considerable periods of time as they recovered from injuries.

After considerable discussion within the division, the decision was made to send the Training staff and 5 field instructors to a precision pursuit driving school for law enforcement officers. At the completion of this school, the Training staff and instructors designed a specialized driving course tailored to improve woods maneuverability, reaction time and reflex coordination for wildlife enforcement officers. This program was conducted on a statewide basis during the summer months of 1976.

## **METHODS**

The course is composed of both classroom and field instruction. The purpose and objectives are explained as follows:

### **Purpose**

- (1) Reduce accident rates in the Division of Law Enforcement and improve driving techniques and skills.
- (2) Familiarize the officer with his responsibilities and liabilities in driving a pursuit vehicle and to de-emphasize the importance of excessive speeds in pursuit situations.
- (3) Familiarize the officer with the dangers and physical forces operating in pursuit situations.

### **Objectives**

- (1) To instruct the officer to intelligently assess the hazards of driving situations and to properly apply driving skills.
- (2) To instruct the officer to constantly weigh the hazards presented to himself, the violator, and the public, and to fully understand responsibilities and liabilities of the driver.

## **RESULTS**

Twelve months after the completion of the training program, accident statistics were again reviewed by the Training staff. Vehicular accidents decreased by 31 percent, down from 92 accidents to 60 accidents. Damage costs decreased 52 percent, down from \$23,000

to \$10,000. In the interim, however, the driver training program was cancelled for the upcoming year because it was felt by administrators that the program was too harsh on equipment and was not successful at teaching driving skills.

In 1978, accident statistics were again reviewed by the Training staff for the previous year and found an additional 50 percent decrease. Thus, an 81 percent decrease in accidents was realized when compared with the period prior to the training program. In addition, the saving of several lives during this period was attributed by the officers involved to skills learned in the program.

Since the driver training program has been discontinued, the Training staff went on with other duties and programs and did not again review vehicular accident statistics until early 1980. A study of vehicular accidents for fiscal year 1978-1979, showed a phenomenal 220 percent increase from the previous year and, even more staggering, a 600 percent increase in damage costs as a result of these accidents. It should be noted that in this period, quite a number of new wildlife officers had been placed on the payroll who had never received any type of precision driving training.

With the cost of repairs now approaching nearly \$65,000 per year, the Training staff has again proposed a program which will review, as well as further refine, skills taught in 1976. In addition to this new training program, specialized 3-day programs are being scheduled for officers who are involved in more than 2 accidents within 1 calendar year. A close analysis of accidents also showed that a small percentage of officers were responsible for a large percentage of accidents. A carefully designed training workshop is being devised for these officers.

#### SUMMARY

In summary, we feel the initiation of a practical precision driver training program for wildlife enforcement officers can more than pay for itself through a reduction of vehicular accidents. Other, more intangible benefits, such as the saving of human lives and the refinement of officers' professional skills are invaluable attributes that can not be viewed in mere budgetary terms.

An instruction outline, maps for 5 driving courses, and example score sheets are available upon request from the Training Coordinator, Division of Law Enforcement, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, FL 32301.