

Skid Monster teaches safe driving

'Skid Monster' teaches safe driving

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DeKALB - What has two yellow wheels and whips you around like a carnival ride?

A new safe driving tool coming to Northern Illinois University, that's what.

The Skid Monster and its inventor, Fred Mottola, came to DeKalb on Monday for a demonstration of the latest tool in driving safety.

At first look, the yellow wheels look like training wheels, but they help provide a visual example of how even the slightest increase in speed can lead to a "monster" of a problem.

"It provides instant feedback to a lot of the everyday things people do," Mottola described.

In an empty parking lot on the west side of the NIU campus, Mottola took riders through a brief demonstration of how the Skid Monster offers instant feedback by exaggerating little mistakes and adjustments a driver makes.

Mottola's creation, which is attached to the rear of a vehicle in place of its regular wheels, illustrates prevention as the best tool for being a safer driver, showing that it is easier to keep a vehicle in control than attempting to regain control.

"An analogy can be made to a domesticated animal it's easy to handle inside the cage, but the animal turns into a monster when it breaks out of it," he said.

The "monster" showed riders how even the slightest overacceleration can lead to a spin-out.

The first demonstration by Mottola showed his technique of "targeting a path" during a turn. Mottola's early acceleration during a turn sent the minivan spinning on the castered wheels of the Skid Monster. With one second of hesitation and the use of a visual guide, Mottola made the same turn without any loss of control the second time.

Later, Mottola graphically showed how an increase of less than five mph on a curved road or ramp could easily put the vehicle into an uncontrollable spin. One rider compared the feeling of the ride to a Tilt-A-Whirl.

Kristin Gannaway, a high school driving instructor from Naperville, talked about how the Skid Monster and the "target path" technique will bring new awareness to preventive driving safety.

"It is teaching (new drivers) how to learn the vehicle faster," Gannaway commented.

Gannaway said when she was a younger driver, she sought out snowy or wet parking lots to do 360-degree turns as a way of learning how to handle a vehicle.

According to Dr. Frank Gruber, engineering professor at NIU, the Skid Monster provides the same type of experience Gannaway gained in snowy parking lots, but in a controlled environment.

"You can simulate many situations in a limited amount of space," Gruber said. "It allows you to demonstrate to students the use of visual habits."

Gruber added that the Skid Monster will be integrated into NIU's driving teacher training program within the next month.

According to Mottola, the total curriculum and structured practice help to teach preventative concepts to beginning drivers 10 times faster than those who learn without it. In addition, for more experienced drivers, the Skid Monster detects and responds to every error make.

"The concept is to attempt to show how easy it is to maintain control with proper techniques," he said. "I have teachers tell me, 'I don't know how I taught without it.'"

Mottola, who has spent 40 years in the field of traffic safety, said a number of Skid Monsters have been sold throughout the country based on demonstrations alone.