

A lesson learned the hard way

by MIKE BAKER

Well, the Great White North has certainly lived up to its name these past couple of weeks.

We here in Dufferin County have been tormented by Mother Nature in recent times, with dangerous amounts of snow and ice descending from the heavens and levelling our community and its residents.

One would think that, by now, we would have grown more accustomed to living with the harsh realities of Canadian winters. Alas, that doesn't appear to be the case.

The words 'drive to the conditions' are a staple of drivers ed courses nationwide these days, yet, when conditions are at their very worst, it is often easy to spot a car in a ditch or an accident on the road. While, undoubtedly, there are some cases when crashes simply cannot be avoided, if we all applied a little common sense to our driving during inclement weather, the number of collisions and subsequent calls to tow-truck operators would drastically decrease.

Trust me, I speak from experience.

Years ago, while I was in my second year at college, I got into a fairly bad accident because I wasn't doing the very thing I'm preaching about right now.

At what must have been around 7 a.m., the morning after a particularly horrendous snowstorm that had continued into the early hours, I set off on my regular hour-long commute from Lindsay to Oshawa. The problem? Plows simply couldn't keep up with what was falling from above. The main thoroughfares were mostly fine, if only because of the amount of traffic driving on them. The side roads, however, were not.

Driving in a early 2000s Saturn with, if my memory serves me correctly, all-season tires, I continued driving as if it was a beautiful, mid-summer day. By the time I came over a slight bump in the road, it was too late. I was gaining on the big Ford truck, whose owner was, I might add, driving to the conditions, at a dangerous rate. Inexperienced, I slammed on my brakes.

What happened next is, and will likely remain, one of the most terrifying moments of my life. My car span 180 degrees, entered the lane of oncoming traffic and slid beyond the truck. There was this moment when my eyes locked with the truck driver's as I flew beyond him? I was expecting a smash any minute as the inevitable rush of oncoming traffic grew closer. I'm not sure what compelled me to do it, but, now clear of the truck, I pulled on my steering wheel, veering left back into my rightful lane, albeit facing the wrong way. I smashed through a few mailboxes, narrowly avoided hitting another truck idling at the end of a driveway and, eventually, flew into the ditch. My car warped around a wooden hydro pole and rested on its side.

I remember sitting there not fully contemplating what had just happened. I heard movement outside and it dawned on me that, for safety reasons alone, I should probably clamber out of my now destroyed vehicle. Climbing out was interesting ? I had to basically pull myself up, stand on top of my driver's seat, fling the door open and hop out in one clean move. I expected to be met with anger, but instead those that had stopped were simply concerned about my health and wellbeing. I guess, since I wasn't hurt, I didn't think it was a big deal really.

Eventually the police came, took a statement and left. How I avoided a ticket, I'll never know. The tow truck operator followed. Upon observing the scene, he took off his hat and turned to me. What he said made me understand just how big a deal this was.

?I'm almost afraid to ask, but did the driver make it?? he looked at me warily.

Taking a moment to consider that question, I told him that I was, in fact, the driver. I wasn't hurt. Truth be told, I didn't have a single scratch on my body. After pulling my car out of the ditch and onto his tow, he motioned for me to take a look at the damage I'd caused. He pointed to a huge dent ? the impact point of the wooden hydro pole. It couldn't have been more than two feet up from my driver-side front door.

?That's how close you came to dying, kid,? he said.

So, when I ask you to slow down and drive to the conditions, know that it comes from someone who has already made the mistake. I was fortunate that I was able to walk away. Don't take that chance.