

Training the truckers

Written by Brian Lockhart

If you drive a car there has no doubt been a time when you're on the highway, either a 400 series or a secondary two-lane road when you glance in the review mirror and see the enormous front bumper of a semi tractor trailer bearing down behind you.

It's an unnerving sight to see that much chrome filling your mirror. If you need to stop in a hurry for whatever reason, you know that truck does not have the same capability to stop as you do and if a collision happens, you're going to be the one that loses.

A couple of years ago I was traveling down Highway 9, east of Orangeville at a time when the roads were wet and I was going down a large hill. My speed was around 90 km/h ? pretty average for that stretch of road.

A tractor trailer suddenly started pulling out from a rural sideroad to the left. I saw him start to enter the highway but what I didn't expect was that he was going to block the entire road. He didn't make the turn into the left lane but continued into my lane.

With a full-size sleep cab and a 48-foot trailer behind him, the rig now occupied two west bound lanes, an east bound left turn lane, and both eastbound lanes.

At 90 km/h, a vehicle travels around 88 feet per second. In the couple of seconds it took to realize this truck was going to block the entire highway I had traveled almost 200 feet. A car traveling at that speed takes around 42 metres to stop.

For a second I braced for the impact, then made a sudden decision and hit the shoulder of the road, passing between the front bumper of the truck and guard rail next to a ravine with only inches to spare on each side.

I'm pretty sure the driver realized his mistake and knew he almost caused a serious collision ? not to mention giving this driver a few seconds of absolute terror ? although I felt pretty good about my defensive driving.

The recent disaster in Humboldt, Saskatchewan is an ongoing investigation. At this point there is no indication who was at fault, but it does show what can happen when a fully laden tractor trailer collides with something.

It has also raised concerns about the experience of some people who are behind the wheel of some big rigs.

There's no doubt that most truckers are experienced drivers, however in light of this recent crash the focus has turned to what is required to get a licence and some truck driving schools that have less than exacting standards when it comes to graduating their students.

Even the trucking industry admits that some driving schools are mills that turn out drivers based on getting their money, rather than training people how to navigate a fully loaded truck in a safe manner.

A CBC report that quoted professional driving instructors said that road exams are 'far too easy,' and that instructors 'aren't allowed to fail a student who can pass the most basic written and road exams.' The report followed up saying the majority of driving students pay to take a week of training but more than 200 of them took no training at all.

In Ontario, drivers must take a minimum of 103 hours or roughly three weeks of training. In Saskatchewan, training remains optional.

The trucking industry is huge. Goods must be transported and transport trucks do the majority of that work in North America. Your grocery store, hardware store, lumber yard, and pretty much every industry receives goods and supplies by truck and there is no substitute for that. We're not going back to a team of horses and a wagon.

However, getting those goods to market must be done in a manner that doesn't jeopardize the safety of other motorists on the road.

Having unqualified and inexperienced people behind the wheel of a big rig carrying a heavy load is a disaster waiting to happen.

The investigation into the cause of the accident in Huboldt is going to take some time. People there are already questioning the experience of the as yet, unnamed driver.

If it turns out that inexperience or lack of training is the cause of the crash that claimed so many lives, you can bet there is going to be an immediate backlash and legislators better start putting together a better plan.