

3PointTurn – Episode 1: Personal Responsibility

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You're listening to 3PointTurn, a driver safety podcast presented by the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles. In promotion of a safer Florida, FLHSMV offers this educational series as a supplemental resource to the Florida Driver License Handbook. For more information on the topics presented in this podcast, please visit FLHSMV.gov.

On this episode, the FLHSMV team discusses just what it takes to become a driver in Florida. They will talk about first-time drivers, vehicles operations, and the roads on which that vehicle will drive.

Derek Perez:

Welcome to 3PointTurn. I'm your host, Derek Perez. I'm joined today by Captain Peter Bergstresser, a 24-year veteran of the Florida Highway Patrol, and FHP's chief of public affairs. How you doing today, Captain?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

I'm doing very well, Derek. I'm ready to talk about some important issues.

Derek Perez:

Well, what we want to do in each of these discussions is discover, debate, and drive. To anyone listening, that's our tagline. And for the purposes of this podcast series, we're going to hit three driver safety topics each episode. We're going to break those points down a little further from what you might read in a book. And hopefully it better prepares you to drive safely while out and about. Ready to dive in, Captain Bergstresser?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Sure am.

Derek Perez:

As we talk about you as a prospective first-time driver, we're really identifying the character traits needed to carry that level of responsibility. Captain, what are some of the most important qualities a new driver can display?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, I think one of the most important characteristics that a new driver, say a 15-, 16-year-old, just starting out, is maturity. And maturity doesn't have to be age. It has to be the way you look at life, the way you look at your responsibilities in school, and the way you look at your responsibilities if you have a job, let's say, at Publix or Chick-fil-A or something like that. So those things have a lot to do with it.

And it goes into other things, your temperament, the way you deal with people on the road. You don't want to be a hot head. You want to be somebody that's calm and collected. And you want to do your homework before you even get into these, whatever vehicle you're going to get, hopefully. You want to look at that driver handbook, the Florida Driver License Handbook. Really study it from front to back and get a good knowledge of it, or a good working knowledge of what the rules are.

Derek Perez:

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Well, if you're listening here, our captain has told us that maturity is one of the first and most important things to develop. Now, it's okay to wait until you're ready and your parents think you're ready. Don't feel pressured just because you turned 16 and your friends are getting their driver license. It's okay to practice longer, or tell your parents certain aspects of driving, like driving on the interstate, scare you. Captain Bergstresser also mentioned the proper temperament. Now, can we expand on that? I mean, obviously you don't want to be an aggressive driver, and overly aggressive driving is dangerous, but what does that proper temperament entail?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, temperament go both ways. You can be overly aggressive, or you can be way too timid. Aggressiveness can get you into crashes, and then being timid can get you into a crash such as when you're at a four-way stop. If it's your turn to go, you need to go. You don't need to sit there and hesitate. There's other seasoned drivers out there. They're going to jump ahead of you. So you don't want to be too timid, but you don't want to be too aggressive. You want to be right in the middle.

You want to know the law. You want to study up on that driver handbook. And then at the same time, you want to have well prepared, and this goes back to being prepared, if you're going to drive that vehicle, know where you're going, kind of practice that route, map it out. If it's going to work, it's going to school. Just be aware of, hey, how many intersections do I have to go through? How many traffic lights have to go through? And then that way, the more comfortable you are and alert at the same time, the better off you are going to be as a new driver.

Derek Perez:

Well, that preparedness is an excellent point. You've mentioned studying up on the driver's handbook. You've mentioned reading your own driver's manual for your vehicles so that you know how it operates. Being diligent in understanding as much as you can before you get on the road is key. Don't be in a rush. There are a lot of scenarios that can only truly be appreciated after you've experienced them. And experience comes, one, with practicing scenarios, and, two, actual drive time.

Another thing that will probably be taken care of when you go to get your license is some of the physical traits needed. And I'll just run through a few of these now. How is your vision? Do you require corrective lenses? Is your hearing an issue? Do you have an illness such as diabetes or epilepsy that could affect you unexpectedly while driving? Should you speak to a doctor before driving to make sure aspects of your health are in order before driving? Be sure to talk about all these things with your parent or guardian before you get behind the wheel and before you take your driving test. Now last but not least as far as these traits go, and I think they all sort of add up to this, is awareness. Awareness of yourself on the road, your vehicle, and almost more importantly, awareness of other drivers. Captain, would you like to talk about awareness?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well awareness, it encompasses a lot of things. But one thing that encompasses when you're a new driver is, and this is what I've seen with a lot of crashes that take place over, and I worked in the Orlando area, is when you're coming up to an intersection, that may be fine. You know there's a stop sign there, you know there's a light there, but you have to be aware of your surroundings. And what that means is there might be a child walking on the side of the road. There might be a bicyclist about to cross the road. Don't let those things freak you out, at least when you go up to it. Just stay alert, and then take a little bit more time if you see somebody. I would say, stay a little frosty when it comes to that.

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Captain Peter Bergstresser:

You want to stay on top of things because ultimately you don't know what that pedestrian's going to do, or what that bicycle is going to do. So be aware of that. And then be aware of the speed of the road. Be aware of signage of the road, be aware of the light. I mean, there's just so many different things. But if you practice that route, and you go through it and you know the law, and you're confident in your driving, you'll do much better than if you just try to wing it.

Derek Perez:

Well, it sounds like if you've got the mature attitude, you've got the proper temperament, you're prepared, and you maintain awareness, you will be ready for anything that encounters you on the road. As much as driving centers on your own preparedness, it's also being aware of other drivers on the road. Because truthfully, you can do everything correct and still get in a crash because someone else did something wrong. In fact, there's a greater likelihood something happens as a result of someone else. Well, as we end this first point, Captain Bergstresser, what are some of the ways you see young drivers getting into trouble, especially in their first year of having their license?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, some of the things that I, and I'm coming to you from a crash point of view – I worked in Orlando, as I mentioned earlier – and there's a huge amount of crashes that take place because it's a very populated area. But when it comes to young folks, what I see that happens most often is, one, they have a car that they've been gifted by the parents, or it's a vintage car. It could be a new or an old car. But it's too much car for them. It's got an engine that's just like a race car, and they don't take enough time to learn that vehicle. So when they go down the road, they're hitting the gas, and it's just flying. So they get into these crashes.

And you go up to them after the crash occurred, and they say, "Well, I don't know what happened. It just started to slide sideways," or whatever. Well, that just tells me they lost control, or they were going too fast in wet conditions, so on. But, ultimately, they didn't learn that vehicle's mannerisms and temperament. So you have to know if you're driving a slow beater car, you probably are going to be okay. But if you're driving a 5.0 Mustang, you're going to have to be aware that you just can't hit that gas and just fly. Because there could be problems because you're not used to curves and managing certain roadways.

Captain Peter Bergstresser (cont.):

The second thing that I see that happens with young drivers a lot is that they always want to have their friends in the car. They're either coming to or from school, or they're going to the beach or what have you. And they have their friends in the car, the music's loud. So you have to be cognizant, that is the driver of the vehicle, you're responsible for not only yourself and that vehicle, but all the lives in the vehicle. Too many times I've seen, and it's actually true, too many times I've seen where the driver crashes and hits a tree or whatnot. And then unfortunately that passenger, their best friend or school friend is now deceased. And we have to go tell that family, and we have to tell the other family. It's just a tragedy all the way around.

And that type of thing stays with you and stains you through your whole life. Whether you like it or not, it stays on you. So something very seriously to think about when you get behind the wheel, that if you have your friends in the car and everybody's piled up, make sure they all have their seatbelts on, but at the same time, make sure they're not distracting you.

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Derek Perez:

Maintaining that awareness even in the face of having your friends in the car is incredibly crucial.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Absolutely.

Derek Perez:

Thank you, Captain. Thank you very much for that. We're going to a quick break. And when we come back, we're going to start talking about your vehicle.

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Derek Perez:

Welcome back. And we're onto our second point, which is understanding your vehicle. As much as cars are all the same, engine, gas pedal, brake pedal, steering wheel, they're all also very different. Captain, you've probably driven quite a few FHP vehicles over the years, and a lot of personal ones. What first comes to mind about this topic?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, the first thing comes to mind is when I first came on the Patrol back in 1996, I was, after getting through the academy, I went to Troop F which is out there in Bradenton. And my first car was a Ford Mustang. It was one of our patrol cars, and it was a five-speed. So that's what comes to mind. It was a great car.

And I think that with all new drivers, whether they be 15, 16, that first car is really exciting. I mean, I had a personal first car, but I think in my career life, the first patrol car I had was a Mustang 5.0. And those are beloved cars. But the first thing I did when I got it is I looked at every single thing on that vehicle. And it wasn't pretty, it was dirty. And I cleaned it up, and it took a week to do it.

But I looked at every switch under the hood, in the trunk, under the car, everything. Just because to me, it was really, really exciting. And I think with the young drivers today that are getting into cars, they're going to have the same excitement for whatever car they get. Whether it be like mine, a spare Mustang with quite a few miles on it, but still, it was my first patrol car. I was excited about it.

Derek Perez:

As you get into your first car, it can be an exhilarating experience. It's a feeling of freedom that maybe you haven't experienced before. But it's an important thing to go over and familiarize yourself with a few key points in your vehicle. The first of which is your turning radius. How well the car maneuvers

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when turning, whether it's a normal, U-turn, a straightforward turn, backing up, or parking. Some vehicles turn easier than others.

Whether you have power steering, power assisted steering, or a really old manual car, you're going to familiarize yourself with how it turns. Some cars need more space. Some people can't perform U-turns in one movement, and it ends up turning into an illegal three-point turn amid traffic. If you are familiar with how your vehicle works and how it turns, you're always going to have a safe drive.

Derek Perez (cont.):

The next important point is braking and the weight of your vehicle. Your vehicle needs to stop. And some vehicles stop quicker than others, depending on how heavy they are. Motorcycles stop quickly. Big 18-wheelers need a lot longer. If you're driving a van or a truck around, it may require extra time to come to a stop than a standard smaller car.

A very important aspect of driving is understanding your lights, your hazards, and all of the instrumentation on your dashboard. How well do you know where everything is? At night, you need to turn on your headlights. You should also do that in the dawn or dusk hours, as well as in poor weather and visibility conditions. Do your windshield wipers have different speeds. If you have to stop on the side of the road, do you know where your hazard light button is? All of this is a huge part of understanding your vehicle. Captain, because of the many vehicles you've driven, what are some of the configurations and interesting things you've encountered when looking at your instrumentation and dashboard?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, the first thing you want to do in a vehicle, besides just looking at it and waxing the car, because let's face it, you like the way it looks or what have you, but you want to know where there's lights are because you're going to have to turn the lights on. You don't want to have to fumble for that. And there's different types. There's toggle lights. And then with the newer cars, there's automatic lights. And they also have daytime running lights.

So ultimately you want to figure out what kind of car you have and what kind of light system it has. So if it has automatic lights, probably set it on automatic. That way it'll come on automatically for you. If it has daytime running lights, make sure that's activated because when people see a car with lights on, even if it's during the day, it still makes you visible to them.

Captain Peter Bergstresser (cont.):

As far as Florida weather, as we know, it rains every afternoon sometimes in the summer. But it's really a panic moment for a new driver when they get in their car and they just don't know how to get those wipers on, or they don't know how to get the back wiper on. I would recommend learning how that works. Look at it. It's usually, it's not a toggle, but kind of a part of the actual arm of the one of the turn signals. And you turn it, and it turns the wipers on. Same thing goes for a rear wiper. I mean, you might want to just practice that as well, because when it starts to downpour, you don't want to be stuck there without the wipers on.

And lastly, one that stands out to me, which is a big thing, is that if you do get into an accident or you break down for some reason, when you go off to that shoulder, make sure you know what that hazard light looks like. It's usually a square, pretty conspicuous button in the middle of your car dash somewhere. And it has a triangle to it. Hit that. It'll turn your hazards on.

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Derek Perez:

Thanks for that advice, Captain. Now, along with all of the instrumentation, it's also very important for safety to properly adjust your seats and mirrors so that you have clear visibility all around your vehicle. Now ask yourself, is your vehicle low to the ground, or high up? Being high often means you can see traffic easier, especially if it's coming to a stop in front of you. Being lower means your car probably isn't as top heavy the way an SUV may be. SUVs can be susceptible to cross winds, or they may need to take turns slower because of the wheelbase. Each vehicle also has different vantage points to the front, sides, and rear. They also have different blind spots. Always be aware of any visibility issues in your vehicle and always adjust seats and mirrors before you take your car out onto the road.

Now, a final point that you should definitely be aware of is your spare tire. Do you know how to change a tire? Many people don't. Some people rely on AAA or another road service when they break down. What if you get a flat tire? You should have a spare tire, a jack, and know how to handle that scenario. Captain, can you also illuminate some points of what should be done should you got a flat tire?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, first off in, and I'll just take it from the perspective of an interstate situation, which is where I usually work out. A good example is when you have a blow out in your vehicle, one of the biggest things you don't want to do, you might hear a bang or whatnot, and the wheel starts shaking violently. You don't want to snatch the wheel one way or the other. At that point, you want to kind of let off the gas. You want to look around in your surroundings. And then you want to start going to the right lane into the emergency shoulder there.

And once you get to that shoulder, you want to pull completely off. You want to hit that hazard button we talked about earlier. And at that point, be aware of vehicles going by you because they might see it. They might be slowing down as well. But definitely get well off the roadway. Even if that means going a little bit onto the grass at first. Because ultimately, you want to make sure everything's safe and you want to stop the vehicle safely. So at that point, when you get out, let's say it's just a slow leak and it maybe just went down flat. One thing that I always recommend to folks is to get that Fix-a-Flat, keep that in your vehicle. Going back to what we talked about with having your new vehicle and looking at it from top to bottom, you need to make sure that spare is inflated. You need to check it, and then have that Fix-a-Flat.

Derek Perez:

Excellent, excellent. Great advice. Now, just to wrap up knowing your vehicle, Captain Bergstresser, of everything we've discussed, what's the biggest takeaway towards understanding exactly what a new driver needs to know about their vehicle?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Just besides cleaning it, and waxing the vehicle up, and just really looking at it, they really need to take time, one, to look at the driver handbook, which that's not to do with the vehicle, but it's important. Maybe keep it in the car with you. Secondly, they need to look over the owner's manual of that vehicle. Looked through it. And if you want, look at YouTube videos, that's always good too on your vehicle, if they have them out there. But basically just really take the time to just study that vehicle. Sit in it, adjust the seats, adjust the mirrors. You're not driving. You're just sitting there adjusting. Adjust the radio the right way, make sure you know how the radio operates so it doesn't blare at you sometimes if you hit it the wrong way. Make sure you know how the wipers work, make sure you know basically how the lights

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turn on, how the hazards work. Everything that's going to be very crucial to when you go down that road.

Derek Perez:

Now, it sounds like that the more you know about your vehicle, the less startled you'll be when something comes up.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Absolutely correct.

Derek Perez:

I think that's great advice, Captain. Thank you. That goes back to the personal responsibility and maturity that each person needs to operate a motor vehicle. It's you, and it's the people around you. Good reminder. We'll be back in just a few moments.

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Derek Perez:

All right. So now we're talking roads. Captain Bergstresser, what does a young driver need to understand about them?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, there's a lot of different types of roads out there. So first off you need to learn your local roads first, before you try to venture out on an interstate highway. Learn those local roads and get familiar with your neighborhood, get familiar with your local smaller intersections. Then you want to take that next step to get onto the interstate. And that would be with somebody in the vehicle with you helping you ramp on. But yeah, there's a lot of different roads to deal with, and we can talk about them.

Derek Perez:

All right. Well, let's do talk about them. Let's talk about the challenges specifically. Of course, you mentioned the kinds of roads you should start with versus the kind of road you should maybe graduate up to. But we've got all kinds of roads to deal with. One-way streets, interstates, four-lane highways, six-lane highways, country roads with no markings. To learn your city's roads, you've got to think about where you're going before you go there. If it's a quick trip to the grocery store, think about your best route. Is there a turn lane? Will I be driving in rush hour traffic? You've got to prepare for what roads you might encounter. Captain, if you were giving advice to a new driver specifically about the kinds of roads, can you elaborate on what they might need to do to prepare?

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Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, and that's a good question. The main thing they need to prepare for is they need to know the laws of the road. So that's where the Florida Driver License Handbook comes in. Just really learn that right off the bat. And then once you get out there on the road as a new driver, I would say route out some destinations and make sure you know where the intersections are, what type of intersections they are.

And for the most part in Florida, you're going to have two-lane roads. You might go out to a four-lane highway, and you'll have a light. But in the beginning as a brand-new driver, find a nice neighborhood area, and maybe have your parents or whatnot with you. And you can go around and practice some of those easier roadways first. But ultimately you will graduate up to driving on the interstate. But in the beginning, let's just take it easy, be patient, and not rush around.

Derek Perez:

Really well said, Captain. Thank you. It sounds like you constantly need to learn as you go. So my advice to young, new drivers, excited as you are, is to always be a student. Continue learning. As you encounter a road, don't just drive it, study it. File away knowledge about it for the future. The better a student you are with your driving, the better you learn. And the more you reflect on those experience, the better a driver you'll become. And over time, it'll just become instinctual.

Now while driving, two things are crucial – being patient and maintaining your awareness. You don't become the world's best driver on your first time. Approach driving knowing that you're a novice. Don't get cocky. Pay attention to the laws. They're there to protect you and others. Now regarding awareness, I like to drive listening to music, Captain. But sometimes it causes me to zone out. Can you give our young drivers any recommendations as to how to activate their brain and maintain awareness?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, just remember when you're driving that vehicle, it's got a lot of power behind it. It's got a lot of weight behind it. And it's a lot of responsibility behind it. If you're going to work, yeah, it's okay to have your radio on, just don't have it blasting. If you have friends in the car, that's fine, have them in the car. But let them be aware that, hey, they need to wear their seatbelts. They need to be aware that you have to concentrate. Ultimately, it's up to you as the main operator of that vehicle to ensure the safety of the people in the vehicle, safety of your fellow citizens and people on the roadway around you, and then also ultimately get home safely and arrive alive at your home to where you can continue to have many, many years of happy driving.

Derek Perez:

I couldn't agree more, sir. You cannot drive a car without being focused. On every road you encounter, there are signs. The speed limit on a residential road is different than that of an open highway. As soon as you get on a highway, you should be looking for that speed limit sign to see how fast you're allowed to go. And if this sounds like a lot at the beginning, as long as you're maintaining your patience and your proper temperament muscle, memory will happen. It'll happen with constant practice. Soon driving will become second nature, like shooting a basketball, painting, or playing guitar. You don't become an expert at those overnight. It can take years and years of diligent work. Driving is no different. If you're not a good driver early in life, those bad habits can continue with you into adulthood. So always do your best on the road.

Derek Perez:

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Well, this feels like a good stopping point. Captain Bergstresser is going to stay with us for the next couple of episodes. As we dive into a few more important topics. Thanks for listening to 3PointTurn. Until next time. Drive safe, Florida.

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On the next episode of 3PointTurn, the FLHSMV team dives into driving safety, defines right-of-way, and talks about how to approach roundabouts and intersections.

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