

3PointTurn – Episode 2: Driving Safety

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On this episode, the FLHSMV team focuses on beginner aspects of driver safety with a look at intersections, roundabouts, and right-of-way.

Derek Perez:

Welcome to 3PointTurn. I'm your host, Derek Perez. I'm joined again by Captain Peter Bergstresser, a 24-year veteran of the Florida Highway Patrol and FHP's Chief of Public Affairs. Welcome back, Captain.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Glad to be here.

Derek Perez:

All right, folks. Time to discover, debate, and drive for this episode's three key topics of driver safety. The main topic is the interactions a driver may have with other drivers. So within those three intertwined points, intersections, roundabouts, and right-of-way, we're going to get into those, break those down, and maybe try to understand what all of those are. Captain, which one should we start with?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

I say let's start with right-of-way. That's a big topic in crashes and I think that's a good place to start.

Derek Perez:

Excellent. Yeah, understanding intersections and roundabouts could definitely help avoid a crash. Now, I'll admit, right-of-way confuses me sometimes. How would you define the term, Captain?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

That's a big part of a crash is that who is at fault? Who had the right-of-way is usually the way to put it. Now for young drivers, it's a different thing. It's where when you go down the road and you come to a four-way stop, who has the right-of-way to go? If you're the first one to the stop sign, that means you have the right-of-way. But if you come at the same time, let's say you pull up to the stop sign and somebody else at the same moment, you always yield the right-of-way to the person on the right. So, that's what that means. But for all intents and purposes where the rubber meets the road, later on if you unfortunately do get into a crash, you're going to want to know who had the right-of-way, who had the right-of-way making a left turn, who had the right-of-way coming out of this driveway or what have you. So, there's some more depth to it.

Derek Perez:

What I'm hearing though, and correct me if I'm wrong, is that the right-of-way basically boils down to who goes first and who has to wait, in essence.

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Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Exactly. Exactly.

Derek Perez:

Excellent. It's about priority. Well, since now we know that right-of-way means who has the priority, how do we determine priority? You mentioned, I believe, that the person on the... Is that the farthest left yields so that the person on the right will go?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

You always yield to the person to the right. The person on the right has the right-of-way and that's why they call it the right-of-way. But like I said, there's different types of right-of-way, and I'll give you a quick example and this one happens a lot, we work a lot of crashes on it. And it's where you come up to a light and let's say you want to make a left. Okay. And your light's green, but you're in that left turn, but it's a green solid circle. At that point, you have to yield the right-of-way to the traffic coming at you because they have a green light as well, probably coming across. Now, if you get what's called a green arrow, then you have the right-of-way and then you're allowed to turn. But if you just have that green circle, which is just a green light for both sides of the traffic, you're going to have to yield the right-of-way before you make that left turn.

Derek Perez:

So I'll have to let everybody coming straight on pass and yield that right-of-way before I make my left turn across oncoming traffic?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Exactly. Unless you have the green arrow. The green arrow gives you the priority. So once again, that's an example of the right-of-way. That's a big one.

Derek Perez:

Interesting. Important to know and a common situation that new drivers will definitely find themselves in. Speaking of those new situations, I think, and correct me if I'm wrong, that the best way to practice is to put yourself in a low-stress version of that situation, maybe with a stronger driver, parent, or guardian that can help direct you with right-of-way.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

That's correct. And there is something else and we talked about earlier in your podcast, talking about being patient, taking your time, not rushing. If you come to a stop sign, let's say you do tie as a new driver, and for whatever reason, you don't really know, you're a little confused, or you just forgot what the law is. You can always sit there and wave that person on, say, go ahead. You can give them the courtesy and say, go ahead. At that point, you may have had the right-of-way, but you can wave them on. There's nothing wrong with that. Don't panic and freak out and get in the middle of the intersection, then jam the breaks and cause a crash. Just think about what's happening, take your time. But there's nothing wrong with you saying, hey, let's say the other person across from you is an elderly person and they may not be quite as up to what's happening. Just wave them along, say, go ahead, go ahead. And then they'll go through the stop sign, then you go, and everything's happy.

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Derek Perez:

Reading the Florida Driver License Handbook will tell you a lot, but there are plenty of other ways to learn. YouTube can be a great visual resource. There are very helpful driver safety videos that can show you how right-of-way works. Take the time to learn that way. Captain, let's take a quick break and we'll come back and talk about intersections.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Sounds good.

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Derek Perez:

Welcome back. Captain Bergstresser, we've already said that understanding right-of-way is important to understanding intersections, and simply put, an intersection is when two or more roads intersect.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Absolutely. And there's all different types.

Derek Perez:

From little country towns to large intersections in big cities with multiple lanes, and all of them have some basic rules that you can follow. Would you like to enumerate some of those for us?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

The Florida Driver License Handbook is a good place to start for a new driver. First off, you want to read that thing from cover to cover because it's going to give you all the rules and regulations that you're going to need to be safe out there on the highway or the local roadways. But intersections are a big part of it because you're just going to run into one. If you go down the road, you're going to hit an intersection, whether it be a basic, little one with a stop sign and maybe a thru lane on the other side, or you get to a big one that's a big interchange where there's two different turn arrows and four lanes going south. So, there's a lot of different types of intersections, but the rules that are in the Florida Driver License Handbook all apply to the big and the little roads.

Derek Perez:

That's good to hear. Now, whether it's a small country road or whether it's a major intersection in a large city, I imagine that the first thing to do is always to approach the intersection with caution. You

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want to stay alert for an intersection, even if that's a flashing yellow caution light. Be attentive to traffic stopping in front of you and anticipate a traffic signal changing, being prepared to stop or to proceed if you have the right-of-way. Now, there's lots of indicators provided by the state to let us know exactly what we're supposed to do with these intersections. Can you talk about a couple of those?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, there are. There are a lot of things that at least when you're going down the roadway before you hit intersections, sometimes you're going to have pre-knowledge of them because there're signs saying, intersection ahead. Sometimes you come up to a flashing intersection. If it's yellow, you just go through it, but you take caution when you go through it. But for the most part, for most of our young drivers today, they're going to be going through a small neighborhood intersection, stop signs, and so forth. And then they're going to be getting out onto the main road maybe a little bit and they're going to have a couple of lights they have to go through with the light. And everybody knows red, green, yellow, and even a yellow flashing. You might see that, but that means you can go, but you have to use caution.

But ultimately, and this is something I want to bring up with these intersections, is that as a new driver when you come to an intersection, we ask that you be cognizant of pedestrians and bicyclists because those are two things that... Most drivers can handle the intersections, they come up, okay, it's a stop sign. But sometimes when they come up to a stop sign and they see a bicyclist coming down the road on the sidewalk or maybe in the road, it confuses them a little bit. That's when you want to be patient, you want to take your time, approach it, give them a wide berth, let them get through, and that way everybody comes out safely. So as a new driver, definitely look at the handbook, study up on the intersection, study up, be aware of your road signs. But most importantly, look at things like pedestrians and bicyclists that are around you when you approach these intersections.

Derek Perez:

Excellent. So I'm hearing approach that intersection with caution, I'm hearing be patient. It almost goes without saying that you can't go when you're told to stop. And likewise, people in front of you can't go until told, but you have to be patient. You don't want to be the jerk on the road, even if people don't move immediately or even if a pedestrian takes time crossing. And laying on your horn is just rude and it highlights something else that may be going on that you need to work on to really be a safe driver.

Now, we did hit at least two of the things you might encounter when you get to an intersection. We have our signs from stop signs to caution to yield signs. We have various lights with green, yellow, red, flashing yellow, a green arrow, or a red arrow, but there's also some pretty clear markings of, I guess, street paint that let you know what to do at an intersection, including the white line before a stop where one is supposed to stop. Can you think of any other specific examples of street paint that might help you navigate an intersection?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, there's one that comes to mind and like I said, this is something that's near and dear, we have a lot of pedestrian crashes in Orlando where I used to work. And it's basically marked crosswalks. That's something you really want to be cognizant of and this goes for school zones as well. School zones are a big deal. There's always a lot of children walking back and forth, so in those things, you want to be really cognizant of the signage, what the lights are doing. And sometimes, it might not be technically an intersection, but it's something that you have to stop at if there's a certain type of crosswalks that go on.

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I would highly recommend that if you're a new driver to go around, look at some of these sites while they're not running, after school or whenever school's not in, just to see what the signs are, just observe it, do a dry run through some of these places. But then when it comes to just in general driving, one that's a big one is crosswalks. Somebody's going to cut out in front of you someday and you might be pulling ahead to go forward. It might not be your fault, but if you're not aware of your surroundings, just remember, crosswalks usually have some pedestrians near or around them.

Derek Perez:

Caution, patience, awareness. These are all things you want to practice, especially at intersections, especially at intersections that might have pedestrian crossing or bicyclists. New drivers can get confused even by simple things at intersections. But if you remember to be cautious, be patient, and practice your right-of-way scenarios, you'll know who has the right-of-way, who has to yield, and you will save yourself, your fellow motorists, and pedestrians a whole lot of trauma by maintaining awareness and arriving alive. Captain Bergstresser, any final thoughts on intersections and or right-of-way before we progress to our last topic?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

No, I think you touched on some good topics and once again, I think being patient is a huge thing with young drivers because a lot of times you're thinking about getting to school, you're thinking about getting to your workplace, or you're just thinking about getting over to your friend's house or whatever, and then other times you have friends in the car with you. Just be patient and be aware of your surroundings when you come up to these intersections. If something's going to happen, it's probably going to be in an intersection, so just keep that in mind.

Derek Perez:

Thank you, Captain Bergstresser. All right. We'll be back in just a few to wrap this one up.

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Derek Perez:

Welcome back. Captain Bergstresser, point three is roundabouts. You ever seen those crazy roundabouts they have in Europe?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

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Yes, I've actually been in one over there in Paris and there's actually a very funny movie, European Vacation, which has a good scene with a roundabout in it.

Derek Perez:

Now, the one a lot of people are familiar with is called the Place Charles de Gaulle and it surrounds the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Since we're talking about this topic today, I did a little research on it. It is intersected by 12 different roads. There's no way the creators envisioned modern day traffic when it was completed 150 years ago. The good news is we don't have anything quite that crazy and roundabouts are obviously nothing new, but it seems like we're talking about them more and more because they're popping up more and more. Why is that, Captain?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, I think what's happened is they've done studies and a lighted intersection as opposed to a roundabout intersection, they've come up that just through just observing and studying and all this, that a roundabout's safer. And I'll give you an example. We had a very tragic crash that happened over in Volusia County when I was over there, and it was a grandmother and her three grandchildren, and they went into an intersection. It was a four-way intersection. The other vehicle didn't stop. Anyway, long story short, all four of them passed away from the crash. So after that, they did a huge study on this particular roadway, I think it was right there at Grand and State Road 44. And they decided to implement and put in a roundabout there to stop that, or at least try to prevent that type of tragedy happening again.

Derek Perez:

Well, increased safety is always an important factor for drivers, and if the increased safety of a roundabout, especially a one lane roundabout, can decrease the threat of a T-bone, I think that's a good thing.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Absolutely.

Derek Perez:

Now, I understand that can also keep traffic flowing. Care to talk about that?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Yes. Well, they can because what happens is when you come into a roundabout, there's not a red, green, yellow lights, the cycle-

Derek Perez:

A standard stoplight.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Yeah, there's not a standard cycle of the lights. So what happens when you come into it generally, and the ones that I've dealt with you usually when you come into it, you might have a yield sign. At that point, if you see someone in the roundabout coming around it, they're always one way, of course. And

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sometimes they're two lanes, sometimes they're single lane. But as you see that vehicle coming around to you to your left, you have to yield to that vehicle. So as it comes around, then you can merge into the roundabout if there's an opening, then merge and go around it.

Derek Perez:

So as they come, you yield the right-of-way and when there's an opening-

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Yeah, and that's if you have a yield sign. Some don't have that. Some when they're tied into a main road, the main road has the right-of-way on the roundabouts, so you just cruise in there. But if somebody's already inside of that roundabout and is coming around, because technically you could just go around in a circle and if you really wanted to, you just have to be aware of it and say, hey, let me let this guy go on through. Obviously, and this is what I tell people, just because the signs there and says, oh, you have the right-of-way, sometimes you use common sense. You have to say, look, there's a big truck there. He's obviously not stopping. Let that guy go on by or lady go on by, and then you cruise on into it.

Derek Perez:

Making that call based on your awareness and your patience is always a smart thing.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Patience and common sense. You have to realize that they're occupying that space and you can't just merge into it.

Derek Perez:

Now, you did mention one-lane roundabouts versus two-lane roundabouts?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

There are two-lane roundabouts.

Derek Perez:

I'm sure that those two lanes can be a little more complicated and require a little more focus. Can you tell me about those?

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Well, they do in the sense that when you start off and you go into the roundabout, you don't want to change lanes within the roundabout unless you're the only one in there. But for the most part, you get into the roundabout into your right lane or the left lane, whatever way you approach it, and you stay in that lane as you cruise around the roundabout. Now, obviously if you have to get over to the right lane, you want to put your blinker on, get over to it, and then as you can, get in and merge into that right lane and then make your whatever turn off of the roundabout you want to.

Derek Perez:

So it looks like that although they may be a little unusual, the same rules of the road apply. You're going to want to watch for signs, painted arrows. If you need to change a lane and you're all by yourself, you

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can signal. And you want to enter and exit slowly, trying not to rush through, keeping your awareness up and your patience level high.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Absolutely. And I've had to get used to roundabouts because when I was younger in Florida here, I don't know if we even really had a whole lot of them. But after a couple of times when you get through them, you start to actually get very used to them and it does force you to slow down a little bit, you just can't zip through that. You just physically can't do it and you're going to be sliding around it. So, they have a couple things. One, they help traffic flow a little bit better because you're not having to technically stop at a red light. You're just maybe yield for a moment and then you can go. And then also it reduces speed, but it keeps people in a smooth pattern. And like anything, people may not like it at first. They have to get used to it. But once they get used to, they almost enjoy them because they don't have to sit there at a red light and wait for the whole cycle to go through before you can go on through this intersection.

Derek Perez:

And there is something about what feels like the constant motion of driving being uninterrupted, that can be quite a nice feeling.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Absolutely.

Derek Perez:

Oh, and don't forget to use your turn signal to let others know when you're exiting.

Captain Peter Bergstresser:

Yes.

Derek Perez:

I like those topic, Captain Bergstresser. I hope our listeners found them helpful. I know there's a lot to take in on something as broad as right-of-way or even intersections and roundabouts, but I think we summed it up well. Let's do this again, Captain. We got plenty more to talk about in our next episode. Thank you for listening to 3PointTurn. Until next time, drive safe, Florida.

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