



How to cope when you're on skid row



Most of us don't know what to do when those back wheels go. **Jane Hughes** finds a man who does

ICY winter roads have a nasty way of reminding even most skilful drivers about skidding. So what should you do when the rear wheels start to go off on their own? Hit the brakes? Spin your steering wheel in the opposite direction? Panic?

The answer is none of the above. To regain control, says advanced driving instructor Mike Reed, you need to do three things at the same time: ease off the accelerator, steer into the skid and look ahead to where you want to go.

If, like me, you worry about remembering all this in real life, there is an alternative. Driving Management, an independent driving skills company run by Reed, offers half and one-day courses in skid prevention and control at skid pans in Hampshire and Staffordshire.

The pan at the Thruxton race circuit near Andover is a gently sloping tarmac surface awash with an alarming mix of oil and water. It was even more alarming to hear we would be driving old bangers with bald tyres.

The skid pan lets you experience what a skid feels like and so learn to control it. "Then," says Reed,

"you will be less likely to freeze up or overreact if it happens for real."

My three-hour session started with a half-hour briefing from instructor Paul Coombs. Our group included Ian Barker and Rohann Chapman, both 24, from Portsmouth who had been given the session as a present; Andrew Honan, 31, whose company was paying and Vicky Whitham, 45, who had come along at her husband's suggestion.

This is quite common, says Reed, although the women often turn out to be better than their husbands because they are less likely to think they know it all already.

Coombs introduced us to the basics, using model cars to demonstrate various driving faux-pas: "People like to blame other things," he boomed, "but most skids are caused by human error."

Four things cause skids: going too fast, braking or accelerating too hard and erratic steering. If your car begins to skid, you need to remove the cause, steer into the slide until you regain a grip on the road and look for an escape route.

"If you look at the obstacle you are moving towards," says Coombs, "you will probably hit it."

Once on the skid pan, Coombs

bundled a couple of us into a battered Sierra and drove us round, first slowly and then at increasing speed. As he cut a corner more tightly, the back of the car whipped round. Someone (possibly me) shrieked very loudly but I seemed to be laughing at the same time so it can't have been that scary.

At the next corner, Coombs controlled the skid by steering towards the direction in which the back wheels had swung out. The little part of me that hadn't expected this to work breathed again as I felt the car begin to hold the road again and straighten up.

After a few more demo rounds and a spectacular 360-degree spin, it was my turn. My fear had been replaced by nausea but I found I was enjoying myself. As I hit 20mph and tightened my corners, I discovered I was also rather good at steering out of trouble.

"Get off the clutch," yelled Coombs, reminding me of one of my most entrenched driving habits — and one that would increase the likelihood of stalling in a skid.

Next we moved on to emergency stopping techniques, accelerating down the pan and then, as we

passed a cone marker, pumping the brakes while depressing the clutch to stop the car without stalling or skidding. That was easy until Coombs moved the cone so far away that it was impossible to stop before hitting a second one beyond it, representing a stray car. The idea was to come off the brakes and steer round the second cone before stopping.

Finally, Coombs became a human cone, raising his hand at the last minute to tell us when to start breaking and then pointing in the direction he wanted us to steer. This got a bit hair-raising, particularly when he landed on my bonnet — luckily it was only a joke to signify the end of the session.

For Vicky Whitham, it was a morning well spent. "I enjoyed it and I feel less worried that I would freeze up in a real skid now."

Ian Barker agreed: "You get a real feel for what you can control and what you can't and what will upset the balance of the car."

In addition to the skid pan, Driving Management also runs courses for new and advanced drivers. Sarah Rosling, 18, a student from High Wycombe, came for a day of tuition after

being involved in two accidents.

"On both occasions my car rolled over, and I had completely lost my nerve," she said. "The skid pan helped my confidence because I was able to practise in a protected environment. Also, in the driving lesson I was taught how to do a running commentary to myself on what was coming up on the road ahead, which has really increased my awareness of potential hazards." Rosling was also hunching over her steering wheel — a common habit among young women drivers, says Reed, who encouraged her to sit back and relax. "If you sit forward like this, you have less control and risk being injured if the car stops suddenly," he says.

Some advanced driving courses may qualify drivers for reduced insurance — a powerful incentive for some. But as far as Reed is concerned, the best way to minimise your insurance policy is to avoid accidents by driving safely. Whether you're 18 or 48, he says, there is always more to learn.

● Driving Management, Thruxton Race Circuit, Andover (01264 771074). Skid pan sessions cost from £65 for a half day or from £190 including a half-day road lesson