



## *the truth about* **WOMEN** *DRIVERS*

**M**ost male motorists would gladly nominate for woman driver of the year the Ohio lady who rammed her car into a tree and then sued the school that was teaching her to drive. In her suit she argued that the driving school "should have known before they took my money that I could never learn to drive."

"Just like a woman driver," most male motorists would agree.

But if she really is so typical then how do you account for Mrs. Lucille McGill Reese of Lake Lynn, Pennsylvania, who recently celebrated her twenty-fifth anniversary behind the wheel? She's never had an accident, never had a flat, never had a blowout, [Continued on page 130]

Contrary to  
widely held male opinion,  
women can be better  
at the wheel than men

*by*  
**Bernard Roshco**



never got a ticket, never been stopped by a cop—all in a quarter century of steady driving. To prove she isn't perfect: She once ran out of gas on a hill but coasted to safety.

Is she also "just like a woman driver"? And if she isn't, is any man smug enough to claim she's just like a man driver? If both these ladies are exceptions, what's the rule? What's the truth about women drivers?

As far as most men are concerned, a woman stops being a lady when she starts driving and becomes a dangerous competitor for road space. But when you stop listening to sneers and start looking at statistics the truth turns out to be far different from what the average man is willing to concede.

The men who have the facts—driving instructors, law-enforcement officials, safety engineers—don't go along with the popular picture of the woman driver. To them she's not the skittish unpredictable menace most men drivers claim she is. They can prove that the derogatory comments should be reversed, that the question should not be whether or not men drive *better* than women but whether or not men drive *as well as* women.

However, no matter what facts the experts present, most men will still insist that they are better drivers than women could possibly be. This self-centered opinion goes back to the ancient Romans. In 205 B. C. the Roman Senate passed a law forbidding Roman women to drive chariots. It took twenty years of female agitation, including an indignant march on the legislators, to get the law repealed.

Since men for centuries have enjoyed their belief that, at least as drivers, they are definitely the better half, let's see how good they really are. Then we can judge women drivers by comparing them to men.

In order to judge either men or women drivers you must consider three factors, according to Edward W. Pepyne, driver-education consultant at New York University's Center for Safety Education. Pepyne lists these as:

1. Aptitude, or inborn physical ability to handle a car.
2. Attitude, or behavior tendencies on the road.
3. Training, or driving experience.

The results of comparative tests show that on the average men have slightly better physical equipment for driving. But the differences are minor.

The Massachusetts Division of Registry of Motor Vehicles conducted a series of tests on 2,700 men and women. In a test of simple reaction time—pressing gas or brake pedals in response to red or green lights—men's reaction was .65 of a second, women's, .69 of a second. In a test of co-ordination which involved following an irregular white line, the men were right 62 percent of the time, the women, 52.6 percent of the time. Men could recover from glare in an average of 3.17 seconds, women, in an average of 3.32 seconds. After adding up the scores the Massachusetts officials concluded that none of the differences was really significant.

Analyzing the results of driver tests given to several thousand men and women in thirty-five cities scattered across the country,

the American Automobile Association also found that men have a slight physical advantage. The differences, however, were small.

For example, traveling at 60 miles per hour the average woman would go three feet farther than the average man before getting her foot on the brake. Where a man would misjudge distance by an average of 37 feet, the woman's error would be 38½ feet. Women also did slightly less well on the steering test, took longer to finish.

After they mention men's slight physical advantage the driving experts—almost all men—have few other good words for the drivers of their own sex. Professor A. R. Lauer of Iowa State College, who has studied drivers and driving for many years, also found that men should be better than women on the basis of physical aptitude. But most of them are not. The reason—faulty attitudes toward driving.

"It's faulty attitudes, not lack of skill, that cause most accidents," Edward Pepyne explains.

These include attitudes toward speed, toward alcohol consumption while driving, toward others who share the road with you. On the road, men are too impatient, too inconsiderate of other drivers. Result: They average more serious accidents than women. Studies of driving attitudes repeatedly show that a man when he gets behind the wheel suffers from an overdose of cocksureness.

A female driving instructor who has taught both men and women for many years noted: "Men have fat egos they're embarrassed to deflate, even for the sake of safety. You tell them something and they may forget it by the next lesson. But would they ask you to repeat it? No. They'd rather risk their lives than lose their pride."

A New York psychiatrist explains: "Men in cars have an opportunity to express a power drive that they would choke down if they were not hiding in the safety of a fast-moving vehicle. It is very tempting for a man to overplay the character of a ruthless aggressive guy behind the wheel. He tries manfully to beat every car, to burst his way through every tight spot."

Edward Pepyne points out that "no matter what else a man may concede he never admits anybody else can drive better." Pepyne believes men often disparage women drivers in order to have scapegoats for their own faults. Cars are comparatively new in our society, he notes, and many of us still aren't mature enough to use them properly.

When it comes to jockeying a car through traffic, men are often more skillful—though not safer—drivers than women. This is due to the fact that they usually have more driving experience. Greater experience helps them get out of emergencies more capably. It also gets them into more emergencies because experienced drivers are usually faster drivers. Men average more speeding violations than women. And speed is considered the greatest single cause of serious accidents.

But start both sexes with no experience and not only do women keep up—they often move ahead. When boys and girls are given high-school driver-training courses, both sexes do equally well. Professor Lauer

studied the records of 7,692 young drivers. He found that women between seventeen and twenty-eight have 25 percent fewer accidents per 100,000 miles than men of the same age. Women were also the superior drivers in other age ranges tested—from sixteen to thirty-three and from forty-one to fifty-three.

An excellent way to determine how good women drivers can be when properly trained is to study the records they have made driving trucks and busses. World War II forced many companies to hire women drivers for the first time. To find out how they were doing, Rufus G. Jasper, then fleet safety engineer for the National Safety Council, examined the accident records of approximately 700 female drivers and analyzed the reports of twenty-six companies that had hired women. "Not one of these companies reported unfavorably on women drivers," Jasper reported. He found that women who weren't given adequate training for their new jobs were more likely than men to have backing accidents, skidding accidents, accidents caused by misjudging clearances and accidents caused by failure to set their hand brakes. But even with relatively less experience they were less likely than men to hit pedestrians, run over dogs, hit other cars in the rear or be hit while pulling away from a curb. When women drivers were properly trained for jobs to which they were new they matched the men in performance.

During World War II eight southern states hired women to drive busses. Their busses required 40 percent fewer repairs and used 20 percent less gas than the men's. The women accomplished this feat by driving more carefully than the men.

A Philadelphia milk company that hired female drivers for its delivery trucks and put them through a special training program found the women scored nearly perfect driving records. When the Army used women to drive its vehicles it was similarly pleased.

When it comes to actual driving, men's slight physical superiority hardly counts today. Recent automotive developments have pretty well balanced this minor male advantage. With automatic transmission, power brakes, power steering and cars that generally are easier to handle the most petite female can do about as good a job of handling a car as the brawniest man.

Whatever advantage men might get from their muscles they lose through their minds. Even as learners women show they are psychologically better fitted for driving than are men. According to Martin Grossman, veteran instructor for the Automobile Club of New York: "Sex plays a small role in determining the innate ability of a driver." He's found, however, that most women students take their driving more seriously than the men. They show a greater sense of responsibility.

The differences in attitude which each sex brings to the wheel as beginners grow more marked as they win their licenses and take to the road. Studies made by driving experts at New York University and Iowa



State College turned up the following differences in the way the average drivers of each sex behave.

Women don't treat driving as a competitive obstacle course, as men frequently do. Instead of bullying through a tight spot, women are more apt to concede the right of way to other cars and to pedestrians.

This is illustrated by a story Edward Pepyne tells. A little boy went for a peaceful drive with his mother. Accustomed to the steam given off from the driver's seat when his father was in charge, the youngster turned to his mother and asked, "How come none of the jerks are on the road today?"

Mother answered sweetly, "They're only around when Daddy drives."

Women drivers also have a healthier attitude toward the law. They are more likely to treat traffic regulations as rules to be obeyed rather than outwitted.

Women drivers get the following citation from a high-ranking official of the New York State Bureau of Motor Vehicles: "Hour for hour, age for age, situation for situation, women are just as good drivers as men. In fact, it is my personal opinion, watching women drive, that their emotional reactions are more cautious than men's and they are therefore possibly even better drivers from a safety standpoint."

Even though it contradicts one of male-dom's most dearly cherished beliefs every driving expert questioned for this article agreed with the above statement.

What keeps the ancient argument about men versus women drivers from being finally settled, despite all this pro-woman evidence, is the lack of conclusive statistics. To make a definitive comparison of men and women drivers you must know exactly how many men and women drivers there are, how many miles they drive and under what traffic and weather conditions. Such accurate figures are not available, so an exact comparison cannot be made.

Still, there are some direct comparisons of groups of men and women drivers. And the results again contradict the old belief in male superiority. An Ohio study of 1,300 accidents, each involving a man and a woman driver, found the men more frequently at fault. And when it came to the most dangerous violations—speeding and improper passing—men were well out front.

In another recent survey, sponsored by the Hudson Motor Company, two women drove both ways across the country at exactly the legal speed limits, 3,374 miles on the road each way. Dorothy Mignault and Claire Emory used a safe-driving check list compiled by leading traffic experts to note the number of violations they saw committed by both men and women drivers. To offset any possible prejudice on their parts, in nearly every state they were assisted in their checking by a male state-highway or safety-commission official.

In relation to the estimated national ratio of seven men drivers for every three women at the wheel, their observations of 2,061 violations—1,821 by men and only 240 by women—proved to them and to their sponsors that women are far safer drivers.

The most outstanding comparisons in driving offenses reported by Miss Mignault and Miss Emory were: speeding, 665 men and 84 women; passing on hills or curves, 26 men and 1 woman; passing on the right,

21 men and no women; following too closely, 30 men and 1 woman. They did, however, find that women were almost as bad as men when it came to parking—they noticed 46 men and 41 women parking in prohibited areas.

Experts have found a few shortcomings that seem to show up more generally among women. For example, reports seem to show women tend to be more lax about signaling than other aspects of driving.

The Hudson survey showed a ratio of about four to one—404 men and 105 women were observed signaling improperly. The Ohio study found that women outdistanced the men in intersection violations involving improper turns and failure to signal. When the Automobile Club of New York tested a group of women drivers it found them "one of the best groups ever tested." But they got most of their demerits for failing to give starting, backing and parking signals.

Although women are clearly superior to men in their safety attitudes, they do have some psychological liabilities. The flustered lady who tries to make a left turn against traffic, hesitates in the face of an oncoming car, then stops dead while horns blast all around her is offering a package demonstration of most of the female driving defects.

Women are more timid drivers than men. Sometimes they hesitate in situations that demand a resolute foot on the accelerator. If they find themselves in trouble as a consequence, they are more likely to panic than men and thus lose the power of making swift decisions.

A Columbia University psychologist insists, however, that these failings may be due more to environment than to heredity. He claims that if women are sometimes poorer drivers in crisis situations it's probably caused by the fact that women are more self-conscious about their driving than men. "They have heard their driving disparaged so often that they get a bit tense about it and then don't do so well as they might."

If there's a reasonable explanation for these defects men can at least take slight comfort in one small fault that seems to belong primarily to the ladies. Women should beware of talking when they drive, Professor Lauer warns. "When a woman driver is talking," the professor has noticed, "she wants to look at you."

One area where women fall behind is automotive mechanics. No matter how well a woman may drive she usually has only a vague idea of what's happening under the hood as the answers to a nation-wide survey that asked women the purpose of different auto parts show.

Asked what the battery does, 27 percent couldn't answer. A Hartford housewife replied, "Well, a car has to have a battery. You can't plug it into a wall socket." An inquiry about the crankshaft found that 64 percent knew nothing about it. One lady replied, "I don't have to crank my car." Most of the women knew where the radiator was but were vague about its function. One answer was, "It's the thing up front that leaks."

With women getting behind the wheel in a rapidly increasing number, one of the best ways to flatten the woman-driver fal-

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lacy is for female beginners to start off right, from the very beginning. To make learning to drive as easy and pleasant as possible, Edward J. Capillo, assistant director of the Automobile Club of New York's safety department, offers these suggestions:

1. Don't be impatient with yourself when you start learning. Your instructor expects you to make and repeat mistakes, so don't let errors make you nervous or worried.
2. Stick to your instructor's advice. Don't solicit additional instruction from all the drivers you know. You'll probably just get confused.
3. Since the woman learner's biggest problem is lack of self-confidence, rather than lack of ability, Mr. Capillo advises her to tell as few people as possible—and, if possible, no one—that she's taking a road test. This takes off the pressure of trying too hard to make good before husband or friends.

Once the woman driver is out driving on her own she ought to heed the advice of Mrs. Mildred Y. McKay, who has served as director of safety and education for the Cleveland Automobile Club. Mrs. McKay warns women against the temptation to window-shop while driving—and against vision-blocking hats.

"A large picture hat is lovely for a garden party. And those pert little jobs that come down over the eyes look wonderful as long as a woman has an escort's arm to guide her," she comments. "But they have no place on a driver!"

The last warning to women drivers comes from Richard L. Sheppard, director of Porto-Clinic Instruments, Inc., which produces driver-training and testing equipment. Mr. Sheppard points out that most women are accustomed to the low-speed driving involved in shopping trips. When they get out on the highway they are frequently not used to high-speed driving requirements. Because of this they may not judge swiftly changing distances accurately and may react too slowly to high-speed emergencies. People who are not experienced open-road drivers sometimes go faster than they realize and Sheppard advises them to keep an especially watchful eye on the speedometer.

If they keep all these hints in mind women behind the wheel will help make the phrase "just like a woman driver" stand for the compliment it really ought to be.

Strangely, women drivers get some of their severest criticism from other women drivers! A driving instructor who has observed the behind-the-wheel actions of both sexes for many years claims that competent women drivers are especially critical of the mistakes of their less capable sisters. This observation is borne out by a nation-wide poll that asked: "Are men better drivers than women?" As expected, most men answered yes. But so did the majority of women. Most of the women questioned preferred to have a male driver in charge.

We'll leave the last word on the subject to the Travelers Insurance Company's 1953 Book of Street and Highway Accident Data—Who, Me? After examining all the available statistics it concludes: "Your attitude and your skill, not your sex, make you a superior driver." Judged on that basis, the average woman driver needn't take a back seat to any man.



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