

IT'S ABOUT PRINCIPALS

Stuart Walker

Being born and brought up in Clifton, Northampton, and living on one of the biggest council estates in Europe, he certainly wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth, or high and mighty designs. But his parents brought him up to make the best of what he had, treat people with respect and work hard. It was with those principles in mind that Stuart Walker left his local comprehensive school at 16 and entered the world of work and, eventually, moved onto a career road that would lead him to be Principal of Training with Europe's largest instructor training organisation - The Instructor College.

Have you always had an interest in cars and driving?

No, not really. My dad never had a car - he was a local store manager and never had the money. I guess because of that I never really paid them too much attention and hardly ever went into a car. I did a lot of cycling and used public transport. Of course, when I turned 17 and had my first driving lessons, everything changed. In fact, my first driving lesson was the first time I'd sat in the driving seat of a car!

What was your original driving test experience like?

I took my test in 1983 and passed first time. I had a great instructor and learnt to drive in a 1978 Toyota Corolla, which had a huge steering wheel, about the size of a STOP sign. She was great, but on the way to my test she just happened to mention that I would need to carry out an emergency stop on the test. 'What's one of those then?' I asked - she hadn't actually taught me the emergency stop so, on the road leading to the test centre, about fifteen minutes before my test, she went through the procedure. That really didn't help the nerves and the test was a bit of a blur. When I returned to the test centre with the examiner in the car, looking for a parking space, he turned to me and said: 'Have you ever done parallel parking?' and I replied: 'No.' 'Don't worry,' he said, 'I'll talk you through it.' So that's what he did, saying: 'Keep going back. Keep going

back. Keep going back,' and then bang! 'That'll do.' - it was only a soft shunt and there was no real damage, so he just finished up by saying: 'I'm pleased to tell you, you've passed, but bloody wake up a bit!'

Of course, after passing the test and being on the road on my own, I soon realised I could have done with some extra lessons, but couldn't afford them. Instead I learnt from my mistakes, luckily without any serious consequences.

What drew you into the world of driver training?

When I had my first couple of driving lessons, I just loved it and thought I would really love to be an instructor - I bided my time until I was 21. When I was at school and studying for my 'O' Levels, I'd toyed with the idea of going into higher education and training to become a PE teacher - I was pretty good at sport and I liked the idea of passing on skills. However, when I was 16, never having had much money, leaving school and getting a job was a bigger incentive, and I toyed with joining the Police service or something similar, but then, because it was locally available, I began training as a butcher. When I was 21, and I could begin training as a driving instructor, I got a job at a local factory that allowed me to do shift work, and started the course. When I passed the course in 1990, my first customers were predominantly from the factory. But it got to the

point where I was doing 40 hour night shifts at the factory, and 35 hours driving instruction - I had to make a decision and the rest is history.

What was your training like?

Basically, I just had about an hour of training a week, but I used to read the books cover to cover and practice on my own until I was absolutely spot on with my knowledge and understanding of the rules, regulations, training procedures and so forth. Getting so little training doesn't sound very good, and you have to be a certain type of person to do the work off your own bat and motivate yourself, but it taught me to take responsibility for my own development rather than relying on others and realise that, if you put the work in, you can reap the rewards. The course, including the test fees, was £346 in 1990.

Do you think driver training and the current test requirements are still satisfactory considering the increasingly congested roads and the disproportionate number of young drivers killed or injured in road traffic accidents? If not, what are your suggestions?

From my own experience, I had about 17 hours' instruction and an hour's test and I thought I was a natural driver, but on my own I realised I knew very little and was actually quite often scared by my own ignorance. Things haven't changed much

Personal Info



NAME:

Stuart Walker

AGE

42

GRADE

6

YEARS IN THE BUSINESS

18

GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT

The way my sons have turned out

LIKES ABOUT THE JOB

The new challenge every day

DISLIKES ABOUT THE JOB

People who form strong opinions based on limited information or knowledge

HOBBIES

Fishing, sport and relaxing at weekends

MOTTO

Where there's a will, there's a way

since then, except that driving on today's roads is even more complicated and, naturally, the learner needs more lessons just to assimilate the extra information, let alone be better trained drivers compared to my day. So I don't think the current system provides enough time and experience, and in enough depth and breadth, to get pupils to the level they really should be at to be competent and responsible drivers on their own. I think we need some type of graduated licencing system, alongside a longer training period, where new drivers have a probationary licence after their first test and have to be tested again after 6 months or so. This would mean that what they had learnt from their instructor, and passed on their test, is still with them and so the correct way to drive becomes a habit of a lifetime - there needs to be something to keep novice drivers in check for that first year, their most vulnerable time as a driver, and instil good driving practices. Other areas such as curfews or limits on young passengers I don't think are practical or really very effective. Really we need to extend the learning process and the controlled experience period. Again, with the instructors, I believe the entry level is OK but we need to ensure that instructors keep learning, developing and improving their practices and knowledge. CPD has to be the way forward and I believe it will address the weaknesses that are out there at present.

There is a lot of consternation within the ADI community about the advertising for courses and the expectations they generate, and how it differs from the reality, with accusations that there are too many ADIs, not enough business and low earnings - are they valid complaints?

These are perceptions rather than reality. If people go into this industry thinking they can earn £30,000, which they can, they have to be realistic about how they will get that return on



their investment, and the commitment they need to put in. If you think about it, the investment of £3,500 pounds compared to the potential earnings is very good value, especially when you compare it to other vocational training. We at The Instructor College and TIC Direct work very hard now at getting trainees to understand that they have to do the work to get the result, and help them do just that. But there have been too many trainees coming into the industry expecting to get the ADI qualification given to them for their £3,500, whereas that money pays for the teaching and resources they need to enable them to learn the skills to pass the exam and be successful ADIs - you can't just buy the qualification off the shelf, you do actually have to work to earn the rewards.

Are those people signing up to the course made aware enough of what the course involves before they part with their money?

I'm confident they are when they come to us, and fairly confident across the industry generally. The information is there, they have the informal chat before they put pen to paper, there's ample information there for them to make a fully informed decision. I'm all for a mandatory ORDIT to ensure that all training providers uphold the highest standards, that can only be a good thing for the industry and the potential customers.

However, I actually believe that the industry is already achieving those standards.

How does CPD fit in to all this? With the DSA implying that it will be introduced in the near future, is a voluntary system of any value at all? Will CPD improve standards and create better and safer drivers?

The suggestions of what will soon be announced by the DSA are pretty limited and voluntary, but they have to start somewhere. To be doing seven or eight hours a year is very light, but hopefully that will increase and it allows established ADIs to get used to the process and see the benefits. It's a difficult area because everyone is different, and their learning needs are different. Ideally all ADIs should have training or learning needs analysis, and a self-development plan - it's a sad omission from the proposals so far. There is nothing to make the ADI feel involved and see the benefit, and that they have arrived at the decision themselves, rather than just being told what to do - there needs to be a personal involvement in the individual's development plan in order that they feel they have a stake in their own future development. There is so much to being an ADI from teaching through to running your own business and making it a success, and CPD should help in every area, and the ADI should be able to see that they will benefit and get a

return in their investment theoretically, practically and financially.

Has the quality of driving improved since you learnt to drive?

The quality of driving actually reflects the state of society - I'm probably sounding like an old man now. If you look at society, the general attitude has changed so much in just my lifetime. There is quite a lot of selfishness displayed on the roads now. We lead such busy hectic lives, we need to be somewhere else yesterday, everything has to be done there and then, it leads to people taking risks, engaging in dangerous driving styles and losing sight of the purpose of best practice in all sorts of areas, and safety goes out of the window - driving reflects the state of society in general and the sad loss of responsible priorities. If you look at new and young drivers, you cannot expect the driving instructor to be completely responsible for instilling good driving attitudes. That area of a driver's make up comes principally from what they have learnt already when growing up, particularly from their parents. Children learn from what you do and not what you say and, if you as a parent have a poor attitude to road safety and other road users, then whatever the ADI does, they are unlikely to be able to reverse what they have already learnt. Parents and other road users have to take responsibility for their actions and the way they influence young people.

What single thing do you think would improve road safety the most?

It has to be the graduated licence and a continual assessment of drivers at regular intervals to ensure that good driving practices become habit, or second nature. If drivers were reassessed every five years or so, the safety routines they displayed on their original driving test would be instilled in their everyday driving technique.

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