



McLEANINGS

DRIVING AMBITIONS

Steering into an out-of-control slide is similar to sticking a cliff jump on skis—it's all about spotting your landing.

Driving down Galena Pass after a trip to Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains, my truck began a slow and graceful black-ice pirouette at 50 miles an hour. As we crossed into the opposite lane—backwards—Mark casually suggested that I hand him my coffee cup. With both hands now on the wheel, I could fully concentrate on the most important concepts of driving on snow and ice: staying calm and preparing for impact. After completing a single stately spin, the truck hooked back onto dry pavement, and we lurched back into our lane just in time to wave at an oncoming car full of travelers who were oblivious to the fact that they'd just cheated death. I got back to my coffee.

Driving in and on snow and ice is a fact of life for mountain people, and getting to skiing can sometimes be more dangerous and exciting than the skiing itself. I grew up piloting the worst snow vehicle conceivable—a 2WD Country Squire station wagon with a massive engine and light rear end. Studded tires were mandatory and chaining up was routine. Of course, it only took wrapping the chains around the axle ten or so times to realize the importance of putting chains on tight 'n' right the first time, even if it meant getting a double helping of axle grease in your eyes and mouth. The golden lining of my station wagon was that it was almost indestructible, and I got lots of practice sliding and crashing.

On the other hand, one of the safest snow vehicles I've ever owned was a '69 Camaro SS, which was only safe because it couldn't move on snow at all. Good snow vehicles come in a variety of shapes and sizes, the key being a balance between weight distribution, power, ground clearance and tire quality. Beyond your choice of vehicle, caution and experience are essential. My general rule of thumb is to only drive at speeds at which I feel

comfortable crashing—taking into account cushy snowbanks, a pre-dented car, my personal lack of vehicular vanity, and functioning airbags.

Here's a tip: do not shift into 4WD while going 80 mph. You may blow your U-joints and injure your soon-to-be ex-wife with a flying gearshift lever. And absolutely, positively NEVER comment on how well your vehicle appears to be handling in deep snow. This is the kiss of death, and almost immediately upon saying these words, you will learn how long it takes to shovel out a high-centered vehicle. Don't use cruise control in the snow, especially with AWD vehicles. Hitting ice in this mode invokes satanic spirits as the vehicle's computer brain grapples with the complexities of keeping your forward speed steady while two tires suddenly begin rotating backwards. Hitting the brakes on snow or ice usually makes matters worse and should be avoided, unless high-velocity impact is your thing. And keep in mind that a set of quality snow tires costs roughly one-quarter of the repair bill for a two-car accident involving an old truck with old tires and a new Subaru. Don't ask.

One last thing. Steering into an out-of-control slide is similar to sticking a cliff jump on skis—it's all about spotting your landing. Whether it's a 5,000-pound car spinning on ice or a human body flipping through the air, once you regain *terra firma* (or even kinda *firma*), if you are pointed sideways, coffee will be spilled. This is all part of the learning process, of course, and there's nothing to get upset about. Unless bones are poking through your skin. Crashing is an unfortunate aspect of the learning process. Most often, it only hurts inconsequential things like body panels or ex-wives—things that can usually be fixed with sufficient cursing. Or at least by throwing enough money at them.



Andrew McLean lives in Park City, Utah with his trophy wife, two red-headed daughters, one good dog and one bad dog. He's racked up first descents all over the world and laid arcs on all seven continents. In a past life he was an outdoor gear designer, and his current favorite color is aubergine. Photo: Fred Marmsater