Press Release

Bernd Mayländer on aquaplaning, crosswinds, animals crossing

F1 pro tips: How to react correctly in stressful driving situations in the fall

- Basics: attention, safe distance, appropriate speed
- Don’t steer too hard, but don't hold back when braking
- Proper positioning on the seat and at the wheel is important

Aquaplaning, crosswinds, wild animals crossing and more: drivers often find themselves in stressful situations at the wheel, especially in the fall. Those who are well-prepared and react correctly are safer on the road, says DEKRA brand ambassador and Formula 1 safety car driver Bernd Mayländer. His most important basic tip is to always be alert and prepared for anything.

First and foremost, this means not being too distracted by on-board infotainment, passengers or even your cell phone. “Driving is and remains a complex task and we need to concentrate on it as best we can. Too often, we allow ourselves to be lulled into a routine and develop a false sense of security”, says the racetrack pro. “Then, for example, we don't keep enough distance from the vehicle in front – but it is precisely this safety distance that can make all the difference in a critical situation.” Appropriate speed is also a very important issue for Mayländer.

Aquaplaning: when the car is literally floating

Such anticipatory driving helps to minimize the dangers of aquaplaning, for example. When it rains heavily or for long periods of time, water can collect on the road, depending on the road conditions. Ruts are particularly susceptible to this. “The sooner I can see that the road in front of me is more than just wet, the better I can react”, explains Bernd Mayländer. The most important thing is to slow down. “With aquaplaning, a wedge of water pushes itself between the road and the tires which makes the vehicle float. Braking and steering are then difficult because the wheels don't have good connection to the asphalt. However, if I have already reduced my speed beforehand, this can help prevent the critical situation in the first place.”

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Contact Wolfgang Sigloch
Phone +49.711.7861-2386
Fax +49.711.7861-742386
E-Mail wolfgang.sigloch@dekra.com

DEKRA e.V.
Corporate Communications
Handwerkstraße 15
70565 Stuttgart, Germany
www.dekra.com/en/press-overview

The condition of the tires and, above all, the tread depth also play a role when it comes to aquaplaning. “Experience from racing shows that tires without tread are practically unable to drain water. It is difficult to even drive straight on a wet track, let alone turn,” says Mayländer. The situation is similar with normal cars on the road: the better the tire tread, the easier the wheels remain steerable in the wet and can also transmit braking forces better. “We have to realize that the tires are our only connection to the road and therefore pay attention to the tread, the air pressure and the overall condition of the tires”, says the expert.

Don't steer too much in critical situations

Appropriate steering can be crucial not only in the event of aquaplaning, but also in other critical situations – for example, when you need to avoid an obstacle that suddenly appears on the road, such as a wild animal. “It's important that I steer exactly where I want to go”, says Mayländer. This sounds like a truism at first, but it is an essential safety tip: “If I steer too hard in a critical driving situation, I often make the situation worse. The steering intervention must be precisely controlled. The right eye tracking is crucial, because where I look is where I steer.”

Important when swerving from the professional's point of view: always brake and steer. “The aim must always be to avoid a collision in front of an obstacle. But if that's not possible, speed plays a decisive role in the consequences. That's why, for me, every evasive maneuver is also a braking maneuver.”

Unlike steering, the motto in braking in modern vehicles is: a lot helps a lot. “Many people don't dare to brake fully. That's a mistake”, says Mayländer. “With ABS in today's vehicles, there is no ‘braking too hard’”, he explains and recommends so-called impact braking for critical situations. “Translated, that means stepping on the brake pedal with all the force I have. For some, this costs quite a mental effort. So, it's all the more important that I've practiced it – in a driver safety course, for example.”

Proper position on the seat and at the steering wheel

The correct position of the driver on the seat as well as of their hands on the steering wheel are also important for successful steering and braking intervention, for example when swerving. The experienced safety car driver recommends sitting relatively upright and holding the steering wheel with both hands, approximately “at 9 and 3 o'clock” on the bars, with arms slightly bent. The legs should also be clearly bent in the normal driving position. “This allows me to apply maximum force for a quick reaction.”

Beware of sudden crosswinds

Especially in the fall, wind is always a factor on the roads. Sudden crosswinds are particularly dangerous. “The tricky thing about wind is that – unlike wet conditions, for example – I cannot see it, but I will only feel it as soon as it affects my driving stability”, says Mayländer. The larger the vehicle and the higher the speed, the greater the influence of the wind can be. “I recently acquired a motorhome and had the dubious pleasure of picking it up on a very windy day. That was a very special experience.”

Crosswinds often occur on bridges, but the car can also suddenly get sideways thrust after overtaking a truck, when exiting a tunnel or from the forest. Mayländer's recommendation: “Don't let yourself be taken by surprise, be aware of possible crosswinds and steer into them in a measured way as soon as you feel them.” Some large highway bridges are also equipped with wind vanes or windsocks. “If I can see them blowing hard in the wind, I should definitely reduce my speed.”

Despite safety systems: Don't push the limits of driving physics

Another appeal is also particularly important to Bernd Mayländer: he warns drivers against blindly trusting the safety systems installed in the vehicle. “Of course, ESP, for example, reliably prevents the vehicle from skidding during ‘normal’ driving. But even the best system cannot override the laws of physics. This means that if I drive at extreme speeds, I will fly off the road even with ESP.” Such systems cannot be designed for speeds that are simply far too high, explains the safety car driver.

“Modern driver assistance systems such as ESP, emergency brake assist or lane departure warning systems can often help avoid or master critical situations. But they don't take responsibility away from me as a driver. I have to play my part in driving safely”, says Mayländer and summarizes: ”If I drive attentively, with foresight and caution, then I am generally driving safely.”

Picture Captions

1: Bernd Mayländer has been the official safety car driver in Formula 1 for more than 20 years and knows a lot about critical driving situations.

2: Important among other things: Don’t be shy when braking.

About DEKRA

DEKRA was originally founded in 1925 to ensure road safety through vehicle inspection. With a much wider scope today, DEKRA is the world's largest independent non-listed expert organization in the testing, inspection, and certification sector. As a global provider of comprehensive services and solutions, we help our customers improve their safety, security, and sustainability outcomes. In 2023, DEKRA generated revenue of EUR 4.1 billion. The company currently employs around 49,000 people who offer qualified and independent expert services in approximately 60 countries on five continents. With a platinum rating from EcoVadis, DEKRA is now in the top one percent of sustainable businesses ranked.