

Death of 17-Year-old Lyndal Huber Marks Annual Beginning of Roadway Killing Season

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Unfortunately, every spring we see the heightening of major collisions in Ontario. I have come to term this the Killing Season in an attempt to raise awareness to this fact. Yesterday evening's fatal collision near Palmerston, Ontario is an example of what typically occurs.

It has been reported that Huber was the driver of a 2002 Ford Taurus that was travelling westbound on Wellington Road 12 and then west on Line 92 before the driver reportedly lost control of his vehicle, entered a north ditch, and struck a utility pole. There were two fifteen-year-old male passengers in the vehicle who did not suffer any injuries.

The typical scenario of the increased risk is where young persons, predominantly male, tend to drive at night, usually on a Friday or Saturday night, often involving some type of social event and a less than thought out plan about where the driving will take them. In many cases alcohol or drugs may be a factor. And very often there is a lack of attention to the driving task as the passengers interfere with the driver's task of driving. Speed is often an issue. And of course the newer distractions of cell phones and similar devices. Many of these collisions occur on rural highways where the vehicle is involved in a loss-of-control event or a head-on collision. Although the present collision has differences it has several similarities.

This scenario plays itself out over and over again every year from spring into fall, regardless of any driver education programs that may be delivered in schools. I am at the point of suggesting that certain high-risk youths be targeted for special attention/training in schools to make them and their families aware of the heightened risk that they may be involved in.

Whatever the specific circumstances of the death of this young man, it is a tragedy that Lyndal could not continue to live on. Of every person who is tragically taken away from us I hope that they not become just statistics but that we learn from these tragedies and make every effort to detect and prevent them. We all have an opportunity to put some effort into this prevention.

UPDATE: Tuesday, March 22, 2011, 2000 Hours

I attended the collision site this afternoon and have the following photos and comments. Perth Road #92 where the accident occurred is a very straight and level roadway. Below is a photo looking west from about 400 meters east of where the Taurus struck the utility pole.



If you look in the far background on the right side of the road you should see a black "speck" which is my black Buick Regal parked on the road just past the pole where the impact occurred. It is a good idea to go back at least this far to examine the road for any relevant issues since sometimes vehicles can travel along a straight and flat road like this at incredible speeds. For example at approximately 145 km/h a vehicle travels about 40 meters every second. So the distance from what you see above to where the impact occurred could be traversed in 10 seconds. You might say 10 seconds is a long time but you never know.

Below is another photo taken from 200 meters east of the point of impact (POI) or pole.



If the vehicle had been involved in some typical loss-of-control events then you would start to see tire marks (yaw marks) on the pavement by about this location. But notice there are no tire marks here. I'm sure you are already looking at the orange cones in the background thinking that they show some collision evidence - and you are right.

The photo below was taken from 150 metres east of the POI (Pole). Now you should start to see two small orange cones on the left asphalt edge where the first visible evidence was produced by the vehicle.



But wait, you say, the vehicle was travelling westbound or the same direction as this photo, and we don't drive on the left side of the road like in Britain - so what is the vehicle doing way over on the left side of the road? Let's take a closer look.

The photo below was taken from 110 metres east of the POI. The cone you see in the foreground marks the location of the first visible evidence caused by the Taurus. This evidence is in the form of a tire braking mark that is travelling off of the pavement and onto the narrow strip of gravel on the south roadside.



If you look further in the background you will be able to pick-up the right side skid mark that is darker and on the pavement. I can tell you now that it is not a good idea to be skidding with your left side tires on gravel and the right side tires on pavement. This is what classically results in the loss-of-control effect that has occurred here.

Below is another photo taken from 90 metres east of the POI and this is showing the darker, right side skid mark.



I will show you some more details later.

Note that the visible braking marks start at about 105 metres east of the POI. Even if we assigned an overall deceleration rate of $.4g$ over that distance we would be losing about 104 km/h. But the vehicle still had substantial speed when it struck the pole. So do I need to say any more about the speed issue?

But just because the vehicle was probably travelling too quickly does not explain why it is on the wrong side of the road and why the driver had to brake hard just before Lyndal Huber lost control of his vehicle. Remember, this is a straight and level road, even at high speed drivers do not lose control on such a road, even novice drivers. so what happened?

Before discussing the cause, let me give you a couple more photos showing the vehicle's path to impact.

First a view from about 50 metres east of the POI looking from the south side of the road, along the yaw marks and toward the pole in the background on the north side of the road.



You can see as the vehicle leaves the south gravel area at the driveway that it begins to rotate clockwise as evidenced by the curved "yaw" marks. The marks from the rear tires combine to the left while the marks from the front tires combine to the right of this photo.

Below is a further view from 30 metres east of the POI where we can clearly see the yaw marks. For the benefit of those who cannot understand which marks were caused by which tires I have placed two orange cones on the north road edge to indicate the marks that were caused by the front tires of the vehicle. So the vehicle was essentially travelling sideways, leading with its left (or driver's side) when it reached the pole. Such a motion is not uncommon. If the vehicle had not countered the obstruction it would likely have rolled over, tripping over its left side tires as they dug into the earth. Given that there was a fence just north of the pole it might have acted as a "catcher's mitt" and perhaps reduced some of the consequences, but one never knows.



So now let's go back and review things to consider the cause.

I cannot say why the vehicle travelled to the opposite side of the road. What I know is that, as it moved to that opposite side it was still under the control of the driver. Why? Because we can see the tire-marks commencing at 105 metres east of the POI and they start as braking marks, not as yaw marks. So something happened that caused Lyndal Huber to steer toward the opposite side of the road and then to apply hard braking.

Let's look a little more closely at those skid marks before the driver lost control. The photo below was taken from 75 metres east of the POI (Pole) and it is looking west along the skid mark caused by the right side of the vehicle. Note how dark and straight it is in the foreground and then it seems to lose itself adjacent to that orange cone.



What I mean by "lose itself" is that the right tires stop producing a visible black transfer for brief periods. You can see one of those gaps in the right skid mark in the photo below which was taken about 65 metres east of the POI.



Now I imagine this skip may have something to do with the weight transfer as the vehicle begins to slip sideways as a result of encountering the less-aggressive gravel of the south shoulder and driveway. But it is not an easy explanation.

Of course I would be very interested in seeing the right side of the vehicle to determine if there was any unusual damage there. Or even the right portion of the vehicle's front end. I say this because my suspicion is that this was not a single vehicle event but that something else was involved that caused Mr. Huber to perform the motion that he did. Interestingly, the police would have had the statements of the two 15-year-old passengers to evaluate yet there is no mention in the press releases of a cause, only that the police are searching of anyone who might have witnessed the vehicle as it approached the area before it crashed. It is as if the police are not certain about the information being provided by the two occupants and are looking for something additional. Since I neither have seen the statements of these occupants nor have I seen the vehicle I am at a substantial disadvantage in suggesting a cause.

But I do not believe something like a small animal would cause the driver to react the way he has. It appears to me that the driver has moved all the way over to the opposite side of the road as far as he could go and then applied his brakes when he was running out of room. That suggests to me that there was something blocking his path on the road and that "something" had to be fairly large in order for Huber to move his vehicle as far as he did. But I'm speculating.

One possibility is that a vehicle entered the roadway from one of the two driveways near the 100 metre mark and, due to the high speed of the Taurus the person entering the road misjudged how quickly Huber's vehicle would gain on him. Huber also may not have expected the vehicle to enter the road so the reason for the sudden actions. But this idea is simply speculation based on a lack of evidence. But it is at least a bit of "experienced" speculation.

The only thing I can add from an educational standpoint is that, regardless of what might have interfered with Lyndal Huber's path the situation might have changed if he was travelling at a slower speed. Straight and level roads like this sometimes invite us to travel faster because we think we can see everything. But it is always the thing that we don't see that we don't see. Much like "We don't know what we don't know".

I will be keeping an eye out to see if any further information is provided from a police press release.

UPDATE: April 21, 2011, 1120 Hours

Well, the plot thickens.

News media report that police investigators say another vehicle was involved and that a female youth from the Harriston area has been charged with careless driving.

The question remains: how much and what kind of human factors analysis was conducted by police to conclude that this unidentified female should be charged with careless driving? This is always a concern because police investigations have been generally deficient when it comes to understanding human behaviour. Police often do not have sufficient experience in studying the details such how long persons look in any one direction, what they look at, what they are capable of perceiving in a limited time, and similar, normal driver behaviours.

Regardless, as can be seen absolutely nothing has been provided in the media release to indicate how this other driver was involved in this collision. I will remain watchful for developments.