



The Almost Perfect Driver

driver's side Why 45 years with no accidents or tickets and a perfect driving test isn't quite good enough. By Jim Park

Mike C. is one of a growing number of prematurely retired Ontario truck drivers. Mike's got over 45 years experience with 31 years pulling B-Trains for a large chemical producer in that province. He's never had an accident and he can't remember his last ticket but Mike lost his ability to earn a living when he failed the driver's test required of all commercial drivers in Ontario upon reaching age 65.

A while back, Mike had started his own business hauling produce for local growers, and by all accounts had a good business going. That's gone now, too. He can't service his customers without a license. His client had to call another carrier who sent in an American driver. Not only has Ontario's Ministry of Transport (MTO) run a perfectly safe and responsible driver out to pasture, it drove a solid small business down the drain and opened the door to competition from south of the border—where incidentally, drivers aren't even required to do an air brake test to earn a license. And the U.S. CDL is a license for life.

Rumor has it that the same day Mike got booted out of the industry, MTO examiners elsewhere in the province handed out a few new Class A licenses to people who took their driving test in a pickup truck pulling a horse trailer.

But I digress.

Mike has never taken a

driver's test. He's had his Class A since they were called chauffeur's permits. Still, he prepared for the big day by studying and asking for pointers on the test from other drivers who'd been through it.

He scored perfect—that's 100 percent—on all the written tests. He scored perfect on the practical air brake test, and scored perfectly—not a single black mark—on the driving test. He failed because he neglected to turn on the defroster fan, neglected to blow the horn when backing up to couple the trailer, and rather than using individual left and right turn signals, he used his four-ways to check the turns signals during the pre-trip portion of the test.

Mike's shortcomings, according to ministry spokesman Bob Nichols, constitute "major errors," and any two missed or incorrect items on certain portions of the test constitute a failure.

Who the hell are we kidding here?

My father, a captain with Air Canada for nearly 40 years, says even airline pilots are given more latitude in their annual testing.

He can recall only one pilot he knows failing a ministry check ride. "He put the airplane down [in a simulator] on the wrong side of the beacon, winding up in the airport parking lot rather than on the runway," Dad tells me.

That's what I'd call a major error and I'm relieved the

ministry grounded the guy, but what if he'd forgotten to mention an item or two on the pre-flight check list? Dad says the pilot and the examiner would have reviewed the oversight at the time, and the issue would have been forgotten.

As for those sphincters at the driver examination centers ... Mike did the pre-trip



portion of the test before the driving portion, so he'd already failed before he left the parking lot. If the examiner had planned to allow Mike to redeem himself on the driving portion, certainly a 100-percent pass should put him in better standing?

He wasn't even allowed to drive his truck home from the exam centre. His license was downgraded to a 'D' on the spot.

Said Nichols, "Applicants holding a class 'A' that fail the required road test for renewal, are immediately downgraded to the highest class for which renewal testing is not required. The license change

is done for safety reasons—the driver has not demonstrated skills required to maintain that class of license."

"The worst of it is," says Mike, "There are dozens of older drivers, who for the humiliation of having failed the test, won't retry it or protest the exam. They wind up at the Legion playing pool

and drinking beer. They retire quietly in shame and the industry loses another veteran driver."

Mike says he's studying for another try at the test.

I guess there's some good in all this; MTO is licensing horse trailer drivers at a great rate, so there will be plenty of young inexperienced drivers coming into the system who'll work for way less than guys like Mike are prepared to accept. That'll help keep rates down. ▲

A former owner-operator, Jim Park is the editor of *highwaySTAR* magazine. Reach him at 416/614-5811 or jim@todaystrucking.com.