

Round 'em up: Event tests driving skills of Alaska bus drivers

Peninsula Clarion, The (Kenai, AK) - May 18, 2010

- Author/Byline: DANTE PETRI
- Section: News
- Readability: 9-12 grade level (Lexile: 1150)

"Parallel parking a bus with only 6 feet of clearance is just a little difficult," according to Tigger Newman, of Kenai.

While it's not a feat many bus drivers attempt on a day-to-day basis, it was just one of 10 challenges for the 20 drivers Sunday at the State School Bus Safety Competition, or the bus "roadeo."

The annual event moves around the state from year to year, and was held at Skyview High School this past weekend.

Drivers, who qualified at regional competitions, came from Fairbanks, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Anchorage and the Kenai Peninsula.

The event started Saturday with a driver knowledge exam and a driver pre-trip exam, according to Brad Rogers, the location safety manger for First Student in Soldotna, who helped to coordinate the competition.

Competitors had 30 minutes to complete each of the written exams.

On Sunday, the rubber hit the road with the driving portion of the competition.

A weaving course with different tasks and obstacles was set up in the school's parking lot. Drivers had 15 minutes to finish the course.

Some of the events were individually timed, as well, and points were taken off for bumping barriers or not getting close enough to markers.

Rogers said that on average most drivers were taking the whole of the 15-minute limit to get through the course.

He said drivers take what would have otherwise been a day off to participate in an event like this to prove to themselves that they're the best and safest bus driver they can be.

"I think that's what it takes and that's why they do it," he said.

There's also a shot at competing in a national event later in the year. The winner of Sunday's event is eligible to advance.

A trophy is awarded to first, second and third places, as well as a prize for rookie.

As is traditional with another competition popular in Alaska, the contestant in last place gets a red lantern.

For the contestants, the event tests their skills as drivers in a controlled environment, compared to the one they're used to on a day-to-day basis.

Newman, who started driving a bus in the spring of 2008, competed in her first local competition only a few weeks after getting behind the wheel, winning the rookie prize.

She went on to compete in the state competition that year, taking 18th out of 38 with only two months and change in experience.

This was her second roadeo.

"I'm a competitor," she said, laughing. "But I don't let it stress me out. It's supposed to be fun."

Newman said the student load and the railroad track events are easy and fairly common to everyday driving.

"The ones that actually take skill, are the ones that are more difficult," she said. "Like threading the bus through the diminishing alleyway where you only have 2 inches of clearance at the end. That takes skill to make sure the bus is straight."

The offset alleyway and the straight-line events also push a driver's handling prowess, she said.

Before she's waved through the start, Newman said she gets into her zone.

"You need to focus on relaxing for one thing," she said. "And I need to remember the sequence of events."

The "sequence" is the array of safety lights and procedures she must engage to signal to other drivers and children so that everyone stays safe.

Additionally, she needs to have a good sense of her vehicle.

"When you're looking back 40 feet, in a mirror, you don't know where the back of that bus is," she said. "You have to get a reference point back there to know when to stop."

First up on the course is a backup, where drivers have to park their buses backward into a stall marked by cones, inching as close to the back of the stall as they can without hitting the barrier.

The drivers had three minutes to complete this challenge.

Next they did a curb stop, a maneuver commonly seen at pickup and drop-off points at schools, where drivers had to pull as close as possible to a marked curb without going over it.

The third obstacle was likely the hardest -- the parallel park.

Drivers had to squeeze their buses into a parking spot, set off by cones, that was 36-feet long, or a bus length plus 6 feet, in a set amount of time.

They were then measured from the farthest point of the tires to the curb, with the aim of getting as close to the curb as possible without hitting a cone.

Next up is a student load.

Rogers said this event is critical because it tests the driver's ability to go through the proper safety procedures when picking up a student from a stop.

After the load drivers do another largely safety-based obstacle -- a railroad crossing.

Drivers are judged by their adherence to following proper procedure before crossing the marked tracks.

Next up was the right-hand turn.

Drivers were tasked with making as tight a turn as possible by running their rear tires over two set boards at each end of the turn, without hitting the curb midway.

Next they went through an offset alley -- two 10-foot wide corridors offset by a bus length plus one. The driver had to negotiate the two "alleys" without striking either, which is challenging, as drivers must try and turn to make it down the second alley without swinging out their tail end, which is still in the first alley.

Straight out of the alleyway, the drivers had to go down a diminishing clearance alleyway, where drivers enter a straight corridor that becomes progressively narrower.

The driver makes a U-turn once out of the corridor and heads for the straight-line event.

Here, sets of tennis balls set off of the ground on small risers are lined up to the width of the rear dual tires. Drivers must try and drive their bus through without running over or knocking over any of the balls.

Finally, drivers come to the stop line event, trying to come as close to a marked stop line with their bumper as possible.

When they put their bus in park and sound their horn, the timers stop.

While Newman had a little trouble getting into the parallel parking spot, she was otherwise happy with her handling and performance when she got to the finish line.

She admitted, though, that most of the events are more of a test than a representation of reality.

Parallel parking, driving through narrow alleyways or keeping the wheels in such a confined space are unlikely challenges on the regular routes of the Kenai Peninsula.

On the other hand, Newman pointed out that the backup, the tight right-hand corner and keeping kids safe both on and off the bus are everyday events.

The real rodeo, though, is on the streets.

"The whole world is out there, and you've got to keep focused on all of it," Newman said.

"A bus driver's responsibility is so vast, and people don't realize it. They have to keep track of every student on the bus, what they're doing, all of the traffic that's driving beside them, all the pedestrians beside them, they have to make sure their bus is running correctly and still have the skills to maintain and keep it on the road."

School bus safety competition result

First: Robert Parrish, Matanuska-Susitna Borough School District.

Second: James Smith, Fairbanks School District.

Third: Tigger Newman, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District.

Rookie: David Ganley, KPBSD.

• Caption: A school bus driver navigates the straight line event at the State School Bus Safety Competition, or the bus "rodeo," held at Skyview High School on Sunday. The straight line was one of 10 obstacles the 20 contestants had to maneuver through as part of the course set up in the school's parking lot. Tigger Newman, of Kenai, is reflected in the rearview mirror of a school bus as she negotiates an obstacle as part of the State School Bus Safety Competition, or the bus "rodeo," held at Skyview High School.

• Record: 6d3d62b8ba8f988205763c8fa6d5df9ecc331c

• Copyright: Copyright (c) 2010, Peninsula Clarion, A Morris Communications Corp. newspaper. All Rights Reserved