

Hooked On Recovery

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Mad Skills

“There but for the grace of God go I.”

I first heard the term “mad skills” when Joshua and his two best buds, Kyle and Dylan, were playing Need for Speed Underground on GameCube. They were on a mission to see who could finish all 113 races first. One kid said, “I got SKILLS!” and another said, “Yeah? Well, I got MAD skills.” Judging by how their cars cruised at about 400 miles per hour through hairpin turns, yeah, I’d say they had some skill. Compared to me, they definitely had skill. When I play, I crash. I’m an expert at crashing. I can’t figure out all the controls. Too many buttons for me and my thumbs just aren’t quick enough. I was a teenager when Pong came along and I could hold my own with Space Invaders, Pac Man, Asteroids and my all-time favorite, Missile Command. These young whippersnappers had a definite edge with modern technology. It’s second nature to them. They got frustrated with me. As I tried to drive my Nissan, the three of them yelled, “Turn left!”, “Watch out for that car!”, “Keep the Right Button down!” Too much info for my old brain to handle. I crashed again, went the wrong way, got stuck, crashed again. By the time I got to the finish line, the three of them were outside jumping on the trampoline.

It’s funny how the “cool lingo” of the day gets passed from the pre-teen generation down to younger generations. Last Sunday, Joshua was stalling getting ready for church, not unusual for this 11-year old. He was sitting on the couch, dangling his sneaker and watching it spin around and around. Finally, he gets his shoes on and goes off to brush his hair to spend another three-four days in front of the mirror. As I’m waiting, Matty Boy takes Joshua’s place on the couch and dangles a sneaker and starts spinning it around and around, saying to no one in particular, “I got skills. I got mad skills.” He’s also been known to admire his latest Lego creation in the same manner, “I got mad skills”. And did I hear Sami mention it as she practiced her latest soccer spin move in the living room?

I no longer possess any mad skills, but I used to have a whole slew of them. Where I’m concerned, there is a Miracle Gro of mad skills. It’s called Budweiser. Or Rumple Minze. Or Guinness Stout. Or Jack Daniels. These were all powerful, magic potions. When they hit my system, I became instantly gifted with all kinds of mad skills. One of the first I discovered was my ability to communicate. I could captivate any woman with just a few words, just ask Marlene from junior high school. I couldn’t even talk to her during school, but after three Maximus Supers, I loosened right up and became incredibly intelligent, funny and charming. I could tell by the look in her eye, that she thought I was really cool too. Right up to the point I threw up on her shoes. Later on in life, I realized that not only did I possess James Bond-like qualities with women; I had 007’s warrior skills as well. I bet that 330 pound defensive tackle remembers me twenty-five years later. Yeah, he does. He remembers throwing me right through that 8-foot plate glass window at Rapp’s Delicatessen. My “friends” told me he broke his knuckle on my face. Served him right for messing with me and my mad skills.

Without a doubt though, the maddest of my skills was my ability to drive. Now you may think this is all in my head, but I’ve had confirmation. The UCONN police told me they had never seen anyone drive like that on the sidewalks of their campus. When I politely thanked them for their hospitality while in their care, they kicked me down the stairs. I’ve found that sometimes

people are a little jealous of mad skills. A whole bunch of State Cops, along with their German Shepherds caught me flying up Route 2. I found out that day that a '73 Mercury Monterrey, affectionately called the "Green Machine", could indeed fly. The cops told me (with admiration) that the only reason they caught me was because I slowed down for the exit. Another State Cop also told me he couldn't believe the back wheels of a '74 Capri could end up on a guardrail that way. He said it was impossible! Boy did I love that car, it was my first car thanks to my Dad, but sometimes sacrifices have to be made in order to pursue mad skill perfection. (Dad, I'm still sorry I wrecked that car.)

Now, I'm a shell of my former self. I haven't had a drink in over 18 years and my mad skills have disappeared, absolutely deteriorated from no use. Now, I drive no more than a few miles an hour over the speed limit and take virtually no risks. I'm ashamed to say I haven't had a ticket in many, many years. However, once in awhile, a young protégé will come along that stirs something deep within, that kindles a spark of remembrance of times gone by. The other night I was sitting in my big ol' brown chair, feet up, family in bed, enjoying the waning moments of "Lost", when something roared past. Then a fire engine went by, then another and then a lot more emergency vehicles. Living on a quiet street, this was a happening thing, so I reluctantly dragged myself out in 20 degree weather dressed in slippers and sweats, and met all the neighbors in the street.

Seems a young boy about 16 or 17 was showing off his own set of mad skills. He zoomed down our residential street doing at least 70 (it's hard to push 30) and sailed through a stop sign right into the back left fender of a Passat parked on the street. I'm sure he planned this because there was someone on the sidewalk walking his dog and people with mad skills love an audience. This kid was good; he careened off the Passat and into the side of a Buick that happened to be owned by the guy walking the dog. Brilliant! Then the Blazer he was driving took to the air, flipped three times and landed on the roof, crushing it to the seat tops. The kid called for help amidst the wreckage. The dog-walker called 911. When the emergency personnel arrived, they cut him out of his rig and he emerged swinging both fists. Mad driving skills and mad fighting skills too! When I saw him, he was strapped down on the gurney getting shoved into the ambulance and was eloquently and confidently shouting directions to the firemen, police and EMTs. "Get your bleeping hands off of me!" "Let me make my bleeping, bleeping phone call NOW!" With mad talking skills, too, this kid had the complete package. I liked him. I was a little proud of him too, showing off his skills and all.

Judging by the shattered glass, crumpled bumpers, smashed mirrors and assorted car rubble strewn all over the street, you would have thought that someone must have died. Most of the people at the scene could not believe the kid was alive, never mind alive and fighting! The kid was simply lucky. Skill had nothing to do with it. He lived purely because of God's grace. And I could relate to that. As I walked back home, with the kid still ranting, I thanked God that he was alive and that no one else was hurt. I prayed that he doesn't drive for a long, long time. I prayed that he might find recovery.

With one last look back at the carnage, I shook my head in amazement at this kid's good fortune. Then I smiled a grateful smile and as I stepped into my warm, inviting home, I wondered if he, too, had ever thrown up on some pretty young girl's shoes.

Hooked on Recovery is a biweekly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, a father of five and just another surf fisherman. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.