

# Driving while stoned – not a party for anyone



Goggles simulate what it's like to driver under the influence of marijuana. Photo/Michael Rohm

**By Michael Rohm**

RENO – I could see the sharp S-curve approaching, but my vision was blurred and I hit the wall on the first corner. My body recoiled with the shock and I overcorrected, striking the opposite wall. With my peripherals reduced and the walls seemingly amorphous, I continued to bump my front fender, jolting my car and body during the final hairpin turn. On a straightaway at last, and on the verge of vomiting, I stopped the car and sat quietly, willing the world to stop spinning. I waited with my eyes closed as two uniformed officers approached the vehicle.

“That was some bad driving,” Lt. Kevin Honea with the Nevada Highway Patrol said. Still reeling, I unbuckled the harness straps and stepped from the go-kart, then pulled off the green-tinted goggles and padded helmet.

“Did you notice the difference?” asked NPH Trooper Dan Gordon.

He was referring to the goggles I had just removed; large, snowboard-style ones with the words “Marijuana: Fatal Vision” emblazoned on a green sticker dead center of the forehead.



A padded helmet protects those trying out the pot goggles while driving.  
Photo/Michael Rohm

To put it mildly: yes, I noticed the difference. The first lap around the go-kart course I completed unimpaired. For round two I was very, very impaired.

This zero fatalities event coordinated by the NHP gave people a chance to see and feel what it is like to drive under the influence of marijuana without lighting up or ingesting anything.

This difference between unimpaired and impaired driving is

exactly why the NHP partnered with Need 2 Speed, an indoor go-kart track – to get the message out that pot affects one's ability to drive. Now that the use of recreational marijuana is legal in Nevada, and in preparation for the dispensaries that are planning to open for business as soon as July 1, officers want to remind people that impaired driving is and always will be unsafe and unlawful.

"It doesn't matter what you're on if you're driving," Gordon said. "Anything that impairs your ability to drive a car will get you arrested."

Unlike alcohol, where the legal limit is clearly stated and easily defined, marijuana impairment is more misunderstood. According Gordon, many people think eating edibles, food items cooked with THC, does not count as using marijuana. Others think marijuana doesn't impair one's ability to drive. Some don't even know there is an age restriction for the use of marijuana.

"It's very clear," Gordon said. "You must be 21 years old to use marijuana, including edibles. And if you are 21 or older and you decide to legally use marijuana, please don't get behind the wheel."

Despite the information campaign, Gordon knows there will be an increase in marijuana impaired driving.

"When the use of marijuana was legalized in Nevada, we began to look at states that had legalized marijuana prior to us. We saw a clear pattern in the increase of impaired driving and we knew we were going to see a rise in marijuana impaired drivers here in Nevada. That's just a given."

To meet the increase in marijuana impaired drivers, officers are trained to identify drivers who are under the influence. Unlike alcohol, where breathalyzers can pinpoint the exact level of intoxication, marijuana intake is harder to measure. Instead, officers learn techniques in field sobriety tests

aimed specifically at marijuana impairment.

When an officer pulls over a driver suspected of marijuana impairment—usually one who fails to stay in his lane at consistent speeds—the officer will request a field sobriety test to determine signs of marijuana inebriation. The Rhomberg Balance Test is one component, in which the driver is asked to hold his hands at his side, tilt his head back, close his eyes and silently count to 30. Because marijuana is a depressant, impaired drivers will often count much longer than 30 seconds.

Another test unique to marijuana inebriation is Lack of Convergence. An officer will hold an object—his finger or pen—in front of the driver, moving it back and forth before moving it closer to the bridge of the driver's nose, forcing the eyes to cross or “converge.” If the eyes do not converge, it is an additional component in building probable cause for the arrest of the suspected impaired driver.

“These tests are very accurate,” Honea said. “If we pull you over and you show signs of impairment, we will request a field sobriety test.”

As I drove home after the event, I found myself looking at the cars around me and wondering if any of the drivers were impaired by marijuana. With weed legal, it seemed plausible that I was sharing the road with a high driver. Wasn't that blue Subaru in front of me driving a little too slow? Hadn't the black Charger beside me switched lanes a time too many?

But then I thought of Gordon's parting words.

“We're prepared, we're getting the word out,” he told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We will continue to do our best to curtail negative decisions about impaired driving.”

And in the words of Honea: “Individual responsibility is imperative. Don't drive high.”