



People talking on mobile phones while driving should a) be locked up indefinitely, and b) not crash into Jamie Kitman

The next best thing to driving a Mercedes-Benz is crashing one. I've long suspected as much, but have only just been able to confirm this maxim in an up close and personal way, thanks to the high performance telecommunicational stylings of the teenaged driver of a 1986 Ford Taurus. Intensely preoccupied in mobile phone conversation, this young woman still managed to find the time to introduce herself kamikaze-style, piloting her parents' Taurus broadside into the front wing of an E320 saloon I was driving.

Moments earlier, my wife and I had deposited our children at her parents' home in suburban Westchester county, before heading off for a night out in New York city. We'd passed three-quarters of the way through a nearby intersection when the gal, who was waiting to make a left turn against traffic imagined she saw what Ameri-

When a phone box pulls out in front of you

can footballers call 'daylight' and stood on it. Only problem was, we were in her way (and she was heading for the wrong side of the road) leaving us just enough time to say 'What the f#!? and then wha-am, ba-am, call the recovery van, Stan.

The Mercedes performed like it does in the safety films, absorbing the force beautifully, quietly crunching and deforming exactly on schedule. An eerie slow-motion sensation kicked in and we could actually notice the safety belts clinching and feel our backs being pressed firmly into the orthopaedically designed seating as the collision unfolded.

We were travelling at only 20 miles per hour, a detail illustrated by the fact that the airbags didn't go off. Even so, the impact was violent enough to comprehensively flatten the Ford and it was immediately apparent that both cars would be leaving the scene on the backs of flatbed wreckers. But, as I said to my wife, that was such a smooth and painless accident I could do it again and



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again. Mercedes may wish to quote this as a marketing slogan. Or perhaps not.

The missus, who doesn't brook fools lightly, was out of the car in a flash, imaginary megaphone in hand, bellowing at the hapless Ford driver. 'You f#*!ing idiot!' she exclaimed, putting her finger on the essence of the matter. The poor girl was already in tears, having destroyed her family's wheels in an awe-inspiring display of boneheaded driving technique, but, even more remarkably, she was still talking on her mobile and refusing to get out of her wrecked and steaming car. For a brief moment, I reflected on the menace these phones present in America, where their use by drivers in moving cars is often still legal, courtesy of the exceedingly powerful telecommunications lobby, whose considerable largesse helps keep our regulatory authorities and elected representatives in Washington fully stocked with beer, peanuts and call girls.

In fact, according to one recent survey, the mobile phone-wielding motorist is four times more likely to crash than the driver who merely whistles, the same increased incidence of disaster which has long been documented for drunk drivers. Which raises the important mathematical question of drunk drivers talking on mobile phones. Are they eight times more likely to get into crashes? Sixteen? Or do drunkenness and mobile phone operation cancel each other out? We ought to be told.

Medical men are a penny a dozen in Westchester, so, not surprisingly, every third motorist to pass the ac-



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cident scene stopped and said in perfect New Yorkese, 'I'm a doctor [pronounced doc-tuh]. Are there any injuries?'

After my wife and I and the still weeping, still refusing-to-get-out-of-her-car girl assured them there weren't, the doctors would invariably turn and say, Why, an E-class Mercedes. I have one on order. How do you like it?'

When the police arrived, the girl confirmed once again that she had no injuries and was finally persuaded to leave her post behind the wheel of the lunched Taurus. Upon alight-

ing, a hitherto unnoticed miniskirt of microscopic dimension revealed itself, encouraging the gendarmes to treat this desperately bad driver with a degree of solicitousness that somehow I've never experienced in a lifetime of encounters with the law.

'I told her I was sorry, but she keeps calling me an idiot,' she blubbered to the men in blue, waving a finger limply in my wife's direction.

'Ma'am, please don't call this woman an idiot,' an officer directed my wife in a stern tone.

'I didn't call her an idiot,' my wife clarified. 'I called her a f**#!ing idiot.'

Half an hour later, while we waited for the recovery vehicles to show up, the girl's parents arrived on the scene. Eyeing our fancy German wheels and imagining that I, too, was a doctor with pockets of Grand canyon proportions, they informed the police that their daughter was injured and needed medical attention. They stated that we had run a red light and announced their intention of suing.

This after their daughter had told a raft of doctors and the police that she had no injuries and after she had apologised to us for the rather obvious fact that she had caused the accident.

But America is the land of opportunity and justice is a seven-letter word - just like lawsuit, so you never know. The girl was placed on a gurney and left the accident site by ambulance, complete with red beacons and screamer siren. Her vital signs seemed good. That is to say, she was still speaking on her mobile phone •

