

# TD makes his pint in driving test

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**Mark Tighe**

MATTIE McGRATH became an international laughing stock when he suggested that a pint could improve the performance of some nervous drivers.

However, a test on one of his Fianna Fail colleagues concluded that his responses on a driving simulator improved after consuming two pints of

beer. Bobby Aylward, a TD for Carlow-Kilkenny, said his better reaction times with a blood alcohol content (BAC) of 52mg, which is to be outlawed by Noel Dempsey, the transport minister, showed that "a social drink has no adverse reaction on rural people driving home".

Aylward is among the Fianna Fail backbenchers lobbying for a removal of the "two

strikes and you're out" rule in the new Road Traffic Bill for those caught with a BAC between 50mg and 80mg.

Dempsey bowed to pressure to bring the penalty for first offenders down to three points, but his backbenchers say they did not know the punishment for a second offence in the 50mg-80mg range was a one-year ban from driving.

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"If a person is caught in that range again their penalty points should amalgamate as they do for speeding," said Aylward. "I don't think a ban for a second offence is fair."

"It has to be an amalgamation [of points]," said McGrath. "The fat lady hasn't sung yet. The bill was rushed through."

*My 'one for the road' that said it all, page 5*

## TD's driving improves after going over the new limit, write Mark Tighe and Colin Coyle



THE theory was branded "insanity" by Gay Byrne, the chairman of the Road Safety Authority (RSA). The notion that people would be more relaxed and could drive better after a drink was "sheer madness", Byrne insisted. "If you believe that, you'll believe anything," he declared.

So we challenged "rebel" Fianna Fail TDs to put Mattie McGrath's theory to the test. Would any of those deputies opposing stricter drink-drive limits be brave enough to road-test their theory that a pint or two had no negative effect on drivers?

Baile Atha Cliath School of Motoring in Tallaght provided a driving simulator to measure reaction times. The Sunday Times offered to pay for the alcohol, but still the TDs didn't jump at the offer.

Chris Andrews said he didn't drink. Mattie McGrath didn't return calls; Michael Mulcahy said he didn't do "gimmicks". John Deasy, a Fine Gael TD who is opposed to the planned reduction of the drink-drive limit from 80mg to 50mg blood alcohol content (BAC), also failed to return calls.

But up stepped Bobby Aylward, the Fianna Fail TD for Carlow Kilkenny, happy to accept the challenge in order "to prove a point", and partly out of curiosity as to just how many pints he could drink before breaching the new 50mg limit.

Both Aylward and Richard Oakley, a Sunday Times journalist, were required to complete a series of emergency stops on a simulator at three different speeds. The drivers were tested sober and again after consuming two pints of beer, which put them over 50mg but below 80mg, the current limit.

Starting at 20mph (32kph), a sober Aylward was first into the simulator. The stern female voice of the computer soon admonished the TD for misapplying the clutch. "Maybe I

should have the drink now," he joked.

His reaction time over a course of emergency stops averaged 0.803 seconds while travelling at 33kph. It took him slightly longer to hit the brakes at 67kph and 97kph, an average of 0.952 seconds and 0.953 seconds respectively. The RSA says it can take up to 1.25 seconds for a driver to perceive danger and move his foot from accelerator to brake. It warns that this can



**I'VE ALWAYS SAID THERE IS NO ADVERSE REACTION TO JUST ONE PINT OR TWO**

be affected by alcohol, drugs and tiredness.

Aylward's reaction times were below the average one second it takes people to react on the simulator. The Sunday Times journalist scored slightly better, and then both repaired to a nearby public house.

Over two pints of Guinness, Aylward explained his opposition to Noel Dempsey's proposals. "The new law will be bad for law-abiding people in rural Ireland," he said. "Isolation is a problem and if some people can't drive from their homes to have a drink, then they'll never come out."

"I am against drink-driving

but speed and drug-driving are the biggest problems and should be tackled first. There are places in the country that don't have taxis. A social drink once a week might be a person's only outlet."

Back at the simulator 40 minutes later, Aylward completed the same tests at three different speeds. The TD was breathalysed and registered 52mg BAC. The machine, configured to European regulations, flashed red and warned Aylward: "Don't drive."

The slightly tipsy reporter completed the same tests with a blood alcohol level of 68mg, also over the new limit. "I'm a bit bigger than you, all right," Aylward volunteered to explain his lower level.

The test results, delivered the next day, were surprising. Aylward's performance was better second time at all three speed categories. The reporter's performance was better in two categories after consuming two pints, but his reaction was slower at the highest speed (See Driver's View panel, right).

For Aylward, this proved a point. "I've said all along that people in rural areas are capable of having a pint or maybe two and be quite capable of driving home," he said. "People who have had a social pint will not cause an accident. They are of no danger to anyone."

"I am not promoting drink driving. People who are over the limit of 80mg shouldn't drive. But people in rural Ireland are being over-regulated and we need to give them some breathing space. I've always said there is no adverse reaction to just one pint or two."

Thomas Papp, director of the driving school, said the results from the test were "scary" and hard to explain. "It would be difficult to believe that both drivers could react better and faster in an emergency after having their drinks," he said. "That's how accidents happen. People drink because they think they know the roads."

More familiarity with the simulator second time round

## Simulator test results

### BOBBY AYLWARD

#### Sober

Test speed 30.74kph —  
Reaction time: 0.803  
seconds  
Stopping distance: 12.5  
metres  
Test speed 66.95kph —  
Reaction time: 0.952s  
Stopping distance: 40m  
Test speed 97.53kph —  
Reaction time: 0.953s  
Stopping distance: 69.9m

#### Blood alcohol content 52mg

Test speed 33.15kph —  
Reaction time: 0.803s  
Stopping distance: 11.9m  
Test speed 66.79kph —  
Reaction time: 0.869s  
Stopping distance: 36.5m  
Test speed 97.04kph —  
Reaction time: 0.903s  
Stopping distance: 65.5m

### RICHARD OAKLEY

#### Sober

Test speed 33.8kph —  
Reaction time: 0.903s  
Stopping distance: 18.1m  
Test speed 66.14kph —  
Reaction time: 0.752s  
Stopping distance: 34.3m  
Test speed 101.23kph —  
Reaction time 0.706s  
Stopping distance: 63m

#### Blood alcohol content 68mg

Test speed 32.83kph —  
Reaction time: 0.903s  
Stopping distance: 14.7m  
Test speed 62.6kph —  
Reaction time: 0.753s  
Stopping distance: 31.5m  
Test speed 98.17kph —  
Reaction time: 0.803s  
Stopping distance: 67.8m

know the roads.

More familiarity with the simulator second time round may have played a part in the better results, but not enough to explain the reaction times.

Brian Farrell, a spokesman for the RSA, which turned down the chance to be involved in the experiment, said it was not a scientific study. "Our advice is based on the overwhelming body of scientific evidence that shows even one drink impairs driving," he said.

The new BAC limits cannot be enforced until at least 2011 because the Medical Bureau of Road Safety has to purchase equipment so garda stations can detect a new limit of 20mg for learner and professional drivers.

McGrath criticised Dempsey for the delay. "Considering they won't be ready to go until 2011, why the rush to publish the bill last week?" said the Fianna Fail TD. "It's cart before the horse but that's not surprising of Noel Dempsey. He normally puts the cart before the horse."