
DRIVING

Mr. Fix-It Takes A Speed-Trap Tour

By DANA WHITE

CASEY W. RASKOB III lifts his hand from the steering wheel of his flannel gray Mercury Mystique and points to a ramp onto Route 9 about five miles south of the Indian Point nuclear plant in Westchester County. "Here's a big trap right here, a really sneaky one," he says. "The trees are hiding him, but he has a line of sight of cars coming down the hill."

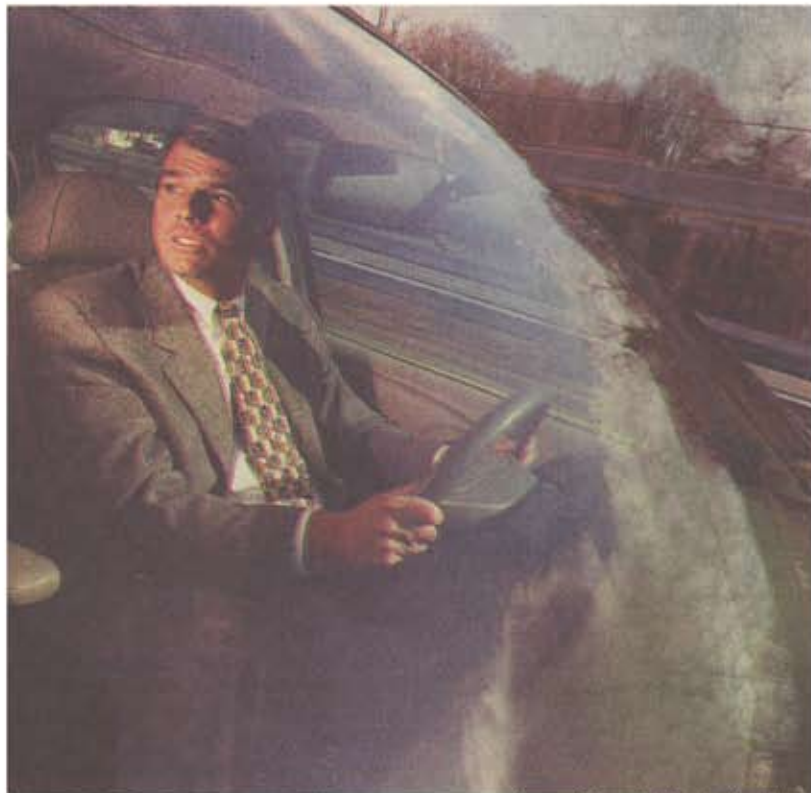
A few miles farther, Mr. Raskob says: "Look behind you. See where that red truck is? That's where the cops sit. They've got a bead on you the whole way." And farther still: "This right here is a very popular spot. This driveway by the convent. Very popular."

We are two hours into a driving tour of speed traps in the New York City area, and Mr. Raskob, 41, a lawyer in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y., who specializes in traffic law and is rather a fanatic on the topic of speed laws (you may have seen his star turn in the documentary "Speed Traps!" on the Learning Channel), is still going strong.

While he likes and respects people with badges, nothing revs his engine like the injustices of speed enforcement.

"There's technically speeding, and there's legally speeding," he says. "If you're doing 75 on an open interstate highway in good conditions in a good car, you're doing what the system is designed for. But if you should be unlucky enough to run across a police officer,

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Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times

SPEED OBSESSED Casey W. Raskob III specializes in traffic law.

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Defender of the Defenseless, Mr. Fix-It Takes a Speed-Trap Tour

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suddenly you are speeding."

Anyone who loves and buys fast and powerful cars knows the frustration — when the road is straight and broad and the car hums with energy, why stop it from doing what it was engineered for? But few people take the speed obsession as far as Mr. Raskob does.

He calls himself a "speed weenie." He has attended the Skip Barber Racing School and his idea of fun is reading laser-gun manuals. He can expound, in great technical detail, on the difference between a laser jammer and a radar detector (he contends that both provide a false sense of security).

In casual conversation, he throws around lots of traffic enforcement jargon — an appliance user, for example, is his term for a police officer who sees his radar merely as a tool for writing tickets, not as the super-cool technological toy that it is. And he says he knows just about every speed trap between New York City and Albany.

His definition of a speed trap is broader than the old "cop lurking behind a billboard" stereotype. If the state sets the speed limit for a road lower than what 85 percent of drivers customarily drive there (a common highway engineering standard),

Entrap? Drivers speed all by themselves, an officer says.

he calls it a trap.

Of course, there are people in law enforcement who object to the very term "speed trap." Sgt. Robert Hogan, traffic supervisor for the New York State Police Troop K, which patrols Westchester, Putnam, Dutchess and Columbia Counties, is one of them. "There is no such thing as a speed trap," he told me a few weeks after my ride with Mr. Raskob. "We don't entrap people into speeding; they do that all by themselves."

It's a hard point to deny. But Mr. Raskob, who makes his living defending people who have been caught driving too fast, is hardly alone in regarding the sudden, surprise appearance of radar or laser guns as somewhat unsportsmanlike, especially if the police have been monitoring speed from a spot they know is not clearly visible from the road.

Mr. Raskob is a longtime member of the National Motorists Association, which takes a generally libertarian stand on many traffic-law issues. This group, based in Wauna-

kee, Wis., runs the Speed Trap Exchange (www.speedtrap.org), a Web site where drivers in all 50 states can post what they view as notorious speed traps and vent to their hearts' content. (Mr. Raskob's name leads a list on the site of New York State traffic lawyers.)

As Mr. Raskob sees it, speed traps are an irritating reminder of the motorist's lowly spot on the law enforcement food chain. "When we're talking about speeding tickets, you are not the lion," Mr. Raskob said. "You want to buy the Corvette and think you're the lion, but you're not. You are the hunted. They are the lions."

But today we are the hunters, two civilians stalking troopers with ticket books.

Our speed-trap safari begins at my house in Ossining, N.Y., where Mr. Raskob arrives in something of a lather. Driving south from a court appearance, he has passed a big-time Troop K sting on the southbound Taconic State Parkway, and he wants to get back there while it's still in full swing. We jump into his car, an unassuming 1999 sedan with a child seat in the back and a radio between the front seats that picks up the police band. (Mr. Raskob, a ham radio enthusiast, also uses it to talk to other radio operators while he's on the road.)

As Mr. Raskob heads for the Taconic on Route 133, he fiddles with the radio's knobs, browsing for police chatter. He likes gadgets. The first time he saw an officer using a laser gun to check speeds, in the early 90's, he walked up and asked to see it in action. "The cop wouldn't give me a demo," he says. "It was really annoying."

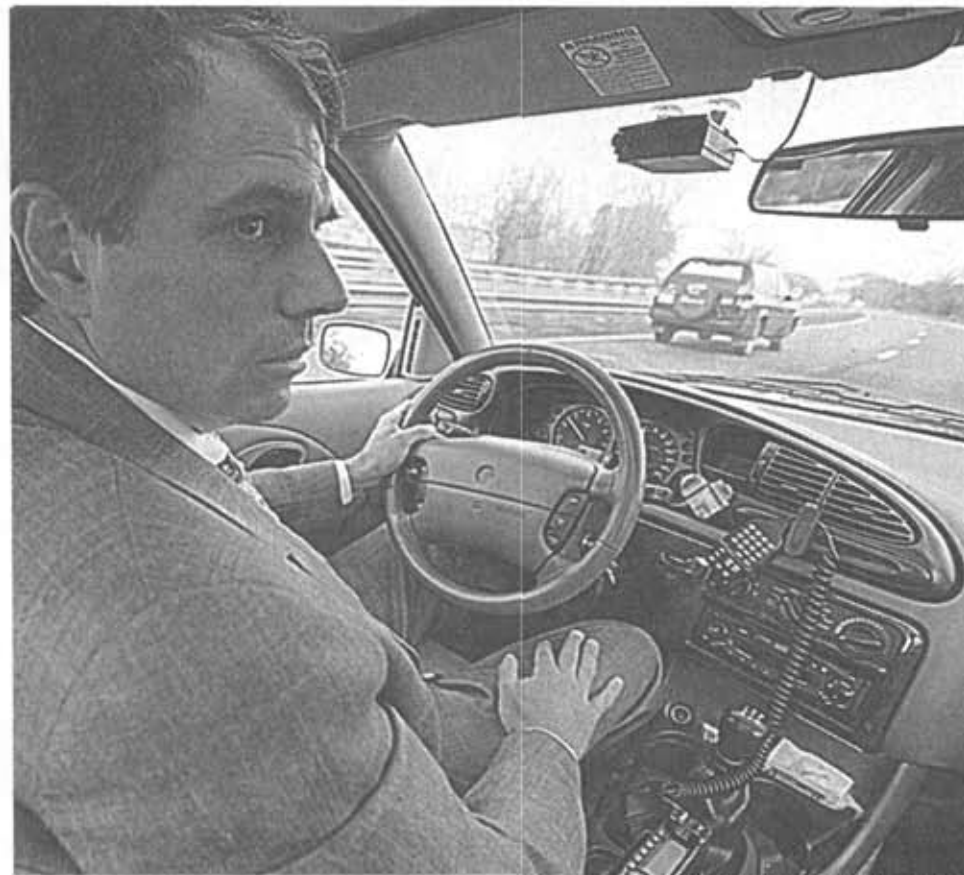
Almost immediately, he starts ticking off his theories on how speeding tickets are doled out. The more your car stands out, Mr. Raskob says, the better your chances of getting bagged, as he puts it.

"The sports car goes first," he says. "Rich guys go second — that BMW or Mercedes shield on your hood tells the officer that you can take a \$100 ticket and your kids will still eat. Everyone else goes third." And yes, he believes that red cars are more likely to be pulled over. "If you just bought a red Porsche," he says, "return it."

His own car, he says, is "dull, boring." But it has a six-cylinder engine, 24 valves and multiport fuel injection. "It's a cheap car, but it's not a slow car," he says. "I can drive faster than a Corvette on most highways for the simple reason that I don't stand out from the pack."

Sergeant Hogan of the State Police disputes most of Mr. Raskob's carefully wrought theories. "Make, model, color — it makes no difference," he said. "Fifty-five miles an hour is the speed limit. Anything above that is fair game."

Soon we're heading north on the Taconic (speed limit 55), going about 70. The radio, which has done little but bleep and bloop like



Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times

FULLY EQUIPPED In his nondescript gray sedan, a 1999 Mercury Mystique, Casey W. Raskob III has a radar detector and a ham radio for listening in on police chatter.

R2D2, suddenly crackles with trooper-speak. We are approaching what is posted as a work zone, with a speed limit of 45. Today there is not a worker in sight, but there are plenty of state troopers: four cars stationed along a half-mile stretch. "This is a saturation trap — you've got multiple cars across an area," Mr. Raskob says.

WE are doing about 55 approaching the trap and nearly every other car, oblivious to what's ahead, is passing us. The drivers are ignoring the signs announcing the 45 m.p.h. work zone. You have to pay attention to signs, Mr. Raskob tells me, and mentions another example: "People miss town lines all the time. You'll be in a 55 and go down to a 30, 35. You've got to be on alert. Most towns are very proud of themselves."

"If you start seeing a lot of civic hoo-ha about where the Rotary Club meets," he adds, "be prepared to slow down."

We see a laser-equipped trooper parked in the striped wedge between the highway and an exit ahead. Over the radio, we hear him

alerting the chase cars: "65, this green Honda right here, 65, green Honda just passed in the left lane; 68 on the purple minivan, just passed you."

"A white minivan?" another trooper asks.

"No, not the white minivan, the purple one!" the trooper with the laser gun answers. "It's about four cars up. It's the next minivan you come to."

We slow down to 50 as we come into the laser gun's cross hairs. "Now see, Mr. A shoots us," Mr. Raskob says. We pass scrutiny, but we see that a trooper has ordered a white-haired man out of his car. "Maybe the guy was drunk — you never know," Mr. Raskob says. "They find a lot of stuff with speeding."

We move on, and after some twists and turns we are on Interstate 684 near Bedford Hills. Mr. Raskob considers 684 a speed trap because it combines lots of traffic and lots of troopers with a 55 m.p.h. speed limit. "You'll consistently see 72 or 78 miles per hour as an average speed," he says. "So I ask you, are 95 percent of the people on that road driving dangerously? Of course not. But it's

a speed trap because the trooper can sit out there and write tickets all day."

We see two troopers parked smack in the center median. "Aren't they a little obvious?" I ask. Mr. Raskob replies that unlike radar, laser guns require the user to be in line of sight with the target.

Mr. Raskob says he once asked a trooper how he could nail people when he was so conspicuous. "He laughed and said: 'You've got to be kidding. Nobody looks 1,000 feet ahead. I'm in a marked car crosswise to the roadway, but they don't even see me until they pass me.'"

Mr. Raskob wasn't really surprised. "Most people drive in a cloud," he tells me. "I've heard this from police many times: 'I followed that guy for half a mile, and he didn't even notice — and I was driving a marked cruiser.' If you're that asleep, you deserve a ticket."

(On that point Mr. Raskob and Sergeant Hogan agree: "Generally speaking," the sergeant told me, "by the time your radar detector goes off, we've got you.")

A Dodge Caravan blows past the Mystique, weaving in and out of traffic. "That's just stupid," Mr. Raskob says. "That's two tickets — speed and an 1128A, unsafe lane change." Where's a trooper when you need one?

Now it's time for "the worst stretch on Manhattan Island," on the Henry Hudson Parkway just north of the George Washington Bridge where the speed limit, for no apparent reason, drops to 35. "I'm doing 40, I'm speeding!" Mr. Raskob says in mock horror as cars whiz past.

Back north, Mr. Raskob says with obvious relish, "No tour would be complete without my favorite road." We are on Route 9 near Mr. Raskob's stomping grounds in Croton — "wide open, recently repaved, conducive to speed," he says, and "in a just world" it would be posted at 70 or 75.

Yes, and in a just world it would be the guy weaving in and out of the traffic like a maniac who got the ticket, but it's little old 85th percentile you, tooling along on your way to the video store. But, Mr. Raskob says, if you're pulled over, never show your anger, no matter how victimized you feel.

"If you get pulled over, it's 'yes sir, no sir, here are my papers, sir,'" he says. After all, everyone gets traffic tickets — "your grandmother gets them."

Even the "speed weenie" gets them. Mr. Raskob recalls being pulled over doing 82 in a 55 zone. He had a reason — he was trying to get home before his children's bedtime — but he kept his excuse to himself. "The cop wrote me for it," he says. "I went to court and got a reduction. But you know, I couldn't get mad. I was doing it. In this car."