

Cops & Robbers

By Larry Edsall
Photos by Brenda Priddy



Remember playing cops and robbers when you were a kid? I got to play something like that recently when I was invited to ride along on the inaugural Radar Rally. The rally pitted make-believe speed enforcers against those who believe speed limits are set too low and are established not primarily for safety on the highways but for generating income for various municipal, county and state coffers.

The rally equipped three vehicles with the latest in speeder-detection technology (the same equipment used in police cars) and positioned those vehicles alongside an 80-mile route driven by a group of vehicles equipped with state-of-the-art “counter measures,” including radar detectors and laser jammers.

The idea wasn't fast driving, but to discern which of the detectors and jammers were the most effective in identifying speed-enforcement equipment and warning the driver, and not only about equipment in the enforcement vehicles but of stationary speed cameras as well.

“In a few hours we'll have six months' worth of data,” said rally organizer Craig Peterson, who also is the founder of RadarTest.com.

Peterson, a former municipal police officer, has been actively testing speed-enforcement equipment and various counter measures for more than 20 years. After leaving law enforcement, Peterson worked as an executive recruiter. He also started writing about his speed-enforcement and detection equipment tests for a national automotive magazine. In 1999, he launched his website, which both evaluates and sells such equipment. His passion includes extensive speed-enforcement research work, which has involved him as an expert witness in several court cases.

“People driving perfectly safely find themselves in violation,” Peterson contends.

“Traffic engineers don't set speed limits,” he adds, “Legislators do ... and no elected official wants to be accused of ignoring safety.”

Therefore, Peterson says, instead of listening to traffic engineers, who say the speed limit should be based on whatever speed the 85th percentile of drivers typically—and safely—travel a given stretch of roadway, those limits are set by politicians with votes and ticket income in their eyes.

For example, Peterson says that while red-light cameras may reduce the speed at which intersection accidents occur, traffic engineers tell him that an even more effective—though not money-generating system—would be simply extending the duration of yellow lights by one second, thus providing an inexpensive and yet effective way of clearing an intersection before the red and green lights glow.

One piece of evidence Peterson offers for his statements is that nearly all cities include fines from speeding and parking violations in their annual budgets, counting in advance on such income and thus depending—and putting pressure—on law enforcement personnel to provide those funds.

I divided my Radar Rally day into two halves. For the first half, I rode in an enforcement vehicle equipped with

radar, laser and even old-fashioned VASCAR technology (VASCAR is short for Visual Average Speed Computer and Recorder, a system created in the 1960s).

Peterson explains how the various enforcement equipment works, and says that because it employs only a time/distance computer and the operator's hand-eye coordination, VASCAR is the only detection system that cannot be defeated by electronic counter measures.

So why isn't it used more? Because it takes time to measure out the roadway reference points, and operating the aged equipment requires a lot more concentration than simply aiming and pointing a laser gun or flipping the switches on a radar machine. VASCAR is the system used when highway speeds are checked by aircraft.

Oh, another thing Peterson said is that those tinted license plate covers really don't hide your registration numbers from law enforcement equipment. He explained how it has to do with refractive and reflective angles that may shade the plates from eye view but not from roadside camera equipment.

“The sheer volume of erroneous online information on the subject of speed-measuring technology is astounding,” Peterson recently wrote on his website. “And just about everyone, it seems, is confident that they're well up to speed on this stuff.”

“They're not, but try convincing them of that. Worse yet, I've got sitting on the shelf two new laser guns that can neither be detected nor jammed. Once their numbers grow, they'll become a tangible threat, further turning upside down the clueless driver's tenuous grasp of the technology.”

“But seeing is believing and there's one way to illustrate how the latest radar and laser are used against speeders... [so] we're hosting the first Radar Rally.”

For the second half of the day, I rode along in a car equipped with three different counter-measure systems, including one that links similar model radar detectors from various cars and thus shares up-to-date entrapment warnings by talking to you through your smart phone.

Once upon a time a few decades ago, I tried driving with a radar detector. However, I quickly quit using it because if it was constantly offering up false warnings—some units are sensitive to garage door opener frequencies—and, well, because of worry—I found it was much less nerve-wracking to drive at or just beyond the speed limit rather than risk my license on the capabilities of a cigarette pack-sized box suction-cupped to my windshield.

Peterson said—and my Radar Rally ride showed me, however, how some—but not all—modern devices very effectively screen out false warnings and provide a clear alert at a substantial distance before mobile or stationary speed-detection equipment comes into view.

Should you be interested in such things—provided, of course, you live neither in Virginia or Canada, where such devices are illegal—Peterson will be posting the results of the Radar Rally on his website.

Oh, and the second Radar Rally is scheduled for 2014. Why wait two years? Because that's when the next generation of detection equipment and counter measures are scheduled to roll onto the roads. ■



Speed radar and traffic expert Craig Peterson (opposite page, at top) organized the inaugural Radar Rally to test the latest in detection devices (e.g. opposite page, bottom), as well as the newest “counter-measures,” including various radar detectors and laser jammers (this page).

