

Montana Trooper

# Squad's Approach Turns Odds Against Illegal Drivers

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**T**he Montana Highway Patrol's new patrol squad is making its presence known.

"People talk about us everywhere we go," Trooper Dave Munson said while cruising Interstate 90 on Friday.

Munson is a member of the Strategic Traffic Enforcement Team, a group of troopers who travel the state and do just what their name suggests: strategically enforce traffic.

The squad, as members call the unit, is funded by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration for two years. Its goal is to reduce crashes by 2 percent each year, Munson said. On Friday, Munson gave out as many warnings as tickets. The stern talking to and reminder of Montana traffic laws is effective, he said, and is usually given for the less egregious offenses.

He recalled stopping a young man who was caught on radar going 107 mph outside of Belgrade. At least 12 people honked as they passed Munson at the stopped car.

"They are excited," Munson said. "He just blew their doors off. Law-abiding people enjoy seeing us out here," Munson said.

There are not enough law enforcement officers to catch every violator, Munson said.

"But when we're in town, it increases the odds that an aggressive driver is going to be caught."

The STET is a twist on the patrol's "goon squad" of years ago. The major

PHOTOS BY CASEY RIFFE, GAZETTE STAFF



Montana Highway Patrol Trooper David Munson talks to the driver of a vehicle he pulled over for speeding on Interstate 90 near Lockwood Friday morning. Munson is one of five troopers that make up the federally funded Strategic Traffic Enforcement Team.



Munson checks the driver of a vehicle he pulled over for speeding on Interstate 90.



Montana Highway Patrol Trooper David Munson returns to his car after pulling over a vehicle for speeding on Interstate 90.

**While the troopers can and will cite people for violations outside the specific areas, they concentrate on the designated areas.**

difference is that where STET works is highly focused, based on stacks of statistics the MHP has compiled. This squad also uses some of the top equipment available to troopers, including laser radar.

Billings MHP Capt. Keith Edgell was on the goon squad - a moniker used internally and by the public - when he joined the patrol 20 years ago. Like most of the other members back in the day, he was fresh out of the academy. Back then, the squad covered the whole state. Now, its coverage is on the statistically most dangerous stretches of road, the "high-crash corridors."

Those areas are mostly in the state's larger-population areas of Billings, Missoula, Kalispell and Bozeman-Belgrade, Edgell said. The squad provides "an extra boost in the arm," for the MHP's day-to-day operations.

"We don't have the ability to be as proactive as we would like to be," he said.

In the Billings area, the corridor is Interstate 90 from the junction with Interstate 94 to Laurel, U.S. Highway 212 into Red Lodge and Route 78

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### STET Overview *By Sgt. Pete Richardson*

The STET was formed with a two year grant from the MT Dept of Trans, funding the pay and expenses of five troopers and a sergeant to free them from their normal duties and have them concentrate on traffic enforcement on highways deemed by MDT to be high-crash corridors, safety-wise the worst in the state. Data was studied for 2004, 2005, and 2006 and from that, crash patterns and causation began to emerge. This data formed the basis of the deployment schedule for the STET, which patrols these corridors in the Missoula, Kalispell, Butte, Billings and Bozeman districts.

The team has been together since February, and since that time has stopped 2,200 violators. 1,700 of these were speeders, but there's no requirement that only moving hazardous violations be the basis for a stop-any time the lights are on it's considered a good thing, as passing motorists assume the worst and adjust their driving techniques. The team has been an encouragement to law-abiding motorists--many have expressed their approval by means of e-mail or in person.

There are challenges in this program, other than living out of a suitcase for the eight-day deployments. Courts and prosecutors, somewhat individual in their methods, procedures and documentation required, call for a flexible trooper as far as case prep is concerned.

Troopers in this assignment are volunteers, even the first-year probationary troopers. The team approach to traffic law enforcement has its appeals. The team works together, trains together, troopers back each other, and share the same days off. This is a rarity in the Highway Patrol, although other agencies use teams in the same way.

The team is mission-oriented, and it's only fair the team's report card be based on the mission as well. The team is tasked with reducing crashes on these high-crash corridors by 10% in three years. If crashes aren't down that much by then, it won't be because the team was inactive.

between Columbus and Red Lodge. While the troopers can and will cite people for violations outside the specific areas, they concentrate on the designated areas.

"Over the years, those have been our deadly highways in this district," Edgell said.

In two hours Friday morning, Munson drove about 60 miles making laps between the South 27th Street exit and the authorized vehicle turnaround east of the Interstate 90-94 junction. He stopped five drivers, writing five tickets - four for speeding and one for not using a

seatbelt - and gave those drivers a total of about eight warnings. Several hundred cars were not stopped, he said, because the drivers were voluntarily obeying the law - just as those who were stopped chose not to follow the law.

The squad works closely together, sometimes stacked up along the road. One benefit of that is to pull over drivers who are violating the law while driving past a trooper with a stopped car. For example, Montana law requires drivers to slow and pull to the left, when possible, while passing an emergency vehicle stopped with its

emergency lights flashing.

"Not a lot of people seem to understand that," Munson said just after the force of a passing green pickup rocked his patrol car parked in the westbound shoulder.

Had a second member of the squad been directly ahead of Munson, the pickup driver would have been stopped and likely written a ticket.

On the next eastbound lap, Munson spotted a sport utility vehicle coming down a hill - past a 65 mph sign. The radar unit on the dashboard just over Munson's car's odometer blinked a red "84."

"This one is smoking," he said while slowing to change directions through a highway turnaround. With Munson in the inside lane behind him, the driver continued to speed. Munson was able to pace the driver at 90 mph, the speed for which he could legally write the ticket. Instead, Munson relied on the radar, which he called "solid as a rock" in court, and wrote up the man for driving 84 mph in a 65 zone. ➤

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Standing: Troopers Neiminen, Mitchell, and Cozby; kneeling: Sgt. Richardson and Trooper Munson.

### The squad provides "an extra boost in the arm," for the MHP's day-to-day operations.

The U-turn Munson completed to stop the driver would be impossible in commuter traffic, for example between Billings and Laurel. There is just no safe way a trooper shooting radar from the median or a driving lane could safely get into traffic and make a stop.

That's when the squad puts one trooper in the median to shoot radar. The others line up in the shoulder on one side of the road. As soon as that trooper has a speeder on radar, he or she radios the vehicle and driver description to the others. The first trooper in the line

merges into traffic, usually just in time to stop the speeder.

"It's safer, cost-effective and efficient," he said.

The strategy also works on aggressive drivers who are zigzagging through traffic, Munson said.

Although the squad can't track it, Munson believes their presence provides a strong psychological impact. For fast or belligerent drivers, just seeing all the MHP cars is a good reminder to follow the law. Even more fulfilling for Munson knowing there are drivers who know

they have obeyed the speed limit and followed other laws and are glad for it.

"The squad comes in and leaves a big effect on the public for a while," he said.

About the time that wears off, the squad rotates back. They are scheduled to be in the Billings area about five times this year, Capt. Edgell said. The members work eight days on and six days off. This stint in Billings continues through Tuesday. □

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