

WHAT'S IT TAKE? JOURNALISTS DRINK UP

You hear the numbers: .08, .10. But what does it feel like to have a blood-alcohol concentration at either Minnesota's new or old legal limit for driving?

Answers can vary widely among individuals. But three Pioneer Press reporters set out to shed some light on the question with the help of Washington County Sheriff's Deputy Lee Bloomquist, who administered Breathalyzer and divided-attention field tests on them.

The field tests determine the extent of impairment a driver is suffering. One -- the "horizontal gaze nystagmus," or HGN, test -- cannot be practiced or faked because it measures the deterioration of smooth eye movements. A "walk-and-turn" assesses coordination and the ability to concentrate on and remember instructions; a "one-legged stand" test, when drivers are asked to count to 30, assesses whether their internal clock has slowed -- the officer is timing how long it takes to make a count that should take 30 seconds, in addition to observing the driver's ability to balance.

Nancy Yang, 23, 115 pounds

Test 1, 7 p.m.

Consumed: One vodka mixed drink since 6 p.m.

Alcohol concentration: 0.026 (still legal)

HGN test: Passed; eyes jerk slightly when tracking left and right.

How it felt: "I'm relaxed. You might need to repeat yourself but I'm fine enough to hold a decent conversation and maintain solid eye contact."

Test 2, 8:45 p.m.

Consumed since last test: Two vodka mixed drinks. (Total: three since 6 p.m.)

Alcohol concentration: 0.118 (over the limit)

HGN: Failed; unable to complete because of uncontrollable laughter. (The sort of inappropriate reaction Bloomquist said is not unusual.)

Walk-and-turn test: Failed; did not follow instructions.

How it felt: "It's near impossible to focus on one thing and I'm having lots of problems walking in a straight line. I'm even swaying when I'm trying to stand still."

Test 3, 9:55 p.m.

Consumed since last test: Nothing.

Alcohol concentration: 0.091 (between old and new limits)

How it felt: "I feel a little sleepy, but I am remembering what people say to me and can absorb their words. I feel steadier than at the last test."

Alex Friedrich, 38, 185 pounds

Test 1, 7 p.m.

Consumed since 6 p.m.: Two glasses of wine.

Alcohol concentration: 0.06 (still legal)

HGN: Passed; slight disruption.

How it felt: "Wow, I reached this level fast. I've got a strong buzz -- enough to make concentrating a little harder. I talk more. I usually wouldn't drive at this point. But Bloomquist says if I were in a bar, the noise and distractions might keep me from realizing I'm as buzzed as I am."

Test 2, 8:15 p.m.

Consumed since last test: Two glasses of wine. (Total: four since 6 p.m.)

Alcohol concentration: 0.106 (over the limit)

HGN: Failed; eyes jerk when tracking back and forth and jump noticeably when held in a sideways gaze.

One-legged stand: 30-count took 37 seconds.

How it felt: "The buzz seems to have evened out -- a possible sign I'm losing the ability to judge my own drunkenness. I have to focus on maneuvering smoothly as I walk around a table."

Test 3, 9:55 p.m.

Consumed since last test: 1 1/2 glasses of wine. (Total: 5 1/2 since 6 p.m.)

Alcohol concentration: 0.15 (over the limit)

Walk-and-turn: Failed; lost balance, did not follow instructions.

How it felt: "I'm feeling a bit numb but have no clue how Bloomquist can say I'm making all these road test mistakes. I'm louder and even more talkative -- to the point where I repeat myself a few times and interrupt the deputy."

John Brewer, 30, 220 pounds

Test 1, 7 p.m.

Consumed: Two bottles of beer since 6 p.m.

Alcohol concentration: 0.03 (still legal)

HGN: No signs.

How it felt: "I started the evening with a warm tingling in my arms and butterflies in my stomach. I don't know if the nervousness is from the beer or from the armed deputy sitting across from me. I relax much more after a couple of beers."

Test 2, 8:20 p.m.

Consumed since last test: Three bottles of beer. (Total: five since 6 p.m.)

Alcohol concentration: 0.075 (still legal)

HGN: Passed; some disruption.

How it felt: "I've lost my sense of time but am told that if I drink one beer per hour from now on, my alcohol concentration will probably stay where it's at. I'm having a hard time keeping interest in the dominant conversation, though, and want to talk more than listen."

Test 3, 9:50 p.m.

Consumed since last test: Three bottles of beer. (Total: eight since 6 p.m.)

Alcohol concentration: 0.115 (over the limit)

HGN: Failed.

How it felt: "I don't see things happening in a continuous way, but in short episodes. Everybody is having their own conversations. The last few beers went down really fast. Can we dim the lights?"

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