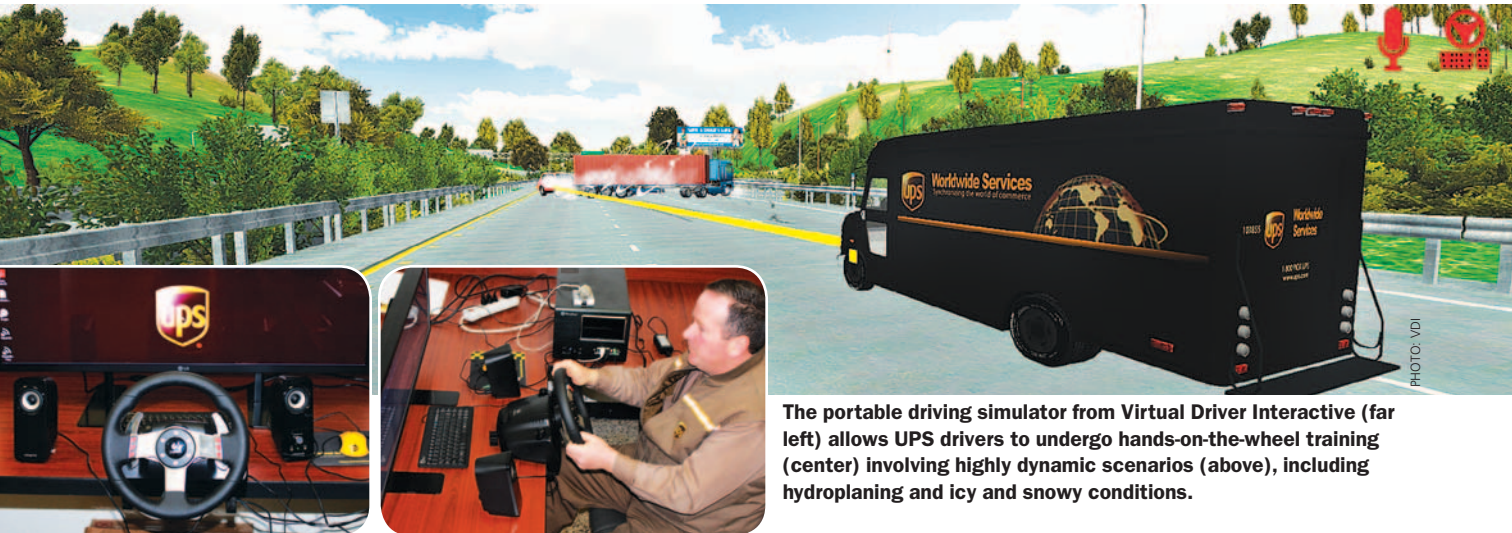# SAFETY GOES VIRTUAL AT UPS

The package delivery company recently began using a virtual training simulator to augment its driver safety training. It is already scoring positive results. **BY CHRIS WOLSKI**

PHOTOS: UPS

The portable driving simulator from Virtual Driver Interactive (far left) allows UPS drivers to undergo hands-on-the-wheel training (center) involving highly dynamic scenarios (above), including hydroplaning and icy and snowy conditions.

With more than 7,200 employees honored in 2014 for having more than 25 years on the road without a crash, safety is at the core of UPS's fleet.

When hired, drivers are put through a rigorous training program of in-class instruction and behind-the-wheel coaching; however, some situations are difficult to cover using traditional training methods.

"We know inclement weather and other variables are hard to duplicate when you're out on the road, so we decided to replicate them in an off-road, non-business environment through a simulator," said Emilio Lopez, global fleet safety director for UPS.

To create this simulation environment, UPS turned to Virtual Driver Interactive (VDI), a company UPS has worked with since 2006. The resulting portable system gives UPS drivers the ability to virtually learn how to handle highly volatile and dangerous driving situations.

"UPS' first requirement was to develop something in which the driver didn't have to take their hands off the wheel to take the course," said Bob Davis CEO and president of Virtual Driver Interactive.

It's a Training Tool, Not a Game

While the VDI simulator was built using a graphical gaming engine, that's where the similarity between it and a video game ends.

"When you first sit down at the system there's that video game allure, but you're quickly brought into the reality of why you're sitting in front of that virtual screen," said Jeff Watson, UPS's package division manager in Long Island City, N.Y.

Drivers are taking the training as seriously as if they were actually in the cab of one of the iconic brown UPS trucks, according to Kevin Gates, UPS North Atlantic District health and safety manager.

"I've personally seen an intensified concentration on someone when they're going through a module," he said.

The training is broken down into bite-sized chunks with each module focusing on a particular safety issue. Going through the entire virtual program takes about an hour, limiting driver downtime.

While ensuring drivers are able to handle a vehicle in dynamic conditions may be a key takeaway, Davis of VDI said there's something even more fundamental to the virtual learning experience.

"When teaching fleet drivers, it's all about the decisions you make. It's less about the car handling," he said. "No simulator is going to replace the driver's knowledge of being in the actual truck."

The simulators are currently being piloted primarily in two locations: metropolitan New York City and Texas.

As of press time, about 320 new and veteran drivers have used the simulator to supplement classroom and in-cab training and refreshers. The virtual training has been a big success.

"Since July 2013 when we implemented the simulator in our facility, we've seen a 38-percent reduction in crashes," said Rodney Ruff, division manager for UPS' Foster Avenue Building in Brooklyn, N.Y. "And, so far this year, we are trending well below last year's numbers." **AF**