

# Bus driver is a champion on wheels

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**Phillip “Pat” Patterson** has driven his share of city blocks.

And he’s also maneuvered his share of bright orange cones.

Patterson, a bus operator with the Central Midland Regional Transit Authority, is a driver with distinction. This fall he’ll be representing South Carolina in the International Bus Rodeo in California.

Patterson, who lives in Northeast Richland, earned top honors in the S.C. Bus Rodeo last fall. The event is open to all public transit operators in the state.

Patterson won in the 35-foot bus operator category, beating bus drivers from the approximately 25 public transit systems across South Carolina.

“I’m on a pretty good roll here,” said Patterson, who claimed top honors in his category for the fourth-straight year and the fifth-time overall. “All it takes is a little bit of confidence.”

That’s easy for him to say.

In the rodeo, drivers must safely navigate their buses forward and backward through narrowly positioned traffic cones. The drivers are judged on the number of cones hit and the amount of time required to complete the maneuvers.

In one challenge, Patterson had to maneuver a bus through four rows of tennis balls placed on washers and positioned slightly wider than the front tires of the bus. In another, he had to drive down a descending tunnel — reaching at least 25 miles per hour — before bringing the bus to a stop no farther than 18 inches short of a cone.

Patterson said the key to success is concentration

“And practice, practice, practice.”

To fine-tune his skills, Patterson and his supervisor, **Eddie Mitchell**, have set up test cones in the bus lot off Huger Street, where he regularly runs through the maneuvers. Transit authority executive director **Mitzi Javers** said the precision that Patterson demonstrates in competition is exactly what passengers are counting on each time they step onto a bus.

“It takes a lot of driving skill and an extensive amount of practice,” Javers said.

Patterson has 26 years experience behind the wheel of a bus, having worked for SCE&G when it ran the system, and for the transit authority.

Until August, Patterson served as an “extra board” driver, meaning that, on any day, he might be asked to man any of the authority’s 29 bus routes. That meant he had to memorize close to 1,400 stops and better than 400 round-trip miles.

“He’s like a tour guide,” Javers said. “He knows the system so well. He’s not just good at the skills test. He’s a really valuable employee.”

Patterson is assigned to Crosstown Route 36, a connector route that runs from Bluff Road near Williams Brice Stadium to Harbison Boulevard.

“I just enjoy meeting people generally,” Patterson said. “I get a pleasure out of doing it. I really do.”

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