

PCA Skills Day

I attended my first PCA Skills Day on a wet Saturday in 2005 with my trusty 944 turbo. It was a great experience, so I returned last year in my Westfield (a Lotus Super 7 clone). Those occasions convinced me of two things: this is a fantastic event to learn the handling and braking characteristics of a particular car, and it is a humbling experience that exposes just how much I have to learn about driving. When I bought my 993 at the end of January I immediately went to PNWR.org and looked for the next available Skills Day. The 993 marks my first foray into the magical world of rear engine cars, so learning a bit about its dynamics in a controlled environment was a must. I also wanted my wife to attend. When we met 5 years ago she drove a Jeep and had no real interest in cars. But after several years of my corrupting influence, she now enjoys attending vintage races and watching the occasional F1 race. However, she draws the line when it comes to enthusiastic driving. I'm okay with that, but I am a firm believer that understanding the performance envelope of your car makes you a safer driver in normal driving situations.

When I first approached her about attending the PCA Skills Day, her answer was a resounding "no." She stated that she had no interest in driving fast and so didn't see the point of the event. I countered by explaining this is not a track day event. Rather its purpose is to teach skills that a participant can employ on the street to avoid potential accidents or mitigate their severity. In fact, given that these skills could potentially save a life, the course should be thought of in the same vein as CPR or first aid training! Although a brilliant argument designed to appeal to her love of humanity, it didn't work, so I then resorted to that old standby: begging. Eventually she agreed and I signed us up. Last week, with the event looming on the horizon, she began having second thoughts and was considering backing out. However, given that it was to help her to become a safer driver on the street, she acquiesced and reluctantly decided to attend.

Fast forward to the day of the event. After registration we drove the cars over to the designated line for our group, where a variety of Germany's finest were already in place: 996 turbo, GT3, 996 C4s, 993, 930, Cayman S, Boxster S, some Z4 convertibles...and my wife's refrigerator white Subaru Forester 2.5XT complete with ski rack. She looked up and down the row of cars and then at her car, shook her head and said "I think I am in the wrong line." I tried to explain to her that no one cared what she was driving, and besides, with its turbocharged 2.5 liter engine and 5-speed transmission, the car is a hoot to drive and is deserving of its family nickname, the Ballistic Refrigerator. Sure, the suspension is very soft and the car leans like a fishing boat running along the face of a 50 foot swell, but Skills Day is about improving your driving, not setting fast time of the day. After hearing that heartfelt speech, she looked up at me and gave a perfectly executed Wife's Eye Roll. Husbands reading this will know precisely the look I mean. It is a look for which there is no known countermeasure. *Sigh...*

With great trepidation I grabbed her hand and escorted her to the drivers meeting. It began with an overview of what we would learn during the various exercises and finished with the day's logistics. In between we were repeatedly told that we were to have fun. Looking over at my lovely wife, I could see that she wasn't having fun. Not yet. Once we were turned loose, we headed back to our cars, donned our helmets and began with the skidpad. Now going around in circles doesn't sound like a lot of fun, but mix in wet pavement and some VHT, and the grins begin. Perhaps a word about VHT is in order. VHT stands for Very High Traction and is a chemical used on drag strips to increase surface traction. It has an interesting property though: although extremely sticky when dry, throw on some water and it makes ice

look like an OSHA approved traction compound. About 1/3 of each skidpad was placed on Bremerton's drag strip and consequently on VHT. The purpose of this exercise is to help you understand how the throttle can control the attitude of your car. Push down on the right pedal and the circle gets bigger. Lift and the circle gets smaller. However, push down really hard or lift the throttle abruptly and the car spins. Hit the VHT and everything is magnified – including the spinning. Neat! After her first time around the skidpad, I approached my wife's car and saw she had a huge grin on her face. A grin that would thankfully shine more brilliantly as the day progressed.

Next up was the Threshold Braking and Emergency Lane Change station. This exercise is a pretty basic, yet eye opening exercise. You accelerate hard to about 60 mph and then slam on the brakes with the goal of getting as close as possible to the cones at the end of the stop box without permanently maiming any of them. You then meander through a creative excuse for a U-turn, and accelerate to about 40-50mph right at some poor guy holding a yellow flag. Apparently PNWR has some agreement with a local fraternity who makes pledges hold the flag as part of their hazing ritual. After you pass the point where you think this person is about to become very familiar with your windshield, he throws the flag either to his left or his right at which time you brake hard while swerving towards the stop box located on the appropriate side of his quaking body. It is amazing how late the flag can be thrown while still allowing enough time for the car and driver to react and make the appropriate moves. The next time an empty beer keg falls off the pickup truck in front of me on the freeway, I will be prepared.

The slalom was next. It's a pretty straight forward event. A series of cones are evenly placed in a straight line. After my first run it was explained to me that the point was not to hit as many cones as possible. Oh... Apparently the course workers aren't there for the exercise. After that clarification, it became more challenging and even more fun. This exercise really forces you to practice one of the cardinal rules of driving: look ahead. As soon as I stopped looking far down the course, it became very easy to fall behind and lose my rhythm – and force the course workers to perform another round of cone collecting aerobics.

We then broke for a lunch catered by Woody's. Although the Polish Sausage hit the spot, I must admit I was previously unaware that relish came in that particular shade of green. In fact I don't think I've ever even seen that shade of green before – but I digress. After lunch we headed back to our cars and started the next exercise, the Mini Autocross. For those of you unfamiliar with the term, autocross is Latin for "sea of cones that contain a hidden path only visible to the enlightened few." Apparently these cones were supposed to outline a little road course that would give us the opportunity to put together the things we learned in the morning's exercises. Unfortunately it took me three runs before I attained enlightened status and the road course magically appeared. Once it did, the autocross proved a lot of fun and gave me the opportunity to practice steering the 993 with the throttle, looking ahead, and using the brakes for all they were worth.

After that fun was over we headed to the Handling Oval. Our mission was to accelerate hard out of the gate, brake hard as we approach the first corner, roll off the brake pedal, eyes up towards the apex cone, feed in some steering, smoothly dive towards the apex, roll on the throttle and repeat. During the runs I discovered that the 993 will plow when steering inputs are ham fisted (see comment above about smoothly diving towards the apex), and my wife discovered that the front tires of the Ballistic Refrigerator still have some level of grip when driven on their sidewalls.

The last event of the day was the advanced slalom. This differs from the regular slalom in that gates of 4 cones were set up at varied distances and offsets. My initial reaction was that this setup meant there

were simply more cones for me to hit, but then the lead instructor reminded us that the objective was to go between the cones. After watching my wife again trying to tear the tires off the rims of her car, we decided to switch vehicles for the last few runs. The Subaru is actually a lot of fun in its own way. It's a car that responds well when driven like a rental car (i.e. abuse it). Get hard on the throttle when going through the cones and it gets a little sideways and heels over like crazy, but it sticks in its own unique way. My wife, however, was blown away by the 993 and now wants something a little special that she can use at future events. Yes that's right. She now wants to explore the other driving events offered by the club. So look for us – but not the Ballistic Refrigerator – at a DE soon.

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