

That's a Wrap: Putting 2006 in the Rear View Mirror...

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For: The Wheel

2006 has been an exciting year for all of us involved in the SCCA, The Wheel, and Hooked On Driving. You can look back on articles covering everything from the new Z06, to the GTI and lots of interesting rides in between. As we polish off the year, one story from 2006 has been resonating with me and it's now time to share. No – no car reviews this month – just a first person story from a guy who is involved up to his eyeballs in performance driving and racing.

A Little Help from On Star

One day this spring I received a phone call from a very courteous young man. We'll call him Fred, who was a candidate for a position as a California Highway Patrol officer. He was quite bright, and very athletic and had exceeded standards in all his training and tests – up until the high speed driving skills review. It seemed that he had failed this critical phase of the CHP screening process, and was about to be allowed his second and last chance to pass this very tricky test of car control and high speed decision making skills. A friend who knew about our program had suggested a day with a coach, such as me, in a street car on a race track. With this request, I sincerely wanted to help this young man, begged my way on to an empty afternoon at Thunderhill and we were on our way. He met me with a shiny new red Cadillac DTS sedan – he said it was as close as he could come to the Crown Victoria cruiser in a rental car. Fine, I said, let's see how this hot rod handles. We strapped on helmets, and with Fred clenching the wheel and his jaw, we drove onto the track. This was quite an adventure. Fred, to be frank, was not smooth – in fact I realized that my primary short term goal was to retain the McDonald's breakfast I'd eaten on the way up Highway 5. Fred was all over the place. It was a case of complete lack of feel to the point that my coaching from the passenger seat, as our pace picked up, became a matter of life and death. As Fred tried to get the DTS to a quick pace, we not only found his limits quickly, but discovered that the Cad was not really meant to do this, and began complaining vociferously. To use the term “plowing beast” would not be an understatement. Mind you – I have nothing against this lovely car – it just wasn't ever intended to be running from bump stop to bump stop from Turn 3 to Turn 4. As Fred settled down a bit, and I began a stream of consciousness pronouncement of “Brake now, turn in, unwind the wheel, gas on,” types of commands. Fred began to improve a bit and the Cadillac began finding its limits. I struggled with guiding him to be smooth – this was not a strength that Fred brought to the track. And into this scenario, for those who know Thunderhill and its (in)famous Turn 5, The Cyclone – we began really scaring one another over this tricky and technical 90 degree left hander on the top of a small hill. Trying to maintain some momentum over the top became a goal of the exercise. About the third time we survived a quick slide (no, the car didn't actually turn, it just pushed) over the top, Fred landed the Cad hard on the far side of the hill. Immediately we both were startled to hear what sounded like a phone ringing, but we knew it wasn't us. From the ether we hear an angelic voice saying, “Welcome to On Star, we see that your car has been in an impact, are all the occupants ok?” As we approached Turn 6, Fred looked at me with big eyes and mouthed “What do we say?” So, this not being in our training manual, I decided to take the bull by the horns and state to the nice lady “Oh no, we just hit a big bump... we're all fine.” She responded in an argumentative tone, “Are you sure, our system reports a fairly large impact – I'm surprised the airbags didn't deploy.” Needless to say, as we approached the very fast Turn 8 left hand kink, with our novice driver Fred now completely distracted – as they say – this was

quite a moment. I remained pleasant (thank goodness I had an open faced helmet on!) and convinced the operator that we were fine and the system must have been a bit out of adjustment and just too sensitive. As we came around to the pit entrance I suggested to Fred that we take a break – he scurried into the pits and stopped to breath. “Well, we’ll have to be a bit smoother over Turn 5 Fred; do you think you can do that? Remember, in slow, out fast,” I said quoting the number one driving coaches’ mantra for survival. He was sure he could do it and we attacked the track again. At this point, we settled into a routine: If I coached every braking point, turn in, apex and track out, Fred could do reasonably well. If I went quiet to see what he was learning, he got lost and fast...this was not a natural, instinctual driver. And then there was Turn 5 – if the Bypass wasn’t even scarier I would have suggested it, as this became a necessary evil placed by diabolical track designers just to make it hard to get from Turn 4 to Turn 6. Third lap, second session, Fred turns in early while going up the slope to the Cyclone, “I say brake, brake, brake” but its too late as you don’t want to brake over the top – screech, the front tires howl, everything goes weightless as we crest the peak, and wham, this top of the line Hertz rental lands hard on the berm that borders the track on the down slope. Ring goes the On Star system. “This is the On Star operator; we have detected an impact in the right front side of your Cadillac – are you alright?” Here we go again – the second time around though, we’ve got the speech down pat...no problem – “we just hit a bump and the system is just too sensitive,” wanting to be sure there was no admission to this happening previously, we remain calm, have a nice chat with the On Star operator as we traverse Turn 9, trying not to squeal the tires so she’d notice, and we end the conversation with a big “Thank you!” for their concern and interest in our well being. On we go – Fred is improving, but there is still significant doubt about his readiness for his pending test. Two more laps...a bit quicker, a bit smoother, then the age old Newton’s Law of equal and opposite reaction kicks in. He finally gets the perfect line through Turn 4 and magically we’re headed toward our nemesis turn, only this time, we’re 15 mph quicker...I try to prepare Fred for this, but there simply isn’t time – we fly over the crest, only to land hard once again and this time we look at one another just knowing that the eye in the sky will be calling soon. This time it’s a guy operator “Hello this is the On Star operator and we have this vehicle with multiple readings of impacts – is everyone ok?” Yikes, this guy sees in the database that this is the third call. What is he thinking? That he has Bonnie and Clyde on the phone? Having been in sales all my life, I go pursue the “baffle them with bull” approach. With an indignant tone of voice, we go on the offensive “No – the system keeps going off for no reason, we’re on a bumpy road (this is an absolutely true statement) and you guys keep calling us and there is NO problem!” The operator hesitates for a moment – “We see that this is a Hertz rental car, who am I speaking with?” Double yikes...Fred has to step up and get in the conversation (keep in mind that we’re in Turn 10 by now). He does the right thing and gives the operator all the accurate information – then comes...”We see that you are on Highway 162 in Northern California, do you think you could take the car in to have it checked at a dealership nearby?” I panic to myself, hoping this guy doesn’t know where Thunderhill Raceway is, and that it’s not on the GPS system he’s perusing. “Yes,” we respond – “that’s a great idea.” “But in the meantime, can we get this thing turned off so we can finish our ride?” I ask, knowing that Fred is just not ready. The operator decided we were legit (ha!) and said “Is there a place you can pull over and turn the car off?” We said “Sure, just a minute.” We immediately pulled into the pits and dutifully pulled to the side. He had us shut down for 60 seconds while he reset the system in the car – this must have been the equivalent of clearing fault codes in the engine. We fired it up, took some slow laps to wrap up our day on track, and I wished Fred the very best on his test. The only sad part of this story is I don’t know if he passed and I’ve lost touch with him. Suffice it to say we gave him every chance to succeed, with a little help from On Star.