

**The Competition Driver's School Adventure:
Some Important Lessons Learned
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For: The Wheel**

It was 1986, and I'd been totally hooked by a drive at Sears Point in my Mitsubishi at a track day. "I must figure out how to race," I announced to my pregnant wife. Yes, it would have been much more mature for us to wait until the kids were born, we had some money in the bank, and I had no business pressures, but this was an emergency. I had to race.

So I bought a beater Datsun 510 four door, having heard that these were worthy cars that could be made into racers. Of course, I hadn't seen this article and already had the very rough 510 in the garage and was excited to make it go fast.

Lesson 1: Find knowledgeable friends and professionals who can guide you into this sport, preventing you from doing too many stupid things. At this point, I had a stroke of luck. Having autocrossed for a season, I'd gotten to know Roger Kraus who had guided me into the world of sticky tires and air pressure adjustments, so I took this future race car 510 down to show it off to him. This is when I learned about his integrity and also how ignorant I was. He told me that he'd love to help me build a race car out of this close-to-death 510, but when we started adding up the parts and labor for the job, it was going to be cheaper to buy a Riley & Scott Trans Am car. So, says Roger to me....unload this beast and go buy a current SCCA legal race car from someone local and you'll be way ahead, even if you have to do further fixing up.

Lesson 2: Used race cars, if purchased by an informed buyer who does his homework, are smokin' deals. You didn't have to tell me twice to go shopping for a race car, I love shopping for cars. But this one was dodgy....there really wasn't any budget, nor did I know anything about which car to buy.

Lesson 3: Become versed in SCCA or your sanctioning body's rules and classes. Does this car have a place to race? Is it going to be competitive? If not, what will it take to make it so? And of course, not having read this article yet, I bought the first car I saw, based on three crucial selection criteria: First, it was really cheap - \$1800 with trailer. Second, it started...and actually sounded cool (my first Supertrapp experience). And third, it was unique - an ITB Opel was something of a novelty, and this seemed to take some perceived pressure off of my performance as a driver. If I was fast, I thought, everyone would notice, if I was slow, I had an excuse. OK, I'm twisted. Getting the Opel home was a joy, but I knew the car needed some updating and a good check over.

Lesson 4: Go through your car to find out what you have. And drive it before you go to school. OK, I did pretty well on this one. I can't really remember how Tom Lepper found me or vice versa, but Tom offered to let me test the car at a Sears Point test day, just to do a "shake down run" and to sneak in some practice. We won't get into how we accomplished this, but suffice it to say that I found myself in my new driver's suit, strapping in for a "sneak-peak" run at Sears one day.

Lesson 5: Get coaching before you try to go fast. Driving out of the hot pit, a full red mist event happened in my helmet. I was in a loud race car with R compound tires for the first time - it was time to go for the track record. Except for one thing - if you go up the hill out of Turn 1 too fast and try to set up Turn 2 too late, you drive into the tire wall rather than making the turn, which is of course, what I did on the fourth lap.

Lesson 5A: If you didn't follow lesson 5, be prepared to be nice to emergency workers and tow truck drivers.

A review of the day told us that the car needed a new driver's seat, and some re-wiring - not a bad show for my \$1800 hot rod. Of course that didn't count the body shop bill for the fender straightening....and we hadn't even been to school yet!

First step, ground school: The ground school was very informative, but, with all due respect to the very qualified and engaging individuals who put this element of the school on – it was pretty tortuous to be sitting in a Holiday Inn on a Saturday, talking about having fun all day without the actual having of fun. Oh well, this was the price to be paid to become a highly qualified race car driver...so I survived this first step with some actual content retained in my red mist cluttered brain.

After what seemed like a wait of a year (actual time: two weeks), my wife and I headed off for Sears Point with the Opel for our first real adventure together. Regardless of my level of preparation or the lack thereof, arriving at competition licensing school was one of the highlights of my adult (no wise guy comments here) life. The pace of the school picked up right away. It seemed that we were either in a meeting or in the car on track. I almost ran out of gas on my third run. I suddenly realized that most everyone else had spare wheels mounted with new tires, and/or a set of rain tires. Hum...that seems to be a good idea. I also found out the really cool solid dish aluminum Centerline wheels did not allow any brake cooling, so I began driving the car with soft brakes. But none of this mattered...yet. I was having a blast in the lead and follow format, with a coach driving his G Production car leading four of us novices-to-be around this very difficult and technical track. It was a major load off of my shoulders that I didn't stink. I was actually able to stay in line, and it seemed like my sweet little Opel could handle the competition. Our debrief meetings gained energy as the pace picked up. And then, the magical moment when the group leader announced we could pass. Yes!! We could race! No need to learn any more. We now knew everything we needed to know about racing and it was simply time to just do it.

Lesson 6: There will always be someone slower than you and faster than you. OK, there's Schumi, Lewis (even he had a close call), Ayrton, and a few rare souls. Other than those, I'll stick by my rule. After having thought I was fast early on, when the dogs were let loose to hunt, I realized I still had some work to do. Things now happened at what seemed like twice the speed. My mirror became a cluttered mess of cars....some I had just passed, and others who were chasing me down. The other drivers were just rude! Any concept of courtesy seemed to have been thrown to the wind. I'll give myself one bit of credit here: I didn't panic and push it too far. Ah, there were several of those, leading to....

Lesson 7: (which I actually avoided): the fastest drivers on the first day of driver's school either seem to slow down as everyone else gets faster and passes them, or, they crash. Yes, there were several victims of this lesson (they obviously hadn't read this article either). Hot shots, well-financed beautiful cars began finding tire walls and such. First, Turn 8A, then Turn 2, then the dreaded Turn 10. These turns all provided lessons of their own. Some of us learned by observing, some of us learned by doing – ouch! I'll note here that of the drivers who pushed hard early on and resisted practice and technique, thus struggled, most stuck with it, mellowed out, and eventually learned the line. It was just too bad to see good folks get trapped by not listening or pushing too hard early on.

Just about the time school was really becoming a flat out blast, the Opel decided that she was going to have a say in all this nonsense. It started to hesitate coming out of sharp turns – sounding like a hiccup. Coming just at the time when competition was getting stiffer, this was a blow to the excitement of the event. And I realized I just might be in big trouble. I did know how to open the hood. I knew where the carburetor was (I'd been told that I had a really good one, a Weber). I knew that there should be 4 spark plug wires plugged in. I knew I needed gas in the tank. OK, my diagnosis was pretty much done. Frustration set in. I was late for a meeting, but I didn't want to go out there again with this malady. I was a sitting duck upon exit of every turn and getting passed by cars I'd had my way with earlier. Standing next to the Opel, looking under the hood with a perplexed and probably pitiful expression, a guy named Dave wandered by and asked if he could help. He said he'd seen carburetors like this before and maybe he could really diagnose the problem. After interrogating me for a moment, he nodded his head convincingly and said: "You have a float level problem." I said, "Oh." What I meant

was I had no idea what he was talking about or what to do about it. Dave said he'd help. I had an executive decision to make. Do I allow this stranger to start fixing my car, knowing that we could end up with worse problems? Ah, but I had no alternative but to give it a shot. Dave proceeded to borrow a couple of tools he needed, disassemble the Weber, and walk away. Yikes. He came back right away with a guy named Larry and a tray of parts in a fishing tackle box. It seems that the jets were wrong on top of the float problem. I watched Dave and Larry work and it seemed to make sense. I think they put in a couple of new gaskets and other random parts, but by now I was in deep with these guys and I just shut up and paid attention. In no time, they had the Weber back together and I fired it up. Sounded fine. But how about exiting Turn 4? We'll see. I thanked these guys who casually walked away, asking for nothing in return. Another student came over to help me out of my ignorance. He told me that Dave was Dave Rebello, a top race engine builder, and Larry was Larry Oka of Oka racing, a top race car prep and rental shop. Needless to say, the Opel ran fine from then on.

I learned two important lessons from this scenario.

Lesson 8: If you don't have the mechanical ability to maintain your car (and even if you do!), find someone who has a similar addiction that can help you prepare, repair and support the car at the track. This is the part that I was just a dummy about. My mechanical ability was basic tune-up work, and changing flats. Hadn't I noticed the race teams on TV with professionals who seemed very busy keeping cars on track? Apparently not.

And,

Lesson 9: SCCA members are awesome. The brotherhood of racers is amazing. People help each other in unbelievable ways on a regular basis. The hour these guys spent working on a pre-novice's car owned by someone they didn't even know truly saved my school experience. The remainder of my competition driving school experience was incredible. The Opel showed some spunk and even got noticed by its dreaded competitors the BMW 2002's. Lap times plummeted to respectability – at least for a novice. Lifetime friends were formed. Ray Q, Gary Meeker, Mike Sullivan, Scott Rubin, Leslie Berry, Barry Streets, and many more became a part of my racing life. My wife Leigh had our child during this whole transition from buying the car to driving the car. And she won an award for patience and I think she actually thought this was a pretty cool thing – especially when I did pretty well in our first sprint race at the end of school. Graduation, after a very wet series of sprint races on the final Sunday is one of the treasures in my memory bank that will be there til the day I die. What a rush, to complete this challenge – and to complete it together with these amazing new friends. It is something that I encourage anyone who has contemplated to try to accomplish. And don't be proud. Buy an Opel if you have to but get out there!! And hopefully you can learn from my lessons....this is a serious venture that should be planned and executed carefully for maximum fun.



Addendum One: My subsequent racing career starting out precariously. Running toward the front of the pack, the red mist was blinding me at times. I had three incidents in my first four races. I realized then that crashing cars is no fun, and after all, this hobby is supposed to be fun. And after major appeals for forgiveness from the stewards, and developing a good relationship with a body shop (I guess that should be another lesson), I settled down to have an exciting and fun club racing career which I intend to continue indefinitely.

Addendum Two: To those who can get competition licenses via the professional racing schools. Do both. The pro schools are great, but there is NO substitute for live competition with a real mix of competitors, car preparations, and talent. SCCA competition licensing school is a must for the serious future SCCA club racer.