

**Life at 7/10ths:
Can it be 70% as Exciting as 100%?
By: David Ray, www.hookedondriving.com
For: The Wheel**



I read with interest Brian Forster's thought provoking discussion in the April Wheel about 10/10ths driving – Brian is certainly qualified and I love the title of his column, "Life at the Limit." Possibly without intent, he started some of us pondering our path – as our Hooked On Driving business model and several others out there are developing programs and a driving technique aimed at "Life Off of the Limit." We define what we do at Hooked On Driving as 7/10ths....allowing room for error and staying short of your and your car's limits. The new term many of you will hear much about in the near future is "Performance Driving." Future US publishers and Hooked On Driving have worked together to launch an inaugural magazine by this title. On newsstands in about a month, "Performance Driving" will be focused on driving as a hobby – not racing or competing. "Hum," you say. Is there really something called 7/10ths or "performance" driving? If so, why? I'm not about to buy a performance car, and then never put the pedal to the floor...holding off at a magical 70% of throttle! That would be just silly. And, by the way, "Why is the name of your business Hooked On Driving, not Hooked On Racing?" I guess, by now its time for me to shoot straight with you and say I'm here to tell you about driving on a track and not racing – and why we think it's a good thing when done properly.

To say that "track days" have become popular and are growing is an understatement. Many of you have either guided friends to track days, or participated in them yourself. Some of you – myself included – got "hooked" by innocently attending a track day just to see what it was all about. I still remember shopping for a long sleeved, cotton shirt as required by Jerry Kunzman's

Capri Club, predecessor of the now huge NASA organization. I still have the rugby shirt I bought for that day, and will never forget almost sliding off the track the first time I crested the hill entering the carousel at Sears Point. The rude awakening and raw excitement of that day has now subsided, but the experience will never be forgotten.

Fast forward 20 years – the track day for me, sent me directly into racing, with a stop at autocrossing on the way. Club racing has been my passion for all this time, having “retired” and re-entered the hobby no less than 5 times. I’m promising to not “retire” again any time soon. So what happened along the way to peak my interest in “performance driving” that is obviously something short of racing? While assisting the Thunderhill “Street School” in the 90’s, I became fascinated with the excitement we saw in the students’ eyes as they experienced the great Thunderhill road course, learned more of what their street car could do, and more important, felt the development and results of the improvement in their driving skills. Personal obstacles were overcome, relationships between spouses, siblings, offspring and buddies were expanded to a new level by sharing this unique experience. I even had a wife tell me that her husband “was a new man” after learning how to do the late apex through Turn 2! But in these early days, we also learned that driving a street car on a race track had its liabilities. One had better be able to get to work if something happened to their car on track. The 7/10ths term was not being used prevalently yet, and many drivers abused their cars, and others on track while taking inappropriate risks.

But seriously, is 7/10ths, performance driving, an achievable concept?” My answer is yes. And even more importantly, I believe that performance driving has the potential to explode – giving our sport – that of motorsports – the mainstream place among hobbies that it deserves.

Performance driving is not as threatening as racing. Just think of how many folks out there have interesting cars, but would never consider getting in a Formula race car. With public perceptions of racing guided by television images of Indianapolis, NASCAR and drag racing, would most normal people get in cars like that? Performance driving allows your neighbor with the \$2000 Honda to check their oil, pump up the tires a bit, borrow a helmet and drive to the track.

Performance driving doesn’t require you to be rich. The \$2000 owner, or Datsun 510 owner, for that matter, can show up at the track and try their hand at the same skills that are displayed by Fernando Alonso, Jeff Gordon or Danica Patrick.

Performance driving does not require that you are an excellent driver. Because run groups on track are determined by experience and driver preference, even drivers with limited skills or experience, given that they keep their heads while on track, can find a home in a lower skill group and have the time of their life and not feel out of place.

Performance driving has come a long way. What used to be “play days” on the track, have now become High Performance Driving Experiences. Certified instructors, car/driver classifications, tech inspections, controlled passing zones, and many other enhancements have evolved this interest into a more sophisticated enterprise. All of these things are only natural evolutionary steps in the maturing of the hobby – and hopefully will dissuade those who want to just rent the track, grab their buddies and go drive fast.

Performance driving is safer than the alternative. We’ve had many customers come to Hooked On Driving after harrowing experiences on the public highways. Let’s face it – current sports

cars starting at around \$20K can be wickedly fast and driving Highway 9 with redwoods just off of the rearview mirror is no way to even come close to your skill level or the limits of the car. Performance driving offers a controlled environment, structure and instruction, lack of police, and a group of consenting adults. More often than not, drivers of the new Z06, Twin Turbos, Vipers and other amazing hot rods, gain respect for their cars and an understanding of the stakes that are involved in driving their cars fast on the street.

Even competitive drivers with race backgrounds can enjoy “performance driving.” This has taken some practice and maturity, but I recently was able to objectify this statement, as some may dispute that this is really possible. Example: Turn 8 at Thunderhill – an exciting, very fast and challenging turn for every race car driver. For drivers of momentum cars, it’s working up to going flat out. For the higher horsepower drivers, it’s figuring out how close to flat out you can take it and survive. This is truly a “pucker” turn when driven at 10/10ths. But recently, while giving a person a “spirited” ride in my T2 race car, I had a moment of clarity. This was not a time to pucker. It was a time to relax and let the car flow through the perfect line – and, yes I’ll admit it – lift off the throttle and tap the brakes. I didn’t need to scare the stuffins out of the passenger to demonstrate proper driving technique. And my pace, well within my limits, was PLENTY fast for my novice passenger. The point here is this: even for current competition drivers, slowing down the pace, relaxing the intensity off of the edge a bit, and driving the car below the limits can not only be fun, but improve your driving. Just like a golfer taking an easy, grooved swing in practice, these 7/10ths laps can build muscle memory, visuals, and confidence with the perfect line that has enormous advantages when spooled up to the limit that Brian talks about.

In conclusion, I’d like to clearly make two points in this article. 7/10ths driving CAN have a legitimate place in our motorsports passion. And to answer the question posed in the title – yes. While there may not be the same adrenaline buzz that comes from wheel to wheel competition, driving at 7/10ths can be just a flat-out blast. And with proper on-track management and instruction, performance driving can be a valid hobby for those who have no lust for competing, nor the budget for weekly tire purchases. In addition, racers can use 7/10ths driving as an opportunity to drive without the pressure and stress of competition, and a good place to burn-in needed skills. At Hooked On Driving, we’re banking on the future of performance driving as a new way to drive the great cars of our era. We hope that you look into this new hobby and either try it yourself, or send your neighbor with that great car out to the track to give it a try.