

So You Think You Want to Go Racing??!

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For: The Wheel

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It all started innocently enough. You've always enjoyed cars and driving and maybe even did a tune up on your Dad's car many years ago. Now, you're really busy with work and family, but still love cars and driving. That (fill in the blank) out in the garage is a pretty capable vehicle, and your buddy, owner of an M5, suggested that you try a track day program at the road course outside town. You didn't really know what to expect, so you didn't have to share a lot of details with your spouse or significant other(s). Like we speculated, it was all very innocent. You arrive at the high performance driving program to find quite a diverse group of drivers and cars. The Z06 gang, with the seemingly bald tires, looks intimidating. The Porschephiles look very serious and have the best shoes in the bunch. There are teenagers with modified imports, restored race cars, rental cars (for goodness sake), modified pony cars, and two just like yours. Everyone reacts to these days differently, but we can safely say that almost ALL newbies have the thrill of a lifetime. And for some, we just strike a nerve. Let's say that you are one of those fortunate/unfortunate souls. The Chief Instructor reminds you this is not a race, but a school and an opportunity to drive your car closer to its limits in a controlled, non-competitive environment. But once on track, that speech fades into the memory banks along with your spouse's reminder to not buy the expensive premium unleaded, and that you still need to clean the gutters out from last fall. You drive your car onto the track and a transformation takes place. There is a car ahead of you and you NEED to pass him. They've told you to go slow while learning to go fast, but this seems counterintuitive as you are in a high performance driving environment, so why would one be going slow for any reason? And then there's that kid up ahead with the car that has a wing on it big enough to be a cocktail bar for a tailgate party...he can't be faster than you!! With coaching supplied by your event manager, you are guided to get control of yourself and learn the line. This seems to be a major hassle and poses the possibility of ruining your day as you see the kid with the wing disappear over the hill at Turn 4. Your coach says that you're inconsistent and missing the edges, pinching exits and all sorts of nonsense. Your intelligence kicks in just long enough to absorb some of the input, but these are really distractions to the main concern at hand. Passing cars and bragging about it. And...the other side of the coin...under NO circumstances are you allowing yourself to be passed – ESPECIALLY by the kid with the wing on the \$15,000 car.

As HPDE operators, the profile illustrated above happens often enough. Are we shocked when it happens? Certainly not. What we do about it is a key to your safety, enjoyment, and the enjoyment of all of our program participants. As business persons, we want you hooked, and to become a regular customer. But if you're over the top with a racing perspective at a non-racing event, we have a responsibility to manage your on-track behavior, and to know when enough is enough. As you are receiving the third black flag warning for aggressive driving or passing in a non-passing zone, it seems to be the moment when we, as the HPDE operator, know that it's time for a chat. Either you MUST adjust your HEAD (translated: attitude), or we are going to recommend a fine racing organization like the SCCA to you for the next step in your hobby. The key differentiator here has nothing to do with talent – but rather your perspective behind the wheel. If your focus continues to be on moving through traffic and making your car faster, then you should take a look at the next step – wheel to wheel racing.

What to Consider Before Taking the Green Flag?

The very first thing we should warn you about is that racing is a completely different set of skills to those used in driving fast. Performance driving is a blast, and knowing that you are catching up to a buddy in a faster car can be a real ego-boost. But running wheel to wheel with him and figuring out a way to get by is VERY different. You will need to practice race craft skills just like you have practiced performance driving. And you will never stop learning. Those who show up knowing that they can drive at the track record pace, many times are disappointed at how “rude” everyone is around them, blocking lines and getting in the way of their perfect lap. Be prepared for an aggressive sport with folks who really want to beat you. This is very different than a really fun performance driving day.

In helping you ponder and possibly prepare for a racing hobby, we’ll break this analysis into several categories for consideration:

1. Self-Analysis
2. Financial analysis
3. Personal situation
4. Knowledge acquisition
5. Car Selection
6. Racing School

Self-Analysis:

Auto racing, even at the amateur, club level is one of the most intense hobbies you can choose. Yes, there are activities that may carry more thrill, risk and momentary excitement. Hang gliding, parachuting, surfing come to mind. But there are few experiences that sustain for 30-40 minutes, requiring total concentration, while you are side by side at 110mph with your best buddy dicing to see who gets to Turn 3 first. The combination of physical and mental effort, the side-by-side excitement and mutual trust, and the need for a clear head and judgment that must kick in with a split second’s notice – these are pretty unique in the hobby world. So you must ask yourself the questions: Can you clear your mind and remain focused and clear headed for 30 minutes? Do you have a healthy competitive spirit, but are willing to let a better driver win? Are you in sound physical condition to withstand a 30 minute, intense, isometric and aerobic workout while concentrating? Are you free of personal distractions that might lead you to a momentary loss of control? We hope that this part of our article gives you pause to consider your decision to race with a clear head. This hobby has HUGE rewards that go with it. But it is NOT for everyone. The good news is this: Going into racing with a clear understanding of what to be prepared for, knowing there will be challenges, can make the difference for you. One issue for me in my first few races was a lack of focused concentration. With a competitor in front of me, I found it easy to concentrate on hitting my marks, pushing my abilities, and mounting a challenge to pass. But having made the pass, I found myself driving in my mirror, losing focus on what was ahead, and pondering whether I was fast enough to stay ahead of this competitor. This loss of concentration on driving ahead of the car cost me several dices in my early racing experiences. It was not until a competitor who had just passed me on the last lap shared his in-car video with me that I discovered my two different driving lines – one as a leader, and one as a follower. The key here is being mentally prepared for many kinds of challenges and possessing the willingness to be humble, do self-evaluation, and constantly work to improve. If any driver expects to be great right away, they are setting themselves up for failure.

Financial Situation:

This one is just no fun at all. And every racing school usually opens up their lecture with a warning: If you can't afford to wad your car up into a ball, you'd be better off heading home now. With that being said, there is a common temptation to many new drivers to enter racing just after being granted a higher limit on their VISA account. They may make quite a splash, drive very well, and enjoy themselves a great deal. But it seems that reaching the maximum limit on the credit card usually comes simultaneously with the realization that Frank Williams has not called with a multi-million dollar offer to drive for and rescue their struggling F1 effort. This driver then quietly puts the cover on the race car, or sells it – and we don't see him or her for another few years. Some that fit this profile seem to repeat this cycle every year or two. I admit to a bit of this in my early days as well.

But here are some cardinal rules that apply to the sport of road racing:

1. It's not fun if you can't afford to pay for it.
2. This is an expensive sport, but an informed driver can save BIG money if sound judgment is applied.
3. Set your ego aside with your first race car purchase. Don't start out with your dream car – it could be a nightmare.
4. Do your homework and prepare a budget (not a strong suit for most amateur racers). Tires, brakes, body damage, fuel, entry fees, motel and gas bills, trailer and towing costs, time away from work, cost for repairs, setup and maintenance of your car. These are hard questions to ask, but it's our job to strongly suggest that you ask them.
5. Beware of the "Points Chase" trap. Race organizers everywhere will hate me for this. But getting in a points chase for the bragging rights of being third in the Region and taking home a plastic trophy can be the undoing of your budget. Take a break from racing if you can't afford it this week. The organizers really would prefer this if it means you can sustain your hobby long term.
6. Be realistic about your abilities. Find a place to race that you can handle and be competitive. Not everyone is Mario. Maybe a vintage club is perfect for you. Or you've found that you just hate the hassle of hauling the car and working on it, so a pro school arrive and drive race series is perfect. Or, maybe just time trialing is what will fill your need for speed.
7. Work with your family support structure, whatever it may be, to assure yourself of a bed to sleep in if you come home with a crunched race car on the trailer.
8. Become street smart in the hobby. Know where and how to buy necessities without wasting money and paying premiums for being unprepared.

In the final analysis it is rare that I would counsel someone to not race because of finances. Yes, the college kid with no recurring revenue and a hot foot may not be a good combination. But it's all about which car and class they decide to run, AND how often they run it. Two or three races a year can keep the fire burning and avoid financial pressures for many drivers. My first car cost \$1900, with trailer included. It should not have been a surprise that it needed another \$3500 spent on rewiring, repair of the roll cage, new race seat, two sets of tires etc. But the bottom line was that I was racing sooner than later, and I learned as I went, due to a combination of common sense – not wanting to waste money – AND – not having much money to waste.

Personal Situation:

This hobby has risks. The chance of any significant injury is very remote, but does exist. Does your family understand your passion and are they supportive of you doing this? Can your life continue if something happens and you are injured? This may be a question of insurance – and this is not a fun series of questions to ask, but reality must be considered as you strap on your

HANS device and enter a good dice. In addition, can you enlist help from loved ones, friends or acquaintances? I have a lot of respect for the racers that come to the track alone, unload, prepare and maintain, drive, repair and clean their car for the race. I've been there and done that. It's TWICE as much energy expended – and it WILL negatively impact your performance. The regional championships I've won have each come with very capable friends caring for the car while I was able to focus on driving. **WARNING:** Begin your recruiting of friends to help early in your plans. There will be many folks who sound excited and talk about helping. But few will be willing to do the 5:00am run to the track and bleed the brakes under a hot sun that afternoon.

Knowledge Acquisition:

Translated: **DO YOUR HOMEWORK!!** This may be one of the biggest failings we see with folks who have been bitten with the bug, and just go racin'. First thing to do: Go to a race!! I am constantly amazed at the performance drivers who start talking about racing, but have not taken the time to go to a local amateur race to see what it's really all about. Just taking a walk through a racing paddock should be a required assignment. In addition, you should visit more than one club. Marque Clubs like the BMWCCA, PCA (Porsche), SAAC(Shelby) have mature programs that each have a personality. Some allow more aggressive racing than others, and they offer the fun of running with cars of a common nameplate. NASA, Jerry Kunzman's privately run racing club has a pretty wide open atmosphere where you can run what you bring, within limits. The NASA weekends may be more suited for the more savvy driver who does some of his own work, or has a good support team. Their weekends are very busy while they combine racing and performance driving programs together on an aggressive schedule. The largest and oldest club racing organization, SCCA has many supporters and its share of detractors too. Their philosophy is to try to find a place for your car to race, which means they have a kaleidoscope of classes, and their size means that you might have a bit less track time with all the entries that have to be included. Clearly on the upside is their anal-retentive approach to safety and driver behavior. The more conservative racer may find SCCA the most comfortable – but then again all of these organizations vary by Region – so, **GO SEE THEM IN ACTION.**

While shopping these clubs, begin studying the different classes and their related rules. Also, the class you run in may have a big impact on the current value and future resale value of a race car. We'll talk about this more in a minute – but suffice it to say that any new driver should arrive and know the difference between a Formula car and sedan, and a tube frame race car. You should read the rulebook that tells you race rules and protocol, and the safety regulations that you and your car will be held to. In the end, you are about to spend a bunch of money in a new hobby. Do your due diligence. Become an informed consumer. This will help you make the right decisions for yourself and your budget as you proceed down this path while avoiding the slippery slope.

Choosing a Race Car:

Disclaimer: I hate to see money spent unnecessarily, or for people to pay too much for what they do. Having said that, there are folks out there that make a decision to do something the way they want to do it, not worrying about the dollars involved, and can afford to. If you're not worried about money or budgets, this section may not be for you. And, by the way, congratulations on your success.....most of us are just a bit jealous.

Here's a scenario. A performance driver, who has started to go too fast, and attend every event, realizes that he is wearing down his really nice daily driver. And making too many track modifications runs the risk of making it less hospitable on the day-to-day commute. He decides

to jump in to racing and has something in his mind. A 1972 XMobile, just like the one his dad had, and is what he really wants to race. He finds a street version, takes the car to a race-prep shop, and has an awesome car built. Custom roll cage, show paint, anodized valve covers, forged mega-buck wheels and the killer motor. Then comes the \$20,000 trailer and the new duellie truck to tow it. The day comes to pick up the car and take it to the track for a test. Immediately there are teething problems – 20 minutes on track and the injection system needs some tweaking, so in the trailer it goes – as his mechanic is back at the shop. After 4 of these R&D trips, he realizes that he is having less fun than budgeted. Eventually though, this dream car is brought up to speed and he has a ball driving it. However, there is still the issue of whether he really wants to run it with those heathens in the club races, as this is a concours quality car without a scratch on it. All this can be worked out, but there is a truly disappointing truth beneath this story. The car cost \$90K to build. The day it was put on the race track, especially since it was not really built to a commonly run racing class, it was worth \$45K. Again – keep in mind my disclaimer – some folks want what they want and are willing to pay – and this car may be the apple of the owner’s eye. We just wanted to point out that there are ways to avoid this if you choose. For the rank and file of us out there, here are some guaranteed valuable tips.

- Buy a good, used race car and take delivery immediately after it’s been run successfully. I played expert and helped a friend find a gorgeous, region champion-winning race car to buy from another region. But after we picked it up and brought it back, we discovered that the championship engine had been replaced by a “serviceable” unit, dramatically reducing the actual value of the car.
- Consider the class you’ll run in carefully. The larger the class you run in, the more demand there will be for your car if you want to sell. In addition, availability of parts and expertise on the car can make the difference for you in completing a weekend if you encounter problems. It’s worth its weight in gold to discover, after burning up a front hub and coming in limping – that your new buddy has a spare in his trailer and can show you how to replace it.
- Make a conscious decision whether to go open wheel (formula), or sedan racing. Any speculation about the relative safety of each type of car would be just that, so I won’t go there. But one should do their homework on lap times, speeds, safety and the overall experience of a specific class before he buys into it. And watch the class that you’re interested in race – can you see yourself in that seat?
- Purpose-built vs. converted street car: Here’s the dilemma you’ll face. The converted street car will be appealing to you, as it will resemble something you’ve already driven. And most times, it will be a less expensive way to get started. However, keep in mind that purpose-built race cars are designed to do just that: race. While they probably will be more expensive to buy, they may be less hassle, and expense, to repair. Once you tweak a subframe on a street sports car, it will never really be the same. While the construction of the purpose-built car will deflect damage, and absorb shock more efficiently, and replacement parts should be readily available to effect a quick repair. Having said that, entry level racing can be downright cheap – say \$5,000 - \$10,000 for a decent ride. Most of these prices will be for converted sports cars like the Mazda Miata, a Datsun 240Z, RX7 or the like. With the investment and related risk lower than jumping into a \$20,000 Spec Racer Ford or new \$75,000 Formula Mazda, we would not argue with taking this first step with the lower investment. The fun per dollar may actually be higher, the racing education just as effective, and you will learn just how good you are and how fast you want to go. In the end – with our recurring theme – do your homework and it will save you big bucks and enhance the probability of you having a blast with this new passion.

The Racing School:

We could belabor this subject and do an evaluation of all the professional racing schools, but I'll shoot straight with you on this part of your decision process. If you can afford it, do both the professional school AND a top level club racing school. The pro schools excel at skills analysis and development. Their drills, seat time, repetition, pro instructors are all very worthwhile. They will use a methodical approach that takes one step at a time, and end the programs with practice races and a great sense of accomplishment. Recently, most of the professional schools have become sanctioned by clubs like the SCCA and NASA so that their graduates have the credentials to compete with these club programs. But this is where I think the club school has its important place in your development. Unless you want to simply do "arrive and drive" programs for the rest of your life, I believe that a real-world club racing based school is absolutely essential. Especially if you have a foundation as a strong performance driver, this school will be closer to that of "hard knocks" which is frequently the most valuable. We regularly have drivers come from the pro schools, speaking very highly of them, only to admit that club racing is much more aggressive, more intense and requires more overall savvy. You will get to know your car better. You'll be accountable for your actions with track officials – meaning you will begin developing your racing reputation. Are you a hot head? Are you quick? Do you lose concentration after 20 minutes in a 25 minute race? Can I run with you side by side through the Corkscrew? Can I trust you to run an honest race with me? These are all questions that begin to be answered at the club level, grass-roots racing school. If you have the experience of the pro school under your belt, you should have a leg up. But my friend Dave who came straight from a pro school to the SCCA competition license school in the San Francisco Region, one of the country's largest, came out of his first sprint race with eyes wide open, jaw gaping, and complaining that "Two of those guys just cut me off in turn three, and I had to move over or I'm sure they were going to hit me!" Well, if he continued to move over, he'd never find out. Dave proceeded to get the feel for the level of aggression that is appropriate. He began coming off track expounding how he closed the door on the Porsche, and made a pass in Turn one on the Miata...he fell in love with the freedom of controlled, but aggressive racing. Not everyone does. For this reason, I'll repeat – if you can afford to go to both schools, do so. It can never hurt, and the professional school will prepare you technically AND help you decide whether this is a hobby for which you are cut out.

What it's all about:

The beauty of club racing is the diversity you'll find within a structured group of people and cars. You will encounter retired school teachers who are wickedly fast, professionals who are happy in the middle of the pack, auto technicians that never stop working on their car to eek out one more tenth, the full gamut of people and budgets. And all of them with a common story to tell, bench racing to do after hours, and a sense of accomplishment and self-esteem for every time they see the checkered flag. My only disappointment is when I see a club racer lose track of why he or she is there. We do this to have fun and compete for the love of competing. Arguing with a fellow racer, cheating on your engine displacement, or ending the day mad because you didn't win, completely misses the point. Pro racing? That's another topic, for another day. I've been club racing for 23 years and can count on one hand the drivers I've run with that could have a future making a living racing. So that leaves the rest of us to get to know one another and enjoy the opportunity to share this incredible experience.

How does the Club Racer and the HPDE mix? First, someone who has worked hard enough on their skills to go racing may be perfect to coach at an HPDE. However, this is no guarantee. One must not brag too much about their lap times and adjust to where the HPDE driver is and what he

needs to learn. The racer is also one of our best source of new customers, as they know to refer their pharmacist, the guy that parks his Lotus in your corporate parking lot, or a friend of a friend. Being an advocate for the sport helps us all. We have many club racers returning to our program for many reasons. Bringing their brother to drive their race car, teaching their spouse to drive, or just coach and get some 7/10ths seat time. At the end of the day, the more enthused drivers and racers there are out there, the brighter the future is for our growing sport.