



My First DE ***By Randall Neighbour***

One Saturday morning last summer, I hopped in my Boxster, dropped the top, and headed to College Station to check out a PCA high-speed driver's education course. Mark Weisser (a friend and fellow LSR member) told me I'd enjoy myself if I came out to watch him drive and check out the wide variety of Porsches that were brought to the events. Mark's thought was that if I saw what fun everyone was having I might sign up for a future DE . . . and right he was! I would have paid an entrance fee to hear the sound of race-prepared 911's flying by at 140+ mph and walk around the wonderful collection of cars. 997 Turbos and GT3's wowed me until I saw two GT2's parked side by side. Then there were the PCA members who chose to bring another car from their collection to the event. At the risk of looking foolish, I asked Mark on more than one occasion, "What the heck is that? It looks fast, but I've never seen one of those!"

By the time I left that Saturday, I was fully motivated to sign up and learn how to drive my car at speed through hairpin turns. However, my old car needed some work first. After a number of worn suspension and brake parts were replaced on my 1997 Boxster, I signed up for the December 2008 DE event. Since I'd be borrowing one of the helmets from the LSRPCA, I purchased a balaclava (a fire retardant head sock). Then, I took my car to North Houston Porsche for a tech inspection. I was now ready and excited!

What follows is a time stamped series of events that will help you understand what you do at the track during your first DE (I really must stop watching 24, eh?)

Saturday

4 a.m. - Driving to TWS

It was early and *very* cold that morning, but I wanted to be out the door a half hour later and at the track on time for registration at 6:30 a.m. The drive to the track was great, but it was very dark and had I not had my GPS on the windshield, I would have missed a turn.

6:20 a.m. - Parking and Preparation

Since all the garage spaces were sold out, I found a spot to park the Boxster and tape up my headlamps with painter's tape. This kept rocks and track debris from scratching up my new litronics. (Some drivers go nuts with the painter's tape and nearly cover the car with it, but my front bumper is so peppered with rock dings I didn't bother.) I also put my car's number on the hood and both doors in blue painter's tape so corner workers could identify my car while on the track. Then, I took everything out of my car that wasn't bolted down to keep objects from flying around in my car under hard cornering.

6:30 a.m. - Registration

At registration, I turned in my tech inspection form and received two stickers. The first was a green Texas shaped sticker showing my run group and designating me as a LSR member. The second was a laser printed label with my name, my car's information, etc. Both went on my windshield for the duration of the event.

7:30 a.m. – First Driver's Meeting

Everyone involved in the DE gathered at the fuel pumps for the morning driver's meeting. There, I learned about the various flags used at stations along the course, what they meant, and how I was to respond when I saw each one waved. Our fearless DE leaders also told us that there had been far too many spin outs during the last DE and a couple of crashed cars as well. Hearing this was not comforting, but then they repeatedly assured all of us newbies that the goal was for us to drive home in the same car we arrived in, safe and sound. Finally, everyone was encouraged to drink far more water than they typically would do on a cold day in December. I learned that adrenaline creates dehydration, and dehydrated drivers make dangerous decisions and lose their precious reaction time when it counts.

8:00 a.m. – First Classroom Session

All the drivers in the green group were gathered in a small room for our first classroom setting. Our instructor, Stan, did an excellent job of explaining how our street driving would be vastly different from driving on the track. He then put a folding chair on a table and explained how our car's weight moved from tire to tire during turns while braking and accelerating. Of course, we were all itching to meet our instructors and get out on the track. However, a second review of what the flags meant and what it we should do when a corner worker waved one at us or pointed at us with a flag was reviewed once again. The challenge Stan gave us for the morning run was to a) listen to our instructor abandoning any desire to impress them, b) find the line through each turn that would allow us to drive it safely at speed, and c) count the number of manned corner stations.

9:25 a.m. – First Track Session

I drove my car over to the grid and parked in lane 5, which was my designated subgroup (printed on that sticker I received at registration). I met my instructor, and he went over the goals for the first session:

stay on the track, don't worry about high speed, find the line, listen to his instructions, and watch the corner workers and count the number of manned corner stations per Stan's challenge in the morning meeting. I thought to myself, "That's a piece of cake!"

With my heart pounding, we left the grid and drove onto the track. My first lap was not pretty. Although I did some advance reading on how to approach a turn, hit a late apex, and come out of the turn looking for the next turn, none of that registered when I actually did it for the first time.

The second lap was much better. My instructor asked my permission to grab the wheel from the passenger seat and show me the line on a few corners. One might think this is overly controlling for the instructor or frustrating for the driver, but it was very helpful. The combination of his verbal instructions (Brake hard! Accelerate! Turn in now!) combined with the help to turn in at the last possible second made my second lap far faster than the first.

The third, fourth, and fifth laps were great fun as well, but my death grip on the wheel made my hands very sore. I was driving through corners at far faster speeds than I had ever driven on public roads, and it was intense!

As we pulled into my parking space, my instructor asked me how I thought I did and if I saw any flags. "Er, um, no" was all I could muster. I didn't even see the checkered flag that indicated we were to finish that lap and cool our brakes! Later, I found out that every first-timer thinks he or she will see the flags and others are just not as observant. Frankly, I was among that arrogant group, and the first laps were humbling.

When I left the car to find Mark and tell him about my first session, I realized I had nothing to brag about. I thought I was an excellent driver. I was sure I would impress my instructor with how well I was doing even though it was my first time on the track. I just knew I had the capacity to absorb all of my newfound knowledge and apply it immediately. I wrong on all counts! When I confessed this to Mark, he just smiled. Then he said, "It's fun *and* challenging, isn't it? There's a great deal to learn and it's all got to work together in split-second decision-making. Keep working at it and you'll get a lot better."

9:45 a.m. – First Braking Exercise

Everyone in the green group was asked to report to the skid pad with their car for the first braking exercise. The goal was to accelerate as fast as possible

toward a cone half way down the stretch of pavement and then brake hard and actuate the ABS to come to a complete stop as close to the second cone as possible. Once again, I thought, "Piece of cake!"

The accelerating part went horribly wrong, which I never anticipated. I'd never experienced wheel spin in my Boxster before, even when I dumped the clutch. However, my tires were very hot from the track and the traction control did its best, but I was pushing the car very hard. And if all the wheel spin wasn't bad enough, I braked so hard that I stopped short of the cone. What a pitiful display of driving prowess (or lack thereof).

The braking clinic instructor told me to try it again, limit wheel spin off the line, and brake a little later. By following his advice, I nailed it the second time and drove back to my parking space.

As I walked around looking at cars before the next track session, it hit me I had not downed a single bottle of water, so I found one and guzzled it.

11:37 a.m. – Second Track Session

During my laps, I practiced finding the line and braking to put weight on the front tires to enhance grip for turning. I also drove my car much faster than the first session, which only showed me I had no idea what I was doing. So, I endeavored to slow down for the rest of the day and learn the basics. I also saw half of the manned flag stations and one or two of the flags, which was still an embarrassment, but par for the course according to my instructor.

12:00 p.m. - Parade laps and Lunch

The food at the track is actually quite good. There's no need to bring food with you unless you are a strict vegetarian or you're on a low carb diet. The burgers and chicken sandwiches are tasty and priced right, and folks who run the cantina there make the best fries you'll find anywhere. During lunch, I drank another bottle of water to try and catch up with my hydration needs and tried to sit still and relax.

1:00 p.m. – Second Classroom Time

In our afternoon session, Stan asked us to share impressions of our first few runs around the track, and specifically asked us about flag stations and flags. Evidently, I'm not the only one who thought, "What flags? There weren't any flags!" Stan encouraged us to watch for them and tell our instructor what we see going on to help us remember to do it. Then, he put the metal folding chair back on the table and explained the physics of a spin out and how to avoid it,

which was very enlightening. I then understood how easy it would be to lose control of my car. [Note: I must say that when I saw the schedule, the classroom time did not excite me. However, what Stan taught us and what others shared was absolutely fascinating! It was good to hear words of wisdom from someone who had driven the track for years and knew what he was talking about.]

2:32 p.m. – Third Track Session

This session, I focused on driving the line and speaking aloud each time I saw a flag. I could tell I was tired, but the thrill of driving at speed around the track fueled me to keep at it. For the first time, I nailed turn 13 and was able to move through 14 and 15 *very* fast. This allowed me to gain a great deal of speed on the straightaway and I looked down to see I was driving 106 mph. This may sound fast to some, but frankly, others were driving much faster just behind me. So I used the lap to learn how to signal others so they could pass.

One thing I did not anticipate was the need to downshift after hitting triple digit speeds on the straightaway. Learning where, when, and how to downshift so as not to mess up the first turn or spin out is indeed a skill I will have to learn over time.

2:55 p.m. – Second Braking Exercise

This time, we were instructed to accelerate hard to a cone, brake hard and get back on the throttle smoothly. With some track time under my belt, I decided to abandon my previous thoughts about it being easy. It took three attempts, but I eventually got the hang of it.

4:04 p.m. – Fourth Track Session

To be honest, I made so many mistakes during this last session of the day I told my instructor I was coming in early. My hands hurt badly from gripping the wheel and I was suffering from complete mental and physical exhaustion. Evidently, this is not unusual, especially for the new guys who forgot to drink the mandated eight bottles of water.

6:45 pm – Early Bedtime

After a bite to eat, I drove to the motel in College Station and immediately disrobed and crawled into bed. Within minutes, I fell into a deep asleep as if I were dead. The only thing that woke me up was a banging headache around midnight (a telltale sign of dehydration).

As I drifted off to sleep, I told my wife I was a lousy driver. I went on to share the day was fun and interesting, but I finished it a bit depressed. I didn't see the flags, the flag workers, or the flag stations. I only hit the apex in right place a few times. I braked too late and not hard enough. And I never passed anyone but was overtaken repeatedly every lap, even by much slower cars.

Sunday

Sans the braking sessions, day two is a mirror image of day one. The only difference is I did not wake up at 4 a.m. to drive to College station. Because I got the rest I badly needed, my attitude was much better, and my skills increased tenfold on Sunday.

While driving, I saw most of the flags, turned into the corners at the right time and crossed more of the apexes late (which is good), and came out of corners much faster. I learned how to do a throttle blip and downshift without chirping the tires, and I looked down the track to the next corner instead of at the pavement just ahead of the car. I also drank a gallon of water and visited the bathroom every hour because I was fully hydrated. This kept me sharp mentally, and the headache did not return.

As I drove home that afternoon, I knew this could not be my last DE event. I want to hone my driving skills and move from the green class into the advanced blue class where I can drive solo. After that, I truly believe I would enjoy being an instructor because I do so much teaching in my day job.

Check it out!

If you've ever wondered if you would enjoy a track event, drive out to TWS for the next DE and have lunch with the LSR, make some new friends, and walk around the garages. Visit with the drivers and instructors and ask them about their time on the track and the modifications they've made to their cars. Or, sign up to work a flag station and you will earn a free DE in the future. If you take the time to check it out, you'll discover that the PCA high-speed driver's education course is the most fun you can have with your clothes on and you'll become a much better driver on the public roads and the track as well.

—Randall Neighbour has been a LSRPCA member for five years and makes a living writing and training for his non-profit organization.