

The Making of a Performance Team

By Kelli Araujo

“Next lap, I want you to take Turn 12 without braking. Lift off the accelerator to plant the front wheels and then turn to the apex while accelerating. Accelerate all the way to the braking point going into Turn 13.”

“Are you sure, George. You’ve seen my driving. You want me to go even faster?”

It is my first High Speed Drivers Education (DE) at Texas World Speedway. It is the second track session on Saturday morning. Gratefully, my confidence has somewhat returned from the first session on the track where I swore I was driving a Porsche for the first time. Speaking with my fellow students, most of us came to the track thinking we were pretty good drivers. Amazing how ignorance breeds confidence. I was humbled on the first track session. My instructor drove my car twice around the track demonstrating the proper line at very low speed. Then, it was my turn to get behind the wheel.

“Use all the track just like I showed you.”

“Drift all the way to the outside!”

“You want me to actually put my wheel on the rumble strip?”

“Yes.”

Okay. My wheel is on the rumble strip. But, isn’t the rumble strip there to warn you GET OFF?!? Unload what you’ve learned from driving on the street. If I knew when I arrived at the track what I know now, I would have taken a deep breath and exhaled all the knowledge and confidence I acquired in my ignorance. A clean slate is the best place to start. You only need to keep the basics: (1) Brake only in a straight line; (2) Throttle and steer smoothly at all times; and, MOST IMPORTANTLY (3) Get your eyes up and look where you want the car to go.

“George! Will you take me for a ride?”

“Yes. But not today. I don’t think that is best for you yet.”

“Are you afraid I might try to go even faster and take lines my skills don’t dictate?”

“Precisely. But, don’t worry. You’ll get a ride with an instructor when you are ready.”

One thing is crystal clear: The people willing to come to a DE already think they are good drivers. Anybody who doesn’t have confidence in their driving probably won’t sign up. Luckily, it doesn’t take long to humble most of us. Stan, our classroom instructor, has to compete with our excited, animated chatter during the Saturday afternoon session. Many of us want to share our triumphs and bemoan our struggles.

We are barreling into turn 6.

“Stay on the outside. Short tap on the brake. Dive in. All way down. Further down. Get down to that apex. Throttle. Throttle. More throttle. Now look at your gauges. Look at the flag station. Stay wide. No brake this time. Again, briefly lift off the throttle to plant your front end. Now. Throttle. Throttle. Throttle.”

It is my third session on the track. We are having some serious fun now. My car is putting out sounds and smells that are new to me (and the car as well, I’m quite sure). I am getting the proper line consistently on some of the turns now. A few of the others—Turn 2...oh my goodness...what was that?—let’s just say a few of the turns are NOT consistent. But when I come off the track, I have the urge to jump out of my car and run across the paddock shouting and doing cartwheels. Is it legal to have this much fun? Yes and no. It is NOT legal on the street, but, it is completely legal at TWS and the whole reason why 60+ volunteers come 6 times each year to instruct and help fellow drivers.

Each driver is assigned to a run group (based on skill and experience) and a team. My team leader, Colin, is taking me for a ride (FINALLY!) in his 911 race car.

“It will be too loud for us to talk. Just give me a signal if you want me to pit.”

The sound of the engine shoots a shiver through me. I LOVE the sound of a “properly” exhausted Porsche engine. I often drive around town at 4500 rpm with the sun roof open just to hear my engine sing. Colin’s car sings. We are haulin’ spoilers around the track, and I can’t seem to remove the smile from my face. Somewhere in my DNA, speed is encoded. The turns I am struggling with—did I mention turn 2?—don’t seem so beastly. Colin shows me the proper place to straighten the car and brake, dive

through the apex, throttle hard to drift out, and use all of the track. Several times, I have the urge to whoop as he nails a turn. Is this much fun still legal?

“Would you like to have an entirely different experience?”

“Of course!”

“Eat lunch quickly. Be at the instructor’s garage at 12:45pm.”

Michael, one of the instructors, has offered a ride in his open-top race car. I won’t even attempt to give a gear-head’s description of this car. It looks like a grown up go-cart. The engine bump shifts like a motorcycle and has around 200 horsepower. You don’t so much get into this car; you put it on. I’ve got my face shield on my helmet, and I have the sense I’m about to have an experience I’ll never forget. We’re off and flying around the track. The faster we go the more stable and sure the car feels. We can take lines through corners the mortal cars can’t even consider. We pass every car on the track, even the cars with nearly three times the horsepower. A red 911SC is in front of us in Turn 10—“The Carousel”. We are so low that I watch the 911’s right front wheel come an inch off the ground! I could see the suspension flex and then stabilize. Incredible! I’ll never forget it. As we sadly leave the track, I tell Michael that I was glad he could not hear me, because I couldn’t stop giggling for the first two laps.

Colin bravely rides with me for a session.

“Very nice. That was good.”

“Brake. Brake. Brake!”

“Brake. Downshift. Keep wide. Stay outside.”

“Next session, you and George need to work more on keeping your hands at 9 and 3; no shuffle steering. Also, you need to brake harder sometimes; there were a couple turns you came into very hot. You saved them well; but there was no reason to be there in the first place.”

And so we’re done. I’m driving home after an amazing weekend. I am bone-tired but somehow really relaxed. I reflect on the weekend and ponder my driving future. A set of racing seats is on my wish list, before the next DE preferably. I’m going to read some books about performance driving. And my car? Before the DE, I was really thinking about buying a new 997. But I have a bond with my car

now and more horsepower would translate into driving faster. George kindly told me that I don’t need more horsepower yet. I need to use the horsepower and brakes that I have. My car doesn’t have the PSM guardian angel, so I am learning to get into AND out of trouble on my own. I like that. As for the cool race numbers on my hood and doors? Those are staying for awhile; they are a right-of-passage. My 993 and I are no longer just a beautiful car and an enthusiastic driver. We are a performance team.