

# Teaching an Old Dog New Driving Tricks- Zendog Goes to Autocross School

by Millard Johnson

It is 4:30 a.m. My alarm wakes me to cold drizzle outside. My day at the Evolution Drivers School will start at 9:00 in Alexandria, Kentucky – just east of Cincinnati. I tank up on gas and black coffee and head off through light rain with squalls and freeway construction on I 74. I pull in at the school right at 9:00 am – just in time for the drivers meeting. We have two instructors – both hold national autocross titles: one in a S2000 (formerly a Miata driver), the other in a Corvette. We all introduce ourselves. Three people have trailered their cars to the event. These, and a couple of others, are serious autocrossers. We are told that more than fifty percent of recent national autocross champions have taken the Evolution class. There are two other novices here: an Indian fellow driving a new Golf and a girl (young enough to be my daughter) who had the only other Miata at the school – a new, silver MX-5. The rain is now down to a mist and it is still cold.

I am in the third pair. I am pretty nervous when put the top down, strap myself in, and put on a racing helmet for the first time. I have never done this. I don't want to embarrass myself and I can't get my glasses inside this snowmobile helmet I have borrowed. The instructor puts me at ease and tells me he will watch as I go as fast as I can around the course. Sounds easy enough. I avoid any obvious blunders like missing a shift or spinning out through a wall of cones. After the first run, the instructor tells me what I have done wrong. Quite a bit. I have 45 years of bad habits to correct. All of the runs of the morning are devoted to correcting mechanical problems of hand placement, steering, shifting, breaking and acceleration. After I drive the course three times, we switch places and the instructor drives, showing me how to do it right. (I thought he would be impressed with my supercharged Miata – then I remember he has just exited an autocross tuned Corvette and he is a national champion in an S2000.) We switch places and I drive the course six more times before the next pair takes over again.

After lunch we pile into a door passenger car four at a time (the Subaru is the biggest rig this morning) and an instructor teaches us about "looking ahead". We drive slowly looking not at the obstacle we are negotiating but the one ahead of it. The rain has been gone for a while, but a chilly wind has dried the course. Not that everyone needed dry pavement as much as I did. Some of these people have been driving autocross for a while. A Corvette and a Pontiac are strong among the high horsepower cars and a VW Rabbit has been trailered to this school — complete with race only tires. The best thing about the dry afternoon for me is that there is not enough room inside the Miata for me and my helmet with the top up. The afternoon is a repeat of the morning session but we have switched instructors and we are concentrating on looking ahead. This sounds obvious, but it is harder than you would think. The course is a 4 cone slalom, two 270 degree circles, a sharp dogleg left, a long downhill sweeper and a Chicago box. From start to finish the course is less than 45 seconds. I am faster after lunch in the dry, but my runs with the instructor driving show me I still have plenty to learn.

The last part of the day, we each take three runs without the instructor. I am beginning to feel confident when I lose my concentration and run the course in third gear. Throughout the day, I have splattered my share of cones, but even the best drivers seem to have respect for a novice com-

petitor. Does it work? My first run was 51.82 seconds. My 27th, and best clean run, was 36.368 seconds — two and a half seconds slower than the fastest lap my instructor was able to clock in my car.

Most of my increase in skill is due to what I learned today but part of it is purely from experience. Because the usual autocross event gives a person 6 runs, the 28 runs of this course is the equivalent a 5 months of events without the "forgetting" that takes place between events – or even runs. Well, it may have taken more than 40 years but I now KNOW what it feels like to take a hot car, put the peddle to the floor, and take it to the limit of both my car and my own ability. It is one HELL of a kick. If you ever get the chance to take this school – go for it!

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Read the complete article and view a clip of one of his runs on the internet at Millard's web page: <http://members.telocity.com/~zendog/autox.htm>

(No cones were hurt the filming of **this** run.)

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## Factory Turbo for MX-5

Forced induction lovers from Down Under have something to celebrate! Mazda is doing a factory turbocharged MX-5 for release in the Australian market later this year. What about North America? Unlikely. Between emissions controls and safety issues, we'd be surprised if it were to happen.

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## Classifieds

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