

I Love the Smell of Boiled Rubber in the Morning!

by Chris Poglitsch (originally published in the Peachtree Miata Club newsletter)

The day before Mother's Day, I participated in an event that would make Mom proud. White Lightnin' and 30 other cars from the Peachtree Miata Club had a day of racing (er...driving school) at the Talladega Gran Prix (Little Talladega to those who know) in Talladega, Alabama.

It all started at 4:30 am, with very little sleep due to my excitement over the pending activities. At 5:30 I picked up my partner for the day, "Track Babe Debby", who played Cameraman/Pit Crew for me. Against my advice, she had spent the prior evening at a birthday party. Come to find out, she'd gotten in at 3:30 am, and totally reeked of Maker's Mark bourbon. Sport she was, and we made our way to the 6:30am meeting place.

The trip to the track was short - about an hour, and we gained an hour getting there, so at 8am we were all in pit lane, ready to do our last Tech and get some instruction on coming into the pits and passing. We were split into two groups of 10, and one of 11. Each group was on the track for 3 twenty-minute heats. After your group ran, each driver rotated through the tasks of corner worker and timer. For the first heat I was a timer on the front straight. From this vantage point, I got to see the first two off-track experiences of the day. The first car was a red Sebring equipped car which came out of a decreasing radius turn too hot, and spun a 360, ending up pointed perfectly, albeit off course, down the back straight. The car behind may have freaked out over watching this and went sideways, doing if I recall correctly, a 180. The beautiful aspect of this particular track is that you have to really, REALLY try to hurt your car. There is only one bank, and plenty of grass to skid off into. In the course of the many times Peachtree has done this event, no car has ever been wrecked, or nearly wrecked.

Keep in mind that the best times tended to lean towards the best drivers, but one particular car, Barney's, made me stop and look. Barney has installed a Stage 3 Flying Miata turbocharger, which pushes 12psi of boost into his engine. This is one BAD machine, folks. When he would come through the front straight where I was standing, and get on the clutch and brakes (about halfway down, well before anyone else), his car would emanate the most wonderful sound. I think it was the surge gate, or waste gate opening, and it sounded like an F-14 taking off from an aircraft carrier as it passed. Need a dribble cup over here, please!

Second group out was mine, and I did the prudent thing by taking a more experienced driver with me. Bill had driven Little Talladega before, and gave me some serious wisdom, one piece was "Chris, don't try to catch him, he's got racing compound tires on, and you don't want to spin out on your first couple of laps out". Good advise. The course laid out essentially like this: Coming out of pit lane, you drive straight for about 30 yards before entering a constant radius right-hand turn. The way to do this is set the wheel, and throttle steer. Throttle steer, almost as cool a descriptor as torque wrench, impact ratchet, and channel lock. Anyway, if you can stay on camber through it, and let the car 4 wheel drift to the outside right at the end, you will be perfectly set up for some sharp left turns. These turns are two "L's" facing one another, three sided. The key to this is aim for the rumble strips, which unlike Road Atlanta, are nice and easy on the car's suspension. If this is done correctly, one portion of hard braking at the beginning and a smooth transition to the gas will easily allow you to accelerate through. After the two "L's" comes a decreasing radius right hand turn which was one of the trickier turns to master for me. A decreasing radius looks somewhat like seashell, if you cut a cross section of it. The further

you get into it, the tighter it gets, what I should have done, but didn't do, was start wider on the turn, and, like the lay of the road itself, come in tighter as the turn increased. This turn dumps the car into the back straight, where unlike the front straight, you can pass cars if they wave you on. At the end of the back straight is the only banked turn of the course, known as the "Nascar Sweeper", the only trick to this is get towards the apex at the apex, and stand on the gas!! Another short straight and the final turn of the course, it looks like a backward "G" and takes the car onto the front straight.

Each heat was 20 minutes, or about 14-15 laps, and it was HOT! Each car had one heat prior to lunch, which was catered in by a local BBQ place. It was around lunchtime when Track Babe's hang-over wore off, and she was ready to ride! Her first trip on the track was with Glen Stephens, who happened to be Top Gun the last time the club went to this track. Most enjoyable for Debby weren't the fast speeds or the sharp turns, but the John Deer effect. The JD effect occurred when Glen would cut corners to get around the track faster. Not just cut corners, but drive THROUGH the infield, leaving a John Deer size swath of mowed grass in his wake. This was an extremely forgiving track, and Debby really liked the ride until Glen blew out an expensive racing tire he had flat-spotted earlier in the day.

Once we'd gotten Glen's car off the track, it was time to pack up and eat dinner. Throughout the meal I was a zombie, racing (uh....learning how to drive better) takes the steam right out of me. Nevertheless, I had heard a very intriguing story about the use of clothes dryer exhaust tubing in an air induction system. This was so interesting; I often sit and ponder the possibilities. While I can't go into much detail here, I highly recommend you call me and ask, I'm sure you'll be equally intrigued.

The day finished, I sat back and pondered the experience, at this point, I'll apologize to "The Big Show", but I wanted to take a moment to interview myself and get some relative bearing grease on where my racing career was at:

"Well Chris, I looked like I had a great day at the track, why don't I tell myself about it?"

"Yeah, Chris, it was really a gas, during the sixty minutes on the track, I know I burned ten gallons of Amoco 93 Octane fuel in old 'White Lightnin' and 10k of rubber off my new Yokohamas, but I can tell me that I really improved on my driving skill today!"