

# Frances Goes to the Races at Laguna Seca

by Shane Benson

It is truly amazing what can happen when a great idea comes together with people who are passionate. A case in point would be our recent trip to compete in the MazdaSpeed Cup, in which six fairly normal people with different backgrounds (some not necessarily motorsports related) came together and formed a team of racing renegades willing to do everything and anything it took to help the team as a whole succeed. As with most great events, it all started with a dream and some beer. But first, let me give you a little background.

Spec Miata is a road racing class that is new to CenDiv this year, but it has been around for over 3 years in regions South and West of here, and it is the fastest growing class in the SCCA. I own a performance shop in Indy, and earlier this year spent four months of my spare evenings and weekends building Frances (aka "The Mule"), my Spec Miata. I am a rookie driver for sure, with nothing but a couple seasons of autocross and time trials, and years of experience behind the wheel of various high performance machines. Still, I like to think I have acquired some skills.

Chuck Wills, Mike Selvey and I hooked up one night to greet a Miata competitor in town for Car and Driver's One Lap of America. Chuck is President of the local Miata Club, and Mike is a club member/Miata owner, so it came as no surprise that their interest was piqued when I casually tossed out the idea of making a trip to the legendary Mazda Speedway at Laguna Seca in beautiful Monterey, CA. Within days a skeleton crew of unemployed, underemployed, and otherwise-socially-irresponsible friends was formed and viola! The makings of a campy low-budget racing movie:

**The Plot:** Take a rag-tag team of five enthusiasts and one novice driver, spontaneously pack them and their gear in vans, trailers and planes and ship them off to distant Monterey, California to compete in the biggest Spec Miata race ever. Do it all on the same weekend as the Monterey Grand Prix featuring CART, Formula Atlantic, and Skip Barber Dodge.

**The Scene:** Located at the legendary Mazda Raceway at Laguna Seca. 70 plus cars (the largest group ever fielded at that facility) to hit the track and 70 plus adrenaline-crazed competitors battling it out for top honors.

**The Cast:** Chuck "The Prez" Wills, Mike "The Mayor" Selvey and Chris "Gas Man" Poglitsch play true hard core iron-butt race-crazy roadies, hauling the car and the gear 5000 miles to and from sunny California. Jason "Grrrr!" Baugh, Carol "Hot For Teacher" Roth (Poglitsch's girlfriend) and myself fly out in the lap of commuter-class Delta luxury. Throw into the mix Troy "I'll Eat That" Stinson, our secret team member cleverly disguised as a hospitality worker for Walker Racing and the plot thickens!

Laguna Seca is one of the most beautiful places a racecar driver or fan could visit. Admire the stark beauty of its hilly surroundings; feel the weather change from see-your-breath cold to hot and arid; lust for the gorgeous track with its marvelous technical layout and exhilarating elevation changes; stand with respect and awe at the top of The Corkscrew. Monterey is equally as beautiful; I hope someday to be able to afford a cardboard box on a sidewalk there. Yeah, that's all nice, when do we get to race?

Friday started with an early morning practice session and ended with a late-day qualifying round. No warm up laps or pace cars here, kiddies, just all 70 of you line up and GO once you hit the track. Not standard procedure for an SCCA event but hey, time is limited when you're sharing the track with Paul Tracy and company. Amazingly there were still cars flying out of the paddock by the time I got around the backside! Our first

practice session went well, but the car had some problems that needed to be sorted out. Frances was plowing like my dad's F150 in the dead of a snowed-in Michigan winter, and then would revert to wicked oversteer upon lifting the throttle. Still we managed a respectable lap time, placing upper mid-pack. In the pits, a quick alignment check revealed a couple of gremlins that we set out to correct. Our changes worked and we picked up a couple places in the afternoon qualifying session, moving us into the top 30. During the day we had plenty of opportunity to mill about and check out what other teams were doing; every aspect of SCCA club racing was present, from the guy who built his car in his garage last month to the top shelf Pro Spec Miata teams from across the country. It was amazing to see the diversity of people and cars, like 70 different interpretations of the same basic theme.

The next morning we fiddled a little more, and Frances got a little better. Unfortunately we didn't fiddle enough (or was that too much?) and lost a couple spots in the morning session, moving us to the back half of the field again. The groupings were so close that often 10 or more positions were separated by only a few tenths of a second. Fortunately the great thing about being at the largest Spec Miata race ever is that there are plenty of friendly people there willing to share information. Miata owners are unique in that they form a sort of community that is perhaps not so prevalent with some other classes. Everyone we ran into had the same "for the class mentality", and was very helpful. We borrowed tools, exchanged ideas, and supported each other, so in all I guess you could say we all formed one very large team in the name of promoting both the SCCA and Spec Miata.

We picked up some tips, again put the screws to Frances, and hit the track. Afternoon qualifying resulted in a 36th place start for the Sunday race, squarely mid-pack. I was quite disappointed with this, figuring we had maximized the car, and was convinced that my driving must be the problem. I felt like I had already let the team down. However, I was fortunate enough to run into a long-time racer and engine builder that had been involved with the SCCA for decades. After asking about the car and it's preparation, he was amazed we were doing what we were. Frances was my daily driver for three years, and she has 110,000 miles on her, most of which were under