

# Drivers Education - Learning about You and Your Car

By Chris J. Poglitsch

Read the following quotes, see what sort of conclusion you draw:

“.....So do I. Longer than you, and I’ve never had to take my gun out of its holster. I’m proud of that.” Harry: Well, you’re a good man, Lieutenant. Good man always knows his limitations.” -Magnum Force, 1973.

“VSC - Vehicle Skid Control: Vehicle Skid Control (VSC) senses the onset of loss of lateral traction and helps the driver stay on track. Input from four wheel-speed sensors, a yaw-rate (directional) sensor, a deceleration sensor and a steering-wheel-angle sensor is communicated to the VSC system’s computer. The system has the ability to reduce power and to control the brake actuator. Working with both ABS and TRAC, the VSC system helps the driver to compensate for loss of lateral traction, which can cause skids and loss of vehicle control.” -Website [www.Lexusafety.com](http://www.Lexusafety.com)

O.K., What happened between 1973 and 2002? At one point in time, it was up to a driver to understand the limitations of an automobile. If it rained, you watched your line, maybe slowed down, and by all means, checked your tread depth to make sure your chances of aquaplaning were minimal. Now, if a Lexus driver wrecks, they’re a victim of a terrible computer system that didn’t take into account they were talking on the cell phone to their Shaman, who’s reciting their Mantra back to them (no offense intended to any religious affiliations here folks, really).

What I appreciate about a Miata, or, for that matter, an F150 pickup, and any auto I’ll ever own, is that the avoidance of accidents is purely up to me. I’m the driver; I take responsibility for my actions. Period, end of discussion. One way that I’ve taken responsibility is by attending driver education courses. Actually, I’ve attended five driver education events and two auto crosses, hosted by the North Carolina region of SCCA (Sports Car Club of America), Porsche, Miata, and Datsun clubs.

The beauty of these events, and I recommend them fully to “Anyone Who Gets Behind The Wheel”, is that you understand your limits, and the limits of your vehicle in a safe environment, very forgiving to the beginner.

This last weekend I joined the Michigan Miata Club at Waterford Hills road course just north of Detroit for a Driver Ed (DE). This was NOT a race in any sense of the word. Though there were two Spec Miatas there, they both had to cover their markings so that, to the casual observer, they just had terrible paint jobs.

I ran in the “White group”, the most experienced class. We could take instructors along if we chose, but it wasn’t mandatory. I did, and my instructor was a pleasant gent from England, who, like I, had lived in South Africa for some time. Nigel “This one goes to eleven” Fox drove his 2002 Porsche Carrera to the event, and trust me folks, it went to eleven, in about three seconds. He was quite experienced at the course and showed me the proper line. Plus, he talked to me a great deal, which I like in instructors.

Here’s where the education comes in....I didn’t always take the proper line, but I always (except for once when I spun off course), could atone for my sins with the proper opposite steering, release of throttle and maybe, but not likely, braking.

If you’ve never done a DE, go for an Autocross. They are less expensive and slower, but slow is good, remember, you really want to understand what happens when you’re turning 180 degrees around a bend in your car, as fast as you can, and you mash the brakes.

Here is a checklist I’ve used for the past five years of things to bring

and do at both Autocross and DE’s:

## **Before the event:**

1. Especially before a DE, take your car to Shane at AIM Tuning (dingding) on Gasoline Alley for a tech inspection. The organizers of the DE will send you a sheet of what to check for. Shane is not only the owner, but also having raced Pro Spec Miatas; he knows what to look for in your car, to make sure your ride is up for the event.

2. Change your oil. Throw out your idea of value, it doesn’t matter if you changed it only 2000 miles ago, high revs burn much fuel and carbon blows out tailpipes, and into oil, which, if mixed with condensation, creates caustic sulfuric acid. Engines don’t like acid much.

3. Bleed or have bled your brake system.

4. Check thickness of brake pads 50% is a good rule of thumb for autocross.

5. Check tread on tires. At least 3/32. At Waterford, I had two week old tires, and scrubbed off 50% of their life. Waterford is EXTREMELY gritty, and eats tires for breakfast.

6. Go to an empty parking lot, put your car in reverse, and idle backwards. As you idle backwards, very gently depress the brake pedal, so that your car doesn’t stall, but keeps rolling, with the brakes on. This will take off some, if not all, of the “brake glaze” that builds up on the pads. You’ll feel the difference in the pedal if your pads were glazed, much grippier.

## **Take with you to the course:**

1. Extra brake fluid. When pads wear down, sometimes adding a little fluid is necessary.

2. Torque wrench and 21mm socket. People love those bring torque wrenches, we make friends quickly. DO NOT torque lugs that are on hot wheels, just after a run, aluminum is malleable, and 86ft/lbs can become 150 if you hot torque.

3. Water - gallon jugs of it. Maybe some Gatorade. Under our helmets, we perspire considerably. I can’t tell you the number of times I’ve dehydrated myself. NO BEER HERE, or soda for that matter.

4. Chocks for rear tires (see below).

5. A friend. It’s always nice to have a buddy with you.

6. A wide brimmed hat. I have to disagree with the Miata Owners Club on the sun block at the track statement in a recent magazine. Anything that makes my steering wheel slippery or sweats down into my eyes and burns is a big no-no in my book. Let your buddy use the sun block. You wear wide brimmed hat.

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