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Around The Bend... by Jay Hofaker, President

I'm an autocrosser. The enjoyment I get out of autocrossing is experiencing the limits of handling of my car in a safe, legal environment. Because of the time I've spent competing at these events, I have a much better feel for how easy it is to lose control when taking a sharp turn too fast.

What is autocross? It's a precision driving contest in which one car at a time takes a timed run on a course marked with traffic cones. The events are usually held at large parking lots, or inactive airstrips. The speeds reached on these courses are no higher than you would reach in normal highway driving. Competing cars are split into classes based on the make/model of car and what kinds of modifications have been made to the cars. Each driver gets three to six runs to record their best time, with penalties assessed for each cone knocked over or displaced out of its marked location.

There are various organizations across the country that sanction autocross events. Here in Indiana, the Sports Car Club of America has several regions that have active Solo II programs (SCCA's term for autocross events). You can see the Indianapolis region's schedule of Solo II events on their website: <http://indyscca.org> (Also, see page two for this month's event information.)

Once you find an event to attend, there are only few things you absolutely must have to get started in this sport. You will need: A car in working condition with all loose items removed (take out your floor mats, leave your CD collection at home), a driver's license, the entry fee (\$25 for non SCCA members), and a way to put numbers on the side of your car (with masking tape, for example). A helmet is required to compete, but the Indy SCCA has helmets you can borrow during the event. Since an autocross is an all day outdoor event, you will need to dress appropriately for the weather. Bring plenty of water and sunscreen. These events go on rain or shine, so be prepared.

At a typical Solo II event, you will arrive around 8-9 am to register for the event. After registration, you will take your car through Tech, where a brief technical safety inspection is made. After passing tech, you will have some time to examine the course. There are no practice runs, so walking the course is your only opportunity to learn the course before competition, so you should walk the course several times. A driver's meeting is held where the rules are explained and special instructions are given. After the meeting, you will be broken up into groups based on car class. One group will be competing while the other group helps run the event by working the course.

When it's time for your group to compete, drive your car to the grid area and a worker will direct you where to park. Cars are usually lined up by class, so you will be taking your run before or after cars similar to yours. Cars proceed then the start line, where the starter will signal one car at a time to start their run. After you pass the finish line, you need to come to a complete stop in an area discussed during the driver's meeting, then proceed slowly back to your position in the grid area. After every car has had one run, the second run begins. Depending on the length of the course and number of competitors, there will be between three and six runs.

When it's time for you group to work, you need to report to the worker chief to get a working assignment. Most workers will be assigned to stations around the course. Each station has one flagman, one radioman, and several cone shaggers. The flagman is there to wave the red flag to stop the event if there is any safety problem. The radioman uses the radio to tell timing and scoring when a car knocks over a cone and the cone shaggers replace cones that get knocked over by the cars.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. There will be time between runs and when you aren't working so you can talk to more experienced competitors to get advice. Many will let you ride along on runs so you see how they are driving the course. Invite an experienced driver to ride along with you so they can give you tips. Most importantly, have fun. Yes, it's a competition, and there is a trophy for first place, but winning isn't everything. Learning about your car is the important thing. See you there!