

## Fear Joy of the Unknown

I remember my first Autocross, many years ago. It was my first PCA event, and certainly my first foray into “real driving” with the club; it was mysterious, a little scary and once there, confusing. I thought that 11 years later I might share a typical day, debunk some myths and make it more easily approachable. And that’s as it should be; autocross is the affordable, accessible end of the driver education/racing spectrum – its done in a day, requires no special car prep, and is pretty easy on you and your car.

### **Yep, you can run your street car, safely, as-is.**

As to the last – yea, it really is easy and safe on you and your car. With a minimum of common sense, crashes are pretty much unheard of in autocross, although spins are common, not to mention educational and entertaining for the rest of us. And my autocross car, (PCA class Stock 1, SCCA class street C) is, as the class suggests, bone-stock. I run on the same tires I drive on the street (ok, I may be crazy, they *are* Bridgestone RE-71Rs) and have driven them in all seasons, for four years, street, trips, and autocross – so the idea that you will damage or unduly wear your car is simply not proven by my experience.

### **What exactly is autocross anyway?**

Autocross is sometimes, (and I think officially by the SCCA) called Solo 1 racing. It is racing, through a cone-defined course, one car at a time, against the clock. Classes allow slow and fast cars compete, just like a golf handicap. We cycle through so that all cars get the same, pre-defined number of runs through the course – as many as time allows (more on THAT later), but typically you can count on 6-8 runs through the roughly one-minute course. There are always instructors available – to truly instruct early, but later as you become an expert, the norm in autocross, is to continue to take along experienced instructors to help coach you to the next level.

Typically an autocross course is very technical, with tight and difficult sections of hairpins, slaloms (just like skiing), offset gates, sweepers, and like a well-designed golf course, a diabolical layout to make you really think.

### **It’s a full day, but over well before 5**

Let’s begin with the schedule. I remember, way back, wondering” how long will it really take me? Can I be home in the afternoon?”. Quick answer: “all day and no”. Here’s the basic schedule – we all spend half the day driving and the other half working. It takes a huge cadre of starters, grid organizers, timers, cone-fetchers, and radio wielding folks out on course to see and report errors, call them in and reset cones. Efficient, attentive workers make for a smooth-running day and therefore more driving. Every minute that the course is down, someone is not driving. On average, that someone is partially you.

So you will spend, for example, the morning driving and the afternoon working. But wait, there’s more! You also need to get there early. Is this just Grant nagging people to show up on time? No! There’s tons to do. You need to register and get your work assignment – it won’t

run without everyone doing their job, but importantly, knowing what that job entails. If you are new, talk to experienced people so you are prepared. Keep in mind that while standing on course for 90 minutes may be hot, its also a first-row seat to the race. Its entertaining to be there, and if you pay attention, rally educational. I miss the days of shagging cones, watching the race, and getting a tan. Now I carry a clipboard or huddle over a computer. Pfooey.

### **. . . And you need to learn the course by walking it and studying it...**

Yes, you have to sign the waiver, get a job assignment and empty your car. But the racing begins far before you sit behind the wheel. Autocross demands that you learn the course. Unlike Watkins Glen, you can't remember it from last year or last month. Every course is different, both by necessity but also by design. Autocross is a sport of learning the road, and driving it in the most effective (fast!) way. I'll point out that by "fast" I mean "lowest elapsed time", not "highest speed". They are different – and a short path may make up for lower time; in fact, it usually does.

Sometime about 45 minutes before the racing begins we will announce that the course is complete, tested and open for walking. Take every minute possible and walk it until you are dragged in. Don't just walk – study. Look for how the gates meld together and what the best line is. Is the corner off camber? Sandy? Do you need to slow down for a tight corner? Is that tight corner followed by a fast section? Remember the concept of "type 1" corners – where the aim is to maximize speed AFTER the corner – typically slow in; fast out. The reverse doesn't work so well.

Moral to story: get there early, spend your time wisely. Talk to experience folks about working, tactics, strategy, how to drive etc. Drive the course in your mind. Just like Lime Rock or The Glen, you should be able to close your eyes at the start line, and do a lap, thinking about how the car is negotiating the course. Can't do it? Pay more attention next time 😊

### **What stuff do you need?**

Autocross involves a whole day, in the sun or rain potentially, in a large parking lot (or Pocono Raceway, or an airport runway...) without a café', or time to go anywhere; bring **everything**. Bring water, food, a folding chair, a hat, sunscreen, and umbrella (useful for sun or rain), a clean shirt, something to take notes with, a box to put your loose items in. Maybe more water – I like to freeze a half-gallon milk container into ice.

### **The wrap – what's the driving like?**

I'll spare you the lecture on looking ahead and tactics – I've done that before. Each run is "driving concentrate" – 60 seconds of adrenalin and hopefully, focus. The course will be overwhelming, and figuring out how to go fast without errors difficult, but this is a key racing skill that transfers to tracks and to the street – the ability to read a course like Jack Nicholas reads a green.

In the end, autocross is both strategy and execution, its real racing, it's an afternoon with your friends, it's a learning experience, and it's pretty much low-cost, low-risk and over in 9 or 10 hours elapsed.

Come and join us, if not this year, then next.

Grant