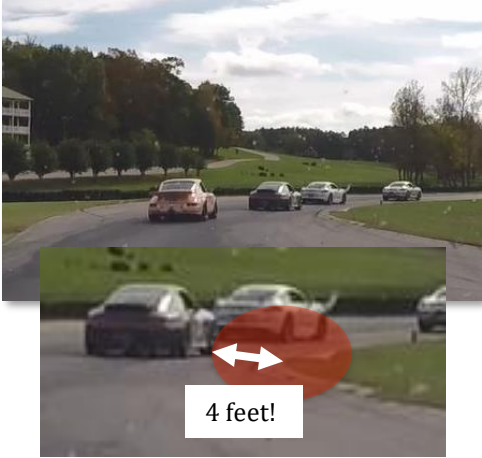


“It has occurred to the NNJR chief instructors that the drivers who need to read this article may be the ones least likely to....don't be that driver.”

Drivers Missing the Obvious

By Bill Gilbert



"The track is like a Banker (or loan shark)...if you borrow 4 feet at the apex, the track will want to collect in full at the exit!"

-- Dyke Hensen

I often write about driving techniques, some for all DE drivers, some for drivers new to DE or Autocross, and some for “advanced” drivers. This article focuses squarely on solo (advanced) drivers and I want to be sure that less experienced drivers aren’t discouraged by a frank discussion of solo driving skills that, to put it bluntly, have not been up to par. I also want to emphasize that my comments don’t apply to all solo drivers. But they do apply to more than a few. Regardless of your driving experience, I hope you find some useful tips. And if you recognize yourself or a driving friend, please pay extra attention!

At our recent VIR DE, other chiefs and I saw many examples of driving in upper run groups that, to put it directly, doesn’t belong in black, white or (gasp) red! This includes three relatively serious incidents where, fortunately, the drivers were OK. Not so for the cars involved. We saw similar driving at earlier events.

The question, of course, is “Why?”

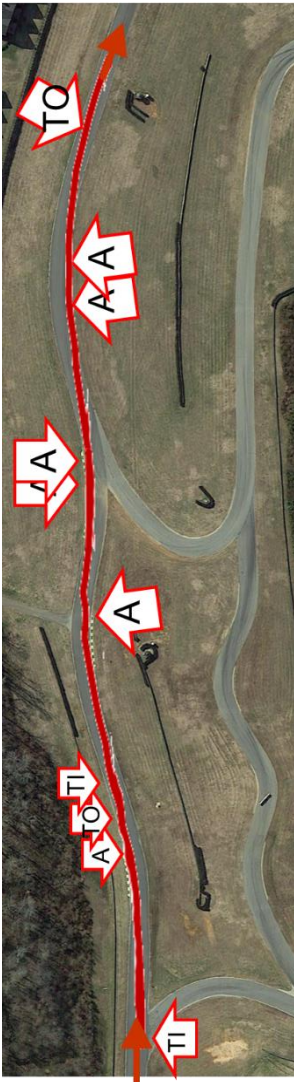
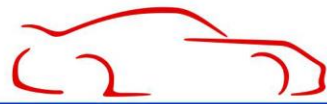
Every driver in a solo group is, by definition, experienced and, presumably, knows more than the basics of driving on track. So the following should be second nature. For an experienced driver, driving on track is (should be) very simple: **drive the line smoothly and consistently, then fine tune, adjusted for traffic, track conditions and flags.**

So why did we observe drivers consistently missing apexes? Not driving the proper line? Make dumb mistakes? In other words, why are these drivers missing the obvious?

“Apexes are not optional”

--Yamaha champions driving school





I can only conclude that some “advanced” drivers have forgotten the basics or gotten too lazy/”comfortable” to focus on them. (Modern cars don’t help: it’s too easy to go fast, even with driver mistakes). For those of us who focus on the “education” in Drivers Education, it’s particularly frustrating when drivers make major mistakes that are easily avoided by taking advantage of the learning resources available. It’s almost like some drivers are ignoring readily available and obvious advice.

An Example

Let’s consider an example: the Climbing Esses at VIR, one of the track’s signature features. Also one of its most dangerous. The danger should be obvious to anyone who starts to take them at speed, especially if you get out of rhythm. There is a correct way to drive the climbing esses that is fun and safe. But we had at least three serious offs here, two of which involved the tire wall. Clearly these drivers missed the obvious: clear instructions written in the VIR turn-by-turn and covered in both pre-event classes. And not just there. The same instructions can be found in the VIR virtual track walk published by Ross Bentley and Peter Kraus. Those drivers who listened to Peter during a lunchtime talk at VIR a few years ago heard him explain the technique then. Our instructors share the proper technique with students. But some drivers in the upper run groups seem to think they know the right way to drive the climbing esses without listening to or reading what others have to say.

Now I can hear some saying, “I know the line but I don’t always execute it perfectly.” Maybe the offs were caused by simple driver error, even though they knew the correct line? So, a correction to my simple definition for driving on track: **drive the line smoothly and consistently, at a reasonable pace, then fine tune, adjusted for traffic, track conditions and flags.** In other words, always have some margin. Many of you have heard me strongly recommend to drive at 8 10ths on track, using the proper (original) definition of 8 10ths: “Having a bit of a go’; using all of the road, but with a little safety factor in reserve.” (Denis Jenkinson, “The Racing Driver”).

“I never TRY to go fast, but I DO try to take every corner perfectly.”
 -- Ayrton Senna (apocryphal)





Consistency

As you've heard me say many times, a driver cannot improve until they have a consistent baseline.

That means:

- Driving the same line lap after lap with only minor variation, meaning a few inches at most.
- Missing a turn in point, apex or other reference point by more than a few inches, means you are not driving at a level that warrants being in a solo run group.
- Reference points such as End of Braking, Throttle Application Point and Wide Open Throttle should not vary more than a foot or two from lap to lap (excepting traffic adjustments).

I want to emphasize that regardless of your level of experience at a particular track, knowing the line and driving it consistently (see sidebar) has to be the basis for everything else that you do. Yes there can be minor variations on the line. As you get better you can and should experiment with those variations but you must have a reason for varying the line. As I said in one of my classes, if you don't know why you're doing something, stop and ask why until you figure it out. If you can't explain the line to yourself and others, perhaps you don't understand it as well as you think.

There are many other "obvious" resources available to solo drivers listed at the end of this article.

Obvious Safety Mistakes

But even more worrying, and more mystifying, than drivers not knowing the line are the obvious safety related mistakes made in upper run groups.

Flags

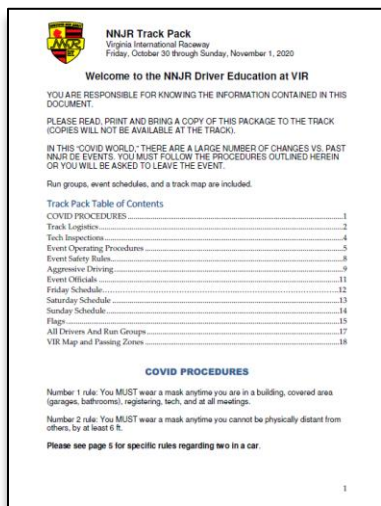
Let's start with flags. When do you look at a flag station? It appears that many drivers wait until they reach a flag station instead of looking ahead as soon as they can see it. A yellow flag is obvious, if you are looking at it. Same for a black flag. Far too many drivers miss black and other flags. There is absolutely NO excuse for a solo driver to miss any flag. After all, it is very obvious. Flags are also the single most important safety feature on any track: they tell us whether or not it is safe to proceed!

Traffic and Passing

Let's consider traffic and passing. Which side to pass on? At VIR (like most tracks), passing is mandatory left or right in some passing zones...for all groups. Yet we had drivers routinely give signals on the wrong side. Not only are passing zones and mandatory sides obvious in the Track Pack, it is obvious why they are important. It's not obvious why drivers can't figure this out.



Track Pack



Speaking of the Track Pack, it appears that some drivers don't feel the need to read it. Over the years, NNJR track chairs and chief instructors have debated how much information to include in the track pack vs. in meetings. We've evolved to our current approach: treat drivers like adults who are expected to know the Track Pack and only cover essential information in meetings. So it should be obvious that each driver needs to know the Track Pack. So how to explain the driver who pulled off at VIR with a mechanical, then proceeded to exit the car! When he was able to limp back to the pits, he did so sans helmet!

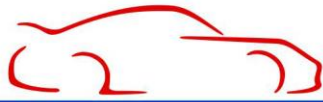
Aggressive Driving

Last but not least is aggressive driving, particularly in the Red run group and, to a lesser extent, in the Black run group. We've seen far too many examples of drivers trying to go fast but driving poorly. In almost every case, they have a relatively new, fast car which enables them to feel like they are going fast and, in some cases, brag about it. But it's the car going fast, not the driver. In many cases, PSM and related technologies are being activated routinely, when they shouldn't be used at all. When we adopted the "Fast and Faster" approach for Black and Red two years ago, the intent was to reduce speed disparities in each run group. To some extent, that has worked. But the downside has been that some drivers now in Red seem to want to prove they are as fast as drivers who've been driving in the Red run group for years.

This is yet another case of missing the obvious. In terms of seat time, a driver new to the Red run group typically has a small amount compared to experienced Red run group drivers (the same applies to a driver new to the Black run group). Plus, traditionally the Red run group was reserved for instructors who've had to demonstrate driving mastery before getting trained as an Instructor. So a driver new to the Red or Black run group should be observing, learning and asking questions. They should have learned before now that trying to go fast does not work: only improved technique leads to improved pace. This obvious fact somehow gets lost.

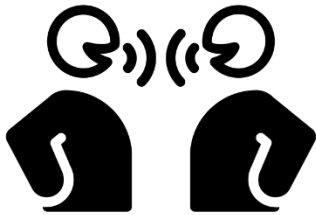
"Just because your car is fast; that doesn't make you Aryton Senna."
-- Dyke Hensen





Share This Information!

Finally, it has occurred to the NNJR chief instructors that the drivers who need to read this article may be the ones least likely to, since they seem to think they already know everything! If you know anyone like that, please encourage them to get one of us in the car with them. And send them a copy or the link and encourage them to read this: tell them it will help them go faster if they pay attention!



Created by priyanka
from Noun Project

There are many other examples that the Chief Instructors can recite where experienced drivers made mistakes that should never happen or were unaware of obvious issues that affect their driving and safety.

I hope this article encourages you to not join that list. Be sure to be well prepared, take advantage of the available resources, and focus on learning. In short, don't overlook the obvious.



Driving Resources Available to Solo Drivers

Thinking about drivers missing the obvious caused me to question whether drivers in upper run groups really take advantage of the myriad resources that are available to help all of us improve our driving.

- “Trackside Classrooms”
 - On one hand, I was encouraged by the number of drivers in all run groups who attended the VIR pre-event virtual classroom sessions on Zoom. Those included turn-by-turn discussions in addition to detailed presentations on Avoiding Understeer and Oversteer plus Passing and Traffic Management. I got good feedback from many drivers about how helpful those sessions were, including the turn-by-turn. For example, after the first on-track session, one advanced driver came to thank me for the climbing esses advice, saying it made that section easier, faster and much more comfortable.
 - On the other hand, drivers who attended (or watched the recording on the NNJR YouTube channel) represent barely more than half of the event. Some drivers are very familiar with VIR and don't need to take advantage of a turn-by-turn because they already know the track. The drivers I worry about are the ones who think they know the track, but don't.
- Turn by Turn Descriptions
 - For some years, NNJR has had turn-by-turn descriptions on the website for all of our tracks.
 - Many of our tracks have a “virtual track walk” available from Ross Bentley and Peter Kraus. Each costs \$50, but that is inexpensive when considering how it helps learn a new track or refine one's line at a familiar track. While I know most of our tracks well, I've bought their “track walks” just to pick up any new nuances.
- Track videos
 - The NNJR website has a video (driven on the line) of every NNJR track available to review at your leisure.
 - There are many videos on YouTube and elsewhere, but they often require some judgment. If it's a video of a pro and a fast car, that can be helpful but may include techniques that an average driver cannot execute. More commonly found are videos of average drivers, many of which contain one or more mistakes.
- Driving Techniques
 - Countless resources deal with driving techniques ranging from books to articles to emails, like Ross Bentley's weekly Speed Secrets. I strongly recommend any or all of these, especially to advanced drivers. It's important to recognize that some books and online material are more focused on drivers with extensive experience. Therefore, they may assume a level of driving competence that you don't have.
- Instructors
 - NNJR has instructors available at all of our events (subject to Covid restrictions). If you are struggling with a particular corner or track, or just want to make sure you're executing correctly, you should ask for an instructor. That can be hard to do early at an event, but once the event gets going instructors can usually be found by asking one of the chief instructors. Besides in-car, it is often helpful to do lead/follow with an instructor.
 - At some events, pro coaches are available and over the past few years we've seen more drivers hire a pro.
- Data
 - Drivers with data acquisition have the ability to look at data and determine how to improve. This assumes you have invested the time and energy to learn how to analyze data. There are also members, instructors and pro coaches who can help analyze data. At the same time, I would point out that looking at data does not help learn the line other than to consider minor variations. If one is taking the wrong line into the climbing esses that won't be apparent, other than inconsistent segment times.

