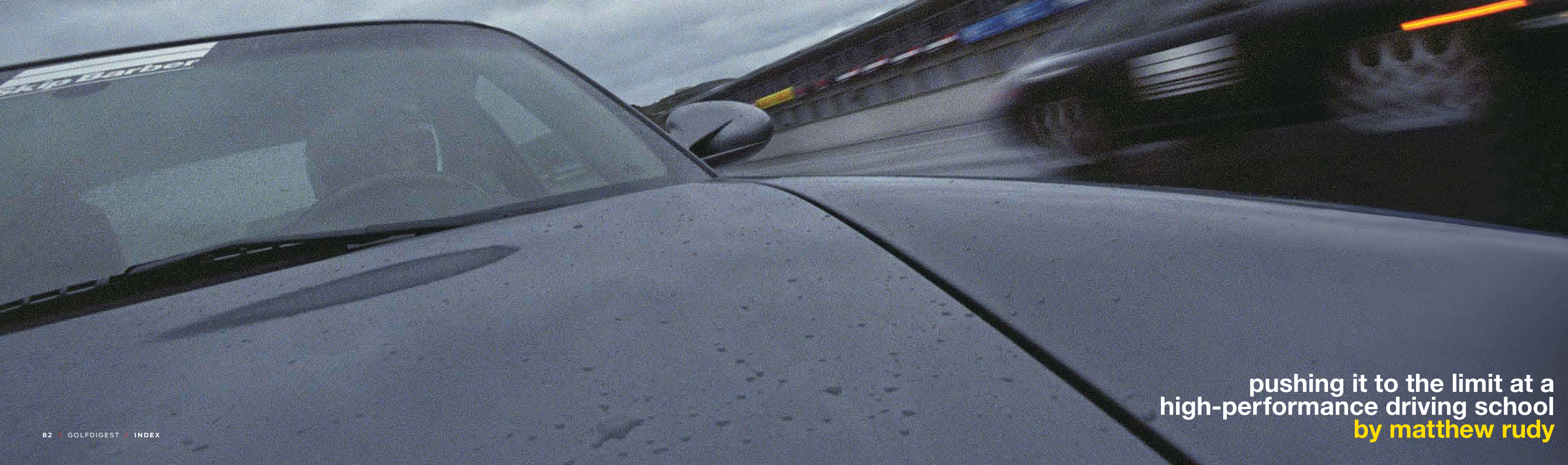


then needed **4** speed
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pushing it to the limit at a
high-performance driving school
by **matthew rudy**



In this case, the edge is represented by twin strands of tiny orange cones organized in an elaborate route around the rain-soaked infield tarmac at Laguna Seca Raceway on the Monterey Peninsula in California. My assignment is to take the 911—warning lights and all—around the auto-cross route as quickly as possible without wiping out any cones.

After a few skittery practice runs, I yank and shove the Porsche around in a lap that feels relatively quick and kills off only a few cones. Riding shotgun, the instructor doesn't stifle yawn, but he could. "That was fine, but you didn't come close to the limit," he said.

We change seats, and in about 4.1 seconds I'm hit with the same sort of awestruck despair that comes when I watch a tour player strike a hundred perfect 7-irons in a row. Or maybe it's the seat belt cutting off the circulation in my neck. His peak speed in the straightaway isn't much faster than mine, but the professional driver carries way more speed much later into each turn, and he pins me in my seat accelerating hard from the apex. I have a lot to learn.

The one-day High Speed Driving class, offered year-round at six high-profile racetracks nationwide (see "Where to put pedal to metal"), is the first rung in the Skip Barber educational ladder for the aspiring speed freak. For \$1,799, students get eight hours of instruction on the nuances of car balance, braking and turning in high-performance street cars—enough to discover just how much you don't know about driving fast. If your need for speed isn't completely satisfied, you can graduate to full-blown racing school in specially prepared Indy-style Formula cars or modified sports cars and qualify for a variety of racing licenses—and get yourself a color-coordinated Nomex fireproof suit.

But I'm a long way from getting my name stenciled on the side of a race car on this rainy morning. I'm attempting to bring a BMW 335i around a curve in a controlled slide while the instructor, drift racer Jonathan Frost, works the emergency brake to encourage the back end to

'it's self-preservation that usually gets in the way for most people. they don't want to "upset the vehicle."'

break loose. "It's self-preservation that usually gets in the way for most people," Frost says. "They don't want to 'upset the vehicle.'" The BMW chatters and bucks to a stop when I turn too early into the curve and spin out before getting back on the clutch. "It feels safer to turn early, but that's the opposite of what you want to do," Frost says. "You'll come out of the curve pointed at a tree or a fence."

Frost reminds me again to look where I want the car to go—"Ever notice that when you see a car that's hit a tree, it's almost always dead center? That's because the driver was looking right at it"—and to add throttle smoothly through the turn. Like magic, the back end of the BMW drifts out around the curve and snaps back in place just in time for me to zip down the straight.

As viscerally satisfying as it is to throw the car around with a modicum of skill, it's sobering to discover how little I understood about the dynamics of a sliding car before Frost's half-hour lesson. I can now do a mean doughnut in the vacant high school parking lot down the street, but I'm also a lot better equipped to keep my car off the guardrail in a slippery situation on my local stretch of I-95.

"That's the main thing we're trying to get across—a sensitivity to what the car is doing," says Germone, who won a NASCAR regional championship in 1997. "The way the weight of the car shifts affects everything you do: stop, turn, accelerate. Our goal is to make the car's reaction a little more predictable for you out in real life."

Of course, walking past the squadron of Porsches, BMWs and Lexus IS-Fs parked in an orderly row, it's also easy to understand the school's fantasy-camp allure. My partner in the skid-pad exercise, San Francisco software engineer Ed Kwan, came to the school to scout the 911

another sort of driving

> For those who want to mix golf with racing school, Monterey is tough to beat. Pebble Beach Resorts is a short drive from Laguna Seca, and it has never been easier to get a room at the Lodge and a round on Pebble Beach Golf Links. You can book a two-night stay at the Lodge, play two rounds of golf—one at Pebble, the other at Spanish Bay or Spyglass Hill—and get a \$100 merchandise credit for \$1,940 (pebblebeach.com). Pebble Beach is the site of the 2010 U.S. Open and a lifetime, bucket-list kind of experience. Spyglass is the more dramatic and memorable of the other two, if you're forced to choose. > The best value in all of Monterey is next door to the track. Bayonet and Black Horse golf courses sit on the former Fort Ord army base, and both courses sparkle after a recent \$13 million renovation completed in December. Bayonet is one of the most challenging tests in Northern California, and the linky and inviting Black Horse rolls out on a hillside overlooking Monterey Bay (bayonetblackhorse.com). Both courses are \$160 during peak times—a third of the green fee at Pebble Beach.

and compare it to the 16-year-old Acura NSX super car he has in his garage. "I've been selling my wife on the idea that there isn't enough room for the two of us and a new baby in the NSX," says Kwan with a laugh. "But in this economy, it's hard to justify the conspicuous consumption, so I probably won't visit the Porsche dealer anytime soon. But this is the next-best thing."

Not that conspicuous consumption was an

Hurry up and stop:
A Porsche 911 (far left)
pours it on, and a
Mazda RX 8 (near left)
hits the skid pad.
Below: the end.

issue for some in my class. Another student had surprised his father with a new 911 for Christmas and brought him to the track to get some instruction on how to drive it. "Why beat up your car when you can beat up ours?" joked Germone after hearing about the gift. A group of four other guys were staying at the Lodge at Pebble Beach—a 15-minute drive from the track—and had incorporated the driving school into a four-day golf weekend.

In the morning session, we practice controlled power slides in BMWs, then switch to supermaneuverable Porsche Boxsters to work on reaction time in a three-lane trap. As you get to the mouth of the trap at the required speed—about 55 miles per hour—the instructor randomly turns on a green light over one of the lanes, and you have to dart the car into that lane without killing more cones. It's astonishing how aggressively you can wrench the wheel and still keep the car under control if you learn to avoid unwinding the wheel too much when you want the car to straighten out.

Teaching a bunch of amateurs how to go fast without covering how to stop is a bit like handing out loaded handguns to teenagers, so we spend most of the afternoon on a variety of braking exercises. Many orange cones die for the cause. It turns out that the instinctive reaction to trouble ahead—jamming on the brakes—is usually not the best choice. Once the car's anti-lock brake system engages, it's much harder to steer the car around the trouble. The best move is usually a combination of light braking, aggressive steering and acceleration to essentially slide the car around the problem. "You're looking for a space for the car, then putting it there," says Germone. "It's active instead of passive."

Easy for him to say, but how much of it got through would soon become apparent: "Graduation" from speed school is a half-hour chase session on the full Laguna Seca track. I'm supposed to use the skills I learned throughout the day to keep up with the instructor setting the pace ahead of me in a similar car.

The persistent rain makes the track slippery, so the instructor stays away from the fastest racing lines, where the Formula cars had laid a greasy film of tire rubber earlier in the day. Even at this relatively cautious pace, I'm going more than 100 miles per hour to keep up through the Rahal Straight before braking hard to pick my way

through the Corkscrew—the blind, downhill S-curve that is Laguna Seca's most famous stretch of track. Alex Zanardi was going more than twice my speed when he made "the pass" on the final lap to steal the 1996 Indy Car race from Bryan Herta. Zanardi's borderline insane move is immortalized on YouTube. Mine just gets me a radio lecture from the instructor when I clatter the right wheels over the inside edge of the track on the way through the last part of the turn.

If the measure of a roller coaster is how quickly you want to go again, high-speed driving school is the tallest, fastest ride there is. Still buzzing from the track, we go back to the classroom for closing ceremonies. Germone hands each student a diploma and a touchingly appropriate memento—one of the tiny orange cones we spent all day destroying. He also offers a steep discount if you sign up for another class at Laguna Seca or any one of Skip Barber's other locations within the next calendar year. This summer, I'll do the two-day high-speed school close to home at Lime Rock Park in Connecticut, where you get more laps on the track on Day 2.

As we head to the paddock to get into our now hugely unsatisfying vanilla rental cars, a Skip Barber mechanic is wheeling the Porsche into the service bay to get it in shape for the next class, three days later. A stack of transmissions for the Formula cars sits on a pallet just inside the garage door, and another 911 rests on the operating table with its wheels off, waiting for a rubber transplant.

Kwan asks Frost what happens to the cars

where to put pedal to metal

> Skip Barber Racing offers driving and racing schools at more than 20 locations nationwide. Six prominent tracks—Laguna Seca, Road America in Wisconsin, Road Atlanta, Sebring International Raceway and Palm Beach International Raceway in Florida and corporate headquarters Lime Rock Park in Connecticut—offer a range of schools, from one-day street-car classes to three-day race training. > Prices range from \$800 for a new-driver school to \$4,000 for the three-day Formula racing class. Graduate from the two-day Advanced Racing School (\$3,200) and you're licensed to race in the Skip Barber Regional Race Series, a schedule of seven weekend competitions throughout North America from May to October. Show up with a helmet, racing suit and \$3,000, and you spend the week-end practicing, qualifying and running in two races against drivers of the same experience level, in Formula cars provided at the track. For more information, visit skipbarber.com.

when the school is done with them, and Frost composes his own tongue-in-cheek Craigslist ad on the spot: "Low mileage, executive-driven, never been out of second gear and professionally maintained," he says, grinning. "Just remember, one mile on the skid pad is equal to about 10 miles of street wear and tear, so you can do the math. I'd stay away." ■

