

Are You Game for the Track Less Traveled?

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Crude hits an all time high and the price of gas is rising faster than the fumes escaping from my open gas cap. Editors rush to publish gas saving tips, "check the tire pressure, tune-up the car, take the junk out of the trunk." And they go on, you've heard the tune.

There is a contrarian view. Over inflate the tires, put extra stuff in the trunk (helmet, tools, driving gloves), check the suspension and the brakes, and pray the nut holding the steering wheel doesn't lose it going into the turns.

Soon you could be hitting the track with a full tank of over-priced premium. It's flat out pedal to the metal on that next acceleration run. Just thinking about it makes your heart race. The arm twitches as if the stick shift for a dogleg five speed is inches away from your office chair.

No doubt some automobile owners are having more fun than others. How so? Each year auto clubs sponsor driving events on numerous racetracks throughout the country. Within the last year members of the Mercedes-Benz Club of America ran full-throttle at Virginia International Raceway (VIR) and at Mid-Ohio Sports Car Course, not to mention the dozens upon dozens of autocross events held throughout the country.

More than likely, there are several such events in your area. Greg Calabro is one organizer and he said, "Last year I organized the Mid-Atlantic Defensive Driving School and Mini-Autocross sponsored by the New Jersey Section. We had many newcomers to the event and you should have seen the grins, ear to ear."

Time trials, autocross, and the acceleration run. Yes, another sport and another vocabulary to master. Here's some of the lingo and a few things to keep in mind if you're game for the track less traveled.

First Things First: Performance and defensive driving classes are offered at almost all of the driving events. Instruction often takes place both in the classroom and on the track. You'll gain essential knowledge from experienced professional instructors in a non-threatening environment. Consider a class mandatory before taking your first lap around the track.

Silver Bullet: Long before you hear the sound of the starter's gun, your car needs a thorough inspection. Tires, suspension, and brakes must be in excellent working order along with other mechanical systems. Even if you're the world's best do-it-yourselfer have your mechanic conduct a complete inspection of your vehicle before taking your car to the track. A second opinion can't hurt. And of course, while the car is on the lift have your pit-crew tune it up.

Time Trials: Strap on your helmet and grab the wheel. It's your turn to test your driving skill and your car's performance against the clock. The fastest time around the track wins. These solitary jaunts are popular venues. Automobiles are rated based on their class (model, engine size, etc.); there's a winner in every class.

Autocross: Autocross events are low to medium speed auto racing challenges that are often held on large parking lots and airport runways. The autocross tests your ability to circumvent a course marked by those lovely orange cones. You'll likely suffer a time deduction as you abuse a few cones on your first attempt.

Acceleration Run: Yellow, yellow, yellow - green! That's right, the acceleration run is akin to a drag race. It's all about achieving maximum speed in the shortest amount of time while traversing a fixed distance.

Helmet: Helmets are required and loaner helmets are usually available. Events sponsored by the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) and other organizations have specific requirements for helmet ratings. No, your bicycle helmet won't do, but your motorcycle helmet might. Check with the event organizer for specific requirements.

To all those enthusiasts holding last year's trophy, "Look out baby, 'cause here I come. Get ready, get ready." By Greg Magnus, a freelance writer and owner of eoecho.com; a custom publishing and strategic, yet sensible, marketing-communication firm. He can be reached via email (greg @ eoecho.com) or you can leave a comment on his blog: Greg Magnus - Blog