

How I Spent My Summer Vacation Realizing My Hidden (Driving) Potential

My First High Performance Driving School at Pocono Raceway

By Gail Wagner

By way of introduction, I am the Ithaca-area Rep for the Midstate Miata Club of NY and I write the technical column for the Club's monthly newsletter "Wench with a Wrench" which I hope someone out there reads besides my husband who's forced ☺ and the Club newsletter editor who doesn't have a choice. ☺

I've enjoyed and owned many different sports cars over the years and have always had a keen interest in all types of cars since I can remember. In 2014, with the help of then Miata Club member and mentor, Harry Frisbie, I completed a "bucket list" item that I've been yearning to do for a long time – take a sports car driving school course.

I'd like to share with you my first ever HPDE (High Performance Driving Event) experience that is essentially a high-speed driving school for amateur sports car enthusiasts from a woman's point of view..

I distinctly remember talking to Harry at one of our Miata events in the summer of 2013. He had just returned from a driving school at Pocono Raceway in Pennsylvania. His enthusiasm lit my fire and I asked him to let me know about the 2014 event there. In February, when he contacted me to see if I was still interested in attending in July with him, I decided to go for it.

A couple of caveats here: as excited as I was about participation, little did I know what I was getting myself into. I began to read up on HPDE's and what was expected of car and driver and how schools were typically run by various organizations. It appears that the Delaware Valley Miata Club ran a very tight event with a 16-year safety record at Pocono Raceway in PA and was endorsed heartily by Harry. I printed out a track map used for the driving school and studied driver's videos of the 2013 event on YouTube videos. It looked like fun but truthfully, I was scared. Could I really do this? Did I really want to do this?

Car prep was another matter...entry fees, new brake pads, new oil filter and high temp Castrol Oil, coolant check and additive, a new battery, a small GoPro video cam to record the event from inside my car (best purchase I ever made besides buying *Scarlet*, my 2006 Miata). My husband and I bolted a new roll bar to the car frame as required for all convertibles for added safety, not that I expected to be rolling over! I already had purchased new high performance "sticky" summer tires from the previous summer.

Then there was me and recommended apparel: new Puma motorsport driving shoes, driving gloves, required safety helmet, a new long-sleeved cotton shirt and diamond-stud earrings (yes, I'm a fashionista like Danica) and I was ready to go.

On July 12th, I left the husband at home much to his chagrin (this was totally for me – no distractions), met my mentor at his home and off we went to Whitehall, PA, the Del-Val Miata Club HPDE headquarters. After settling in to my motel room and trying to settle my nerves, we lined up our Miatas for a required thorough safety "technical inspection" by the event organizers. *Scarlet*, my "Arrest Me Red" 2006 Miata, passed with flying colors and a recommendation to add more tire pressure for the track. Wheel lug nut torque was checked,

brakes checked, under-the-hood-stuff checked and we were ready to race...well, not really race – we were ready to learn to go fast(er)!

Since Harry, my mentor, was a previous participant and not only knew the ropes but many previous participants, we hooked up with a number of his wonderful DelVal Miata Club friends and I got to hang out in the track garage with some of the nicest guys I've ever met. All were Advanced group drivers and Miata-savvy. Best of all, I was accepted as a participant and was very, very encouraged throughout the two-day weekend by all of them. I supposed it didn't hurt that I knew a "torque from a toque" and could name eleven different sports cars I'd owned. When I mentioned I changed my own oil, installed my own brakes and roll bar, well, hey, I was voted one of the guys- actually a high compliment in my book, accepted for who I was. Since then, I have introduced my husband to them and we all meet several times a year between Ithaca and New Jersey for a "Track Rats" lunch together and lots of car-talk.

Day 1 at the Track. There was a brief Driver's Meeting at 8:00 a.m. stressing safety, safety, safety, track worker's communication flags (there seemed to be so many to remember!), track etiquette and more safety rules. DelVal Miata Club doesn't fool around with this event. This is serious stuff and the event organizers have a great safety record as a result. You disobey the rules and you are politely asked to leave the premises and forget about coming back. I might add that at the meeting there were 75 men and 4 women. My adrenalin was at an all-time high!

Day One, Lap #1. Here's a true confession: sitting in *Scarlet* with my driving coach beside me on the starting grid with 19 other sports cars waiting for my beginner Novice group to head out to our first session was, believe me, a deer-in-the-headlights experience. The huge, intimidating, banked oval part of the NASCAR track and grandstands looming ahead of me, and big concrete wall just to the left of the trackside, I thought, "What the heck (not the word I used but not printable here) am I doing here?! How do I get out of the gracefully? I'm in wayyyyyy over my head!" OMG!

I had mentally practiced the course, watched videos of others, read everything about track driving I could get my hands on, prepped my car to a fare-thee-well., but believe me, there is nothing like experiencing track time for the first time, at speed. Not only are you going almost 100 mph on the front straight but your instructor is shouting concurrent rapid-fire instructions as you hurtle around the seven turns and several straights: "stab the brakes", downshift into 3rd", now throttle, brake hard, turn in and clip the apex, now throttle, set up for your next turn, brake, turn in...". Yikes. Now, I'll say that I'm a pretty confident "spirited" driver but this was definitely not for the faint of heart.

But you know what and this is the good part: I gritted my teeth, took a deep breath, did a couple more laps listening and memorizing instructions from my very able, patient instructor and things started to magically fall into place. I asked him if he was scared and he told me I wasn't going fast enough! ☺ Finally, I started to relax and get into the rhythm of the turns and straights and actually finally was able to notice where the corner communication worker/flaggers were stationed around the track! I'm not saying I was perfect or the fastest speed queen on the track but by the end of the day I was eagerly anticipating my next 20-minute Novice group run and my lap speeds kept getting faster and faster and more consistent as I gained more confidence in myself and *Scarlet's* ability.

Day Two at the Track. By now I was comfortable in the pit garage checking over *Scarlet* after each run, meeting new people and chatting it up with the guys, now more like quasi-brothers, in my group. All were very

experienced amateur drivers in the Advanced solo group so not only did I get their wonderful moral support and encouragement but I also got to pick their expertise for tech info and ride with them for more driving savvy. I was starting to become very comfortable, focused and assertive, pushing myself with each session a little faster, each turn better placed and a little smoother. I noticed my instructor had stopped shouting out step-by-step instructions. The “ah-ha” moments had replaced the “oh, no” moments!

And finally - this is the very best part - mid-morning after my first two sessions, my instructor pulled me aside and gave me those golden words: “I have complete confidence you can do this alone” and pronounced me “graduated” to Novice Solo status and slapped a gold star on my windscreen next to my Novice sticker. Now I could drive on the track completely on my own with the Novice group without him! Wow, what a moment! To reach this level at my first driving school was a feeling of tremendous pride, accomplishment and empowerment (yes, hear me roar) that I can’t fully describe here. I might add not all the males in my Novice group were awarded this solo status during the weekend.

Day 2 My First Solo. So here I am sitting on the grid again with *Scarlet* and the rest of the Novice group waiting to be flagged out onto the track for my very first solo run without my instructor, my coveted Novice Solo gold star affixed like a badge of honor. Needless to say I was grinning from ear-to-ear saying to myself, “I can do this!” with full confidence and complete elation and excitement. What an absolute change from Day One first session! I listened, I learned and I did it! And the icing on the cake was that I made my first pass-by past one of three slower Miatas and sailed on by them. (I wanted to yell, “Ha, ha, I passed you and I’m wearing lacy underalls!”.) ☺ All I can say is that it was an absolutely Zen experience. I was confident, I was relaxed, determined and focused. I continued to push myself faster and faster after each lap exceeding my goal of 100 mph. Little did I know that I was being closely watched by the track starter, track organizer, my instructor and the track workers. Remember, I was one of four women driving in the entire event of almost one hundred drivers and the only woman in the Novice group.

On my final, slow, cool-down lap, I literally whooped out loud. I did it and damn it, it was fun and exhilarating! As I turned off the track into the pits, all the men watching me gave me exaggerated applause and thumbs up with big smiles so I threw them big kisses in return. I was running with the Big Boy Dogs all by myself! Later I was approached by the event organizer who told me I was the most improved driver of the entire weekend. What a compliment!

Now, you men out there reading this are probably thinking, well, good for her. She should be proud she did well and accomplished her goal, yadda, yadda. But guys, let’s say I’m a mature woman, social security eligible in a traditionally all-male sport, not only trying to prove to herself but to others that a woman can be as strong, tough, brave, competitive and also be a good sport and play well with the boys.

For this experience of a lifetime, I learned not only to drive well but I also learned more importantly that I was capable of pushing myself far beyond my “comfort zone” than I ever dreamed possible and had accomplished a desired goal well beyond my expectations equally as well as any man and better, in fact, better than many men there. Woo-hoo!

Will I do this again? You bet!