

LAP #2, MEET THE TRACK

Many MCA members are interested in the experience of driving their Mustangs on the track, but are reluctant to do so because they don't know what to expect. You can increase your enjoyment of your car by driving it at least once in the safe, controlled environment provided on a racetrack. Exhibition of speed on the street is illegal, dangerous, and unwise. By following a few simple guidelines and adopting a methodical approach, you can experience the full capabilities of your car in an environment where your speed is only limited by your ability. On this lap we'll address some common concerns and help you take the steps necessary to experience the true capabilities of your car.

The MCA is a great way to have your first track experience, and there are other ways to also meet your need for speed. Check websites for local road courses, view their calendars looking for drivers education (DE) events, and events hosted by local performance groups like Porsche and Ferrari. My experience has been quite good when approaching other clubs to allow a Mustang to run with them. Most appreciate having the vintage iron around and your entry fee helps cover costs. Your street-legal Mustang will work just fine as a basic open track car. Stock brakes and street tires will serve you well your first time out—until you decide if open track is something you enjoy enough that you want to repeat it. Save your money and drive your the car the way it is until you determine if upgrades are needed. Many people incorrectly focus first on the engine rather than on suspension and handling improvements which are where good lap times are actually created.

The most important thing to understand is that you're not racing. This is not wheel-to-wheel competition. Open track is not competitive, and those that think it is are misinformed. In open track, you are not trying to position your car to the disadvantage of your competitor; you are passing only after receiving acknowledgement from the overtaken car. Additionally, passing is limited to designated straight areas of the track and is not allowed in corners. In wheel-to-wheel competition the track is wide

open when under a green flag; anything goes.

"I don't want to be the slowest car out there." Have you ever met the "slow guy?" Of course not! There is no "slow guy." Cars are complex machines and give plenty of reasons not to be at full speed on each lap. The car you just "passed" may not really be as "slow" as you think. The driver may be watching an oil pressure problem, cooling brakes, or just gathering his thoughts before attacking a particular section he's trying to improve on. Never assume the car you passed is slower than you. Always assume it will be picking up speed and staying with you after you pass.

You won't embarrass yourself; just drive at your own pace, in your own comfort zone. Years ago when training to run a marathon, I remember hoping not to be embarrassed by finishing last in a well-attended practice run several months before the actual race. I didn't and you won't either. That day I learned each runner is running their own race and not interested in how your day is going. It's exactly the same on the track; drivers are too busy with their own issues to worry how fast your car is.

Remember, you're not racing.

In the morning, after a drivers meeting where procedures, flags, emergency situations, and track layout are discussed, most drivers education events assign drivers to their run group based upon speed and skill level. It is critical not to let your ego get involved in determining the group you will run in—let the chief steward decide—he is the expert. You want to be one of the faster cars in your run group, not the slowest. Don't get yourself placed in a group where you can't run near the front, because you will not make many friends being a "moving chicane" as faster cars follow you through corners and then struggle to get around you in the designated passing zones. Drivers education is a place to learn about your and your car's capabilities. Make sure you find a run group where you are learning your Mustang's limits, not just driving. If it's your first time on a given track and no instructor is available, find a driver familiar with the track and ask to discuss it with them. In some events, you can have them take you out for a few laps and show you around the track.

If you get the chance to do this, you can break the ice by saying two things some instructors tell their students:

- 1) "Don't try to impress me...
BECAUSE YOU WON'T."
- 2) "Don't try to scare me...
BECAUSE I'M ALREADY SCARED!"

Sponsor contracts and prize money are not waiting for you at the finish line, so go out and have some real fun. This is the only place where it is legal to test your limits, so take full advantage of it. Listen to what the car is telling you, test the surface for grip, carry some speed through the corners, look well past the corner and try to be on full throttle at the apex. Check your gauges, look far down the track, pay attention to your surroundings and **WATCH THE CORNER STATIONS** while asking yourself repeatedly, "What did I see at the last corner station?" and "Where is the next one?" The corner workers are there to keep you and others safe by communicating with you, so give them your full attention.

Remember, you're not racing!

Since you're not racing don't get too serious, have a great time and enjoy yourself. Invite a friend along or bring a young adult with you to enjoy the experience. Many responsible young drivers can benefit from experiencing what it's like to drive a car at speed on a closed course and will quickly understand the street is no place for exhibition of speed. Don't kid yourself, drivers education is not racing; its education and a great way to meet your need for speed.

We'll discuss basic car preparation on the next lap.

Charlie Jones, a.k.a.

Roadracer

