

What to Expect?

The following article is about what to expect if this is your first Drivers School. This was written by the original owner of the Big Dog, **Dave Nichols**, a great friend, great driver and great instructor. I have added just a couple of edits, in **green**, that I have learned over the past several years may make your day at the track even more enjoyable.

First Timers at the Track

by **Dave "Big Dog" Nichols** or the Driver Formerly Known as Prince, er...uh...as "The Weiner Dog"

My first drivers school is coming up, what should I expect?

What To Bring

Most serious students at drivers schools have learned several important lessons:

1. You can have lots of fun just being at the track.
2. You'll have even more fun with the right equipment.
3. SOMEONE at the track is bound to have the right tool or part for virtually any problem. Get to know as many people as possible. Be friendly. Say *thank you*, and you'll be surprised at how helpful people can be.
4. The amount of stuff you want to take to the track will expand to fill the available space.

Here is a brief list of essentials for the track:

Extra motor oil (at least two quarts)

Window cleaner

Paper towels

Hand cleaner

Torque Wrench with Socket that fits your lug nuts

Hat

Helmet (confirm that your helmet meets or exceeds the minimum requirements **Snell SA-2015**)

Sunscreen

Ground sheet to keep the sand and dirt out of the other stuff

Registration/tech sheets

Cover sheet

Lawn chair

Tire gauge

Pen/paper

Watch or clock

Garbage bags (helps keep the small stuff together)

Extra T-shirt (you'll probably get sweaty)

Extra long sleeved shirt (some schools require them)

Cooler stocked with **lots** of water and/or Gatorade plus fruit and snacking veggies (Absolutely NO ALCOHOL of any kind will be consumed by ANYONE during run sessions, but feel free to have a cold one after the last session IF you won't be driving home).

Before the First Session

There are several keys to having a great first school. First and foremost is **GET THERE EARLY!** Absolutely nothing is more unnerving and creates more anxiety in first timers than being late, missing a drivers meeting and starting the day off wrong. Plus if you're early, you're less likely to make mistakes in your paperwork, cleaning out the car or missing a tech inspection. **I always like to meet my instructor or student as early as possible, it helps in planning the day and prevents feeling hurried.** (Yes, even though I instruct and race, I still am learning. And probably always will be)

You'll begin the day with a group meeting with the classroom instructor and the chief instructor. They will go over the rules of the track, what the flags mean, how to pass properly and about a dozen other things you'll need to know to have a safe enjoyable weekend. You'll hear it about a kajillion times throughout the course of the weekend, so let's get the first order of business out of the way:

THIS IS NOT A RACING SCHOOL!

If you're coming to a school to prove you're the next Jeff Gordon, impress your friends with your courage and skill, or see if you can get your money's worth out of all those expensive car modifications, here is rule #1:

FAILURE TO FOLLOW THE RULES AND/OR LISTEN TO YOUR INSTRUCTOR WILL MAKE IT NECESSARY FOR THE CLUB TO REFUND YOUR MONEY AND ASK YOU TO LEAVE. IF YOUR ATTITUDE IS REALLY BAD, THE REFUND MAY BE OPTIONAL.

Please don't embarrass the folks running the school by making them embarrass you. Everyone is there to enjoy the cars, have some fun, meet great people and enjoy a safe learning experience. About 99% of the people who come to these events are the greatest people/drivers on the road. Keep in mind that your instructor isn't being paid. They are just trying to impart some knowledge and live to do it again.

The first priority is to clean out the car. EVERY loose object must be removed from the trunk and passengers compartment. The most important area to check is UNDER THE FRONT SEAT. Objects tend to gravitate to this area and you won't notice them until you get on the binders really hard. Invariably they roll or slide under your feet. Going into a braking zone is not the place to have something jam under the pedals. Any item that is not attached needs to be removed. Clean out the glove box, rear package shelf, and console. All floor mats should be removed to keep them from sliding around.

Next is tire pressure. Due to the nature of this kind of driving, you'll need to add some air. About 35lb cold is a good starting point. (**I would check with your instructor, or an instructor with a similar car or tire, some set ups will start at a lower beginning pressure, but 32-35 sounds about right.**)The one thing you don't want is for the tire to roll over during hard cornering and come off the rim. They will gain some pressure as they heat up, so don't go overboard and overinflate them. **Make sure you adjust the pressure back to street inflation after your event is finished.**

For first timers (hereafter referred to as "track virgins"), as well as those in beginning run groups, you may have some on track exercises designed to help you explore the limits of your car and get a feel for how the chassis works. Before we take your pride and joy out on the track, let's go over the basics of sitting in the car.

It may seem elementary to discuss how to sit in a car. After all you've been doing it for many years, but [no pun intended ;-)] for this type of driving, seating and body position is important. To control the car you must be able to concentrate on inputs - steering, throttle and brakes - without worrying about

being a loose object behind the wheel.

You should be sitting IN rather than ON the seat. Use your feet to push back and wiggle your butt into the seat. After making sure you're in total contact with the seat, see if you can reach all the pedals. If not, adjust the seat and start again.

Next up is hand position on the steering wheel. Place your hands at either 9:00 and 3:00 or 10:00 and 2:00. Notice the word hands, as in plural. This is no place for one-handed driving. You'll get better results if your arms are slightly bent. If they're fully extended you won't get good leverage.

Next move your right hand and place it at "noon" on the wheel. If you can do this without moving your back away from the seat you're probably positioned correctly. To make sure, put your hands back at 9:00 and 3:00 and turn the wheel to the right and left WITHOUT changing position on the wheel. If your elbows hit the seat back or your body, you're too close to the wheel. Tilt the seat back slightly until your arms are slightly bent.

People who are vertically challenged (i.e. short) or those with extremely long arms may never be able to reach the ideal seating position without modifying the car with pedal extenders. If this is your case, go for the best compromise.

Before attaching the seat belt, check the mirrors. When you are on the track (and of course for everyday street driving) it is your responsibility to check the mirrors. You will be in the beginning or novice run group and there may be students who have attended other drivers schools. They may be faster. In any group of drivers there will be faster and slower cars, so be aware of what is behind you. With that in mind, your first priority is still to concentrate on the line in the turns. The mirrors are for the straightaways when you'll be passing or being passed. Try not to let the mirror affect your line in the turn.

Next is seat belts. You want to make sure they're fastened as tightly as possible. On some older cars you can fool the inertia system into locking, if you lower the seat back, set the belt and then raise the seat back up. It might not work for your car, but it's worth a try. Ask your instructor for help.

Riding with Instructors

You may have the privilege of riding with an instructor in their car either during an instructor session (not for the faint of heart, these guys are obscenely fast) or during an advanced student session. Don't be shy about asking for rides as most instructors love to have someone in the other seat. Once you've ridden with your instructor, ask another one. Each has their own style and if it is at all possible, get an instructor with a car similar to your own. This will give you a good idea as to its potential performance and handling characteristics.

When you ride with an instructor keep three things in mind.

1. They know what they are doing. If they didn't, the chief instructor would not have invited them. They will be going very fast and things happen in a big hurry. Most of them don't mind you talking to them, but ask just to make sure.
2. Don't compare yourself to the instructors. They have years of experience and know how their car will react at any given moment. Forget about the speed and watch the line they take in the turns. If everything is done right, the car will naturally hit the apex and track out to the proper position.
3. Watch their hands and feet. The biggest secret to high performance driving is BE SMOOTH!

The steering input, throttle application, braking and shifting may appear violent at first, but it should be smooth and no more harsh than necessary. They should not be making any unnecessary

movements of the steering wheel, turning it only as far as it takes to get the car through the turn.

Braking should be firm and definite. The car should slow to the right speed and then the brakes will be gently released. Downshifts should be barely noticeable except for a rise in engine revs.

The throttle should be applied smoothly and when the entire lap is finished you will notice how gentle it all seemed. Just because a driver is working hard doesn't mean they are fast. The best ones are so good it seems effortless.

Car Care

This type of driving puts extra strain on both you and the vehicle. If you're in a BMW or other German car this is how they are intended to be driven. Even with the fine engineering they still need some extra TLC at the track so here's a short list of things to check:

Before EVERY session:

Check the engine oil. Make sure it's full, but don't overfill it either.
Check the wheel bolt tightness.
Clean the windshield.
Inspect the tires for cuts or imbedded objects.

At the beginning of each day:

Check all the fluid levels.
Check the tire pressure.
Look for fluid leaks.
Make sure you have at least 1/2 tank of gas.

In case no one mentions it to you: NEVER SET THE PARKING BRAKE AFTER A TRACK SESSION!

It's a great habit on the street, but at the track it's a recipe for stuck rear brakes. The rotors get so hot during track use they are subject to warping and sticking if you apply the parking brake. Just park on level ground, put it in reverse and let it cool down. [Opening the hood helps the engine cool down.](#)

Know What You are Learning

It's easy to be overwhelmed with all the information you'll be receiving, but try to come away with some basic concepts. If you master only two skills from this school, it will be money well spent.

1. Look up! The human brain is one of God's masterpieces. We're internally hard wired to go where we look. If you learn the skill of looking through the turn you'll be pleasantly surprised to find that if you have done everything right up to that point (enter the turn at the correct speed) you'll end up going where you look. Concentrating on the 10 feet directly over the hood is one of the worst habits any driver can have. The farther ahead you look, the more time you have to weigh the options and make a good decision.
2. Be smooth with the inputs. Nothing upsets the car more than a jerky throttle, steering and braking. If you're doing it right, it's smooth.
3. Familiarize yourself with the terms turn in, apex and track out. If your instructor uses a term you are not sure about, ask for clarification. "Open it up" may mean open the steering wheel, not floor the gas pedal. The only dumb question is the one not asked.

Are We Having Fun Yet?

If you have any problems communicating with your instructor, let them know. Chances are that they just don't recognize what you need. Everyone is different. If you need lots of feedback, make them aware of that fact. If they're talking too much or not giving you any positive reinforcement, say something. If you are not getting the kind of help you need or not having any fun, ask the classroom instructor about getting a new instructor.

Most first timers are anxious to ask for another instructor, but don't be shy. If you have a great instructor let them know. If you want someone else, do it at the end of the first day. Whatever you do, don't go away wishing you had spoken up. Just make sure you do it in a mature adult fashion. However keep in mind that the problem could be your attitude. If you're having the same problem with a second instructor, re-examine your actions and see if the problem is you.

What can you do to make the car better?

Don't go overboard on modifications. Take it one step at a time and you'll save money and frustration. Most changes to the car are unnecessary until you hone your skills with several schools. Should you want to invest in some extra goodies for your ride, consider these:

Safety equipment
Handling and brake upgrades
Creature comforts at the track

Until you've had at least a dozen schools, you don't need to be concerned with more horsepower. The best investments in the beginning are:

I would definitely make sure your entire brake system is bled with a high temp brake fluid before your first track day. Have a qualified shop, familiar with track events do this, as well as a full nut and bolt inspection. It may cost you \$80, but if saves your weekend from being ruined, it's money well spent.

Good harnesses. Nothing adds more confidence and comfort than being held firmly in the car. Having to use the steering wheel as a brace is the quickest way to lose concentration.
Better brake pads. This is a case of the right tool for the job.
Fresh suspension. New bushings, ball joints, and shocks will go a long way toward making even an older car handle like new.
A good seat. A well made seat will make you a part of the car and enable you to get a much better feel of how the chassis talks to you.
Some good driving shoes and gloves. These help you fine tune the interface of you and the car (plus they look sharp!).
Anything that will make the day at the track more enjoyable such as a canopy (be sure it will fit in the car) and a good folding chair.

Just exactly what is *the Red Mist*?

If you hear an instructor warn you about the red mist, what they are referring to is the tendency for drivers to make bad decisions. These lapses in judgment can be attributed to:

Fatigue
Ego

Overconfidence
Lack of experience
Dehydration

No one can do anything to control your ego, but you. We can remind you to

Drink plenty of water and/or Gatorade. Forget the colas...they just make you more thirsty.
Get plenty of rest.
Don't drive if you're overheated.

If you are too tired to have some fun, you are too tired to be a safe driver. Don't think you have to drive every lap to get your money's worth. If you find that you cannot concentrate, sit out a session. The track will still be there later and you'll have more fun if you are able to focus.

I personally love to ride with first timers, particularly when it all comes together and they "get it". Maybe we'll see each other at the track. **And if you're up to it, take a ride in "the Big Dog"!**

Dave Nichols

I feel the same way as Dave, if you're up for a ride, just ask. You don't need to be my student. And most instructors feel the same. The Big Dog is still a fun and fast car. I am proud to own it.

Have fun!

Jack Sugameli