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Instructor Training School by Thom Rossi

Picture this: a smoking hot, brand new M3 capable of reaching incredible speeds in vanishingly small amounts of time idles in the paddock at a closed road course, and the driver is about to have his or her first experience of high performance driving. But they can't get out on the track to see what they and their car can do without the constraints of speed limits and laser-gun-wielding constabulary to slow them down...unless some crazy person is willing to strap into the passenger seat and teach them how to drive on the track. Do you know what we call those crazy people? Instructors.

If you've never been to one of our driving events, let me set the stage for you. A high performance driving school is all about providing a controlled

environment for students to learn the car control and driving techniques that add up to some serious fun. The events are conducted at closed "road courses". They are not races: no lap timing is allowed, there is no "finishing order", and there are strict rules of track etiquette. However, speed is limited only by the car's and (mostly) the driver's capabilities. Yahoo!

What, you might ask, qualifies an instructor to be an instructor? That's where our chapter's highly regarded instructor training school (ITS) comes in. In order to be considered as a candidate for ITS you have to already have achieved a level of proficiency in the club's driving program. Generally, this is an opportunity for people **(Continued on Page 8)**



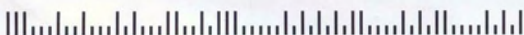
2008 M3 Cabriolet

GROWL!!

Photo by Paul Ngai

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Instructor Training School

(Continued from Page 1) who have been advanced students for a while and are known to our chief instructor to have appropriate track etiquette. But that is just a prerequisite. As I was to learn over the course of the ITS, good instructing is a combination of being analytical, communicative, and being able to connect with various student personalities.

The ITS is a busy two-day program alternating between class room and track time. There is a great deal of role playing utilized as a means to get potential instructors comfortable with a variety of situations and personalities. Each candidate is paired with an on-track mentor who does his/her best to throw every possible curve ball at the candidate then dissect their reactions and provide some coaching on how things could have been handled better. My mentor was Ross Karlin.

I should say that although Ross is a well known figure within our chapter, and although I've seen him at virtually every race and driver school I've been to with our club, I had never really gotten to know him. All that was to change and part of the fun for me was getting to make a new friend. In fact, during ITS I got to know every version of Ross there is as he played various personality types throughout the two days. First we had the timid Ross portraying a novice driver who wouldn't get the car out of third gear, couldn't understand my directions on finding the driving line, and seemed at times not to even know what a road is, what a gas pedal is, what a steering wheel is, or understand a word of spoken English. This was an excellent lesson in stripping away the use of the jargon we've been taught about apexes, lines, turn-ins, and track outs. It also brought home an important lesson for me: you can't assume you know what you're going to teach somebody until you figure out what it is they already know and what they need to learn. I had started the school with the impression that I could have a preconceived lesson plan for various levels of driver. Not!

The next Ross was the overly aggressive Ross. Here, my challenge was to reign in a student who started off "knowing more than the instructor" and was absolutely dedicated to proving he was the fastest driver on the track, which allegedly was populated by "wusses" who couldn't drive as fast as my student. Track etiquette? This person needed a basic lesson in "becoming a human" before we could even get to track etiquette. I couldn't help but laugh when the first words he said to me as we pulled into the pits after a harrowing session were "So, are you going to sign me off?" But the funniest version of Ross, by far, was in a scenario where I was his second instructor of the event, his first instructor having been a fellow named Pasquale. Ross packed in at least three driver errors per corner and for every correction or piece of advice I gave him, his comeback was invariably "But Pasquale told me to do it this way!" Half way through our second lap neither one of us could keep a straight face anymore and after we finally stopped laughing Ross was able to coach me through how to handle that kind of situation.

Overall, I found the role playing to be highly effective and useful. Most of the time, as the trainee, I knew what was going wrong and what I wanted to correct, but it really was necessary to have the coaching to help me understand how to get my point across better. My hat's off to Ross. I figure he had to have been a darned good driver to intentionally make as many mistakes as he did without getting the two of us into any serious trouble.

The class room sessions were based on materials developed specifically for our ITS program, and a text written by Richmond Shreeve. As both a driving enthusiast and an amateur writer, I read the instructor's manual with a great deal of admiration for the understanding of driving, teaching, and writing craft which went into creating it. By a funny coincidence, I was paired up with Richmond as my evaluator when it came time to put my newly learned instructor's skills to the test (literally). The instructor evaluation consisted of another role playing scenario, this time with Richmond as the student and me as the instructor. I won't give away all of his tricks and secrets, but I will tell you that part of the evaluation came down to the student intentionally making errors, some obvious, some subtle, and the instructor having to make the right observations and give the right feedback in a timely fashion. Fortunately, the baker's dozen of nut cakes that Ross had impersonated in our mentoring sessions gave me a well prepared mind and eye, and I was able to perform effectively in the evaluation.

The last step of the evaluation was a driving test on Sunday afternoon. This was the first time I had gotten my car onto the track over the course of the weekend. By the way, knowing that the driving was going to be rather less intense than a typical track outing, I brought my 540 down to Summit for a return to its old track haunt. What fun to have horsepower again, and I swear I could see my car grinning with the excitement of being in the center of the action one more time! Geoff Atkinson strapped in as my driving evaluator and put me through the paces for a few laps, with specific requests to demonstrate certain driving techniques. This too was a bit of a role playing exercise, the idea being that Geoff was a student taking a ride with an instructor. Therefore, the challenge for me was to demonstrate good high performance driving technique while talking the student through each maneuver. Geoff has one of those personalities that instantly puts people at ease, so I found that this was the least stressful part of the weekend and, since I had a steering wheel in my hands, the most fun.

Then came the waiting. For about two hours, we instructor candidates hung around in the parking lot, got our gear stowed, and waited for the outcome of the deliberations of our mentors, evaluators and the upper echelons of instructors. Finally the smoke could be seen rising from the chimney and we knew the results were in.

Ross had one more chance to make me sweat and boy did he capitalize on it. As he meandered toward me with my evaluation results in hand, I was mentally preparing myself for the outcome. That's when Ross, master of suspense that he is, casually excused himself to use the boy's room! I am happy to report that, judging by the amount of time it took Ross to re-emerge, he must be in that narrow portion of the male population that does a thorough job of washing his hands before exiting the rest room. This is good news considering his profession as a dentist. Confident as I then was in Ross's hygiene, I was happy to shake his hand upon receipt of the news that the evaluation of my performance was favorable and that I was a newly minted instructor. The fact that I made it through is as much a testament to Ross's excellent coaching as to my own merits as a student, and I would like to thank him and the rest of the mentors who took the time to help us candidates learn the ropes.

I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to add a serious note to recognize that there is an inherent level of risk for all participants in our club's driving schools. One of the best tools we have for managing that risk is to develop the skills of our instructors. To that end, our chief instructor, Blake Smith, has put together a best-in-class program for instructor training. It is serving as a model for other chapters in developing their instructors. I am happy to have experienced it first hand and to have been entrusted to help others advance their skills in our driving schools.

I congratulate James Banks, Bart Bartlett, Thomas Buchanan, Greg Conway, Erick Corwin, David Guida, William Mellott, George Pizzullo, Peter Stephan, Richard Vernick, and Scott Reiman on their successful completion of the ITS program.

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