

A Virgin No More

by Joe Holzer

An 18 year old virgin when he arrived, having never turned a wheel in anger, nor exceeded the posted limit. But a virgin no more. And like most 18 year olds, still a child in so many ways, even as he was certain he knew all there was to know. How wrong he was, he came to understand. This is the story of my nephew, and his ascent to the mountaintop and descent into the perversity we refer to as “track junkie”.

As this is written, he is still two weeks from actual high school graduation. But he has been a good student, and has not yet decided between the computer engineering programs at New Paltz and Syracuse U for the fall. The progeny of a broken home, and bounced around between relatives like my wife and I as a child before his mom settled down with someone, at which point he became defacto babysitter for his step-brothers, he has nonetheless managed to turn out sane if a little insecure. And when he got his own license he filled the role of assisting my parents when I and my siblings were incapable of doing so for a variety of reasons, for which we all owe him a debt we can never repay.

But he is a car nut, even if it runs something like “nothing domestic with an ovoid logo is worth discussing, and VW can do no wrong...”. He has much to learn. And so it was that I decided that an appropriate graduation gift would be a two day Driver’s Ed with Viagra (that’s not a mis-print, we decided to rename it) Region June 1-2 at Watkins Glen. All expenses paid, which means he got to sleep in a bag on the floor of the motorhome at the ticket office at the top of the hill, and use a loaner helmet graciously provided by that Ferrari Turncoat, (who didn’t even TELL me when I called to borrow the helmet, for which he will be forever chastized in print and otherwise... you get the picture ;-}), eat munchies from a bag for all meals but two, and listen to the bench racers with greying hair. He also got the dubious honor of driving the club car; my Silver Bullet which has about 200K on the clock and is starting to show its age. Like its owner, it starts hard in the AM and needs a little extra time to get things together. But a reliable old steed it still is, and it will be expected to soldier on for at least a few more years while it waits for Jessica to come of age as well, but that is another story for another time. Maybe between now and then Lynne may do a few laps again as well, who knows? But I daresay the Silver Bullet has had more drivers than any other car in PCA, so Mark has an honorable position in a distinguished and noble assault vehicle! A truly SPORTY UTILITY VEHICLE.

I had asked Dan Deegan, arranger extraordinaire for the Niagara event to arrange another instructor, so Mark would not feel inhibited in my car. How was I to know he would get a cleanliness freak? I found this out when I saw Mark removing EVERYTHING from every pocket in the car while he waited in staging. I was both embarassed and pissed; Mark could not tell this “instructor” that these parts had more time on the track than that person, so leave them alone. I was also MUCH less than happy to learn that person left that evening, after having “instructed” by grabbing the wheel rather than directing Mark to do so, which might have assured Mark had more feel for the car himself. That is not to say I have never grabbed a wheel, but I doubt Mark was getting them in danger; I had been in another student’s car all the while, and observed he was in control the entire time. So that “instructor” and I will have some words, because first and foremost is a responsibility to the student to assure they have an ENJOYABLE experience, and Mark’s comments made it seem anything but. The best news was that he had at least lightened up a little by Monday night and the day had been dry. And Mark had at least had some pleasure in the driving, even while feeling he had no CONstructive advice. But I also know Mark enough to understand that Mark may first have needed what the Marines refer to as “attitude adjustment”.

So it was time to go drive go-carts at the track down the hill. I can't speak for anyone else, but I can assure you that we Porsche Track Junkies are a childish lot. And proud of it. If his mother had seen us, she would surely forbid Mark any further contact with his crazy uncle. And WE weren't even thrown off EITHER of the courses, though some guys got the boot from BOTH! Needless to say, a great time was had by all. And I needed HELP to get back out of the cart! Next time I'll bring electronic RF jamming gear so they can't stop us on the course! And we got all that crashing out of our systems in a safe venue to do so.

Monday night was cool but clear, though we had some scary weather all around us. Sunday night I had arrived to a Tornado Warning, which is not good in a motorhome at the top of a big hill, and Tuesday we drove home through the same and worse. But except for the first session downpour on Tuesday, it was a remarkably dry event. Tuesday morning we discovered Mark had another instructor, a much more laid-back person, and they progressed very well. My student meanwhile had been a double virgin, never having even DRIVEN the 928 he shared with a friend who had just bought it. Having been told that, I was happy he accepted my directions to leave it in fourth most of the day, as the 928 has so much torque that is possible, and he was really disruptive of the car when he shifted, and I was afraid of a mis-shift or worse. He learned well, though, and was soon running a smooth line. But every time he went for the shifter, all hell would break loose with his rhythm.

About mid-day Mark's instructor told me he would stay all day if necessary, but he expected he could sign Mark off 'IF MARK WERE NOT SO TIMID'. As things happened, my student's car started to overheat, which I found to be the fan rubbing on a shroud. I suspect he had bad motor mounts which allowed the engine to drop, but I helped them move the shroud enough to allow the fan to run. The mounts were safe enough for our needs that day (they have built-in redundancy to prevent separation even when broken), but the owner agreed to have the car gone over fully before more track events. Then they had a belt-tension light come on. This is a sensor which can hope to prevent big misery, because like the 944 there is not enough room for the pistons and the valves together, so major damage is possible if a belt fails. The light was intermittent, but there was no percentage in pushing their luck, so they decided to limp it home to Buffalo instead of continuing. So I offered to take Mark for his last run group, so his instructor could leave.

I could see immediately what his new talent had wrought, but recognized his timidity as well. So I was very pleased when he adjusted to my earlier apex and slide to trackout style and could see the grin going from ear to ear as he saw the results of more aggressively approaching the turns under my tutelage. Like any new learner, he was rough around the limits, so we did not go too close to them. But I am certain he had an outstanding experience. He as much as said so when he asked me what a car like mine would cost, then was depressed at the answer, despite its mileage. Such is the 911 mystique.

So I told him to keep his priorities straight; select his school and work at it. Forget a Porsche until he has an education and a good job, then I will help him find the best buy he can afford. And in the meantime, I'll sign him up to join me at another event later this summer in my car. Should be fun, now that he's no longer a virgin.