

Tip - Toeing at Watkins Glen

I expected that the 993 Cabrio with Tiptronic would drive differently on the track vs. my '77 Targa. Having instructed for years at the Glen, I was anxious to see what changes it would make. Unknown to myself, and most of the rest of the instructors and students, was that the Glen had been repaved completely, thereby changing the track significantly in some key areas as well.

So the first few laps for the "Red" run group were spent learning the nuances of the track changes, while mine were spent learning the new car as well. The only obvious differences from the outset were the lack of shifting, as I simply put it in Drive and left it there, and the significant torque available from the 3.6 liter vs. my previous 2.7 liter engine. But I was to learn a LOT more differences over the next two days. If you can make the Niagara Driver Ed held typically the first Mon-Tue in June each year, you should try. It is about a third the size of Zone 1 48 Hours in July, meaning you have lots more opportunity to get better learning experience. And they allow basically any car which can pass Tech Inspection; not just Porsches.

I discovered that the 993 was designed, in part, by tort lawyers. I have never had understeer in the Targa, with its uniform 60 series rubber on 15" rims, but the wide rubber of the 993 combined with 17" wheels made for an interesting entry to at least a few turns, where I was actually forced to be slower vs. the Targa experience. That is, until I got a revelation; where the Targa transitioned from four-wheel drift to full grip as a corner evolved from off- to on-camber, the Cab simply plowed, then gripped. Where the Targa called for braking to about 20% into the turn, then squeezing power back on through apex to track-out, the Cab seemed to violate the laws of physics.

To understand, you need a basic primer in track driving. Rule #1: Keep the shiny side up, the dark side down and all the tires on the pavement. This is accomplished generally by braking in a straight line (with some braking via modulation after turn-in for those who have REALLY learned the limits), and downshifting to the desired gear before turn-in. Then you have the correct torque at the rear wheels to plant them (ie put added vertical force due to the acceleration, thereby causing increased grip, albeit at the expense of the grip at the front, which tends to lower its grip forces). However, it is essential that NO abrupt actions occur, as they disrupt the balance of the car. But an automatic tranny, which is where Tiptronic starts, wants to shift up if you lift at all. Of course I could, and even did, put the shifter into the manual program, so I could drive it like I'd become accustomed in the Targa. But doing so consciously requires motions not yet instinctive to me, and the track is NOT the place to be learning a wierd or new shift pattern. So I decided to back off a little and simply see what it would do by itself. Rule #2; If you have no idea where you are going, any direction is right. Or wrong. See, the Tip has five distinct shift patterns, based on lateral loading and RATE of accelerator input. That is the key, because initial turn-in should not be laterally loading the car enough to lock into the most aggressive shifting. And at the end of any straight, the gearbox simply sees that you haven't lifted for awhile, so squeezing as you get back on the gas merely leaves it in the higher gear than you want. So I tried simply stomping on it about 20% into the turn, where I had enough runoff to deal with any surprises that might cause. What a great surprise!

Another automatic characteristic is the half-second delay between input and action, which impacted that learning as well. Because I found that TRAMPING on the gas caused a downshift with almost uninterrupted power from that point out to the next corner braking point. What a ride! Just like the 911 has always been, this was counterintuitive - the way to go safer was to go faster!

But this car wants to plow. So won't that make it worse? In a word; yes. But that is where experience also helped. I knew that the track has varying camber throughout most turns, so I adjusted my line. For example, at the "esses" which

precede the back straight, the Targa never had enough power to push, so it simply steered along the inside right curbing until the left handed turn-in point. The Cab, on the other hand, pushes at entry, which can be a little scary. But the key is that half way through that right-hander, the track elevation rises abruptly, which simply tucks the front end in. So I let it slide and kept the power on. What a rush! Heading for the weeds and simply holding on, followed by immediate hard left so I wouldn't do just the opposite when the arc across the bridge drops to off-camber if you miss the correct line. Which would make some SERIOUS changes to bodywork and armco. Net result was a max speed of 126 mph indicated at the braking point for the Bus Stop, vs the Targa's 110. Not bad. And I think there may be about four more once I learn to slide better.

The Bus Stop, though, was just as I expected; I drove over the low curbing and followed a straighter line through it, thereby catching cars with racing rubber and stiff setups in great leaps. I got nowhere near the real limits of the "Chute", which will require a lot of line testing to optimize, but the Toe of the Boot was a revelation; I had TORQUE! No more arm over the top for everyone behind me; it was "come on, come on, give me the signal!" so I could pass THEM!

The brakes felt a little mushy a few times, but I found out why; I'd filled the cross drill holes with the OEM organics. Nice brakes, but time to mount the Cool Carbons! I took another instructor for a ride in my last run group, and you should have seen his eyes as I TROMPED the gas in the middle of the "90" as we were already plowing away from early turn-in, only to have it dig down, settle and rocket towards the exit and the "esses".

Yeah, it's good to take a refresher course once in awhile.