

The Alternative Line

by Joe Holzer for CNY-PCA Redline Report Copyright 2016 <http://www.holzerent.com>

I'd rather be shifty than shiftless, but clutch my history well

I have just finished reading through the Winter 2016 Redline, the first edited by Skip Testut in four years, and my heartfelt response is “welcome back Skip”. I am unsure exactly when, and even whether, you dear readers will see this, since he inexplicably removed exactly one sentence from my submission in that issue, which probably leaves a whole bunch of you asking “Huh?” Don’t worry; it was simply a suggestion that I find Boolean Logic pretty simple, thank god. I’ll leave it to you to figure out why ;-)

Anyway, digressing as usual (well, I just realized that my almost four year hiatus myself has likely left a whole lot of you readers wondering what the heck I am talking about – don’t worry – you’ll have plenty of opportunity to figure me out, I promise ;-). I am prompted to write my “tech/humor article” in response to the personal memory thread of Danielle in the Winter issue for manual transmissions. Many of you know I was one of the earliest to try the Tiptronic with my ’95 993 Cabrio Tip after spending two weeks killing my clutch leg in Chicago before I had the opportunity from my subsequent client to get the 993. With that now seeming the Pleistocene, I’ll not rehash it. Instead, I’ll contrast me today with my daughter today. I live in rural Oswego County, where a manual ought to seem reasonable, while she and her husband live in “Lawn Goylind” within sight of NYC. I LIKE my Tiptronic, which is a pure automatic in the classic sense, with a torque converter, which makes it a terrible competitor for autocross because it takes so long to convert the torque to forward motion. She, on the other hand, PREFERS a manual gearbox. And despite her largely parking her “Silver Bullet”, my original ’77 911S Targa with the ’88 Motronic engine but 915 transmission (cable vs hydraulic actuated clutch, and split-ring Porsche synchros vs the less balky “paper cone” type used by most today including even Porsche ;-). her daily driver is a Subie Imprezza-based sports wagon with a five speed. And she prefers manuals because ONLY a manual allows YOU to have complete control.

While an automatic CAN be limited for rotation, it can ONLY do so by braking against engine torque. On ice or snow that is at best wishful thinking, whereas a decent driver with a manual can control the rate of torque application absolutely and completely with the clutch. Add the fabulous Subie All Wheel Drive system, and she has no fear to drive in ANY conditions which won’t swamp the car (She lives in Long Beach, where they are still recovering from Hurricane Sandy ;-)

So you might wonder, given my obvious belief in the advantages of manuals (they also get far better fuel economy and drivetrain longevity as there is no slip nor heat buildup in fluids like all automatics ;-). why I still extol the Tiptronic. The simple answer is that I don’t yet own a PDK, which is the nearest to the perfect mix of both, but is still a conundrum to me that Porsche has not made EVERY Porsche with a PDK with user selectability for driving as EITHER, since it requires only a dump valve clutch pedal, with manual gear selection by electrical mechanism, which is exactly how the computer selects them in the automatic mode. I wrote about that in Skip’s last issue four years ago. Not much changes, except we get older ;-)

But since then a bunch of interesting facts have come to light. Not least impressive has been that MOST non-American Porsche purchasers PREFER the PDK. Like Jess and Danielle, North Americans seem to be the general hold-outs for manual gearboxes, even as we continue like most to slide closer to a primarily urban population. In large measure, that has been advanced by the fact that even Porsche offers many models with no other choice. The most surprising of those is the latest GT3, the car I would have predicted would be the one to change ONLY when they “pried the owners’ cold dead fingers from the shifters”. But Porsche AG, ever the epitome of “We’re Porsche and you’re not” listened closely to the experience of Hurley Haywood on track, who demonstrated regularly the empirical advantages for competition of the PDK, and their warranty experience, which showed the machine’s control of the launch and shifting made for FAR lower claims experience vs manuals. I submit that most of us have seen the typical “boy racer” behaviors which drive such deterioration and needless damage to well-made equipment, as well as the global emissions and CAFÉ fuel consumption standards driving engineering efforts today. Something has to give, and your choices will be the first.

Now to my comments on the unmentioned factor both Danielle and Jess share – they are both women who learned to drive under the tutelage of their Dads, both of whom understood and liked manual gearboxes. While I have no epidemiological data on which to base my sexist rhetoric, which I fully acknowledge is sexist because my daughter says so, I think it is far more critical and salient to the issue than most will admit ;-). After all; what percentage of the populace was ever taught to drive a manual correctly? Based on observations, I’d say DAMN FEW, male or female. But being a male, I can assure you the predilection to teach sons such talents was far more prevalent than for daughters. ONLY where there were no sons was that likely to deviate from the norm.

Can ANY individual story or anecdote explain a society? No. Can a broad spectrum of them give indication of trend? Sure. So why might we in North America prefer Porsches with manuals while even where the immediate prior experience suggested manuals would be preferred, for example Europe, and why are they rapidly leaning the other way? The answer is PDK-like technologies. People who drive city cars with micro-engines, or diesels, plus manual gearboxes don't drive them because they WANT the inconvenience of the clutch, but because they pay up to six times what we pay for gas, and they want to minimize that cost. With what Jeremy Clarkson, late of "BBC Top Gear" fame, calls "flappy-paddle gearboxes" most carmakers have been duplicating the efficiencies of manuals, but with the ease of operation of automatics. And as the CEO of "Black and Decker" once observed, nobody really wants a 1/4" drill, they want a 1/4" hole, so satisfying THAT need is where the opportunities exist.

And BTW – "gearheads like me, and most of you dear readers, probably are NOWHERE NEAR the median marketplace of which that CEO spoke. For all the ways in which my daughter daily amazes me with HER talents, my SOLE "disappointment" with her has been the fact that she sees tools like that CEO, while I know every tool in my toolkit on a first-name basis, and purchase tools just to have THAT tool itself, often without really knowing how I will apply that tool at the time. And I'll bet a LOT of you readers have more in common with me than my daughter in that regard. Where I suspect I'll be wrong, though, will be with YOUR loved ones ;-)

Where is all this heading? I am not sure. I can foresee that there will come a point where ENOUGH North Americans will buy enough Porsches with PDK's that there will cease to be justification for the cost for certifying the alternative manuals. And that will be doubly sad considering how SIMPLE it would be to make BOTH capabilities in EVERY Porsche, since a PDK IS a manual gearbox. It simply has a computer running the clutch and shifter. And, frankly, YOU have long since lost direct control of the throttle either, and you are close to losing the brake too. Just ask Google, who will be happy to even take the WHEEL!

And "Aaahhold" will have become the norm sooner than you think. Don't be surprised when you will not even be ALLOWED on a road unless your car drives itself, at which point its transmission will be moot. Do not go gently into that dark night. But you had better start thinking about those implications, because they are already here. Just try to buy a new Porsche GT3 with a manual. See?

