

PCA Club Race: Road Atlanta April 12-14

by Joe Still

It was just two weeks before Road Atlanta when we returned from racing Circuit of the Americas (COTA) in Austin, TX. I was the only car in class, made massive progress with Bryan Sellers coaching, took two races 1st in class in Sprints (helps to have no competitors show up and qualify☺) but was knocked out of Enduro by a spinning car costing me another first place.

It was one of those great experiences that keep you coming back like (I hear) one great golf shot in 100 does. I had lots of drivers telling me I was “crushing it,” which is driver-speak for being hard for them to catch, let alone get a look at a pass. Pro driver Tom Long told me from video he reviewed of a car following me that I was keeping the ABS cars honest with some serious braking. Anyone have a hat stretcher I can borrow?

Moving ahead, I had already signed up for 3-day PCA Club Race event at Road Atlanta April 12-14, along with the preceding two-day David Murry Track Day event prior to it, even though I only planned to run one day of DM. DM is for advanced drivers only with open track and open passing. The open track is highly desirable for testing as you can go out for a lap or two to shake down, pit for adjustments, and go back out whenever you want to. No schedule to follow - even Chin has started trying to offer a few of these days. Obviously, they only work with skilled drivers and most of the attendees are there for early Club Race practice.

DM only sells two-day admission, even if you are running just one day; they contend the track rental is the same whether one car or 100 run. A bit exaggerated, but you get the idea. Well, business is very hectic in Huntsville right now to no one's surprise, and the demands on our time are stretching us thin. So when a prominent client called for a big meeting at 10 AM on the second day of the DM run, it meant staying in Huntsville until noon CDT or 1 ED the second DM day, and then getting stuck for 2 hours in Atlanta. I arrived right after the DM event ended. Sorry, no refunds in the last two weeks. Curse you Red Baron!!

Wednesday Night

Ok, my car is there as is my regular race engineer, Hugo from Florida. Hugo and I have been together for just over a year and he works really hard to keep me going

in spite of the occasional bit of bad fortune/mental lapse. The car is repaired from COTA except the wrap is unfinished - the left side door and rear quarter are a lovely, stark white. My wife said just tell everyone my right-side profile is my best - funny, funny girl. After an evening beverage or two, we joined the Accumoto team for some really fine Italian dinner buffet at the track and off to bed at 9 PM.

Thursday

We started on Thursday at a regional PCA-sponsored Test 'n' Tune, running only two groups but getting 6-each 30-minute sessions. Traffic was an issue at times, but no excuses. DE rules for Test 'n' Tune mean strict point-bys. You get a bunch of Club Racers on track and tell them point-bys are mandatory and it does little good. Everyone swears they thought they saw a point-by.

The first session, I run about 8/10's looking for quirky handling from the COTA hit. Anytime a car gets hit and knocked high enough off the ground to flatten the tires AND rims on landing like I did at COTA, the first session or two is going to be proving to myself nothing is cracked and about to fail.



Picture of left side after being hit while racing at COTA. Note both rims flattened by impact falling back to track. Car felt like it was 30 deg off of horizontal before gravity took over.

I ran a steady pace about 1:35 but found an open lap and put up a 1:31, which is close to FT (fastest time) for me at RA. #hopeful. The second session, I hit every curb I could find to make sure nothing was partially failed, which it was not; the car remained completely solid. I failed to mention we had just installed a set of Ohlin's 4-way shocks for COTA and they perform beautifully. They are only this

year allowed in class and inspire a lot of confidence over curbs, which in racing is where the time comes from. It opens the radius allowing more rolling speed.

So, for the third session I tried for speed but by then the old tires from COTA (not counting the two that got squashed) were about done and despite the great coaching, I was off the pace. My regular coach, Bryan Sellers, was racing the E-Jag series in Rome that weekend and arranged for his friend and sometimes IMSA co-driver Andrew Davis to handle the team coaching duties. I found Andrew personable and articulate and certainly a fast driver who can look at video and data and teach similarly to Bryan. The two of them actually spent 90 minutes the week before reviewing areas of concentration for the five drivers of Bryan's that Andrew would be coaching so as to know where to focus. Less/late braking, right? I will get his impression of my driving back-channel after he debriefs Bryan on how we did. Bryan has been helping me for over a year and can shine the light of truth on harsh reality with a smile and make it positive.

I did not make the 1:29 I have been so close to at RA, but we were using old tires for a while and then traffic made good laps scarce. I got a 1:30.05 in Quali on Saturday morning and never got closer. The track record in our class is about 1:25 for a pro-level driver. Andrew pointed out that no one was equaling their personal best at RA this weekend and that the track was off. Summed up, "Don't get hung up on a number, look for improvements lap-to-lap." RA is a short lap and 5 seconds is not as close as it sounds. If driving down the interstate. pick a spot and count to five and see how far you've moved. At 80 mph that will be about 500 ft. In some ways it seems a lot and in some ways, it seems so little. But they are paid to do it and I pay to do it, so deal with it, Joe. Or as the taciturn Bryan Sellers would say, "Drive faster." Such a Chatty Cathy!

Late in the day we get a quick rain and a chance to go to wet tires to practice what is most certainly going to be a wet race Sunday. I did pretty well in the wet; Andrew told me I was one of the faster guys, so that makes me good or dumb (don't answer - leave me to my rationalizations!)

That night Hugo does brake pads and bleeds brakes. And we go back to our newish tires for Friday practice. High hopes.

Friday

Friday consists of a warm-up, two practice sessions and then a Fun race with three practice starts. Since starts are the highest risk of getting nailed through no fault of your own, I no longer challenge in them, choosing to grid at the back and dog the first few laps to get a gap to work on technique. It works well and I run two laps in a row at 1:30.6 but still no 1:29. There was a little traffic on every lap and Andrew can take two good laps and overlay them. My second 1:30.6 lap was actually 7/10's ahead thru the first half lap and then lost back to even. Probably an indication of being affected by traffic, but the data showed rolling lap of 1:29, just from sector-to-sector other than Start/Finish. Kissing a sister?

Saturday

Saturday is Sprint day. We started right off with qualifying for 25 minutes and went out hot. That means no yellow the first lap to warm up tires. We were warned that tire scrubbing will get you black-flagged. Really, if you are by yourself and can control the pace running 8/10's, then 9/10's then flat out, warming up tires is no big deal. It is when you are 8/10's and someone else is flat out that speed difference becomes a concern. Not an insurmountable problem.

I have new stickers and am looking for a magic lap in the 1:29's. I got a 1:30.5 but that is it. I was out-qualified by Jason and Randy (Randy runs in my class and runs out of Goldcrest as well, and he is an all-round great guy). I start third.

For Sprint 1, the group splits badly on the out lap and they send us around again. It still splits second time around but they throw the green. I have Randy on my right and stay outside through T1 and tip-toe around T2 on the outside while everyone bunches up inside. I make it through and pick up several spots including Randy. He has had a little pace on me in Quali so when he recovers and catches back up, I let him by. Not exactly top racer form but I want him to maybe bother Jason who is just plainly faster than either of us so far. Alas, Jason checks out through traffic and Randy takes second to my third. Still a good time.

For Sprint 2 late in the day, I again am split outside next to Randy. I look outside again in T2, but this time it is clogged so I tuck in single file and follow. After one lap, positions are about set and other than staying out of trouble and letting the big dogs go by, it's another solid third for me.

Saturday night we attended a soirée on site and had pretty good food and some people won prizes. Not me, of course, but my buddy Grady of BHM wins something he cannot use in his class and gives it away. So, it is off early to bed and back to track with generator fuel by 6:30 AM. We only have two sessions on Sunday, Enduro day.

Sunday

Warm up is at 9 AM and we race at 2 PM. Everyone knows it will be wet, just a question of when and how much. The latest forecast shows possibly starting wet and ending dry, meaning a tire change at the pit stop. With Goldcrest running 15 cars or so and four pit boxes, we cannot all pit at once. Coupled with the 5-minute stop minimum, you gotta wait your turn sometimes. We are warming up on yesterday's Sprint tires. To clear the track before our warm up, they hold us 5 minutes extra on the grid and the rain starts right as we pull off, everyone on dry tires. I make two laps and stop, spray is kicking up and the rule-of-thumb is, if you see spray you should be on wets. There is no time to change them and get back out, so we bail on the warm-up. Warming up three or more hours before you actually race is not all that useful anyway IMO.

So back in the paddock, Hugo puts on the rain tires and changes the suspension to the wet set up and we wait a few hours.

When the 90-minute Enduro before us is about to start, they reduce it to 60 minutes. That means a 5-minute pit stop is required but refueling is NOT required or allowed. Halfway through the first run group race, we jump in the truck and go look at the downhill esses between T4 and T5 to see what is coming. The rain is so heavy the cars are almost floating thru the bottom of the esses. Everyone is slowed way down; I am sure a few brave souls have already come back on the wrecker and made believers out of the rest. Also, I think about a third of the guys just bailed based on risk vs return.

The rain comes and goes but the tracks stay soaked. Our time is coming fast and, like Race 1, they shorten ours to 60 minutes. We gird up and they take us around the first time, wisely to let us see firsthand what is coming. I am toward the front of the field, probably because of the dropout rate. I still have my buddy Randy beside me with our friend Reg in front of him. And they get split to the inside again. Well, I know the words to this tune - I always have been split outside at

RA. Over the hill leading to the front straight and I hear “green, green, green” from Hugo on the radio.

In Club Racing, all racers can start moving ahead at the drop of the green flag whether they can even see it or not. Having someone in pit lane watching the flagman with the mic keyed hot is crucial and the call is “green, green, green” to make sure you hear it.

No one is really flat out because there is an epic pond in the T12 at S/F. And Reg gets stranded inside with nowhere to go, trying to hold his speed and line, and loops the car and spins to the inside wall. The spray for a few seconds is epic and my video barely shows him disappearing to the side and rear.

I follow a Cayman with ABS into T1 and see absolutely no one in my mirrors. I assume at this point we are racing to the double yellow but because of the water, make up no positions other than Reg and Randy. We run full course yellow a few laps while they move Reg’s car. His damage is cosmetic stuff and a broken rotor, not a big bill but clearly down for the day.

I try to get a run on the restart but again I am leading in class with no pressure from behind, so my priority is keeping my head. My position at that moment is 12 points and \$1,500 worth of tires if I finish this way. After the Road America debacle last year and getting socked with probation, I no longer race people in slower classes. There is no percentage in it so the little Cayman can late-brake himself with ABS all he wants. About 50/50 I will get by him when he goes off (to his credit he did not but I tell myself that to avoid the red mist).

I make a few passes on some cars I shouldn’t be catching; I am in a C4 (997.1) and I pass a C6 and a C7 (Cup 991.2 with paddle shift, ABS and 500 hp), so I am clearly enjoying myself. One of the C7 cars later thanked me for helping him find a pace. He had no one in his class and did not want to overreach and damage the car, which I understand, but neither did he like getting passed by a slower car. To avoid the shame of it all, he passed me back with about eight laps to go, so I followed him. This is the “new and improved 2019 Joe,” not last year’s “get past NOW 2018 Joe.”

Twenty minutes left of the 60-minute race and we pit for our required 5 minutes. Not much to do since there is no fueling in Enduros 60 minutes or less, so I just sit

in the car cycling the cabin blower for 15 secs, the helmet blower for 15 secs and the cool shirt for 15 secs, all to keep from running the battery down.

Off we go, adding 10 secs for margin of error. If you leave the pit lane before the full five minutes expires, you get black-flagged for a stop-and-go, having to sit for whatever time you shorted the 5 minutes. Next time around, I come up on Randy leaving the pits and do not know if he is ahead or behind after the pits, so I make an easy pass. He tells me later he started to give chase but the car slid a few times in as many turns and he decided to let Joe have this one☺.

The track is drying on the straights but the turns are still puddles, so we made no tire changes at the stop. Speeds are up as the drying line perks everyone up, but it is too late to make a run. I get first-in-class and 9th overall with the 6th fastest lap of the race. A pretty good outcome; my car is upper-mid-pack in terms of performance and this is above my usual placement, so I am excited. A top ten is mega for me! Free pairs of tires (no, not a set, darn it) and a 1st Place Pirelli hat to add to the collection! And Peachstate added an engraved glass mug saying “First Place.” So, I won the class, not a bump or bruise on the car, and all my friends are safe, though Reg did get bruised on the start. And Matt, one of the Goldcrest cars, took the overall. I think Goldcrest cars took five podium positions out of seven cars, so again they prove, “Wanna win? Run with them.”

Next up for the Cup is the Toy Barn Tech with the HOD club folks, which is mostly a show-and-tell about the racing hobby. We may also have a Champ car on premise. It is a vastly more affordable form of racing that I have joined with a few of the club members in.

After that, it's off to Watkins Glen for my third try there. Hope to see everyone at the May 18 tech session!