

Pathway to Motorsport and Instructing

By Chris Cundiff

Hey Dad, what is that noise?!

‘That noise’ was a ¼ midget racetrack behind our family’s favorite pizza takeout spot. I begged and begged for him to just stop in and watch for a minute before we went back home.

The detail of that memory is still as vivid today as it was to my nine-year-old self. I remember how the inside of asphalt corners were worn and patched with an off-color material that made it look like a lunar surface, and my first smell of race fuel. I knew the smell of gasoline from the lawn mower refills and random car maintenance in the driveway, but this was a distinctly different smell all together. Like Ralphie and his Red Rider, I was instantly and utterly gob smacked with racing and speed in that moment!

A racecar was not in the cards for me growing up, and watching a younger rider get run over by a 500 Bultaco at my older brother’s hare-scramble convinced me that BMX is where I’d satisfy my *need* for racing. To be cliché, it was just as Tom Hanks stated, “it was like a duck to water” (Forrest Gump, 1994).

My very first BMX race was in an old horse barn with three 180-degree turns that were easily 10 feet tall. These extreme turns were fantastic to learn the classic over-under technique of entering ‘opposite’ to the rider in front of you and work the mid-corner to your advantage. The two methods were: 1) enter wide (outside) and dive in behind on the exit; or 2) slide underneath (inside) and take the rider to the top of the turn and hang them there while you controlled the corner and used the momentum to gap them on exit. To me it didn’t matter, I was into carving the corners with as much speed as I could manage!

I finally settled on Criterium Racing after sporadic Mountain Bike (MTB) and road-bike racing throughout 22 years of Active Federal Service (US Army). Crits, for short, are on closed street circuits of less than 1 mile and based on time. My BMX skills gave me a distinct advantage over almost all of my competitors, which

led to many accomplishments on the MTB and road bike in the Crits...a 'climber' I am not!

Fortunately, a very slight cardiac episode occurred on one of our 100+ mile training rides and I was gently told by our family physician that I'd need to hang up my racing wheels if I didn't want to have a catastrophic event due to some descending left ventricular blockage. I was dumbfounded that I could have any blockage with how physically fit and active I had been my entire life with Army PT and bicycle racing. But I still had the racing fire in my belly and needed an avenue to compete. As luck would have it, one of my riding/racing buddies (Timo Stark) raced karts with his father (Werner) and would tell me stories of motorsport racing to pass the time while riding.

Timo invited me to a track day with his father Werner at the Talladega Grand Prix. I didn't have a car of my own to drive and my wife Melissa graciously *allowed* me to take her baby, a 2014 Mustang GT. We had all-season tires on her at the time and were NOT prepared for what was about to happen after just two 20-minute sessions. I got an education on how hot tires and brakes get on course! We cut our track day short to make it home without cording the tires. Come to find out, Talladega Grand Prix's surface is a notorious tire shredder! My pathway was set after Timo and Werner's introduction to motorsport.

I was completely clueless on how to pursue anything related to motorsport in Huntsville and didn't even have my own car to participate. I've always followed open-wheel racing and knew I wanted a mid- or rear-engine car to balance our garage of a front-mounted V8 sledgehammer with a nimble 'racer.' My answer presented itself with a 2008 2.7L base Cayman in a beautiful Cobalt Blue. She had been run hard without a lot of maintenance and I did my fair share of spirited driving at the TAC Autocross events. Mr. Ryan Ramsey has been my maintenance muse and we both learned a lot about Porsche maintenance and performance upgrades. *I'm still learning a lot!

I focused on autocross in pursuit of my childhood dream of becoming a racecar driver. I finished second in the amateur finale my first full year of autocross, ironically being beaten by L. Ficken in a Mustang GT. After a couple of years

progressing through the autocross ranks, I was motivated to sign up for my first track day. My first experience with PCA HPDE's was a Driver Experience (DX) at Barber Motorsports Park (BMP). The DX only made me want more!

The decision to raise my hand for consideration of being selected to the PCA instructor program came after seven years of HPDE's, SCCA Time Trials, and completing the 3-Day Primal Racing School. I've always enjoyed teaching and mentoring during my Army career as a Maintenance Test Pilot (MTP) and Pilot-in-Command (PIC) and wanted to provide my lessons-learned to new HPDE drivers. Learning car balance and weight transfer dynamics at speed is still fascinating to me and I'm still learning each time I get on track.

I had my first experience of wheel-to-wheel racing with CCR Racing (HSV) at Road Atlanta. That was a World Racing League (WRL) two-day endurance race series event. WRL is one of, if not, the most competitive amateur racing series in America. Sadly, I could not take credit for the weekend of two races to qualify me for my Full Competition SCCA Racing License.

In my naïveté, I did not know I had to compete in SCCA-sanctioned events or attend an SCCA-Accredited Racing School. The 3-Day Primal school qualified me for my SCCA Novice Permit and I'm very excited to be registered for the Primal 2-Day Advanced Course to qualify me for my Full Competition License at the end of August. It is my goal to participate in the Atlanta Motorsports Park (AMP) Summer Racing Series in the future. I encourage interested drivers to consider all options of driving and racing opportunities from ownership to racing rental programs. Mine is only one of the many pathways to performance driving experiences.

I'm very excited and motivated to mentor PCA drivers as the newest Heart o' Dixie HPED Instructor!