



# Driver Education and Track Days

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Have you ever considered the idea of taking your car to the race track to see what she and you can do? If so, then attending a “Track Day”, or HPDE (High Speed Driver Education) event is the best possible way to gain the knowledge, experience, and thrill many of us seek behind the wheel of our high performance cars. These events offer all of us an opportunity to drive our cars in a controlled environment without concerns about speed limits or on-coming traffic. These events are not considered “racing” and the intent of each event is to provide a safe and fun environment for you to gain new skills (or hone old ones) and become more familiar with your car. You will be in close proximity to other cars but the event run group rules dictate what is or isn’t allowed in your specific run group. These events are very safe for you and your car and very exhilarating for the spirit!

The purpose of DE (Driver Education) is not to “win”, it is to learn how to safely experience driving your car at high speeds in a controlled environment. Those that choose to participate in track day events need to understand that the level of preparation is a bit higher than that of an Autocross but easily done with guidance and a checklist of safety requirements. Autocross event speeds rarely exceed the 60-70 mph range, and if you make a mistake you might spin and hit a soft rubber cone. The dynamics of driving on a race track are very different as you will be driving at even higher speeds and with other cars on track. Your level of awareness and preparation needs to be at a higher level than an Autocross.

The same basic principles you learn in Autocrossing will apply on the track but at higher speeds. You will learn the faster you go, the more important the “proper line” through a corner and being “smooth” with your control inputs become. If you double your speed, you will deal with 4 times the “forces”, and you can’t “argue” with Newton’s laws of physics. DE is learning to drive your car safely under these increased forces, to get more comfortable with the high speeds, to be smooth, to stay in control, and to react appropriately to situations that occur in order to keep both

you and your car safe. It takes practice, concentration, and can be extremely exhilarating, rewarding, and produce a lot of adrenaline ... it’s “on the edge”, it’s lots of fun, and it’s why so many drivers like you attend numerous events each year!

**The Tracks** – We are fortunate in Sacramento to have access to three excellent racetracks, and they all have different “personalities”. Thunderhill was built by the SCCA as a safe venue for cars and drivers. It has all the types of turns you will encounter on other tracks, on camber, off-camber, up-hill, down-hill, blind, but lots of flat and safe run-off so mistakes are not as hard on you and your equipment. Mazda Raceway at Laguna Seca is a nice mix of technical blind corners, elevation changes, and fast sections and it is famous around the world. Sonoma Raceway (Sears Point) is the most technical of the three.

Unlike an autocross course which will be different each time you go, the blacktop on these racetracks is basically in the same place today as it was when it was built (or modified like Laguna in 1987) from 15 to 50 years ago. So, each time you go to a track you can refine your lines and your skills, and come closer to the limits of you and your car at that track.

**Getting Started** – If you’re new to this activity, then you’re probably wondering how to prepare for and attend an event. There are numerous organizations in the region that host events, some new, and some with hundreds of events of experience. It’s important that you don’t throw yourself ‘into the fire’ and attend an event poorly run and/or poorly controlled. Some organizations have fewer or no restrictions on track for what we consider are necessary rules for safe learning and the safety of drivers and their vehicles. Others put too many cars on the track at one time, and others actually conduct ‘race’ type activities within your run sessions. These combinations of inexperience, lack of rules, and/or poor organization ultimately create a negative experience for drivers. TrackMasters and PCA events share many of the same basic values about safety and a positive experience, and their events are a great place to start.

What’s the process?

- Decide what car you plan to bring. Certainly a car suitable for the track and not a pick-up or SUV. However, we do occasionally see Porsche or BMW SUVs in our Novice run groups.
- Select an event by looking at the PCA calendar, the TrackMasters Racing website, or by going to the track websites and viewing their calendars. Once you’ve found a date that works with your schedule and meets your objectives, then register.
- Now you need to prepare yourself and your car for the event!

**Vehicle Preparation** – To ensure that your vehicle is suitable and safe enough to use on a race track all organizations that host events want to know that some level of equipment inspection has been conducted. To aide in this process the PCA, TrackMasters Racing, and other organizations have a ‘Technical Inspection’ document that you must fill out and submit at Registration the morning of an event. Some are ‘Self Tech’ where you inspect your own car’s systems, and others require that a qualified mechanic inspect the vehicle. For the latter, it’s important that you have an inspection done well in advance of your event. Once the inspection is completed, then bring the form with you to registration the morning of an event.

**Safety Equipment** – There are some basic pieces of safety equipment that are needed for this type of activity such as helmets and safety belts. However, all organizations requirements are different so verify what’s needed before you show-up at the event. Make sure you understand requirements for:

- Clothing (long or short sleeve shirts, pants, etc.)
- Gloves (rarely required)
- Fire Extinguisher (not always required)
- Shoes (tennis or driving shoes)
- Helmet (typically Snell 2005 or newer are required)
- Eye Protection (only needed if using an open faced helmet)
- Safety Belts (factory or aftermarket)
- Roll Bars (for convertibles only that don’t have factory ‘hoops’ or auto-deploying anti-roll posts)
- Make sure you have numbers on your car either in vinyl or in blue

painters tape. This helps the track identify you more easily if there's an issue on track.

### Self Preparation and Event

**Expectations** – It's easy for first time track drivers to be overwhelmed with the proposition of taking their 'baby' (their car) on the track, how it will perform, how they will perform, what about the other drivers, what if I damage my car, etc. There are literally a hundred thoughts going through a new driver's mind as he prepares for his first journey on a race track. It's important to understand that this is completely normal and expected at your first event. However, the most important thing for you to do as a driver is to understand what your individual expectations are for the day. As mentioned above, these are 'driving events' and not races, so you should never feel like you have to 'compete' with other cars out on track.

For your first few track events you should focus primarily on the event process, the rules on track, etiquette on track, learning the 'driving line' around the track, basic car control techniques, and driving your vehicle as smoothly as possible – not as fast as possible. With smoothness comes speed, so work on being smooth with your vehicle controls first, and the speed will follow.

**The Day Before an Event** – It's important to get to the track with enough time to take a breath and decompress, especially for your first event at a new track as it takes time to understand how the process works at that track. Arriving early also helps you relax and not be rushed through a process and then immediately into your car.

Load your car or tow vehicle with the necessities to make your experience as comfortable as possible. A portable chair, an umbrella or EZ-UP if you have one, a small cooler with some drinks, snacks, etc. You'll also need a few essential items such as an air pressure gauge, a torque wrench to check the torque of your lug nuts, Windex, paper towels, painters tape for car numbers, duct tape, and possibly even some fluids such as oil and brake fluid.

### The Day of an Event

- Get to the track early
- Register early
- Hydrate and Feed yourself
- Attend the Drivers Meeting to discuss rules and procedures
- Perform a Final Car Check before you go on the track
- Meet your coach and discuss your objectives and prior skill-

Identify where to Stage your Vehicle for each run session

- Know where to meet for down-loads with your instructor or the group in a classroom environment.
- Hydrate throughout the day

**Your First Session** – As noted above, the key to driving any road course is to know the track and to learn how to drive it smoothly. Keeping your speeds and RPMs lower is best as you learn the racing line around the track and the proper techniques to control your steering, shifting, and braking. Attempting to drive your vehicle as fast as possible is literally impossible and very unsafe until you have the skills to do it safely. These skills are developed over time, so give it some time! The one thing we hate to see is the driver who expects too much from his first time out, doesn't meet those goals and quits the activity as a result. These drivers never really get to experience the true joy of flying around a race track at speed! It's an amazing experience when everything 'clicks' on a race track. Weather, speed, and camaraderie in the paddock are just a few elements that make up the perfect track day!

**Post Session(s)** – After each session it's a good idea to:

- Discuss your performance with your coach (if you have one)
- Attend the post session classroom download and ask questions
- Check your vehicle out by checking air pressures, looking at your tires, and looking at your engine compartment for leaks, etc.
- Hydrate and prepare for your next session
- Socialize with fellow drivers during your down time in the paddock!

**Your Last Session** – During your last 2 sessions of a track day it's always a good idea to slow down a bit and work on your line around the track. Towards the end of a track day we are a bit fatigued from the overall activity both mentally and physically, so it's a good idea to take it a bit slower to ensure that you don't make costly mistakes. The end of the day is also when the track begins to cool down (especially in the spring and fall) and traction gets worse. This combination of a cool track and fatigue can result in issues on or off track. Neither of which are desirable! Take it easy, reflect on the day, pack-up and start planning what you want to accomplish at your next track day.

**Insurance Considerations** – This is a common question that everyone who owns a special car needs to have their arms around. Is my car covered if something happens to it on a race track. Well the answer to this is 'it depends'. There are a number of variables around your vehicle coverage that affect what and when you are covered. Here are a few points to understand before you go out on track with your vehicle:

- The track and the event organizers DO NOT cover any vehicle damage at an event. Their insurance is General Liability and does not cover any vehicle damage.
- Damage that your car inflicts on another car, person, or the property of the race track is also not covered by the track or event organizers policy.
- Your vehicle insurance MAY cover your car but you need to read through your policy to determine if you are or are not covered. When doing so remember that these High Performance Driver Education events are NOT racing events. So, if your policy states that you're not covered if you're racing, then you will likely be covered at an HPDE event. Conversely, some policies now state that you are not covered if you're car is just on a race track. (racing or HPDE) Again, it's best to read your coverage and possibly consult with your agent for a final decision.
- If your normal policy doesn't cover your car at an event there is other insurance available for track events. Lockton Affinity offers policies for pre-approved track day providers like Track-Masters Racing and the PCA. You can get more information about these individual policies and other track related procedures under the 'FAQs & Forms' section of the [www.trackmasters-racing.com](http://www.trackmasters-racing.com) website.

In summary, the experience of driving your car on a race track is something very few of us have the opportunity to do. It's fun, very safe, rewarding, and is guaranteed to put an ear to ear grin on your face! What are you waiting for? Come out and stretch your car's legs and expand your skills in the process!

See you in the paddock!

Doug Gale