

A Smoking Good Time on the Lewistown Plain

Our 32nd summer of DE weekends is history.. Two days of clear skies, light winds, a dry track and temperatures in the eighties. Understanding that these events are open to anyone with a car that can pass tech, it was especially pleasing that eighteen out of the 36 cars were Porsches, most of them less than five years old.

My two students drove a Cayenne and a 2023 Carrera, but I had the good fortune to drive several of the others.

Midway through the first morning we had our first true emergency in three decades. The track is surrounded by wheat fields, anywhere from fresh green in the Spring, to deep gold in the Summer, to yellowed post-harvest stubble as fall approaches. On that day it was stubble as far as the eye could see through Montana's version of smog. One of our drivers decided to take the scenic route around Turn 5 (135 degree off camber hairpin) and brushed his way through a hundred yards of stubble protruding from soil so rocky it should not have supported agriculture. But the soil did support agriculture, and the stubble supported combustion as the hot turbo exhaust was welcomed by the driest fuel ever and the corner worker transmitted "FIRE!" almost loud enough to hear from the mile-distant pits.

The turbo taxied gingerly back to the track's asphalt, and our fire marshal and I wasted zero time covering the mile with a load of fire extinguishers. The marshal was the Lewistown assistant fire chief who called all his "friends" in that first minute or so, and we emptied all of the extinguishers along the edges of the fire as the first truck arrived and dove into the ten foot flames of the fire's leading edge, spraying water all over the place and the fight was all but over. We replaced the fire bottles and two hours later we were up and running.

Speaking of running . . . the entire fleet of newer Porsche cars are powered by 3.0 liter twin turbos developing anywhere from maybe 350 horses up to upwards of 500. Then there are the transaxles, and several versions of traction control and maybe all wheel drive. And THEN there are usually three levels of performance selected by buttons. You can select the normal mode which shifts gears way below redline, keeps rpms low, and feels pretty normal. Then there is Sport mode which gives you access to stronger acceleration and instant shifts. And THEN there is Sport Plus where everything comes to the table, and where you had better be ready for blurred real estate when your tach regularly reaches 8000 rpm. And THEN those incredible brakes that bounce your eyeballs off the windscreen when those pesky school crosswalks loom ahead. And THEN you get to listen to the music of rhythmic automatic downshifts as the transmission keeps coordinating your engine speed with the car speed so when you exit the corner she's already in the perfect gear and those same eyeballs sink back into their sockets.

Pilot workload boils down to squeezing a pedal with your right foot while you concentrate simply on steering the car through the Carousel twenty mph faster than you

have ever done it before. Brake, accelerate, steer, in various orders. No manual steering, who cares about paddle shifters. On my very first lap in the first car I completely forgot about heel-toe downshifts, matching rpms to wheel speed, or trying to feel what gear I needed to be in to leap out of the next corner. AND then there was the traction control, with a computer which kept track of all four wheels and whether the car was stable as the Gs rapidly built up in ever faster turns. I never felt any of the cars slide, never felt ANYthing but tenacious grip and honestly it was this capacity that I really never fully exploited. I needed some time to think about it.

Most of my recent Lewistown laps have been in my aggressively noisy 928. Far lighter than any of the models I've just been talking about, with close to 500 horsepower and endless torque, far bigger brakes than stock, huge wheels, racing slicks, stiffened suspension, a 5 speed transaxle with shortened gears, and NO computers to help me keep it all straight. And most of the time she is ready and willing to beat you to death.

The Duck Pond, that challenging right-left-right just after Turn 5, where you go full throttle if you have the skill and cajones, leading to some serious speed going through the Kink ten seconds later. The slicks have the grip, the engine has the power, but, frankly I don't yet have the courage to simply make the car the limiting factor. Even slicks can start to squeal; they can even give up and take into a spin. Maybe my neck muscles aren't strong enough, or maybe I don't like my helmet slamming into the side window. So I have yet to stay on full throttle in the Duck Pond. I lift.

Add the computers and the Duck Pond is a different story. Was it just amazing tire grip, or was it the PSM sneaking in little adjustments as traction limits were approached that made every pass through the Pond more like weight lifting at the gym than a drifting competition? And what's it like if you push it so hard that the PSM actually gives up? I don't think I was ever close, or maybe it just doesn't happen. These cars are really in a different dimension, no exaggeration.

I own a 1976 911S which is a lovely car to drive. No faults. No warts. My old dark blue 911SC got a new paint job this summer, and is enduring reassembly and awaiting whatever I decide to do about a hot rod engine. She, too, is a great ride, though not what you would call truly exciting, yet twenty years ago she acquitted herself well enough back when the Lewistown pavement was a whole lot smoother.

But, ho hum aside, this little account is about late 911s and Caymans. They are all of the above, all with such incredible performance, ride, and handling that can't help but exercise your grin muscles. Quite honestly, they ALL took me to the same gut-challenging, throttle lifting point in the Duck Pond, the same mad braking coming off the back straight, ALL with great seats, soft carpet, and perfect ergonomics in the cockpit.

They were all borrowed cars. I never squealed the tires, never hit a cone, avoided all the yawning, growing chuckholes in front of the pits, and simply let all that computer-aided hardware govern the pace while I let their capabilities sink in.

I would not be able to pick a favorite. Well, give me a full weekend with each one and maybe. I love the palpably better balance of the mid-engined Caymans, but all that

traction controlling stuff on the 911s means you no longer have to manhandle them to make them behave in hard cornering like you had to with the older 930 Turbos, so I'm not really sure if just balance makes much difference in the numbers. Make me drive them all at night and I would not be able to tell which one I was in, they were all that good.

We're working on a solution to that deteriorating pavement opposite the pits. Keep your fingers crossed. Meanwhile, many thanks to the three dozen of you that enjoyed a truly special weekend. We have created an incredible monster together.