

Real Women Take Over Limerock

A man might be better on the straightaway because he's got the bravado, but in the corners, a woman has the finesse needed to get the upper hand

by Kathleen Donohue Karapondo



Lining up to ride the Neon's tail



Photos: Jodi Brown/deGarmo Ltd.

Karapondo as Schumi for a day

I considered myself a pretty good driver as I headed to Limerock Park in Connecticut. The program I was to participate in was equal parts racing school and driving school, teaching the basics of car control. And it was just for women. But really, all I wanted to learn was how to drive fast.

I met Matt deGarmo, a broker of vintage cars and longtime SCMer, at the Amelia Island Concours. He told me about an event he was organizing with the Skip Barber School of Racing at Limerock. DeGarmo's event would be different from other Barber offerings, and would be specifically for women with no racing experience. He asked me if I'd consider attending. I replied with an enthusiastic "Hell yes."

I quizzed deGarmo about how he came up with the idea for a day of racing just for women. "All my clients are men, and most have multiple cars. When they start talking about buying their fifth car, they may get some resistance—and rightfully so—when it takes time away from family," he explained. "I thought if I could get women involved and excited about driving, it would help my clients."

DeGarmo arranged for the entire class to stay at the Interlaken Inn, about three miles from Limerock. It was a fairly diverse group of women, ranging in age from 22 to 60-plus; careers and marital status ran the gamut, too, as did net worth. There was a mother-daughter team, and a couple pairs of best friends.

DeGarmo also invited Miranda Seymour, author of *Bugatti Queen*, to speak. Seymour is a wonderful story teller (especially with her English accent), and brought with her the spirit of Helle Nice, the sexy, outrageous and convention-busting racing legend of the '20s and '30s, who raced head-to-head with men.

DRESSING THE PART

Our instructors, all of whom have serious racing backgrounds, introduced themselves and briefed us on our upcoming lessons. We got some basic instruction from head instructor R.B. Stiewing, put on our hero (or is that heroine) suits, and headed down to the track to get into the cars.

Getting into the open-wheeled Formula Dodge car was a bit unnerving. It wasn't easy

sliding my long legs into the nose of the car while keeping them straight. I wasn't crazy about the fact that I couldn't see the pedals, and the shifter was just a metal bar with a linkage that felt more like the control for a carnival ride than a for a vehicle. We slipped on our "head socks" and helmets, then waited for the signal. I noticed one of my comrades was having a bit of difficulty getting the helmet over her enormous diamond earrings. I didn't have that problem.

Three race cars were to follow a Dodge Neon pace car; when the pace car signaled, the lead car would move right and drop back, allowing the next car to move up behind the Neon.

"Ready?"

Though I didn't feel ready, I nodded. I hit the starter switch, shifted into what I hoped was first, and headed out. Limerock is a challenging track—no oval, to be sure—and seeing all those black tire marks where others had slid off into the grass was not reassuring. I tried to remember my instructions, starting with, "Look past the apex cone when pointing the car into a turn." After a few laps on the mile-and-a-quarter track, I followed the other cars into pit lane.

Stiewing came over. "How fast do you think you were going?"

"I couldn't have been doing more than 70," I replied.

"I'll say," said Stiewing "We started pulling away from you at 45."

LEARNING TO RIDE THE ASS

I tried to explain that I just wasn't comfortable "riding the ass" of the Neon, as my dear old dad would have said. Dad taught me to leave at least six car lengths between me and the car ahead, especially on the freeway. Stiewing attempted to stifle a grin. Pretty much all of racing is riding the ass of the car ahead. I begged for another chance.

Heading out onto the track, I stayed on that Neon's ass but good until it was my turn to drop back. I headed into pit lane with my helmet held high, pleased to have the approving nod of my instructor.

I asked Rick, who's been instructing for 14 years, what the biggest difference between teaching women and men was. "Most women are better learners than most men. The majority of the women don't have big egos that get in the way, and they apply the things that you ask them to do. The thing that most women have that slows them down is self-preservation."

"But," he added, "in racing, you have to be smooth. A man might be better on the straightaway because he's got the bravado, but in the corners a woman has the finesse needed to get the upper hand."

Another instructor, Bob Green, added, "Most drivers, especially guys, have a double dose of what we call delusions of adequacy. People in general are self-certified 'good drivers.' And you know, almost everyone who's ever crashed a car has also passed a driver's test."

I admit that before I started this course I, too, was guilty of self-certified competence.

I asked if it's hard for a guy to take instruction from another guy. Rick said, "There are two things you can't tell a man he doesn't do well, and one of 'em's drive."

After lunch, we split into three groups for some instruction in threshold braking and slide recovery. We hopped in the Neons for the braking exercise. This involved taking the car on a straightaway, getting it up to about 45 mph and then hitting the brakes, first using the ABS and then turning it off to understand the difference.

Next, we took the Viper convertibles out on the autocross track. The Viper is an intimidating machine. Although it accelerates vividly and has brakes that inspire confidence, as Skip Barber's Andrew Torres says, "The Viper is an unforgiving car that will exacerbate



Perfect training for Oregon weather

your mistakes. It's very powerful, a great car to learn about limits."

During the last event, a relay race through cones on the autocross track, I'm proud to say that I heard Stiewing suck air through his teeth as I careened around the corners. Lost me at 45, indeed—I had him at the cones.

Every driver could benefit from the Skip Barber program, and the years of experience (and patience) of the team. While this type of driving initially seems dangerous, in a controlled environment, it's really not. Said Torres, "You're safer on a racetrack than you are when you get on I-90."

And I must say, DeGarmo's philosophy has worked, at least for me. The next time a man asks me what he thinks about a race car he's considering buying, I'll tell him I think it's a great decision—as long as I get to drive it, too.♦

KATHLEEN DONOHUE KARAPONDO is a regular contributor to Sports Car Market.



Miranda Seymour signs a copy of Bugatti Queen



Driven women, not Desperate Housewives