

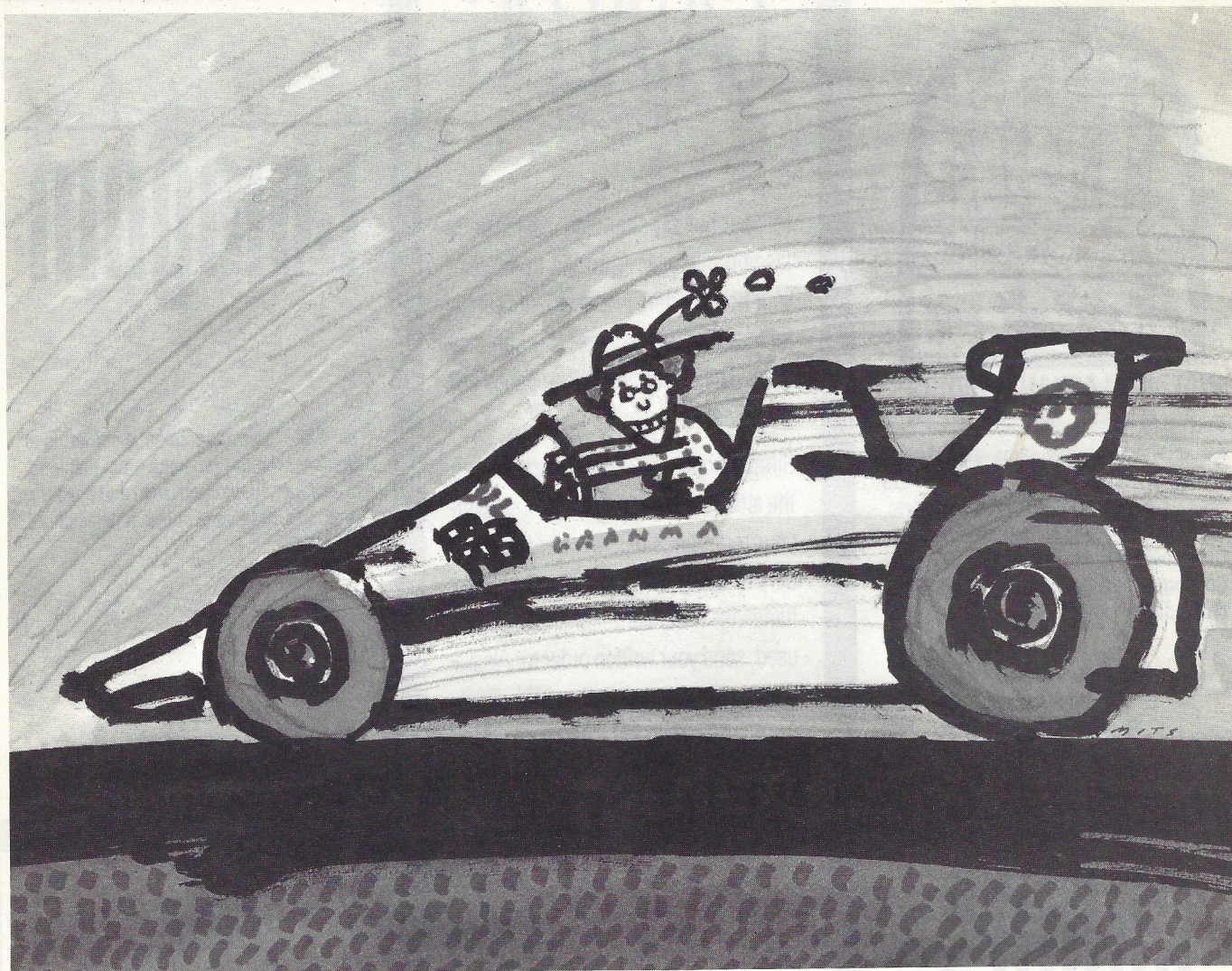
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ALASKA AIRLINES

M A G A Z I N E

The Quiet Places
A Washington Portfolio



Racer's Ed

On track at a driving school. By Gary Witzenburg

Seven men and three women, of various sizes, shapes, backgrounds and ages, arrive at a track in Riverside, California, one morning. They're about to begin their three-day Jim Russell British School of Motor Racing (JRBSMR) course. They wait nervously, eyeing pictures on the wall and checking each other out. All feel confident in their driving abilities, yet they're beginning to wonder ... Maybe this is harder than they thought. Maybe they'll do something dumb and embarrass themselves.

Maybe even ... crash.

Soon each is fitted to his or her very own (for the three days anyway) formula racing car. This is necessary because formula cars are like tight mechanical clothes. The students lower their bodies carefully into the narrow seats, sliding their feet far in front of them. They end up almost horizontal, gripping the tiny steering wheel at arm's length and looking out over the long fiberglass nose between exposed front wheels. By feel, they locate the pedals—brake and gas to the right, clutch and "dead" pedal (a rest for the

left foot) to the left of the steering column. The stubby shifter is a short reach down and right from the wheel; merely flicking the wrist moves it from gear to gear.

Instructors help their students fasten their belts, demonstrate the switches and controls, brief them on what they're expected to do, then send them out to practice proper shifting, braking and steering. The students accelerate, decelerate, drive through the same corner over and over, trying to coordinate everything at once. In the afternoon, they head

for the classroom to learn terminology and cornering theory, helped by a comprehensive textbook and instructional videotapes. The day ends with a walk around the track where an instructor points out the proper lines and potential danger spots through each turn.

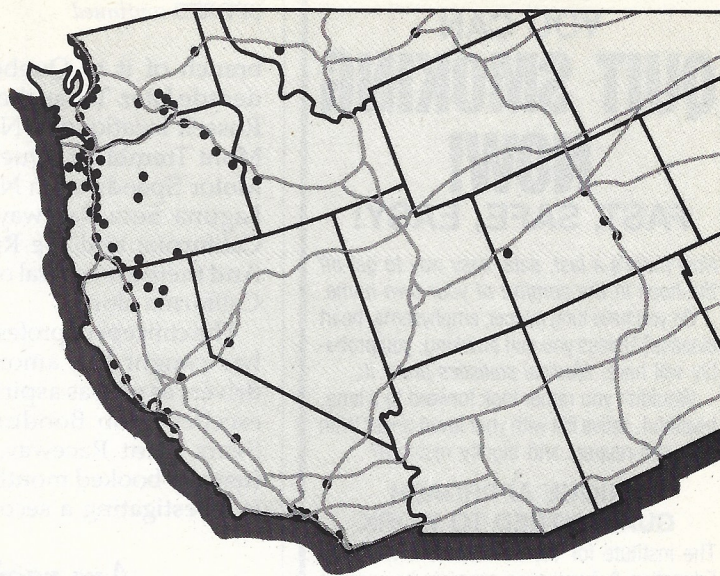
There's more practice the second day, learning the course corner by corner, until at last it's time to lap the entire track. The students are given an rpm (engine speed) redline, which is not to be exceeded. This builds concentration, teaching them to pay attention to their instruments as well as to the track, and provides a very effective way to control their speeds.

Driving complete laps, they begin to appreciate how quickly the little formula cars accelerate and brake, how agile they are, how eagerly they respond to the wheel. Their cornering "lines" (outside to inside to outside) and smoothness improve, and their nervousness turns to elation.

Day three is more of the same: session after session, practice and more practice, punctuated by brief rest periods and comprehensive evaluations with their instructors. As students improve, they are given higher redlines, speeds increase and lap times come down.

When the final critiques are completed and certificates distributed, one self-proclaimed expert named Jim turns out to have had the most difficult time. His concentration and car control were less than terrific at first; but both have improved substantially. That was a relief, because a judge had sentenced him to take this course or lose his license. Nancy, a woman whose major motivation in signing up was to compete with her brother, showed exceptional ability. But she's saving for college and has no racing intentions at the moment. Steve, an aspiring pro who is also a certified mechanic, was good; but he knows he'll have to work hard to be a winner. He's looking into the school's "Swap a Wrench for a Ride" program, which buys a full season of racing in exchange for his help in the shop.

THE IDEA OF A school for racing drivers is nothing new. According to Couture, it was the brain child of an English racer named Jim Russell. Russell started his school in England in 1957, and friend Couture (a former Canadian Road Racing Champion) brought a



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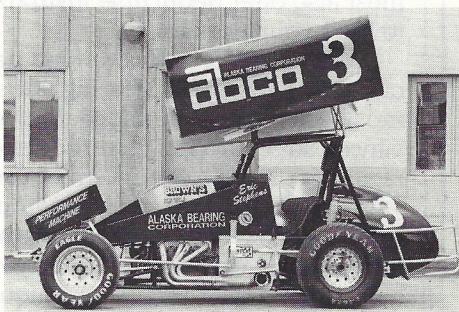
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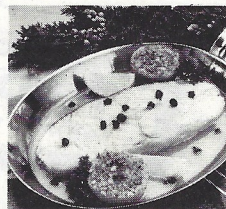
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SPORTS *continued*

branch of it to Quebec, Canada, a decade later. Today there are four Jim Russell locations in North America: Mont Tremblant, Quebec; Charlotte Motor Speedway in North Carolina; Laguna Seca Raceway at Monterey, California; and the Riverside track. And there are several other schools in California alone.

The concept of professional training has caught fire among "ordinary" drivers as well as aspiring racers. The excellent Bob Bondurant school at Sears Point Raceway, near Salinas (usually booked months in advance), is investigating a second location in

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the Southwest. Willow Springs Raceway, near Rosamond, boasts a branch of the famous Skip Barber Racing School (based in Canaan, Connecticut), plus a second school operated by Couture associate Lucien LeComte.

Ordinary drivers may well want to know: are racing schools safe? Yes. It is possible to get hurt, but highly unlikely. The instructors are so watchful and the training so careful, that every one of the major schools has an exemplary safety record. Couture says that his JRBSMR organization, with each of its locations graduating hundreds of students every year, has had no fatalities and only one serious injury in its entire history. Some schools make you pay for any damage you cause to their cars (which provides an added incentive to be careful), but most also offer deductible insurance to limit your liability.

If you can't afford (or want no part of) a full \$1,200 to \$1,500 racing course, most schools offer affordable advanced street driving or introductory racing courses (often in street cars, yours or theirs) that send you home with a day of potentially life-saving training and experience under your belt. Among the very first techniques you learn in a professional school are skid control and accident avoidance,

great for bad-weather driving. Prices for short courses start around \$200.

Still can't afford that, you say? Ask yourself how much even one minor accident might cost.

Then consider what you'll save by avoiding a major one.

Gary Witzenburg has written for Playboy and other national publications.

Jim Russell British School of Motor Racing (408-372-7223), Laguna Seca Raceway, 1023 Salinas-Monterey Highway, Salinas, CA 93908; Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving (707-938-4741), Highways 37 and 121, Sonoma, CA 95476; Skip Barber Racing School (203-824-0771), Route 7, Canaan CT 06018.

Wheel Work

A pro's driving tips

Have you ever been driving along, lost in thought, when a car suddenly appeared out of nowhere, forcing you to slam on your brakes?

Well, race driving is not much different, according to Jacques Couture, president and chief instructor of Jim Russell British School of Motor Racing in Salinas, California.

"Just like anything else, you've got to pay attention," he says. Lack of concentration is one of the major obstacles for a beginning race driver.

After they learn to concentrate, students improve their judgment of speed and distances from corners, Couture says.

Most come into a corner too fast, turn the wheel too soon and "run out of road."

"They end up putting a few wheels off the track," he says. Simple as it sounds, Couture says practice rounding the curves is the best way to learn when to turn the wheel and where to gauge the corner's apex.

It is also important not to concentrate too much on one thing in driving. Aside from looking at what's directly in front of their windshields, drivers must also be aware of what's on either side of them. For this reason, Couture also emphasizes peripheral vision in training.

Although race driving may not be for everybody, Couture believes improved concentration and judgment would lead to safer everyday driving as well. ▲—Michele Amiel