

Notes from the Back of the Pack on the Visiting Pro

by Bill Wright, new NER member

In the afternoon of the first day of NER's September Driver Ed event at NHIS and my second track day ever, I was pretty much overwhelmed by the blizzard of things to learn. Turn-in, apex, squeeze-on-the-throttle, track-out, use-the-whole-track, etc., etc. The speeded-up blur of the track, combined with what seemed an ocean of details and ideas made it hard for me to sort out what was important. Then I remembered that in the morning at the Drivers' Meeting, Margo Pinkerton was introducing Visiting Pro Dennis Macchio and saying that he was available for a one-on-one driving lesson. I wondered if he would be able to help a green guy like me.

As President, CEO, and Head Instructor for Bertil Roos Racing School in Pocono, Dennis could be kind of scary for a new driver. I worried that he might not be able to get down to my level. But when he spoke at the Novice Meeting, he had a thoughtful, calm quality and seemed to focus on what goes on inside your head, instead of just mechanics such as heel-and-toe speed shifting. So I signed up for one lesson. I figured that even if he were over my head, I needed all the help I could get. Exhibiting guru-like prudence, Dennis suggested that we go out at the beginning of the next day, the second day of the event and my third day of DE, after my NER instructor had gotten me a little further along.

My NER instructor was both brave and helpful. I think I was the slowest driver in the Green/Yellow group, and almost surely the oldest one. At the end of that Monday, my instructor said that I had improved, and that my last run had been much less scary than my first ones. Hmmm... Such progress.

That night, after a great dinner at Makris with my new NER friends, I thought ahead to my lesson and decided that this was going to be a Guru/Grasshopper event. And I was definitely the Grasshopper. It dawned on me that I was hoping that Dennis was really a guru. Some time ago, I learned that the idea of guru-ness is not a fiction. There are men and women who have combined long experience with a unique ability to get to the heart of the matter. These people don't horse around – they can simplify a great mass of detail, and distill out what's really important. Not just guys like Einstein. My uncle Charlie, too – as long as you got the right topic.

So the next morning, I was both eager and humble, waiting at staging, when Dennis hopped out of another car, and slid into my passenger seat. I definitely felt like Grasshopper, and so I confessed to him that I knew I had a very long list of stuff to fix and learn, and I was a little worried that he might not know where to start. I asked him if he could please find the two or three most important things for me to work on. Smiling, his eyes twinkling, he put his helmet on, and waved toward the track. "Two laps and come back," he said. "Pretend I'm not here." Oh sure.

I drove my two laps, pulled back into staging, and ripped off my helmet. I looked at Dennis, and for a long moment, he looked at me without speaking. I figured he was trying to find a tactful way to say something. After some thought, he said, "Two things. First, you must hold the wheel right. Put your hands at three o'clock and nine o'clock, and your thumbs around the wheel." Among all the details, I had lost track of where my hands were. But then I thought, "*Oh come on, my hands? Such a tiny thing? What about velocity and radius and The Line???*"

Then he added, "And your eyes. You have to look ahead. If you look where you are going to be, the car will follow." Well, that had a guru-like quality to it. Driving as a lesson in living life. Helmet back on, he waved toward the track, and back we went.

We drove around and around, my hands in place, and my eyes trying to see ahead. At each important point, Dennis prodded and encouraged me to look at the next point. My hands actually seemed to be following my eyes. Ocular driving! It felt much better, I had to admit. Smoother.

More fun. How could such simple adjustments have a strong effect? Near the end of my last lap, I seemed to be going faster. Hmmm...

For the rest of the day, I had yet another instructor, a very experienced and supportive teacher. Somewhere around my third run of my third day of DE, I found a rhythm, and the Line became more obvious. My newest instructor also helped me with seeing ahead, and with smoothness. By the end of the day, I was going a lot faster, with some noticeable consistency. I was having fun. It was disappointing when the day was over.

Driving home after my third day of DE, I was much less tired than my first day. Or my second day. I thought about Dennis, and how he had cut through to the most important corrections for me to make. And how, after those simple corrections, improvements surged. That's the way with gurus. Not many words spoken. Like the Lone Ranger, he was only there long enough to get the job done.

It isn't easy being Green, but hopefully, it won't last forever.

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