

Spec Miata Racing- Lessons Learned

by Shane Benson

It was just another rainy weekend, but it will forever be etched in my mind. Indianapolis Raceway Park played host to the first Central Division SCCA club racing event this season, and believe me, it was a Hoosier-style wet one.

After seemingly endless late-nighters/all-weekenders, a lot of blood/sweat/tears, and the assistance of everyone and anyone interested in being involved, "Frances" made her Spec Miata road course racing debut. For those of you unfamiliar with the project, Frances (aka "The Mule") is my 1991 base red Miata, with 108,000 some-odd hard-beaten miles on her. She's my second Miata, and sixth of eight in my long history of Mazda sports car ownership.. counting #7, the "Power 323". One of these days I'll write a story about my sports car upbringing, but the time for Spec Miata is now!

Those of you who know me, know I am a passionate person. Although I am only now consciously aware of it, my love of driving and all things Miata has culminated and melded into the AIM Racing Spec Miata. And no big surprise that I would find people who also shared that passion. We all know the Miata is a great car; what's even more impressive is how great the people that the car inspires can be!

Of course the weather for the entire week prior to IRP was sunny and beautiful, absolutely perfect Miata weather. And there was poor Frances, not washed in four months, holed up in the shop in pieces, unable to come out and play. We were behind schedule on the car, there was way too much to do and not nearly enough time or people to do it!

Lesson #1: don't procrastinate! Fortunately I was able to assemble a crack pit crew for the event; my good mates Troy Stinson, Scott Beauchamp, and Chuck Wills came through in a pinch and helped me get the car together in time. True to Indiana form, the weather turned sour just in time for race weekend! Our plan was based on the SCCA schedule: Saturday was going to be my first SCCA school, and there was a regional race on Sunday. Normally the SCCA requires two schools in order to run a race, but I was banking on the fact that I could impress my instructors enough to get a waiver and be able to race on Sunday. The school would consist of five track sessions, with driver meetings in between. The forecast for the weekend was rain, with a 100% chance of rain on Saturday and a 100% chance of rain on Sunday. Did I mention it was supposed to rain?

Saturday morning we were to meet at the shop bright and early... and everyone was there on time except yours truly, Mr. In-His-Own-Time-Zone. I was running late, to nobody's surprise. OK, run in the shop, throw all the tools we can get our hands on into a bin along with fluids, lubricants, duct tape and anything else we imagined we might need as fast as possible! Load up Chuck's Trooper with gear and canopy and spare tires! Are we forgetting anything? Where's the torque wrench!? AARRRGHHH!! Gotta get to the track by 7!

Lesson #2: plan ahead! Of course we rolled in a little later than that. Good thing I at least attended the SCCA meeting the night before and pre-registered. Now I just needed my novice permit signed and we're in... uh, where's the permit? \$%&@!!! Is it going to rain? Should we run on the street tires or the track rubber?

Lesson #3: be prepared! We were so unprepared I ran the first school session on street tires, because I forgot to balance my race Toyos! Believe me, those poor Kumho Ecstas never saw such abuse! While on the first session, Chuck and Scott ran the Toyos back to the shop for a quick balance. We had them on in time for the second session, and that's when the fun really began. The car had absolutely HUGE amounts of grip after getting the Toyos up to operating temperature. Lap times started coming down... I ran 2:06 on the Kumho street tires. With the Toyos that figure dipped to 2:00 flat on the second session.



Lesson #4: don't forget stuff, and if you do have solid people there to help CYA! Everyone took a break for lunch, and when we came back we decided to make some changes to the car setup. Troy fiddled with tire pressures while Chuck made adjustments to front wheel camber. Scott kept everything in order and kept us nourished. I had to pit in early because of some wack bushing noise coming from the front control arms. Otherwise I thought we were doing really well, and the weather was giving us a break. Sure it was cold and balmy, but no rain meant I could be aggressive on the track with the Toyos. The lap times dropped to 1:58 and some change. Chuck put some muscle on the control arm bolts and snugged them up for the next session.

Lesson #5: make sure everything is tight! It was before the fourth session that Matt Curry, long-time road racer and my instructor, came to me and notified me that I would not be waived for Sunday's race. What!?! I thought for sure I had it in the bag, since I had prior road course experience and had not made a wrong move in school so far. He informed me that virtually nobody was going to be waived. I suppose I was OK with that; after spending two weeks straight pulling 18-20 hour days at the shop, I was ready for some rest. Sunday would give me an opportunity to finally