

Push-it-to-the-Limit Series, Event #1: Smells Like an Autoslalom

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When you approach the Hershey Centre in Mississauga on a Saturday, you glide through an empty industrial area. You might see another car, but it's unlikely. The only sound is that of your own vehicle and of airplanes taking off and landing over at Pearson airport.

At least, that's the case until you reach the sweeping corner just past Kennedy Road. It's at that point that you can see what looks like miles and miles of cars, parked behind a sea of pylons.

Then it registers: this is not an ordinary Saturday. It's May 8, and the beginning of the Push It To The Limit Performance Driving Autoslalom Series, organized by the Mazda Sports car Owner Club.

Over the winter, I managed to forget how big some autoslalom events get. The PITL series routinely ends up drawing the largest group of competitors in Southern Ontario.

Though 89 competitors is arguably not the biggest crowd PITL has seen in the last few years, after winter events with 30 participants, the Hershey Centre lot is a mass of automotive insanity by 8:30.

While changing tires, I look around the lot. In some ways, you'd swear this was a party. Participants who haven't seen each other in six months, or more, cluster around, trading stories about their winters, cars, car mods, and their plans for class domination (rumour has it that it's all about the tires, but you didn't hear it from me).

I hit up Wes T. for a reservation on his passenger seat, telling him I want to take notes. When I show up at his Civic with my helmet in one hand and a little red notebook in the other, his jaw hits the pavement for a moment. Then he starts to chuckle, "I thought you were kidding!"

The first two cars through the course hit cones. Suddenly, we're up at the start line and rushing towards the first gate. A few twists and turns later, "Rotation! Who!" echoes through the car.

The season has begun, indeed.

Five minutes later, I'm in Rob T.'s Miata. In the start box, Rob tells me that this probably won't be a good day.

"These are last year's tires," he says.

"Uh huh, and?"

"And these are crummy brakes. And my alignment is off."

I raise an eyebrow; "I see the excuse generator works just fine."

"You bet!" he presses the four-way-flasher button on his dash. "See? I even have a button!"

With a raw time barely a second behind the class leader, I don't think he had much that required excuses.

The group of drivers, overall, has a variety of experience. For some, this is their first event; for others PITL is old hat. The veterans are the ones trying out this year's new modifications, or, for some, new cars.

Among the competitors raising eyebrows today are J.C. and Jay.

"I can barely drive my car with my helmet on," J.C. informs me. "You should see us in the thing, tilted all over the place."

"What are you driving?"

"The Porsche."

"Wah, a Porsche! Poor you!" I'm all sympathy.

The Porsche in question is J.C.'s newly acquired 2001 Porsche 911 Carrera 2, metallic emerald green, buttery leather interior, and many other drool-worthy qualities including 300 horsepower.

Take her to an autoslalom? What a way to find out what the car can do!

I count my blessings that J.C. doesn't hold grudges over my sarcasm and get a ride on his second run. He's cursed with elderly Kumho 712 tires, yet he finishes mid-pack.

Meanwhile, Jay W. is a front-runner for FTD (fastest time of the day) with his 2001 Miata. There is good-natured grumbling in the C Mod class over this, but a little competition never hurt anyone.

When I climb into Jay's car, I ask him how the day is going.

"I'm still learning the car," he says. "I finished installing the supercharger and intercooler last night at midnight... then went to bed."

I try to imagine a world in which I hastily complete a supercharger installation and set FTD less than 12 hours later. Nope, not happening.

Jay, however, somehow makes it look easy.

However, for the uninitiated, it isn't Jay's modifications that are attracting attention: it's Paul K.'s supercharged Miata, with its mean, bird-like chirping. No one questions that the car is serious competition, and a little crowd grows every time he heads into the course.

During the event, I get rides with nearly 20 drivers, learning how different driving styles impact performance, cheering on new drivers as they make it through the course unscathed, and picking up a few new interesting curses along the way.

But it's Mike B. that sums up the sport, and a driver's relationship with his or her car the best:

"It's the times that dictate, really. I think and think about the car, but when look at the times later, they indicate. I love that car, I hate that car, it's about the times."

Top 10 Times of the Day

#	Num	Name	Car	FTD
1	97	Jay W.	2001 Blue Mazda M	45.519
2	73	Paul K.	1991 White Mazda	45.656
3	41	Ryan M.	1991 White Mazda	45.840
4	61	Derek B.	1990 Red Mazda RX	46.073
5	16	Hanif P.	1993 Red Honda Ci	46.161
6	11	Stephen T	2000 Burgundy Maz	46.498
7	82	Dave T.	1991 White Mazda	46.673
8	112	Brent H.	1997 Plymouth Neon	47.022

9	75	Curtis S.	1986 Silver Mazda	47.109
10	28	Darryl D.	1991 White Mazda	47.121

Class Winners

A Stock: Stephen T. 2000 Burgundy Mazda 46.498

A Mod: Derek B. 1990 Red Mazda RX-7 46.073

B Stock: Wes T. 1995 White Honda Civic 49.061

B Stock Plus: Ed F. 2003 White Acura RSX 49.762

B Mod: Mike A. 2000 Subaru Impreza 47.153

C Stock: Maxine P. 2002 Subaru WRX 52.407

C Stock Plus: George D. 2004 Honda S2000 48.357

C Mod: Jeff W. 2001 Blue Mazda Miata 45.519