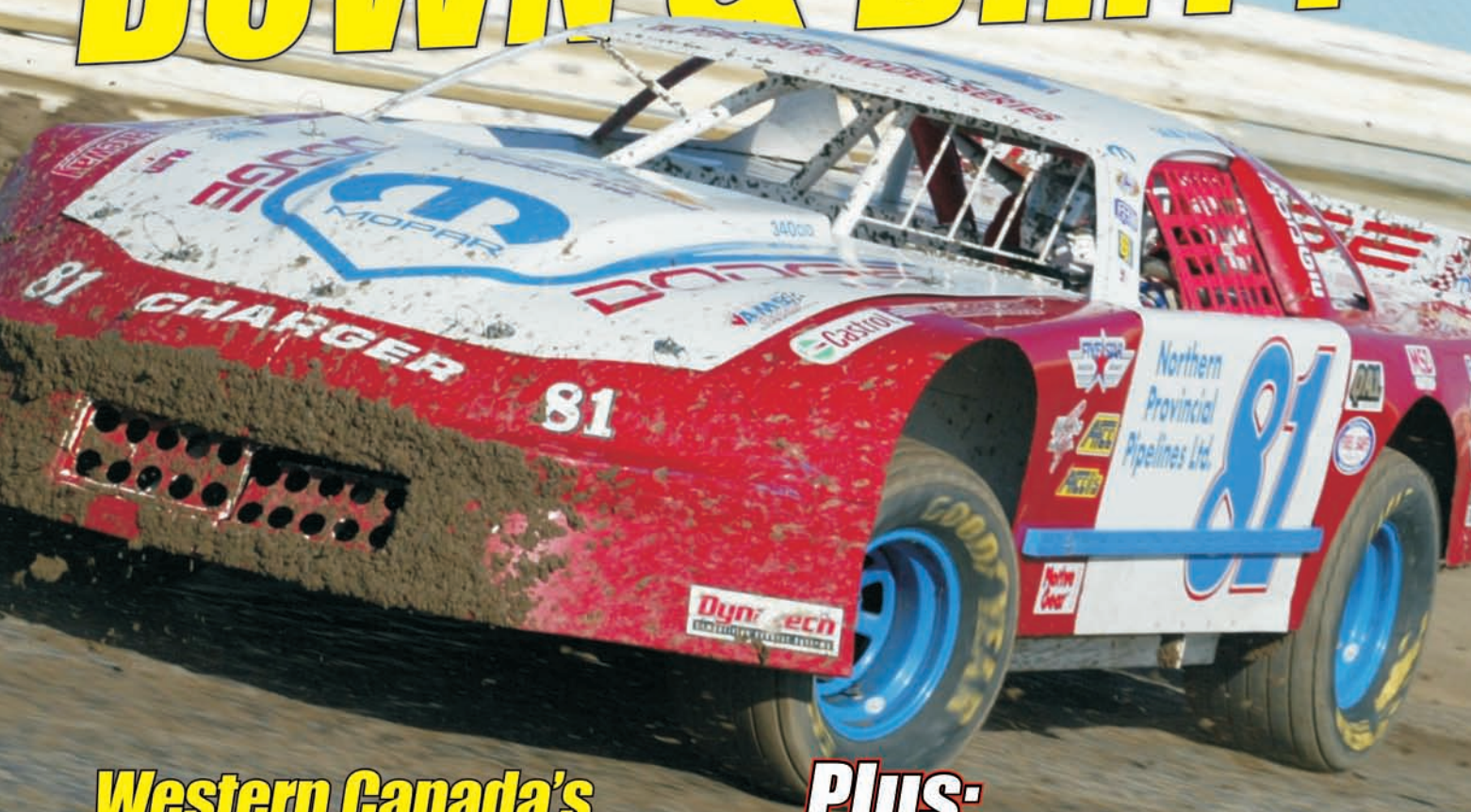


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STAY ON THE ROAD

Open Road Motorsports invites *Inside Track* to Targa Newf Prep School... big mistake!

By Mark Atkinson

Ever watch one of those Targa Newfoundland television shows and think to yourself, "Those guys are wussies! I could have driven faster than that without spilling my can of Molson Ex!"

Well, to help put things into perspective for the prospective Colin McRae's of the world, Glen Clarke of Open Road Motorsports runs a Targa Newfoundland 'prep' school every year to help bring some folks back down to earth. He foolishly invited *Inside Track* to come participate, which we did on June 17 at the Mosport Driver Development Track.

Given the number of options the DDT offers in terms of course layout, it's easy to see why it's an optimal place for Clarke and co. to run a rally school there. With only a couple well-placed cones, the 'stage' could change from slow and sinuous to flat-out sweepers in a matter of minutes.

The all-day school starts early, and students are advised to have their Targa cars prepped beforehand as they needed to be 'tech-ed' before let out on the track. Since my co-driver Michael Banovsky and I showed up with a bone-stock Dodge Charger R/T, our once-over was very short...

A preliminary drivers' meeting got everyone up to speed on the concept of rally and how it differs from straight on-track driving. The objective here wasn't to learn every nuance of the DDT, it was to improve your car control and driving skills. Going 10-10ths wasn't advised because there are always too many variables – blind corners, blown tires, stray animals, etc. – out on real stages to not keep something in reserve.



(Above) Glen Clarke of Open Road Motorsports gives one of the many briefings at the Targa Newfoundland driving school. (Below) Banovksy (l) and Atkinson (r) try not to make fools of themselves...

PHOTOS COURTESY GARTH GULLEKSON

Once the initial briefing was over, Banovsky and I were thrown into the car for the first practice stage. Having already had some experience as the 'meat in the seat' back at the Ontario Winter Rally, I called dibs on the driver's role. Plus I went into Journalism school precisely because I was lousy at math, and didn't want to remind myself of that...

Anyway, with a set of traditional 'tulip' directions and little help, we hit the track for three laps.

Say What?

You don't appreciate just how difficult it is to distinguish that 'bear right' sometimes means 'go straight'... After plowing around the course, we finished up only having missed two turns. And we realized that since we were pretty much the only ones without a calibrated rally odometer, we'd have to do some on-going calculation as the day progressed to stay 'on mile.'

The practice stage post-op revealed that we weren't the only ones to get caught out and get lost at least once, which helped our bruised egos slightly. From there, drivers and co-drivers were split up for a few hours, each for our own specialized training – you can read about Banovsky's co-driving school experiences in the sidebar.

Drivers were treated to a half-hour classroom session on rally driving techniques, which differ more than you'd think from traditional on-track lines. Clarke discussed

how to keep the car under control in the varying conditions, what to expect from Newfoundland's roads, etc. It was an eye-opening amount of information for someone who's never been, and my fears were that where would you get to practice techniques like this beforehand?

My question was answered in the first on-track session as I was paired up with driving coach Mark Scott of Chelsea, QC, who has run in Targa a few times in his vintage Porsche 911. After a few laps of running more 'traditional' lines, Scott had me switch to off-line driving – late apexes, drive on the 'wrong' side of the track, more acute turns and no avoiding puddles.

It takes a while to 'unlearn' what you've spent so much time invested in – i.e. proper corner-entry, apex, corner-exit – but once you're comfortable with it, you don't lose as much time as you'd expect.

After the 1-1/2 hour track session was over, it was time for lunch before another classroom session discussing how to better prep your car to handle a week's worth of abuse on Newfoundland's roads. Higher ride height, narrower tires to cut down the tram-lining or hydroplaning, etc.

Then another whole bunch of track time, with instructor and without. To keep the drivers guessing, Clarke and his staff would alternate the direction of travel every 10 or so minutes – clockwise one time, counterclockwise the next. Then to really mess with people, they'd alter the

course layout between sessions, meaning your out-lap was usually quite moderate so as to not get caught out by a blind '90-left over crest' rather than 'stay right over crest'. Drivers were kept on their toes.

By the time that the instructors decided they'd shoved enough math into Banovsky's brain, it was time for the Practice Rally, which consisted of laps around the DDT, then a transit along the roads between Mosport and Bowmanville, then back to the DDT for more laps. I don't think we did too awful...

Right! No, Left!

The test was devious, involving Banovsky asking me questions as we're trundling around the DDT while keeping an eye out for errant 'competitor' (i.e. Targa school staff) vehicles parked around the track showing the OK sign or not... Throw in the "Drive in third gear until further instruction" (thank you HEMI torque!) and it certainly was a stressful experience, and a perfect example of what you as a team have to be doing constantly



Getting onto the track for the first time... helmets were discouraged for initial practice stage to promote communication and keep speeds down, but after that it was lids on no matter what. PHOTO COURTESY GARTH GULLEKSON

for six days in Newfoundland!

The main theme that kept popping up during the whole day was that communication between the driver and co-driver is crucial to having a safe – let alone fast – time at Targa. And it only whetted our appetites for more! Hopefully next year we

can trick... ahem, convince some generous manufacturer to let us run in the big show!

The school costs \$795 per team, and would be worth it for the 'handbook' alone. For more information, contact Glen Clarke at Open Road Motorsports (glen@openroadmotorsports.com). ♦

MATH REQUIRED FOR CO-DRIVER SCHOOL

The only equation I've worked out is that during math class in high school, I lost exactly six per cent of my grade each year. In other words, I'm mathematically regressing.

As I found out during the co-driver's school, being numerically-challenged is not a good thing.

The morning began much like it should: handing out papers, going over safety procedures, and getting the 4-1-1 on exactly what navigators do. Easy. I began to think, "Hey, sign me up for this. I can read maps, keep the driver under control, and watch the beautiful Newfoundland scenery blur by."

Then they handed out the "Minutes per kilometer" printout.

"Say your rally computer stops working," began the instructor. "You need to quickly calculate the exact average speed you'll be doing at the finish to avoid penalties."

Penalties? Average speed? Calculations? Are they nuts?

Not really. The school isn't for the casual rally racer. As such, they threw the navigators into the deep end of Greenspond and expected us to swim. Or swim and do equations.

Thankfully the first classroom session ended and we met up with our drivers, who we learned from the navigator's briefing a) get aggressive, b) should not be allowed to think about the route, and c) need to be told "yes" instead of "right" after a question – else they'll turn right into a cod hatchery.

I was handed a route book for the Mosport Driver Development Track which – as Mark probably alluded to – isn't the best place for figuring out which part of tarmac to keep the Charger on when I said



Prospective Targa Newfoundland co-drivers get thrown into the deep end of the pool, but the heavy load of information is crucial. PHOTO COURTESY GARTH GULLEKSON

"bear right". We completed three laps, all with different turns thrown in to test our communication skills.

We were terrible.

More classroom, and another session on-track. Only this one was our "exam". It's the most debilitating and diabolical exam I've ever taken. So we go onto the track, only this time I have to ask Mark questions while he's driving at race speeds. Stuff like, "What colour is the second corner flagman's hat?" Then further down, I have to work out our average speed – all while reading the route.

The exam ended in what felt like

10 seconds, and I handed the sheet in. Turns out it didn't count for anything. (Tell that to my ulcer.) But again, it showed that Targa teams really need to gel – as the consequences could be disastrous.

Finally, we had to do a route using the rural roads around Mosport. And you know what? After we aced the first turn, there was a burst of confidence. I navigated perfectly, to the T – one of only two or three teams to do so.

The school taught me that nothing beats practice in the world of rallying. Throughout the day, my skills as a navigator kept getting sharper. Their method of teaching real calculations and using real-life experience is exactly what Targa participants need to compete safely.

But I'd still rather be the nut behind the wheel. Let the co-driver worry about time/speed/distance. Speaking of which, any mathematicians free for next year?

By Michael Banovsky