

The Mini Chronicles – Chapter Two

The Abandoned Kart Track and Watkins Glen

Jamie and Dan Ipsen

I am a child with a new toy. Thank goodness I need to work everyday because I want to spend every waking moment driving. I run errands for people I don't know. I take the long way home. I drive the Mini over mountains, on twisty back roads and down thruways. I slalom around light poles in the parking lot at work.

My son, AJ, explains that a new car has to be broken in. Like a new pair of shoes – I wonder? It finally dawns on me to read the manual. Oh oh, 1200 miles to break in the engine, clutch, brakes and tires. No wonder it was acting funny during those quick downshifts to second. Too late now, I'm well over 1200 miles in a week and a half. Good thing! I want to try the abandoned kart track about an hour from our home. Sneaking out at 6:30am, Dan and I take back roads to find the track. It's just where AJ said it would be! We each take turns driving around, clocking unofficial times, and egging each other on. The brakes get really hot and the tires smell like a pit crews dream. All too soon it is time to go home for morning commitments.

The little track has intrigued me. I get AJ and Lew, a veteran trackie, to help me understand it better. We meet there one afternoon. "This is the line," they try to explain to me. What line? I doubt this old track ever had painted lines. Besides, it's too narrow for two cars.... "This is when you brake. Take the late apex. Oh no – a geometry term. Physics? I'm doomed...No lift here....." Will it ever make sense? I keep practicing all they are telling me. There is a huge hesitation in the Mini after an uphill right hander. I jump out of the car like it's on fire, Why's it doing that? "Stay calm. That's just turbo lag - where your turbo can't catch up." I throw my hands up into the air. They just laugh, "You'll get it. You just need seat time – seat time."

The time is approaching for REAL seat time. I've signed up for a High Performance Driving (HPD) Class through the Patroon Chapter of the BMW Car Club. It will be two days at Watkins Glen. I'm nervous that I won't know anyone or be accepted because I drive a Red Toaster. So I do what any woman would do, I persuade my husband, my son and my RX7 friend, Janet, to sign up too. Signing up is the easy part. Getting the cars track ready is another matter. The RX7 goes into the shop after two turbos are found to be faulty and oil is leaking like Jed Clampet's bubbling crude. Friday, two days before we need to leave, the Rx7 engine components are still lying on a gurney nearby the gaping hole left under the hood. AJ's rebuilt Civic breaks an axle on a joy ride.

There is talk on tires and brakes for the Mini. Saturday, everything falls into place. To break in the new clutch, AJ miraculously drives the completed RX7 300 miles into the wee hours of the morning after fixing his car. The Mini stays stock. Sunday morning after church and giving a presentation on the Church School program I zoom home to pack. What do these people wear? I pack something for every possibility. My suitcase is gigantic. My husband and son roll their eyes. "It's bigger than the Mini," they state sarcastically. Ok, ok. I lighten the load and hope for the best.

I vacuum the car out to calm my nerves. The Mini is pristine and far more ready than I. Finally we all assemble on our driveway. Lew joins us to give encouragement and directions. We caravan out to Watkins Glen playing leap frog like kids. We momentarily catch up to Tom Hansen, the Chapter tech man. He glances our way then blows by us towing a VW Bug. So, not every car there will be a Bimmer...

Four hours later we find the hotel. It's very nice and there is an impressive line of BMWs (all facing out, of course) showing off for the passersby. From an email, I knew there would be a technical inspection at the hotel – but where is it? We find 'the inspectors' are all in a dinner meeting. OK – I'm starving too. Let's go out. Besides I'm going to need energy for tomorrow's driving. Dinner in town, at a restaurant on the lake, is delicious. The company laughs a lot and the margarita helps convince me that I can really do this. We find the tech guys back at the hotel. They are good natured about their work and only make a few jokes about the red toaster as they check the brakes, the tires and the inspection papers. All of our cars get a passing sticker.

I endure a fitful night of sleeping with thunderstorms (and why didn't I have decaf at dinner?). I'll bet every other driver slept like a rock. At 5:28am a car engine roars to life. My husband smiles in his sound sleep. I could swear I hear him whisper "300 horses". "Whoa, boy!" I jump in the shower. The dawn is clear and cool. At 6:00am there's not a car left in the parking lot outside our room. These guys are serious. Give me coffee and a power bar and I'm ready to go. Thank goodness for Lew, or we'd still be in the parking lot of the hotel, clueless! No map to get to the track. No map of the track to get us through the maze of streets and campgrounds to the paddock where we belonged. (Can we have one put in our packet for next time DJ/Ron?)

*continued
on p. 17*

The paddock is a jumble of cars, tires,