

**Mini Chronicles (cont.)** trailers, tarps and tools. Engines are on display for ooglers. The sounds range from polite tinkering to sonic backfires. Doesn't anyone believe in a muffler? Everyone is busy with something. It smells strongly of "O' de Garage Mechanic". At last there is a call over the PA for registrations and a drivers meeting.

The day is divided into classroom time, track time and breaks. An informative class session is given by a professional driver, but where is my mind? Is the track really like the YouTube videos I've watched? Will I be too slow? Will I ever get the line? Who can memorize all this? Will my instructor like me? What am I going to do to my brand new car? Will my helmet fall in front of my eyes?

Time to line up in the grid. I grab my helmet and slip it on. I go to kiss my husband and I can't because of the face piece. He lifts the helmet off and holds it over my head as he plants one. "You're going to be fine. You were born a lead foot. Go have fun." He pushes the helmet back on my head. I can't speak. I jump in the Mini and start toward the grid. I don't know if it's better to be near the front or the back but I don't care. I wait for my instructor. I think of Dan and the huge sacrifice he's made by letting me be the driver. (I had signed us both up for this event thinking we could share the same car. When we found out that wasn't possible he insisted the Mini was my car - I should be the one to drive.) How many other men would pass up this chance? A tear rolled down into the depths of my helmet. I felt sick. Do Minis come equipped with barf bags? I tried to remember if that was in the manual.

My instructor popped his head in the passenger side window with a smile. "Jamie?" "Hi. I'm Andrew." After he fully understood I knew nothing, we were off. Andrew's demeanor was perfect. He was calming and encouraging. He steadily coached me through each turn describing the line and what I had to do to the car to get there. I wasn't too slow. In fact I passed several cars. It was exhilarating. Why hadn't I done this 30 years ago?

The rest of the day was a blur of classroom and track time. A ride from Andrew in his car was both educational and humbling, not to mention a blatant thrill. It got hot. I wimped out by putting on the AC while waiting in the grid. Andrew laughed. "It's ok I don't like the heat either. Once I even forgot to turn off my AC while I was on the track." He laughed again. "I was wondering why my car was so sluggish." By the end of the day I knew the track had a rhythm and my Mini and I were closer and closer to matching it. That night I dreamed of the track. All night I was driving it but it was a far nicer sleep than the night before and I'm sure the TWO margaritas at dinner

helped a bit.

A new day. More classroom. A new instructor. The same pang of guilt on the grid. "Don't worry," Dan assures me. "I'm taking great pictures of everyone. Keep driving. I'm proud of you. My turn will come." We look over the car. He suggests we rotate the tires. The stock tires (only a month old) are wearing like a snow cone on the Equator. I keep driving. Geoff helps me get faster, brake harder, take a shorter line. I memorize the track. "It's like a sonata," I tell him. "Every turn is a phrase that flows into the next and the next..." He's staring at me. "I teach piano." "Oh!" His light clicks on.

It rains. It rains so hard it's hailing. I am in the classroom. There is a scramble to close windows and move cars. Some hasty prayers are prayed to the car gods that no one's paint job is ruined. We're told we can go back out if we'd like when the Track Powers say it's safe. My friends opt no. I jump in the Mini and take the chance. It's wonderful! There are fewer cars on the track and I can concentrate on what I'm doing without worrying about what they are doing. It's an excellent last run.

One more session in the classroom with warnings of our fatigue and track apparitions. "You will look down and see you are doing 97. Take it easy." The instructor was right. Going home was the pits for all of us. AJ's car had acceleration issues on the last run and Lew boiled his brake fluid. Janet valiantly offers to drive behind him so when he veers off into the median she can dial 911. The Mini is great. I worry about the brakes a little. They most certainly feel different. Dan drives. The cars take turns leading. We stop for a big Italian dinner and some laughs. Thank goodness for AJ who was born a comic. He has us in stitches. We are renewed. As a sign that we will get home safely, there is a beautiful full moon rising. We drive on in its wakening. Then sadly, like a meteor shower, we split at our respective exits and float apart from each other. Watkins Glen is a dream I promise myself I won't forget.



***Not the Ipsen's Mini, but a Mini - Ed.***