



## A Mini guide to autocrossing

Let's start with a warning: Autocrossing is a gateway drug, a first step onto the slippery slope of racing and other forms of automotive perdition. It is addictive. It can be expensive. It's like fine port, crystal meth, and the Real Housewives of Orange County.<sup>1</sup> Proceed at your own risk.

That's the real issue: Risk. It's pretty low. Let's face it, hauling heinie around a bunch of cones in an empty parking lot is way less risky than most freeway commutes. Since 1976, I've seen three significant incidents. One competitor looped it badly and clipped a wall when the Red Mist set in; another had a wheel fall off because the studs were too short for the aftermarket wheels he installed; and a third had his engine catch on fire when an old fuel-line clamp got tired and just let go. All of the damage was minor, nobody got hurt, and I'm pretty sure the worst part was dealing with the buckets of crap from friends (including me) after the fact. In reality, you eat some tires and it's a little tough on brake pads and rotors, but if you're paying attention, the only real risk is usually just cone scuffs on the

paint.<sup>2</sup>

So how do you start? Sign up, show up, and do what your instructor tells you. Minis are a blast to drive bone-stock, and are class competitive in Club

There are lots of books on autocrossing, but here are some high points.

Racing, SCCA, and NASA in all sorts of permutations and tunes. Just go and have fun. Do it. Do it now.

There are lots of books and articles that are way more detailed and instructive than a single column can be, and experiential learning with an instructor is best of all, but let me hit some high points.

**Walk the course.** It's sea of cones out there, and sometimes it feels like the Bermuda triangle. Sometimes it *is* the Bermuda triangle, especially if the Course Whisperer is an evil deviant. It's easy to get lost and hard to memorize the whole course. Locate two or three places that are going to be problems, visualize what they look like from the driver's seat, and decide how you're going to handle them. Second, look for the groups of gates that you can link together in a smooth series of arcs. Every course has at least one giant sweeper that doesn't look that way at first glance. Find it and party.

**Sit.** Have one of the instructors check out your seating position: tush and back all the way against the seat with the back adjusted so your wrist can drape easily over the top of the wheel, knees bent when the clutch and brake are fully depressed. Sit that way every time. Don't tilt your head on the turns so you can keep your visual inputs consistent.

**Breathe.** Seriously. Every noob out there forgets to breathe on the run, and by the end, the brain-fade from oxygen depletion sets in and stupid stuff happens. Breathe in. Breathe out. Repeat.

**Look ahead.** Way ahead. If you're looking at the next gate, that's not far enough. At the speeds you're going, it's just too

late to make corrections for the next gate. The line for that gate was determined a gate or two back. If you look two, three or even four gates ahead, you can link the turns and go faster. Feel free to look out the side window. On the tight turns, you're going to need to.

**Don't look at the cones.** Look at the space *between* the cones. The first rule is that you look where you want the car to go. If you want the car to run over the cone, then by all means look at it. If you want to effortlessly scoot between the cones, then look at the space in between. This may mean looking out the side window.<sup>3</sup>

**Slow in, fast out.** Or In like a lamb, out like a lion.<sup>4</sup> Slow down before you get to the tight turn, then squeeze on the throttle as you go through, and end up with your foot flat on the floor.

**Accept that some corners just suck.** There are always a few corners, usually of the tight or off-camber variety, where there is no fast way through. So slow down, drive through, determine where you want to be at the exit, and get there. Discretion here is the better part of not punting cones into next Tuesday. Bugger up a slow, off-camber 180, and you will find yourself understeering off the course. Your run is toast.

**Momentum is everything.** An M3 can get quickly back up to speed. A 116-horsepower Mini cannot. A 208-horsepower Mini can, but only sort of. In an autocross, you have control of three things, and you need to manipulate two to maximize the third. Since autocrosses are measured by time, you get to play with speed and distance. As long as you can keep your speed up, you try to minimize distance; but if the long way around allows you to keep your speed up, that's the best way.

**Slower is faster.** Fast, abrupt inputs slow you down. Slow down your hands, slow down your feet. This is related to looking ahead. If you know where you are headed, you suddenly have plenty of time to smoothly link a few gates together and don't end up jerking your hands at the last minute, upsetting the suspension. You can see and feel exactly where you can start adding gas.

**Have fun.** If you're not, you're not doing it right. Have a run where you've eaten a bunch of cones? Oops! Laugh it off. We all have runs like that.<sup>5</sup> Your long-term goal may be SCCA National Champion, but the best way to get there is to relax, focus, and enjoy the process.

And you have to enjoy the process. There's no Twelve Step Group for autocrossers.

- 1 Except without the cellaring costs, bad dentition, and cosmetic surgery, respectively. There is an aftermarket parts issue related to the latter, but I suggest you stay in the stock classes, at least to start with.
- 2 And assuming a coat of wax, almost all of those come off with bug-and-tar remover or a little rubbing compound. Or you can wear them as a badge of honor. Or you just leave them because you're just as lazy as I am.
- 3 Beginning to sense a theme here?
- 4 Title of the 1993 biography of rally champion John Buffum. It is, sadly, long out of print, and my copy has somehow disappeared.
- 5 My personal record is seven, and I think that the instructor record in the Los Angeles Region is nine. I'm not naming names, but you know who you are.