

Lessons In Speed

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Last week, I told you about a bunch of different ways you could get started in motorsports, mostly using your own street car. This week, I want to take you to the next level, and talk about going to a professional racing school.

There are racing schools scattered across North America. All provide a good education in the basics of car control and race driving for about the same price.

But you don't need to travel; we've got a leading racing school here in Portland. Pro Drive offers professional instruction in a real race car, designed to teach anyone to race. And when you've completed the school, you can rent a car and the support crew from Pro Drive to go racing without ever getting your hands dirty.

"If you can drive a manual transmission and you have a valid driver's license, you're set to go," says owner Todd Harris. "We provide the helmet and suit, the race car, and lunch."

The cars used at Pro Drive are the popular SCCA Spec Racer Ford. The Spec Racer is a purpose-built sports racing car, powered by a four-cylinder engine from Ford's Roush Racing division. Each Spec Racer is identical to every other one used across the nation, so when you train with Pro Drive, you're learning in a car capable of winning a national championship.

"The cars they use for their school are some of the best for learning how to control a race vehicle," says Pro Drive graduate Curtis Aimonetto. And he would be the one to know. As a 2004 graduate of Pro Drive, Aimonetto went on to win Oregon Region SCCA's coveted Rookie of the Year award.

Other graduates agree: "I liked Todd Harris and Pro Drive's professionalism and step-by-step technical instruction. I went from zero to driving in my first regional race in four days," says Gary Manchester.

Pro Drive is among the largest customers for track time at Portland International Raceway, with 4-day racing schools in April, May, and August, along with practice days, high performance street car days, and the Introduction to Racing course scheduled throughout the year.

"Right now, our April school is full. At this point, the next available racing school is in May," Harris says.

There are two options for the racing school. You can take a three day course, and combine that with a racing school provided by SCCA or Cascade Sports Car Club, or take the four day school and receive your racing license on graduation.

The cost to take a course ranges from \$499 for the half-day Introduction to Racing to \$3499 for the full four-day racing course.

Individual attention and coaching is the foundation of the Pro Drive experience. “We have a small class size of 10 people,” Harris says.

“The kind of personal attention you get here, you won't find at other schools. You get a ton of feedback for what you're doing. I'm still taking classes from them. They've got a school in April, and I will be attending the final day just to get tuned up for the season. I'll continue to go back to Todd to get coaching,” Aimonetto says.

Renting a car from Pro Drive for racing is just as easy. Licensed race drivers can rent the same car used in the school for racing in SCCA and Cascade Sports Car Club events for about \$2,000 a weekend. And that price still includes lunch.

“The rental cars are competitive. If Todd gets into one of the rentals, he'll win the race,” Aimonetto says.

With a rental racecar, you do need to be cautious. No one provides collision insurance for a racecar, and if you break it, you'll be paying to fix it. But fortunately, the Spec Racer is among the toughest racecars ever made, and Spec Racer drivers are a friendly, close-knit group, ready to accept and help out the novice racer.

“Even when we're competing, Pro Drive has been very supportive. It's a family,” Aimonetto says.

For more information on how you can get behind the wheel of a Pro Drive race car, see www.prodrive.net or call 503-285-4449.