

Autocross for Newbies - Typical Day at a GGC Autocross - by Scott Miller

At a recent autocross organizers' meeting that many newer GGC members have never seen an autocross. So we'll try to explain autocross in a simple, yet enticing manner.

An autocross is a relatively low-speed automotive competition event where drivers try to be the fastest in their class through a defined course. Cars run one at a time at safe intervals, and a timing system is used to determine each driver's time on course.

The course is defined by orange cones which gladly risk their lives for the purpose. The layout is the creation of a diabolical autocrosser who tries to make the course easy to follow, yet difficult to drive quickly. Each driver is given a limited number of runs – recent GGC events have generously allowed six runs per driver – during which you try to find the fastest way around the course.

There may be from two to four run groups, so each group of drivers takes a turn at various work assignments while another group drives. Jobs include flagging, timing, scoring, announcing, computer data entry, pre-grid manager, exit timing slips, standings board, and course workers. The course workers watch for downed cones or cars that drive off course. This puts them in the best vantage point for watching the lines taken by other drivers through some of the turns, while simultaneously adding to their personal exercise regimen.

The day starts early with the arrival of the GGC's truck and trailer. We encourage about a dozen participants to arrive early to take part in the festivities. While one group sets up the course, a second group starts tech inspections, and another sets up equipment. When the trailer opens for registration, everyone signs the insurance waiver form and receives run group and work assignments. Those who did not pre-register through the web site must fully register and pay, which takes a couple more minutes than for those who pre-registered. Also, failure to pre-register means that lunch is not guaranteed.

Tech inspectors check each car to be sure that it is in good condition for the event. Basically, a car will pass if everything is bolted together properly, is not spewing fluids all over the place, the seat belts, shocks, brakes and steering work, the battery is properly secured, and loose items have been removed from the passenger compartment and trunk. They'll also check to be sure that your tires are DOT-approved, have visible tread and are not under-inflated.

Once the course is fully set up, it is opened for walking. Taking a nice leisurely stroll around the course is a great way to analyze turn-in, apex and track-out points. This is the last time you'll be on the course with an opportunity to stop

and look back in the direction from which you came – well, on purpose anyway. See if you can figure out places to use your car's characteristics to best advantage. Take note of the positions of the timing lights, so as to avoid hitting them later.

Finally, it is your run group's turn to drive. Line your car up on pre-grid. The pre-grid manager will tell you when to pull up to the starting line. Then watch the flagger for the green flag and GO! This is when you find out if you remember the course from your walk.

Look well ahead. Don't worry about the turn you're in now, look for the next one and figure out the best way to connect the turns. Feel the car as the tires load up and unload. Could you have taken a turn faster? Try it on the next run. Is the car getting squirrely on you? That's a spot where you might want to back off a bit next time, or try a different line. Are you getting the most out of your car?

No matter which class your car is in, having the right tire pressures is one key to proper set-up. If you're on street tires, boost the pressures to at least 5 PSI over what you normally run on the street. You'll quickly discover that the factory's recommendation of higher pressures in the back, lower in front, results in a lot of understeer. This resists rotation during turns, or putting it another way, you tell the car to turn but the car tries to keep going straight. Try putting more air in the front tires to make the handling more neutral.

Autocross is a competitive event, but even if you're not a competitive person, you should still give it a try. Besides the six competition classes (for BMWs and Minis with various levels of performance), GGC has the N Class – non-competitive BMWs. There is no pressure in this class, it is just for fun. Compete against yourself! Try to go faster with every run. Improve your car control skills. Pick another driver and have your own private competition against him or her. Try to finish in the top five in your class. Next event, shoot for the top three. Make it whatever you want, be as competitive or uncompetitive as you choose. Or bring a non-BMW and run in X Class.

The best part of autocrossing with GGC is that you'll spend the day with like-minded car enthusiasts who are all having as much fun as you are. This is a friendly and helpful bunch, and everyone is happy to share his or her knowledge and experiences with you so that you, too, can become hooked on the sport. So check the calendar and come on out to a GGC autocross!