

The End of a Racing Career

By Jerry Braunberger

After a season when I did not race, I have had time to reflect on my 21-year career of Solo Autocross racing. Although I refer to this period as a career, it probably should be referred to as a hobby. However, I think career sounds more impressive and I believe I can call it anything that I want.

I got hooked on Autocross racing the summer of 1998 when I experienced the “adrenalin rush” riding with my son Jason. After heavy encouragement from my good friend Bert Jacobson, I made the jump into the driver’s seat. Little did I know then what this decision was going to cost me. After running one EESCC event, my next event was a SCCA National Tour race in Kent, WA. The key memory of this event was the magnitude of the course and that I had survived the experience. This experience made an impression on me, confirming that I was hooked on Autocross and I generally went to two national races each year thereafter.

I raced the same car, an 85 Camaro as a co-driver with Jason, which was Jason’s everyday driver and ran in the C Prepared Class. After an accident, when a truck ran a red light in Portland causing extensive damage to the front end, the insurance company deemed the car a total loss. Jason purchased the car from the insurance company for \$350. and it became a dedicated to racing and a “money pit”. During these early years, Jason would drive the car from Portland, and I drove my pickup with all our equipment from Springfield to the race venue. The power plant was the original 305cc engine which stood up well to the abuse that it received.

Now that the car was not street-legal we had the problem of transport and storage to address. After using open trailers borrowed from friends during the 2001 race season and winter approaching, I had developed a plan (scheme) to present to my wife. We could build an addition to our garage for storage or purchase an enclosed trailer which would cost less than the addition. I called this “killing two bird with one stone”. She humored me saying “Just remember, I’m spending one dollar for every dollar you spend on racing”. I was extremally fortunate when my associate with the company where I worked suggested a proposal that the company purchase the trailer as an annual bonus with the understanding that it could be used for company business on occasion if needed. I attempted to convince my wife that I did not have to spend any money on the car-trailer, but I don’t think she was convinced. I considered this “Creative Financing”. This trailer was the first major upgrade of racing arsenal. Also, I have not seen any sign that my wife is matching my spending on this career.

With the turn of the century the Camaro began a total renovation designed for Autocross racing. Jason was the brains of our team and I considered him the chief engineer. The engine and drive train were purpose-built for autocross to specifications that he had determined with the builder. An interesting fact is that the transmission came out of a car driven by NASCAR-Driver Jeff Gordon. It probably is only the case, but it does have #24 stamped on it. A dry-sump oiling system was installed on the engine shortly after we experienced oil pressure issues during the first year. We have submitted this engine to 18 years of abuse without any issues. Numerous additional upgrades were completed to the suspension, braking, and other systems as other competitors in our CP group made an upgrade that improved performance which then was copied by the rest of us. The result was 3 Camaro’s capable of beating each other and often did. I considered Bert Jacobson and Nick and Dwayne Kerbs as consultants to my race team.

During the next 20 years, we continued keeping the car in Springfield and met at the race site, however the operation was much more efficient with the enclosed trailer. I often commented that my philosophy was, "Build it, I'll drive It" and Jason's was "Arrive and Drive". We generally ran about 25 events including two SCCA National Tour races. These included events sponsored by: EESCC (Eugene/Springfield, ACCO (Central Oregon), ORSCCA (Portland) and SSCC (Southern Oregon). We ran fewer events the last few years when ACCO lost use of its race venues and ORSCCA eliminated the CP class after a class reorganization plan and we chose not to continue entry in their events. During this period our car was the EESCC CP Class Champion 13 years and finished second 4 times and third 3 times. Unfortunately, none of these Championships were mine. I considered myself the "Tire Warmer" and I believe Jason would not have won were it not for me.

The C Prepared Class continues to be extremely strong in the EESCC whereas in some clubs the class does not exist. There is some conjecture that we have more CP cars than any club on the west coast. Since the year 2000 the average number of entries in our club events has been 10 drivers with a low of 7 in 2008 and a high of 13 in 2018. One of the aspects that I have appreciated most about my Auto Cross-career is the relationships that I have developed with other members of the club, some which will be life-long. I will especially remember our CP Family. Memories such as the highway tours with 4 or more trailers in tandem down the road, our group camps, BBQ's, parties into the night and the fierce competition between cars will remain with me forever. The comradery within our group of drivers was great. Whenever anyone experience a mechanical issue someone was there to help and if it could not be fixed someone was willing to volunteer their car so they could complete there runs. I will always cherish the roar of that engine, the g-forces that I experienced and the feel of steering the car with the rear end.

I did not begin my racing career until I was 60 years old. Therefore, I was a little "long in the tooth" so to speak, after 21 years. I recall a best friend, who was 10 years my senior, saying "You're going to find that there is a lot of difference how you feel between the age of 60-70 and 7-80." Little did I realize than, the soothsayer that he was. Although I was in relatively good health, I could feel the effects of aging. Remounting a race tire was more difficult. Getting up and down was more difficult. I began to wonder if I got down, could I get up again. An incident where I re-tore my left shoulder rotator cuff was the deciding factor. I had a severe tear in my younger days which was repaired. However, the surgeon determined that this was a severe tear and his prognosis for a successful repair was not encouraging. Although, I thought I might still be able to drive the car, after one race I realized that the pain of turning the steering wheel was too unbearable and driving with one hand was not an option. It was now time to hang up my helmet and end my racing career. Although, I have still stayed involved in the club by going to Board meetings, the "hole in the pit of my stomach" still remains.