

Was it a Gymkhana?

By Bruce Harmon

Check out the pictures at the end

Reading Jim Mueller's "Early Days of Auto crossing" story in this newsletter inspired me to recall how I entered my first early autocross, then called a "gymkhana" or "slalom." What fun that day was in March, 1969 in El Paso Texas, where I was stationed at Ft. Bliss in the US Army. Well, at least as I foggily remember it. Unfortunately, my second event was 30 years later.

As a pretty successful ex go-cart racer before my college days and the army, I always wanted to race something. When in 1968 I read about the new Datsun 510 – 2000 pounds for \$2000 – I got excited about a car that would be light, handled great and affordable. It had independent rear suspension, McPherson struts on the front. Wow, I thought in those days, this was race car stuff! OK, it had only 95 horsepower from its 1600 cc engine, but that was pretty peppy, especially in that lightweight car.

So, I bought my first new car (Up to that time I could only afford used Junker's). It was a maroon 510 2-door. I also had read about the advantages of radial tires, so I bought it with slightly over-sized Dunlop radials fitted on the stock 13" rims. I guessed those tires would help the car handle well like the articles I read in sports car magazines.

Next, I heard about these "slalom" events being held on certain Sundays at a local El Paso parking lot. I'm not sure autocross was in the vocabulary then. A fellow army buddy, who owned a cool Triumph GT6, filled me in on the next one, so I showed up that Sunday morning. I also heard they were going to give out trophies. That would be cool.

As I arrived, I was surprised at how many sports cars were there. It looked like there were maybe about 50-75 cars and — no classes — just try to run the fastest through the course. I vaguely remember there were Spitfires, MGs, MG Midgets, even my buddy's GT6, a couple Corvettes, and what looked like a race-prepared V-4 Saab sedan. Wow, I didn't know all these neat cars lived in the desert! What chance did I have? Aha, I had radial tires. And that could be an advantage, as few cars had them in those days — at least not in West Texas.

I didn't have a chance to walk the course and I don't know if anyone did, nor did I think about it, novice that I was. So, the first run was one of discovery. The course was well marked with lots of cones, and I watched other cars so I could see where they went. As I remember, there were no work assignments, course workers must have been volunteers from the community and the event was run by a local sports car club.

It turned out the turns were very tight, going behind a building and back, with very short straights. I figured out after that first run, because my Datsun could theoretically rev to 7000+ RPM, I could drive it the only way I knew how — like go-cart, in first gear. So, on the second run, that was the plan. Though we were going to have three runs, I had an Army duty

commitment that afternoon, so I would have to make that second run be it. As I ran full throttle on the second run, I heard the valves repeatedly floating throughout the course. So what the heck, I stayed with my foot in it, finishing surprisingly with a clean run and without blowing the engine. There was no such thing as a rev limiter in 1969, at least on that car. (The engine would also sputter on left turns, and later I found that it was the carburetor float starving.) Whew. I also had no idea what my time was. (All timing was done with a stop watch.)

It certainly was a blast that short afternoon with my GT6 friend and meeting the people there. I was amped up after the run and wished I could have stayed for run #3.

The next evening my buddy stopped by and presented me with a second-place trophy! I was shocked. Now I really fell in love with my 510. I found out the win went to that prepared Saab. I couldn't have been happier. Sadly, that ended up being my last such event for the next thirty years.

What with military duty calling, getting married, raising a family, racing bicycles on the side, and a business career, I never entered another car racing event until 1998 when my old college buddy, Tom Kotzian, talked me into doing what I now know was autocross. Already a national champion, Tom was a great help in getting me started. And he even sold me one of his Corvettes, which I ran for a couple years. Today auto crossing is still as much fun as it was at that first "slalom, or Gymkhana," in El Paso.

I sure wish I still had that 510. And would you believe, I still have the trophy!

Thanks Jim, for reminding me about the early days of auto crossing.



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