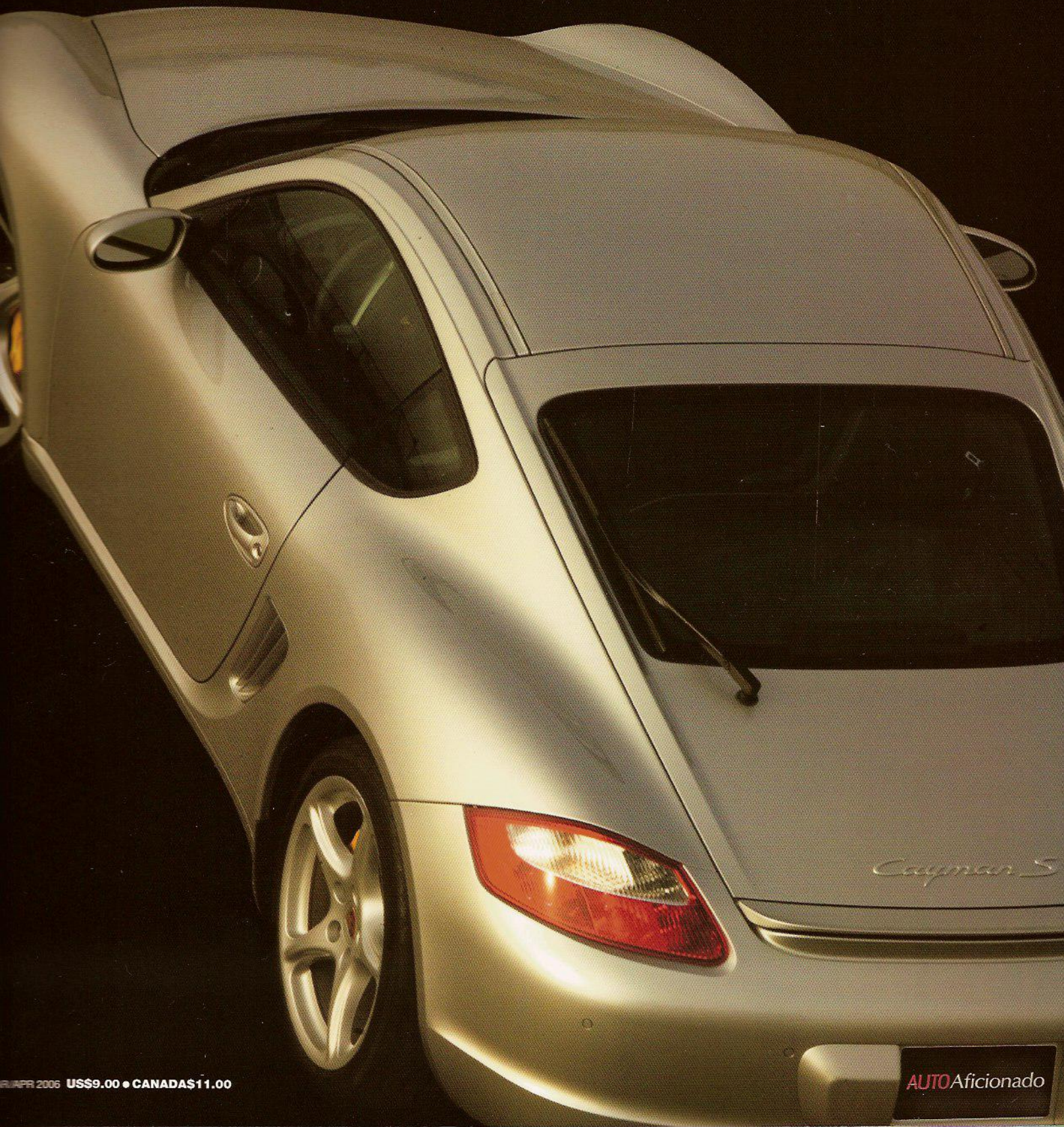


PANOZ CULTURE • 2 PORSCHEs • WOMEN RACERS • GORDON BENNETT

AUTO Aficionado

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AUTO Aficionado

ALLI JOSEPH joins
Matt deGarmo's
"Ladies at Lime Rock"
for a reprogrammed
perspective



Okay guys, demonstrate to the world you can drive a Ferrari well then show you're its equal wearing high heels like Kathy Tropin did (right, above).

The late autumn light in Lakeville, Connecticut is fading. It's often called the magic hour, and suddenly, the low growl of a Ferrari makes the moment seem even more ephemeral. A late model 360 pulls into the Interlaken Inn. The Interlaken is pretty much the only game in town; a nondescript hotel near the Skip Barber Racing School and its track, Lime Rock Park, it will house 19 upscale women tonight before each slides behind the wheel of a Skip Barber Formula Dodge at the crack of dawn.

Out of the 360 steps a put-together forty-something brunette in jeans and stiletto boots, who proceeds to pull a Louis Vuitton valise from the front boot. A rock the size of

Montana gleams on her left hand; with her right, she grabs the suitcase handle and points her high heels towards the hotel, leaving the groaning beast to cool. Distant bird song competes with the sexy ticks of the V-8 coming to rest in the mountain air. Good on her, and in heels, too; like most of the women who've come here to learn basic racing skills, Kathy Tropin is a successful man's mid-morning boardroom dream – a model mom who can drive his six-figure car in clutch-crazy footwear and step out looking like...well...a vision.

Kathy's typical of this bunch. Serena Torrey, a pretty, whip-smart blonde public relations director from New York

LADY RACERS ROCK



PHOTOGRAPHY FROM J.BROWN / deGARMO LTD



who I happen to have known for years) arrives with her stepmother, Podie Lynch, in a late model SUV. Podie steps out of the car wearing purple Prada patent leather drivingoccasins. She says they are all she had possessing a narrow toe, a footnote expressed in the detailed packing instructions sent by the event's organizer.

This would be one Mr. Matt deGarmo, proprietor of deGarmo Ltd., a Connecticut-based classic auto sales operation, and organizer of this "Ladies at Lime Rock" event. deGarmo has taken pains to see that all those in attendance will be turned out women whose husbands are loyal clients of his buying choice Ferraris, Bentleys, and Mercedes – are taken care of. Last year, deGarmo decided to create a driving event with Skip Barber Racing that would give these wives a glimpse into their husbands' car joneses. They'd learn why certain big-purchase items were draining the bank accounts, but maybe get hooked as well. His commitment to detail was there from the start, when we started getting weekly letters months before explaining what we'd experience as first-time racers.

Whether they actually show up in Lakeville in heels or not, this crowd rolls tidy. After an introductory dinner at the hotel, the bejeweled bunch retires early – so early that I can't even get my room for several hours. This is already different from the testosterone-charged, up-all-night rally driving extravaganzas that I know. There, if you aren't out pounding boiler-makers on Bourbon Street until three am and making the chatter with the local hookers, up by seven am, and Red Bull-charged for 400 daily miles, you're not "having a good time". Here, I examine the goodie bag with spa products and gift certificates that deGarmo has arranged for the ladies at Lime Rock. I've never smeared myself in shea butter before driving open wheel cars before, but it sounds nice. Sleep at ten pm now seems more palatable.

But soon enough, it's three a.m. The hotel's hideous digital clock glares at me with red, accusatory numbers. It's been 20 minutes since I last looked at it, and the fact that I have to be up in three hours and spend an entire day flying around a track in Formula Dodges, sliding across a wet skid pad in a truck I've never driven before, and putting a Viper through its paces is distressing. But I have an advantage: Unlike the rest of the bunch, I've been here before. In 2001, I drove Barber's three-day race program and got bitten by the high speed driving bug. Then, I was the only woman in my group of twelve. Now, it's estrogen heaven.

I ponder groping in the dark for a Valium, but figure anything but pure sleep will leave me languishing in my racing jumpsuit by noon. Is it nerves? Adrenaline? I stare at the wall for another two hours, in and out of a hazy dream in which I can hear the scream of engines around the track I've been in before. But each time, it all feels new again, and I can smell the silent asphalt calling me. At six am, I give up, and get up, pulling on jeans, racing sneakers, and a bright orange T-shirt from my rally team, Team Polizei 144, which means, "Respect Das Law". At breakfast, I'm not wearing Prada or Chanel like some. Still, we're all in this together.

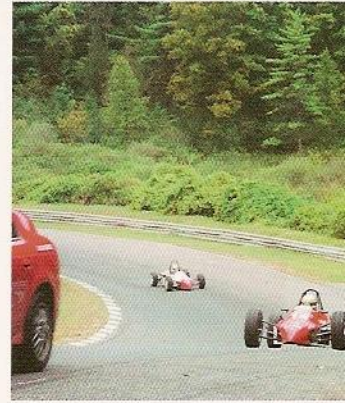
I carbo-load oatmeal as Walter Irvine, head of corporate events, tells the Ladies at Lime Rock what to expect. "In the event that it's thrilling and you love it and it's caught your fancy to drive a race car with a lot of young, hot, athletic professional drivers, please give us feedback," he jokes. Started in 1975, Skip Barber is the largest local driving school, with 20 tracks in the US and two in Canada. You can put your racing skills to the test – or learn some, if you don't have any – at vacation-destination locales besides Lime Rock Park. There are Barber programs at Sebring, Road America, Daytona Beach and Laguna Seca.

Today's program is a combination of everything the school offers: open-wheel racing in the morning; afternoon Dodge Neon/Viper/Ram driving school with a series of modules that prepare you for what you encounter on the street; and a relay finale to make sure we all remember how to play nice and follow a course littered with cones at the apices of the turns. "It's not only fun," says Irvine, "but you'll take away a little something that will help you when it snows heavy; speed control, and braking techniques." Then he adds the requisite "Barberism": a funny aside intended to put students at ease. "For those of you from the greater metro area – New York, New Jersey – we have a sidebar program that deals with finger gestures," he says.

Skip Barber is, as Irvine relates, an actual person and Harvard grad who knew that if you wanted to race, but had nowhere to learn, there would be a need for his now 30-year-old bedrock program. In fact, much of the racing talent in the current field once trained at Skip Barber.

Serena Torrey, the young blonde, raises her hand and admits she's only driven a manual transmission "a few times"; she signs up for the post-breakfast refresher course. I secretly admire her preternatural excitement about getting in cars she doesn't feel comfortable driving, and just nailing the clutch (or, as it might happen, popping it). Outside of a few nervous giggles, most are gung ho. Then again, it might be a rocky morning yet: one woman raises her hand after the first 15 minutes of technical explanations about trailing throttle oversteer and weight transfer and quips, "are there any [shopping] outlets around here?" Another, apparently without humor, wonders aloud, "How does shifting work?"

One woman beside me already knew quite well about shifting – but she'd written more about doing it fast and furious than clutched-in herself. "I've never done this before," said Miranda Seymour, a special guest in from London, and the author of the Hellé Nice biography *Bugatti Queen*. (ed. note: we reviewed this one for you in our previous issue.) "But, I've been taken out on a hill climb in a Bugatti Royale up Prescott Hill in England. I'm a little scared; but, these are the right kind of shoes," she shrugs, indicating racing sneakers. "I always liked fast cars and driving – I had a Porsche and a second-hand Ferrari, a very, very old one, not vintage, just rather beaten up. Still, when I was writing the book I hadn't the faintest idea what a chassis was, so I had to learn it all from scratch," she adds. "By the end of the day I may actually know whether what I



Above: follow the leader to learn the racing line.

Below: Less demure than first perceived, like many of her racing school colleagues, Serena Torrey quickly showed the competitive focus that made her a New York City business success.





wrote about Hellé Nice is actually correct, because I'll have experienced something like it."

I look down at my 1970's Monza Adidas kicks with a melted left clutch toe and tell her she'll be just fine. It's unlikely any of the Barber track cars will be duct-taped together and

hot as a corner of hell, like the fantastic, fume-blowing Mercedes '80s SL 500 rally car I drove on the 2004 Colorado Grand, which, eyeing my worn-down sneaker toe again, I recall as the culprit.

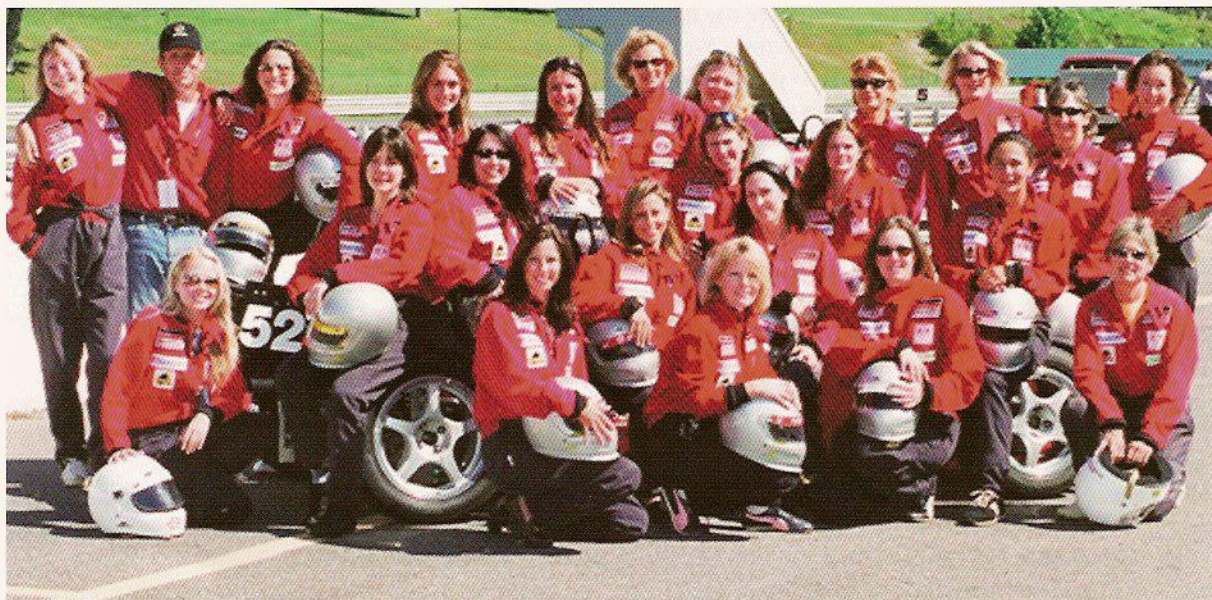
No, the Barber one-day combo course is civilized. Seymour and I share car number 18, and spend our morning alternating laps and watching late September leaves fly by in a blur of brilliant color as we follow the pace car, watch for the checkered flag, and learn the ins and outs of the track. We are offered water, Diet Coke, snacks at every break, and a good deal of reassurance from instructors like RB, a Skip Barber veteran who, like all of the men who train newbie drivers at the track, peppers his lectures and tips with those corny, PG-rated jokes that this bunch of women seems to appreciate.

Presumably, the woman asking about shifting wanted to know how to do it in the open-wheel Formula Dodges that Skip Barber Racing uses, with their 4-cylinder, 2 liter -16v engines that pack 126 pound-feet of torque at 5,200 rpm. At just 1100 pounds, these little race copies go 130 mph at 10/10ths, and they can be squirrely. That's why the Barber instructors take such pains to teach spin prevention in all of their cars, but particularly these, where precision is of the essence. High speed and the precautions one must take

doing, say, 150 in one of the Formula Dodges are a metaphor for driving on the road of life while emotionally (or literally) hung-over. One careless, albeit fractional, turn of the wheel and you're off the track. This go-round, I manage to stay on it and hold pole most of the day, riding on the back of RB's Neon at 8/10 in what was surely a most annoying fashion.

Fortunately, not one lady at Lime Rock manages to spin out towards any real danger, even during the afternoon power slide training in big Dodge Dakota Quad Cab 8-cylinder trucks with booming Magnum V-8s. The school uses these pickups on a wet skid pad covered in muddy water to teach drivers the beautiful balance between oversteer and understeer, how to find it at speed and not be afraid of a little hydroplaning. If you're a "dirty girl" like me (my nickname earned last time I passed through Lime Rock after blowing off the track and returning to pit covered in sod), you liked having RB pull the E-brake at random intervals, looking in the direction the truck is turning, and learning to compensate for back end swing around as mud and water slammed against the windows, even as your neck snapped back like a puppet's.

As the day waned, the Ladies at Lime Rock found themselves more at ease with the nuances of ABS braking. The tyranny of the hydroplane was less threatening, and everyone made it though the relay race in one piece, punishing only a few orange cones in the process. A beaming Torrey, who began the day remembering when to shift, won the "most improved" driver award – a beautifully framed blue mini-model Bugatti Type 35 (one of Hellé Nice's best cars). Kathy Tropin headed back to her red 360, leaving the lesser Vipers and Neons in the settling dust. Like me, she might have had a crick in her neck for the next three days, requiring a chiropractor and some muscle relaxants. But once behind the wheel again, the pain might just have made her smile.



Miranda Seymour, best selling author of Bugatti Queen, tells Alli Joseph (in car) how Hellé Nice might have done it.

The Ladies at Lime Rock 2005: (Top row left to right) Miranda Seymour (Guest), Matt deGarmo (host), Alli Joseph (Journalist), Molly Friedman (Journalist), Joann Ordille, Karen Kessler, Jayne Gunther, Maggie Urciuoli, Podie Lynch, Ruth Bonomo, Kim Kelly, (second row from left) Kathleen Tropin, Nancy Wilson, (space between) Joanne Gusweiler, (straight across) Kathy Karapondo (Journalist), (space) Chris Blais (bottom row from left) Serena Torrey, Melissa Fisher, Sandy Lenger, Terri Flynn, (up and right) Suzanne Blum, Margaret Masvidal, Susan Wimberly

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Ladies at Lime Rock 2006
September 11th and 12th,
Monday and Tuesday
Seats are limited!