

California Dreamin'

Though I am an Audi Club Northwest (ACNW) 'regular', I've attended 10 HPDE events in the Audi Club Golden Gate (ACGG) chapter in the last 3 years. I get a lot of questions about how this works, so I thought I'd write it up.

ACGG runs all of their HPDE events essentially like an ACNW Quattrofest – they have Friday evening check-ins and mandatory meetings, they conduct a Driver Skills program for novices on Saturday mornings, two full days of on track HPDE, and a banquet complete with auction / raffle on Saturday night. They usually do four HPDE events like this each year – January at Thunderhill, March at Laguna Seca, Mother's day weekend at Thunderhill, and October at Sonoma Raceway.

Safety Culture

Not surprisingly, the safety culture at ACGG tracks pretty closely with that of ACNW. The absolute emphasis is on safety, but within that there is an expectation that everybody has fun and that skills are improved by expanding the performance envelope and tickling just outside your comfort zone.

ACGG has a similar "three strikes and you're out" policy for the event – if you have three spins or "offs" at a given event, you will be asked to leave.

Motorsportsreg

In the MSR attendee list, ACGG parses people into two groups, Instructor or Novice. Don't sweat the Novice designation in MSR, ACGG seems to do all the 'assigning' of people to run groups outside of MSR. ACGG sometimes has load balancing issues in the run groups and has to make judgment calls about placing folks in higher or lower skilled groups than would otherwise be indicated.

It's not unusual to have the CDI making some assignment adjustments either on Friday night or during the event itself.

Medical Form

This one is unique to ACGG. All participants fill out the medical form, and it goes into a sealed envelope with your car number on it at registration. The form includes contact info for your "emergency contact" (e.g. spouse), your Doctor's phone number and insurance info, as well as 'existing conditions' notations. One of the odd things they ask is for a "Name of other person you know at this event:" this was a head scratcher for me at my first event. I ended up listing Derek S., as he was about the only person I knew. You can use my name (Todd Peach) if you like, or Troy S. if you know him.

Do what I do and fill this thing out electronically in Adobe Acrobat at your desk, then save it for re-use. I predict you will be coming down for more events.

Tech Form

ACGG puts an emphasis on getting your car Tech'd prior to the event at one of the local dealers or service provider. They do run tech in real-time at their events, but it's on a much smaller scale and sometimes hard to locate. If you're an ACNW instructor, tell them you tech'd your own car (and do so), they seem to accept that.

Again, fill this out in Adobe Acrobat and save it for re-use.

Tech sticker goes on the inside of the windshield, upper left, not the outside like ACNW.

Check-In

The standard process is to check-in Friday evening between 4:00 and 7:00pm. Have your tech form and medical form ready. There are a couple of meetings on Friday evening; in addition to the overview stuff, there is an expectation that instructors meet with their students to do the introduction and goal setting stuff.

ACGG usually supplies 'food' on Friday evenings – not so much a full dinner, but sandwiches or hot dogs.

It is possible to 'arrive and drive' on Saturday morning, but it seriously strains all of the coordination and I do not recommend it for your first time with ACGG.

Badge Holder

This seems an odd thing to make note of, but the badge holder that ACGG uses are remarkably complex. Once you have stepped away from the registration area, ask a veteran for some assistance in assembling your badge. At my most recent (tenth) ACGG event, I learned of 'yet another thing' that the badge holder can be used for (displaying instructor/student pairings).

It's like a day-timer around your neck (if you're under 40, that pop culture reference just fell on the ground).

Instructors

ACGG standard processes say in effect, "If you are not an instructor, one will be assigned to you." Everybody starts the weekend with an instructor. Your instructor may elect to "sign you off solo" for the event after running with you one or more sessions. In the higher-skilled run groups, this sometimes happens on the first day, and you're then free to run solo all day Sunday. In my experience, the majority of people who are not in the Novice group are "signed off solo" at some time during the event. At the next ACGG event, you're right back to being with an instructor again.

To my knowledge, there is no protocol to equate an ACGG "signed off solo" to an ACNW "signed off solo" status.

If you are an ACNW instructor and want to instruct at ACGG, reach out to the Chief Driving Instructor for the event and see if they can use you (they probably will). I don't recommend teaching at your first event at a given track unless you're pretty confident in your ability to both learn and teach a track concurrently.

Instructors typically teach two students at the same event as well as helping with Driver Skills, so it's a very full day.

Run Groups

ACGG usually has six (!) run groups per event. The 'instructed' groups run:

- 'A' (Novice)
- 'B' (High Novice)
- 'C' (Intermediate)
- 'D' (Advanced)

Note that this 'order' is the reverse of what BMW CCA PNW labels their groups – Mark R. had a little mix-up at his first event when he told ACGG, "I usually run in B group with BMW" and he ended up in a slower group than he was accustomed to.

The instructor groups are X and Y. They need two groups as they have a *lot* of instructors to ensure they have coverage for all of the students.

Sponsors

ACGG has many sponsors on-site at the event. Gotbluemilk.com does excellent event photography, get some numbers from them and put them on your windshield for best results. Some people have their cars detailed at the track (I don't get this, I'm there to get dirty). Some of the sponsors have some troubleshooting / repair ability at the track, and this is helpful.

OnEdge performance (Guy Gamba) is usually there doing a very detailed tire tech (contact pyrometers, pressure readings). I highly recommend this if you have any questions at all about your tire pressures. See them first thing before you go out on track, and then cycle through there immediately after your session (tires still hot) until you get dialed in. I saved the little slips and furthered my education to where I can do this for myself.

Driver Skills

Driver skills is run on-site for the Novice run group. Instructors observe from outside the vehicle and coach improvements. All instructors participate in Driver Skills.

Evaluations

ACGG uses written evaluations of both the instructors and the students. The instructor is supposed to go over the evaluation with the student and get their signature before turning it in. It's also how he records that you are "OK to solo".

If the communication is flowing well verbally, what's on the evaluation should not come as a surprise to the student. I don't recall anybody at ACGG specifically telling me this, but in general a student should not expect an "all fives" evaluation – there's always something to work on and improve.

Perversely, the vast majority of the evaluations of the instructors (I'm told) is "all fives". If the instructor is doing a reasonable job and the student is happy, there's a tendency for the student to just go from "all smiles" to "all fives".

Drive Time – Willows CA

Willows CA is the home of Thunderhill. Willows is located about 85 miles North of Sacramento on I-5.

Google says Willows is about a 10.5 hour run from Seattle. I find that to be roughly right if you're driving your track car (not trailering it) and driving at a typical "five miles over the limit if conditions allow" pace with minimal stops for fuel, bathrooms, and drive-thru food. Obviously traffic, particularly in Portland, can hang you up and take longer.

If time allows, I sometimes get off of I-5 at Yreka and hit California 3 down through Weaverville and Hayfork, then East on California 36 to Red Bluff. This adds about 2 hours over the I-5 route, but it also adds an amazing dose of back-roadage. Not recommended for trailers. I imagine that even these roads might get a tad crowded at peak summer usage, but on a Friday or Monday in May or October, they're wide open. Check for snow conditions if unsure.

There are lots of fun roads around Northern California if you want to spend a little time exploring. Hit me up for ideas.

Willows itself is a pretty small I-5 town with the usual smattering of mid-priced motels (I've personally stayed in the Best Western and Holiday Inn Express, both fine) and mid-priced dining and fast food. No real destination restaurants. ACGG struggles to maintain the 'banquet experience' on Thunderhill weekends; most of the time the banquet is actually out at the track. The track food is excellent for what it is, but it's no Red Lion. Consequently the Thunderhill banquets are somewhat sparsely attended. It's typical for me (and some others) to return to your hotel room, take a shower, fall asleep, wake up again around 7:30 and say, "I guess I'll shuffle across the road for some Chinese."

Personally I choose to stay in Willows on Sunday night, then have a nice drive back to Seattle with maybe some scenic off-shoots. Some prefer to head North immediately after the track day and maybe make it to Medford or Grants Pass before bedding down.

Other Tracks, distance from Willows

Willows is about 2 hours' drive time to Petaluma (Sonoma Raceway) and 4 hours' drive time to Seaside (Laguna Seca) – traffic permitting, of course. I will sometimes augment a weekend at those tracks with a Friday at Thunderhill, either with Hooked On Driving or an open track day.

Having said that, I'm also tempted to drive the whole coast of Oregon and Northern California if I'm heading to either of those other tracks.