

[LIFESTYLE]

GETTING **ON TRACK**



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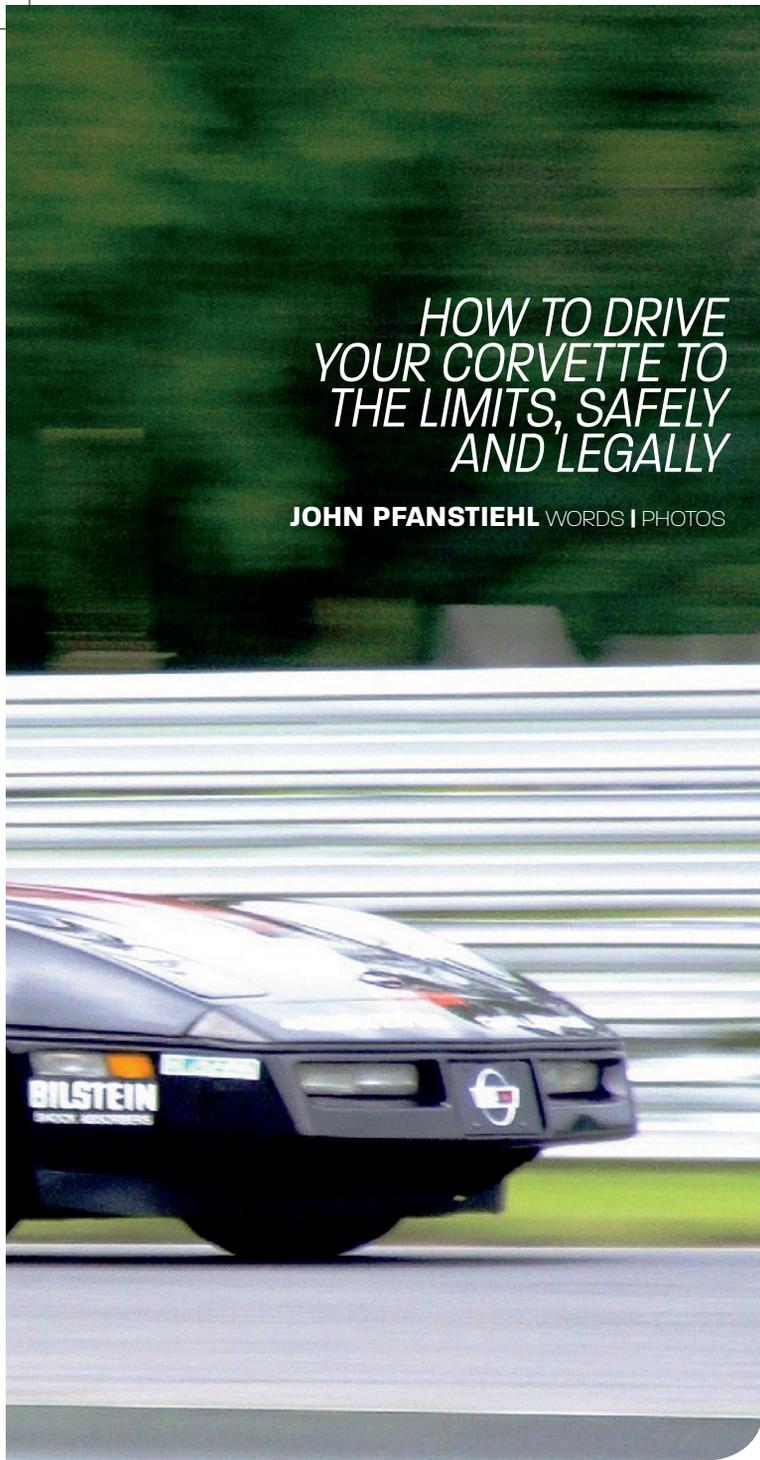
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HOW TO DRIVE YOUR CORVETTE TO THE LIMITS, SAFELY AND LEGALLY

JOHN PFANSTIEHL WORDS | PHOTOS



Sure, we love the look of our Corvettes. Who among us hasn't glanced at the reflection of his or her car in a store window while driving by? Yet what really gets the heart pumping is the car's performance—specifically, the acceleration and handling. Add the sound as the throttle plates open and the revs explode on a lusty V-8, and a grin inevitably forms on your face.

Enjoying all that performance can be difficult on the street, however. There are financial considerations, like the aftershock of a radar-gun encounter. And, perhaps more important, there are safety considerations to keep in mind: Sand, leaves, or black ice on corners; vehicles crossing the centerline; or a tractor pulling out with a load of hay on a seemingly deserted rural road can all put an end to your performance driving session in a hurry.

The solution to all of these problems is track time. There's no radar, everyone goes in the same direction, and you won't ever have to worry about unpleasant surprises from sandy corners, farm animals, drunk drivers, or pedestrians. Best of all, you'll spend the day (or more) going as fast as you want in the company of like-minded people. It's as much fun as a married person can have (only kidding, honey).

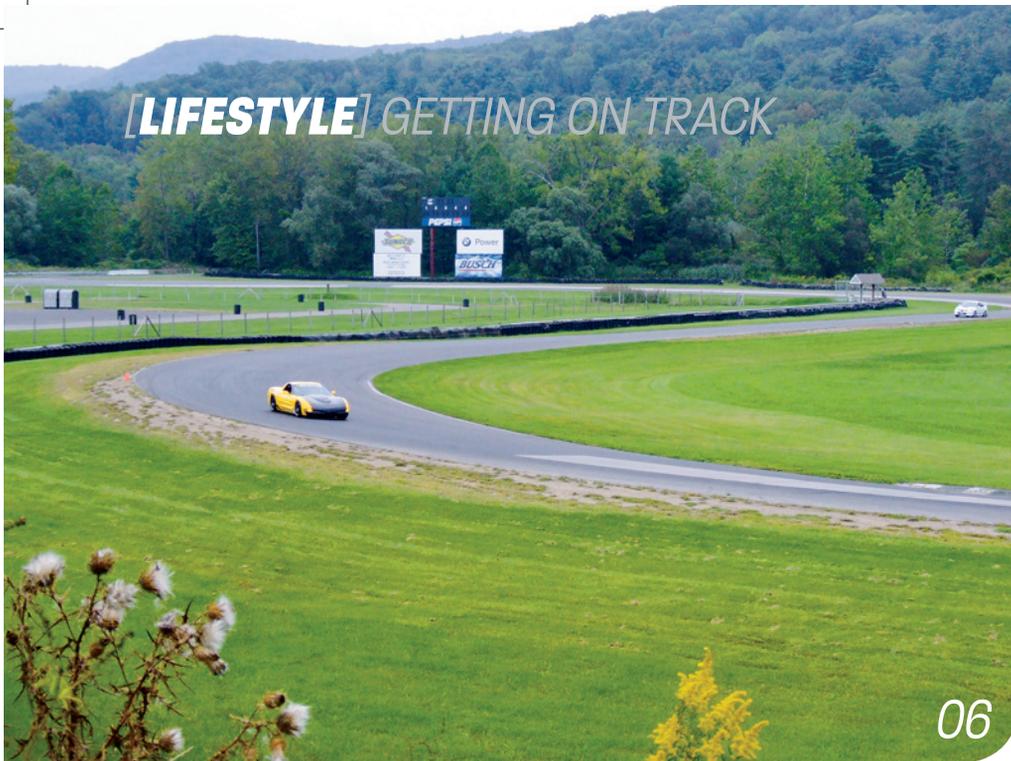
If you're among the millions of people who watch auto racing and are thinking about getting out on a racetrack to have some fun, read on. There are plenty of options, each with its own set of risks and advantages. We'll start with the Sports Car Driving Association (SCDA) because it's a good example of exactly what we're talking about.

The SCDA lets you take your own car out on exciting racetracks at a low price. And it's safe. This track time is non-competitive, so there is no racing *per se*, and novices must ride with an instructor. But there are plenty of opportunities for high-performance driving, with 300 events per year at a number of famous racetracks.

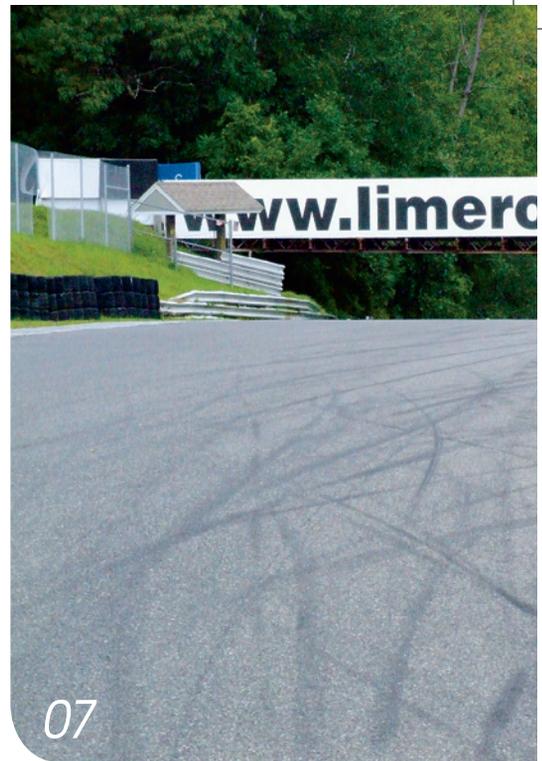
The track I drove on was Lime Rock Park. Nestled in the rolling,

01 → Track time delivers the pure joy of all-out speed, with no pedestrians or police to worry about. **02** → The rolling hills of northwestern Connecticut cradle one of the most scenic tracks in the country, Lime Rock Park. **03** → The beginning of a great day at the track with fast friends. Ray Zisa of Corvette Center let us drive his C4 Challenge car during a recent SCDA event. **04** → The cars are lined up in their respective groups and start one at a time. Note that not all of the participants drove Corvettes. **05** → Drivers can get close to each others' bumpers, but contact is not allowed.





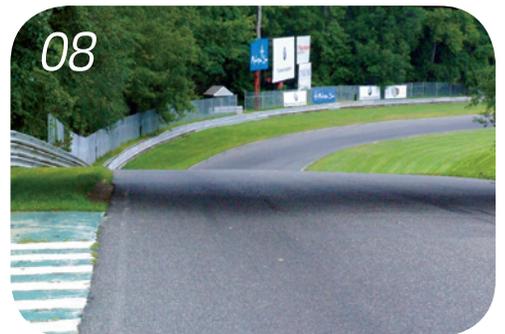
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06 → Lime Rock offers terrific viewing from the infield and surrounding hills.
07 & 08 → The serpentine course offers elevation changes and blind hills that make for an exciting track day. Here, you rocket up the hill just before the track drops out of sight before you. **09 & 10** → In addition



10

wooded hills of northwestern Connecticut, Lime Rock is about as scenic as a motor-racing venue can be. And for those who don't wish to be on track, the venue provides many opportunities for spectators. The historic-car races are a favorite of mine. Seeing and hearing race cars from every decade roar out from the pits and around the track is a visceral treat. You can even head into the pits for up-close inspections of everything from air-cooled three-wheelers to Aston Martins, famous racing Corvettes, and former Trans-Am cars.

The area around Lime Rock Park is picturesque New England, with plenty of B&Bs, antique stores, and non-chain restaurants to choose from. In addition to Lime Rock, SCDA offers track-time events at other desirable destinations such as Watkins Glen and Monticello Motor Club (New York), Thunderbolt and Lightning (New Jersey), and New Hampshire Motor Speedway.

The requirements are minimal. Drivers must



TRACK-TIME OPTIONS: FROM STANDING MILE TO STANDING WATER



One- and two-day driving schools, such as Skip Barber, are held at tracks all around the country. The cost is more than SCDA, but the school provides one or more cars for you to drive. During a Barber course held at Sebring International Raceway, I had the opportunity to drive a specially prepared Neon (with and without ABS active), a pickup with slicks on the rear (for learning slide-recovery on a wet track), and a Viper. I partnered with a teenager whose dad wisely required the training before turning his Corvette keys over to the new driver.

Having grown up in a rural area and made my own dirt tracks in the nearby fields meant that slide recovery was part of my life well before I had a driver's license. This course made me realize that many (if not most) new drivers have never experienced a slide or learned to instinctively steer out of it. It only makes sense to teach these skills on a safe, closed course. Another eye-opening exercise for the students focused on hard braking while curving through pylons, both with and without antilock assist.

Less-expensive means to track time are club days at racetracks. Check with local sports-car clubs. These club days are often open to all marques. More participants can translate into lower costs and more opportunities for everyone.

Many car clubs also sponsor autocross events. Although these are usually set up in large parking lots rather than on racetracks, they offer a day of spirited driving at a very low cost.

The Sports Car Club of America, or SCCA, sanctions driving events in 114 regions around the country for drivers who want to move into competitive racing. Classes range from basically stock cars to all-out race cars for both amateur and professional drivers. Rentals are available for \$500 to \$2,000 per day for a range of cars, or you can equip your own car to the club's specs. Events include road racing, autocrossing, and rallying.

The Holy Grail of tracks, the Nürburgring, is located in Germany. The current 13-mile Nordschleife course has 33 left and 40 right turns, and straights that allow speeds well into the triple digits. And it only costs about \$32 for any car or motorcycle to do a lap.

Straight-line speed addicts have the Texas Mile in Goliad, Texas, held each March. Participants go as fast as they can from a standing start for one mile, with a half-mile shut-down on the concrete-and-asphalt airport runway. Drivers can try for a record in their class, but topping the overall record is not likely: 279 mph attained on a turbocharged Suzuki Hayabusa.

If you've always wanted to experience very high speeds on racetrack, consider a NASCAR ride- or drive-along experience. The speeds and g-forces will be higher when riding as a passenger, because a professional driver will be behind the wheel. If you've ever watched a NASCAR race and thought, *What's the big deal—they just drive around in a circle?*, the experience will shock you. The driver takes off from pit lane with the accelerator nailed to the floor. Within seconds you are rocketing toward a sharp left corner at more than 100 mph, and you know from years of driving that there's no way a car can make that turn. All you can do is hang on in amazement as the track becomes a blur for a very fast three laps.



to the on-track action, Lime Rock events typically feature a variety of historic performance and racing vehicles on display. 11 → Fortunately, most of the track is forgiving in the event you stray from for the pavement.

be 18 and have a valid license. Participants must wear a Snell SA2000 (or newer) helmet, along with long-sleeved shirts and pants. The car can be any make, modified or not, but be aware that there are noise limits at several tracks. Convertibles must have a factory hardtop or a rollbar, and all cars need to pass a tech inspection before going on the track. SCDA even offers race-prepped Spec Miatas to rent for track days.

The day starts with registration, after which each student is assigned to a specific group. A driver with limited or no track driving experience goes in the novice group. There are also two intermediate groups and an advanced group for seasoned track drivers. All drivers gather in a morning meeting to learn the day's events. Then the various groups rotate on and off the track throughout the day.

Total track time is usually about two hours, interspersed with "chalk talks" and classroom sessions. Classroom instruction covers such

topics as vehicle dynamics, threshold braking, and line theory. Although guests can't ride as passengers on the track, they can attend the classroom sessions. The instructors include professional race drivers, regional and national champions, and even specialists in specific marques.

My wife, Kelly, and I were especially lucky on two counts. Ray Zisa, a managing partner of Corvette Center, let us drive his Hoosier-shod C4 Challenge car. Plus, he was our in-car instructor, making for a very educational and exciting day of track time. The accompanying images show part of the fun, but the sheer joy of driving all-out on a great racetrack is a thrill that can only be experienced in person. **VETTE**

Sources

CORVETTE CENTER

(860) 953-2994
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SKIP BARBER RACING SCHOOL

(866) 932-1949
www.skipbarber.com

SPORTS CAR CLUB OF AMERICA

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