

THREE DAYS AT BONDURANT RACING SCHOOL

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By Jim Bray

Photos: Maurice Liang

It all began at a winery. On a weekend trip to Cambria with some neighbors, we stopped at the Hahn winery for a tasting. As we entered the room, Cathy said “Someone’s trying to get your attention “. I looked across the tasting room and saw Loyde and Angie, fellow Norcal VOA members. As we visited, the conversation naturally turned to Vipers and Loyde mentions that Bondurant now has TA 2.0 and ACR Vipers. Intrigued, I tell him I’ll look into it and try to set something up for our Club members.

Tommy Anderson answered the phone at Bondurant and I explained that the Norcal VOA wanted to explore the deals he could give our Club to attend the driving school. He suggests the 3 or 4 day Grand Prix Road Racing course and gives the Club a nice discount. He also provides the option for the 4 day class, where on the fourth day you drive their Mazda race cars. Another option, for advanced drivers, is the ACR class with Justin Bell.



After Barbara posts the invitation to our members, Maurice replies that he is thinking about writing a story on Bondurant for Viper Quarterly, so I put him in touch with Tommy. Bob, who is 83, and Pat, his wife, agree to a story on their school so Maurice comes with us to photograph the event and write the story.

Justin Bell, one of the Viper drivers who won Le Mans in the Viper is the son of Derrick Bell, a famous British race car driver who also won at Le Mans. After moving their classes around to fit us all in, we have 7 members: Denis, Rich, Fred, Christian, Alan, Lon and Jim in the 3 day TA 2.0 class and 2 members, Loyde and Todd, in the ACR class. Off to Chandler we go.

Chandler Arizona can be scorching in the summer time and the price discount is greater, but we opted for a fall class in October. Day 1 begins with an orientation ride around the property with an explanation of the various areas and tracks we will be driving. The highlight of the ride is how amazingly well their large Dodge Ram Promaster High Topper vans with around 14 people in them handle on the course with professional instructors at the wheel.

Next up, we’re assigned our Viper TA 2.0. Bondurant has a recommended supplemental insurance policy that we all take. Students alternate between classroom instruction and track time – with a lot of track time – about 80% for the TA 2.0 class and even more for the ACR class. A 3 to 1 instructor/student ratio is used and each exercise begins with 3 students riding in the instructor’s Hellcat to observe the course and technique. Bondurant instructors are excellent and are all race car drivers.



On one section of the flat Skills Pad practice area we learn and practice heel and toe downshifting. You drive up to speed and then downshift and make a turn around an oval course. One of the things I learned was how loose the traction and stability control is set. I asked if it was turned off but it wasn't. So you can hang the rear end out a bit before the electronic nannie kicks in. Fun!

We then practice accident avoidance by speeding down the course with 3 overhead green traffic lights. At the last minute the instructor changes one or two lights to red and you drive to the green lane. Another ABS exercise has you driving at increasing speeds then applying full brakes and steering into the correct lane. This culminates with entering a small cone box at 60 mph and under full breaking steering out of a small opening in the box without hitting any cones.



Day 2 begins in the classroom then it's out to the "big" track where we use one section, the Maricopa Oval, to practice heel and toe downshifting while driving around a decreasing radius turn on one end and an increasing radius turn on the other. On this track after riding with the instructor, we rotate following directly behind him around the track to observe and learn the line and his technique.



After lunch we head to the skid pad. Bondurant uses specially prepared cars that have 4 outrigger training wheels on them. As you drive around the course, the instructor changes the weight of the car so that you experience under steer and over steer. Those who grew up driving in snow did better on the over steer exercise.

Day 3 we drive on three quarters of the big 15 turn 1.6 mile track. The track appears daunting as we ride at speed in the instructor's car around this very technical track. But after following the instructor and much practice and instruction, we get the hang of it. Our 3 student group included Denis and Rich and we were fortunate to have Mike McGovern the Chief Instructor.

Mike has taught at Bondurant for 34 years.

When we finish the lead and follow session, the instructor pulls off the track to observe. One by one he calls us in and rides with you for personalized coaching. Then we switch seats and he drives your Viper so you can watch, listen and observe him. This is a very effective teaching method.

Finally the entire track is opened and we learn to drive it with 11 other cars on the track at the same time. Bondurant will provide you with the training for an SCCA racing license. As part of the curriculum, students learn the meaning of race flags and we all practice 2 race starts and one race restart complete with pace car. Going on the introductory ride with the instructors, who are all race car drivers, was a blast. You just hang on in the back seat and hope your instructor wins as you race down the main straight away before getting in line to make the first turn. Now it's our turn and we line up two abreast and as we



come around the curve on to the main straight away, as soon as the green flag is waived, we all floor it.



As we were winding up for the day, we had a surprise. Again we were called in one by one and told that Bob was going for a ride with us. Yikes! No pressure, Bob Bondurant riding with you in his car around his race track. He rode with each student for a lap or two congratulating you when you did something well. We learned that if a student didn't do well they heard something like "What have you been doing for the last 3 days?" In our graduation ceremony, Bob presented each student with their graduation certificate which is a very nice plaque that you can hang on the wall.

The class, although exhilarating, requires a high degree of concentration and even though we had cool temperatures for the time of year, students wear a helmet and use a 4-point racing harness and emerge soaking wet after each session. Should you decide to attend the racing school, make sure you are rested and in decent shape physically. Fortunately, free bottled water is provided to keep students hydrated. Students pay for lunch which is catered by local restaurants with signup sheets available in the morning.

Our Norcal group got another bonus. When we learned that Justin Bell was an instructor, Rich suggested asking if we could invite him to dinner. Tommy checked with everyone and not only did we enjoy dinner with Justin but also with Bob and Pat – which is a rare event. Everyone had a great time and we learned that Pat is a Viper gal who met Bob at a car auction when she was selling her Viper. Pat was instrumental in their school switching from Corvettes to Vipers and Hellcats.

If you have ever wanted to drive on a race track, want to improve your track skills or want to experience a Gen 5 Viper or Hellcat on a race track, this is the class for you. Students emerge much better drivers and really learn the capabilities of their cars.

Advanced students will greatly benefit from instruction with Justin. Both Loyde and Todd thought the class was well worth it. I asked Todd about his experience and he said "Going in I wasn't too sure what to expect because he is a Celebrity driver but he was the best instructor I've had. He really listens to you and observes you and coaches you on what you need to do to be faster."



During breaks make sure to check out the pictures on the Wall of Fame. Many movie stars, celebrities and race car drivers have attended this school, including Tony Stewart. Paul Newman and Robert Wagner learned to drive here for the movie Winning.

Norcal VOA will be planning another trip to the Bondurant Racing School in 2017, so if you're interested in attending please contact Barbara Drummer. When the date has been set, members will call Tommy Anderson to sign up.

It's more fun with a group of fellow Viper Owners, you'll learn a lot, and become a better driver. You've invested in your Viper; invest a little more in yourself. You'll be glad you did.

