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Super Fast, Far From Furious

Driving fantasies come roaring to life at an exclusive private track in New York

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By JOHN JURGENSEN



Ellen Warfield for The Wall Street Journal

WHEEL WORLD | A member's yellow Porsche speeds over the Monticello Motor Club's logo

The red-and-white border of the race track blurs to pink as I hurtle toward a hairpin turn at 80 miles per hour. My hands strangle the steering wheel, and my life as a benign motorist—a speeding ticket here, a fender bender there—flashes before me while an apparent car crash unfolds.

My passenger, meanwhile, is so placid he might as well be whistling inside his helmet. Instead, instructor Sam Schultz natters through a microphone, advising me to look beyond the turn to my exit point.

I drag my eyes from the turn, force myself to look ahead. I'm sensing a Wile E. Coyote moment approaching. Then Mr. Schultz's voice crackles in my ear: "Brake." Pause. "Hard!"

Learning to drive fast, it turns out, requires a surprising amount of focus on slowing down.

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Ellen Warfield for The Wall Street Journal

A flagman signals to drivers.

The Monticello Motor Club is a 90-minute drive (at legal highway speeds) north of Manhattan in Sullivan County, N.Y. The 600-acre club's centerpiece is a four-mile track whose 22 turns are carved out of a former airstrip.

Roughly 200 members, including comedian Jerry Seinfeld and Nascar driver Jeff Gordon, pony up \$30,000 to \$125,000 to join, and shell our annual dues. Some want to experience the animal powers of their supercars without worrying about Johnny Law. Others race competitively.

I fit neither profile. On a misty day, I putter up to Monticello in a 2003 Toyota Highlander, an SUV with the soul of a minivan. There's a car seat strapped into the back and a whiff of sour milk on the upholstery.

For the uninitiated, the club offers a day-long high-performance driving course priced at \$1,600. Students learn to corner, brake and generally keep a car in control at speed—

skills I'm told are useful if one's Highlander goes squirrely on an icy road in January. Practical, sure, but my goals are more adolescent in origin: I want to hit speeds I'd never attempt on a highway, in a machine I'd never buy.

Though the parking lot is disappointingly empty on this damp weekday, in a light-filled garage, one member's black Ferrari 458 Italia seems to levitate on the polished concrete floor. A Ford GT with a bumblebee paint scheme belongs to club president Ari Straus.



Ellen Warfield for The Wall Street Journal

Chief instructor Jason Holehouse (left) and club president Ari Straus (right).

My ride is a Cadillac. The manufacturer has made a play for the muscle-car set with its CTS-V series, hiding the guts of a Corvette (a 556-horsepower V8) inside a sedan, a coupe and even a station wagon. As part of a sponsorship deal with Cadillac, the club has 25 CTS-Vs for students.

I'm given a flame-retardant head sock and top it with a scuffed loaner helmet, feeling more like Darth Vader than Dale Earnhardt. We climb into the car and I hit the ignition. A flagman waves us onto the track. I daintily pick my way through a few turns before I

snap out of it: This is not a driver's license test. I squash the gas pedal, feeling the engine rev against my foot as the car speeds up a winding slope.

Prior to my arrival, I had informed my club liaison (with a little smugness) of my proficiency with a stick shift. I imagined myself screaming through the gears of a Lamborghini with the flair I once demonstrated on go-kart tracks.

But the automatic Caddy is handful enough on this course (where spinouts do occasionally happen). Before we hit the track, Mr. Schultz and chief instructor Jason Holehouse used a whiteboard to explain race dynamics. "Every track is different, but they're all the same in how you take a curve," Mr. Holehouse said, using terms such as radius, apex and rate. It makes more sense in motion: Zooming up on a left-hand turn, Mr. Schultz has me hug the right side of the track. I cut diagonally across the inside edge of the corner and accelerate out of it back to the right-hand side.

Smooth braking, I learn, makes for slow turning. Mr. Schultz tells me to go full tilt toward a curve, then brake abruptly before pivoting the steering wheel and easing back on the pedal. This helps keep the car stable through the turn without losing much speed.

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Members' cars, ready to roll.

But the strategy gets jumbled as I consult my mental map of the course, and try to figure out which side of the road I should be on, and look out for the little orange Lotus that's already lapped me, and glance at the flagmen who hunker down in wooden stands. As we pull into the pit after four laps, Mr. Schultz gives me a polite assessment: Be more aggressive and consistent. In other words, stop being so lame.

After lunch, the course seems more familiar and the sedan less like a rental car. I get into

an eager cadence, moving side to side in anticipation of the topography, including a crafty little hill that peaks in a blind turn.

I experience the same loop on fast forward when Mr. Holehouse takes me out in the Ford GT. Though he voices some hesitation about driving his boss's \$150,000 car on a damp course, he casually hammers down, shifting gears with a wrist-flick and skittering the back end just so through the tighter turns. Even with motion sickness creeping up, I grin inside my helmet each time the G-forces shove me back into the seat.

We're told that America is a car culture. But here, that phrase has nothing to do with commuting or cup holders. It clicks for me along the track's longest straightway, a runway of nearly a mile along a tree line. The asphalt is hissing under the tires. The speedometer swings up to 140 mph. I loosen my shoulders, relax my grip and exhale. This isn't the teenage adrenaline rush that comes with insulting the speed limit. There's no dividing line, no other cars in sight. For a fleeting moment, I'm not thinking about slowing down.

Write to John Jurgensen at john.jurgensen@wsj.com

Need Speed?

Extreme driving schools to brake for

Drivers East

Wall Township, N.J.

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Phoenix

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Porsche Sport Driving School

Leeds, Ala.

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World Class Driving

Various locations

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—Seunghee Suh

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