

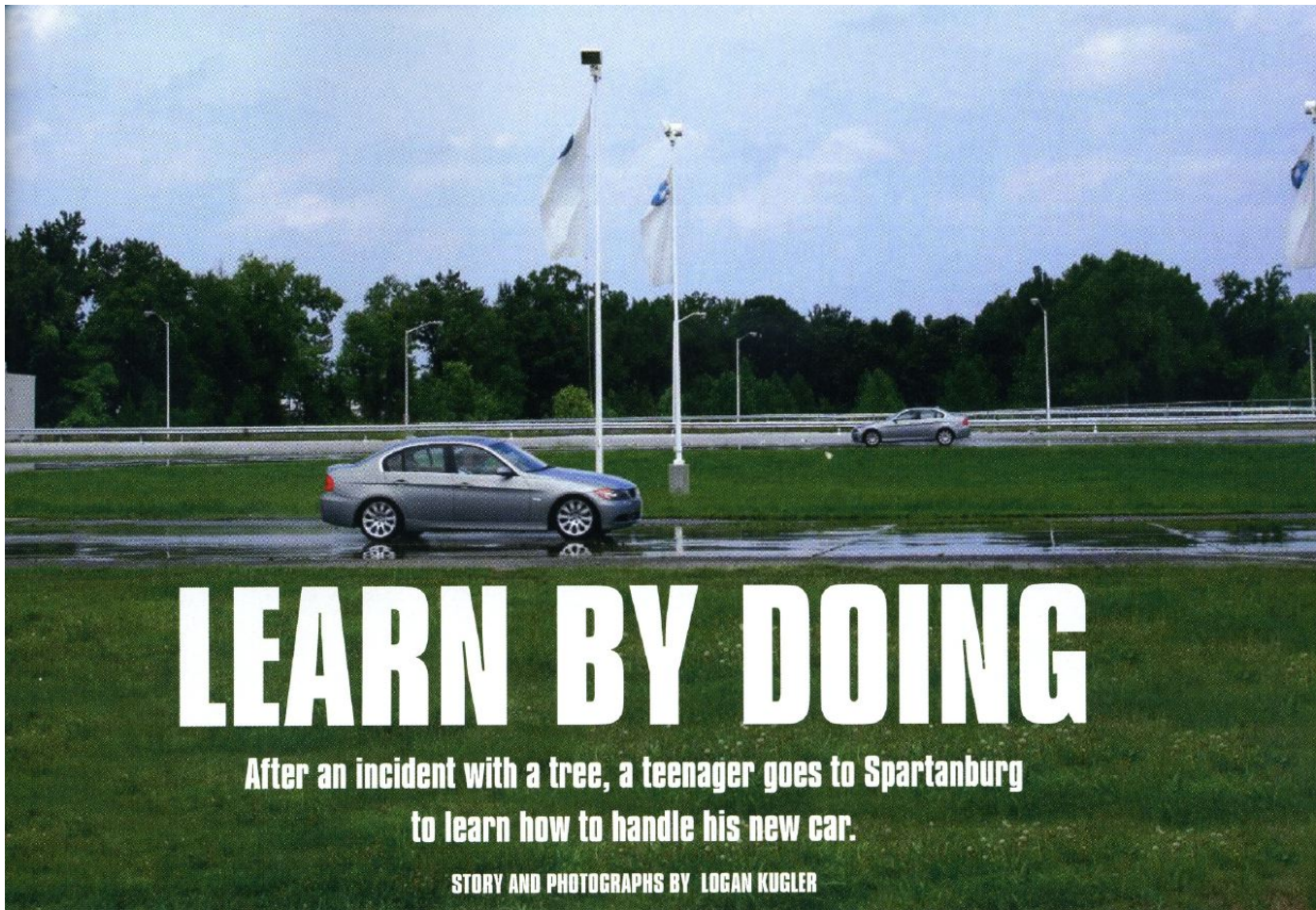
# Roundel

AUGUST 2007

## TIME MACHINES







# LEARN BY DOING

After an incident with a tree, a teenager goes to Spartanburg to learn how to handle his new car.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY LOGAN KUGLER




A BMW school at BMW's track in BMW's cars: What's not to like? The wet-track exercises (top) are probably the most fun, deliberately finding out what happens when your car slides out from under you.

Two days at the BMW Performance Center in beautiful South Carolina: What more could a sixteen-year-old who just got his own brand-new 2006 330i want? Well, a lot more actually—but this is definitely at the top of the list.

But let's back up for a minute. The day is May 10, 2006, and it's the day that I've been salivating over for exactly 48 days. My father and I have flown to the BMW Performance Center in Greenville to pick up my new 330i. Before you start throwing things, I paid for my baby entirely by myself—monthly payment, insurance, gas, everything. Originally, I was going to opt for the standard delivery at the dealership, but because my dealer is located just two hours from Greenville, the great guys and gals on Bimmerfest.com and E90Post.com convinced me that it would be worth the additional two-hour drive home. And boy, were they right! After an unbelievable delivery experience and a couple of hours out on the track for a mini-driving school that came with the delivery, I just knew that I had to go back. After learning of the different driving schools the BMW Performance Center offered, all that was left to do was get the funds in order.

But a few weeks later the enthusiasm died down, and with it, the motivation to get back to Greenville—until I thought the laws of physics need no longer apply with





The off-road course was a surprise treat added to the on-track curriculum.

my 330i equipped with Michelin Pilot Sport PS2 tires going 35 mph into a 95-degree left-hand turn. I wound up sliding off the road, and as luck would have it, right into a log that was sitting there—otherwise I would have come out of it unscathed.

I didn't so much hit the log as scrape it, but the sounds my car made from the freshly painted metal scraping up against the hard wood of the log made me feel like I was in some kind of a nightmare. Lucky for me, the total damage ended up costing just \$600 to good-as-new condition, and that at a BMW-certified body shop without going through insurance. But after the accident I always felt taunted whenever I passed that ill-fated turn. I figured there was only one thing to do in order to reclaim my confidence: attend the two-day BMW Performance Center Driving School.

Only one problem: My dad's schedule wouldn't allow for another trip for at least several months. So I decided to go without him. I booked the airline ticket, confirmed with the hotel that it was okay to stay at the Greenville Marriott by myself (considering my age), and reserved my spot in the July 22nd two-day driving school on BMWUSA.com.

#### DAY 1

Three weeks later, July 22nd had arrived. I woke at 7:00 a.m. and took the Marriott shuttle over to the BMW Performance Center at 8:00. As soon as I arrived, I was directed into the cafe area for an intro briefing, where I met the rest of the group. On my way over I met a familiar face, Donny Isley, the BMW driving instructor

who had given my dad and me our free two-hour introductory driving school on delivery of my 330i just two months earlier. I learned that he was going to be one of the instructors for the class I was in, which got me excited; this way I knew someone. But it didn't take long to make friends among the students. After the staff at the BMW PC welcomed all of us, we were moved into the classroom. We sat there for about twenty minutes while one of the driving instructors laid down the basics. Before we got rolling, the instructor paired all of us up in twos and assigned each group a car number. Finally, after a small introduction from each person in the group to get us acquainted with each other, and a brief lesson on proper seating and steering-wheel etiquette, we set out on the track in eight Z4s and three 330i's. My teammate and I were assigned Car #1, a bright red Z4.

**Beginner Slalom:** Our first exercise was the slalom, which we started at the moderate speed of 45 mph. But because we had eleven cars in our group, there was a nice long wait at the end of each run before you could take another turn. However, the instructors recognized the problem, because after the slalom they divided us up into two groups—six cars in one and five in the other—which made things run a lot faster.

**ABS Braking:** After the slalom we moved to the first (of two) ABS braking section on the track, where we got a feel for what it was like to brake with ABS fully engaged at speeds up to 55 mph. But before we began, our instructor, Larry, tested us. He asked how far it would take him to stop from 20 mph,

and then 30 mph. I won't reveal the answer, but let's just say the difference is pretty incredible for only 10 mph faster!

After the ABS braking exercise we adjourned for a nice deli buffet lunch. Within minutes of finishing lunch we were back in the classroom for another brief lesson, this time on how a tire and suspension react when going into and coming out of a turn, and what to do to correct understeer and oversteer (we also learned how a tire behaves when it's over-inflated or under-inflated).

**Intermediate Slalom:** Ten minutes later we were back out on the track and over to Slalom Course #2 for some timed lap action. A cone got knocked over on the first turn, and Donny, our instructor for this exercise, was motivating us to get closer in the turn to pop the cone upright. "Hit that apex!" he said. A few laps later Donny was bragging on the radio about how he had to have been standing in the safest spot on the track because none of us could get close enough. Finally, I decided I'd throw my instinct to the wind and just drive on the grass to hit that cone if I had to. Coming around the last turn I heard the cone hit the car, but somehow it was still lying down on the ground. Oh, well.

**Beginner Emergency Lane Change:** Next was the emergency lane change. What this means is leveling off at 45 mph and then in an instant throwing the steering wheel as hard as you can in one direction. The inside of the car turns into a washing machine for that one instant, because if you don't have your seat belt on you'll end up in the back seat once it's all over. Since we performed this exercise with DTC activated, it didn't





Before each exercise, students learn what to expect.

seem like all that big of a deal, besides ending up in the back seat if you don't have your seat belt on, because every one of us managed to keep control of the car.

**Circular Skid Pad:** There's not all that many things more fun than being in a 330i drifting sideways, assuming it's not being done by accident, of course. Because of the dangers involved with a car that has no traction, only two cars were allowed on the skid pad at a time, and for this we used 330i's with DTC deactivated—although we got a couple of laps with DTC active to see how incredibly well it works. And for this exercise we had an instructor with us in the passenger seat. The skid pad was unbelievable fun! The goal was to get yourself into a slide and then figure out how to control the slide and drift all the way around the circular course by regulating the steering and gas. It was really difficult at first, but after a few minutes I started to get the hang of it. Two months earlier, Donny took my father and me out in an M5 on the skid pad, and let's just say he put me to shame.

Everything was a different story on Day Two. We had all been taking it a bit easy, but that changed entirely the second day.

#### DAY 2

Let's get this out of the way right up front: Day One was only the precursor—or trial run, shall I say—compared to what took place on Day Two. Which brings me to this warning: If you go to the BMW Performance Center Driving School, damned you shall be if you only enroll in the one-day class. I feel bad for all those suckers who only went for one day. Going just for

the one-day class is like buying a BMW without high-performance tires.

This time I woke at 7:15 to take on another exhilarating day at the BMW Performance Center track. Today we had new teammates, a smaller group with even more instructors—one instructor to every two persons—different car assignments, and a strong sense of speed and spine-chilling fun ahead in the air. After arriving at the BMW PC around 8:00 in a 5 Series wagon, we were immediately escorted into the classroom, where we had a brief ten-minute lesson before going out onto the track. This time my teammate, Angel, and I were assigned a silver Z4.

**Advanced Emergency Lane Change:** Our first exercise of the day was the emergency lane change, with a taste of autocross after each turn. Today we started at 50 mph and moved up to 65 mph. I found, at least for me, that anything over 60 mph in an emergency lane-change maneuver is nearly impossible, whether you've got DTC active or not. When I made my first attempt at 60 with DTC de-activated, I might as well have driven right through the cones without any regard for their placement, as I spun around about three times and sent at least half a dozen cones flying. It was fun, nonetheless, and Angel and I couldn't stop laughing afterwards. Six or so turns later, just as I was beginning to have at least some hope of mastering the emergency lane-change, Donny called for a driver change over the walkie-talkie (mounted in the driver-side door well) and Angel took the wheel.

**Advanced Slalom:** Next we moved to the slalom. This time it was "go as fast as

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The first day is fairly tame—you definitely want the two-day school!

you can.” Now you’re talkin’ my language! And this time the competition began. We were timed on each of our laps and had a “stop box” that we had to be within after slamming on the brakes upon completing a lap. Activating ABS and stopping in a box not much larger than the car itself is harder than it sounds!

**Rectangular Skid Pad Race:** With everyone fired up from competing against each other on the slalom track, we all hopped back in our cars and followed Donny in his red X3 over to the rectangular skid pad for some more redline racing action. For this exercise, one car was set at one end of the course and another at the opposite end, Donny gave the countdown, and the two guys went at it. Drifting around each turn was a heck of a lot of fun. I lost this time, but by less than a second.

**Wet Slalom Race:** After lunch, we set back out on the track for my favorite race of the day, the wet slalom. After navigating your way through six sets of cones, you have to make a tight U-turn without spinning out on the wet concrete. Once you turn around and make your way back through the cones, a stop box awaits. I don’t remember the exact time, but for this race I placed first—but only by 0.2 seconds.

**Extreme ABS Braking:** Ever slam on your brakes on the highway going 85 mph? Probably not—but I have. Well, sort of. It may not have been on a highway, but I can confidently say that I’ve been in a car—a BMW, mind you—going 85 mph when I’ve hit the brakes with ABS activated, all the way through until I reached a complete stop. And it sure was fun. Not the terrify-

ing “Am I going to be able to stop in time?” feeling you get if you have to hit your brakes at such speeds involuntarily. To really give you an idea of the kind of energy exerted on a car when stopping at those speeds, know this: One Z4’s braking system seized during the exercise.

**Autocross:** The day was nearing its end, or so I thought, and the instructors opened up the better part of the track for an autocross exercise. This really gave me a feel for how these cars respond when pushing them to their limits. It may be hard to explain, but after a few laps around the track, it assuredly teaches you how the car handles in terms of acceleration response, braking to go around corners, body roll, and rear-end slides.

**Extreme Offroading:** I’ve got to say, I wasn’t expecting to be taken to BMW’s off-road course in an X5 when I was there for the two-day driving school and not the X-school, but it definitely was a pleasant surprise. First on the off-road course was a drive through a small corridor-like path filled with water three feet high. Next we embarked on a very steep uphill ascent, to then be met with a mind-blowing angled U-turn in which I honestly thought we were going to roll over. No way I thought the car could handle such a huge horizontal incline variance! After that, we moved to a steep downhill descent with the X5’s automatic descent braking feature activated. It was neat to see the car brake by itself going downhill. Finally, we drove over a series of four turtle-shell-like humps that demonstrated the X5’s awesome xDrive feature—I was impressed.

**Ultimate M Autocross:** Here’s where the real fun began. Once we returned from the off-roading course, our instructors dropped another surprise. We were told that because of how well we all were doing, they were going to let us drive the entire line of M cars. I was elated! While we were out at the off-roading track, the guys at the BMW PC lined up the cars. The lineup consisted of an M3, M5, M6, 760i, and X5 4.8L. I figured, *ya know, if I crash while going around the track in one of these cars and don’t make it out alive, it’d definitely be a hell of a way to go.* And boy, does that X5 move! The M3 thrashes the M5 and M6 around the twisties, but once I hit the straightaway the M5 and M6 pulled away from the M3 like nothing else. As for the 760i, it’s one hell of an executive’s car. Around the turns it doesn’t feel like the huge car it is. But as far as the acceleration goes, compared to the other cars I wasn’t too impressed. I was later told that the 760i really shines at speeds above 100 mph with that big V12.

**The Hot Lap:** Finally, before everyone went home, we got our real taste of some intense high-octane action with one of the instructors and an M3. He took us one-by-one out on the track to show us how much will still don’t know. I like to refer to this as the humiliating takedown lap that disgraces our abilities. When it was all over there was so much smoke on the track from the M3’s drifting around that by the time the last person went on the hot lap, I couldn’t even see where the car was on the track.

Just six more months until I take delivery on a new E92 M3 (again, paid for entirely by myself)—and M School, here I come! ♦