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FEATURE

COMMENTARY



Taking Curves at Full Throttle

By Kevin Coupe

So there I was, crammed into the cockpit of an open-wheel 2.0 liter formula Dodge race car. It was the final hour of three days that I'd spent at the Skip Barber Racing School in Lime Rock, Conn. And one of the instructors, an indefatigably cheerful man named Bruce MacInnes, who had decades of racing experience and a century's worth of stories, leaned over me. "It's a race car," he said. "You have to drive it fast. It works better that way."

He pointed out of the pit toward the

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track. "When you go back out there, I want to see the tires smoke and hear them squeal. Now go!"

I took this course—which is offered at more than 20 tracks around the country—out of some vague sense that, as I approached my 50th birthday, I needed to do something different, something that would challenge me. I also thought that I would learn life and business lessons. More than ever, the retailing business is competitive and even cutthroat... and so is the act of driving a car around a track at high speeds, seemingly daring gravity and physics. As Bob Green, another one of the instructors, told us the first day, "It's easy to drive a car at 65% of its capabilities. But it's hard to drive a car beyond that." In business, as on the track, we're

all constantly challenged to drive faster and better. So I went to racing school to seek enlightenment.

(Many companies take executives on sports-related field trips in hopes of bonding and building a corporate can-do spirit. Shortly after my trek, leaders of Bruno's Supermarkets went to a NASCAR race course in Talladega, Ala. After finishing six laps, Tony Davis, the chain's 43-year-old loss-prevention manager, veered into a retaining wall and later died from injuries sustained in the crash.)

Lesson One. In our particular group, I was the person with the least amount of racing experience. Some had built cars, some raced other kinds of vehicles and some were prepping themselves for racing careers. But there was a great lesson

just in showing up—it's important in business to occasionally get way outside the normal comfort zone. It makes you think, feel and act differently. Outside the zone, preconceptions often are revealed to be misconceptions. "When it feels good, watch out," MacInnes told us; if you're too comfortable, you make mistakes.

Lesson Two. Winning, it seems, is accomplished in a lot of different ways. John Murphy, my lead instructor, told us that "the only lap you have to finish first is the last one." The lesson is that it is important not to be distracted by the little battles, but to stay focused on the larger goal. On a racetrack, it's easy to get so preoccupied by little power plays here and there that you forget about the broader strategy ... and I can think of more than a few retailers that have made the same mistake in day-to-day business.

clear: It is almost gospel that when things get tough in the retailing business, everybody starts talking about getting more focused on fundamentals. But the fact is that most people know the fundamentals—it's when things get tough and tense that you have to keep seeing the big picture, the big strategy. Green put it this way: "You can't flex when you're rigid." And you have to be flexible to succeed.

Seeing, of course, is critical to success in racing—and to failure. "Don't close your eyes if you crash," joked MacInnes. "You'll miss the best part."

Skip Barber Racing School instructor Bruce MacInnes, left, and Kevin Coupe, right and in white race car, shared high-speed lessons in competition.



It's critical to know where you're going. "It's called target fixation," MacInnes said. "You look where you want to go, not where you don't want to go."

Lesson Three. So it's important to stay focused ... but not tense. As people get more and more tense, they tend to develop a kind of tunnel vision, according to some studies. On the racetrack, the inevitable tension of trying to control the car at high speeds can bring the eyes down, but if there was one message of the three days, it was that you must keep the eyes up, looking at the whole track, seeing the big picture. Look down and you can't navigate the corners and straightaways efficiently. The metaphor here is

Lesson Four. One of the best messages of the three days, in my view, was the importance of coaching. Too many businesses simply toss people into their jobs and offer training, but not coaching.

Murphy, Green and MacInnes were by turns encouraging, prodding, even nurturing ... watching everything, noting our strengths and weaknesses, and addressing both with a belief in our ability to succeed. Every business should require that its people be not just bosses, but coaches, and these people should be compensated and incentivized on their ability to coach the best from their people. And if they need lessons, they need go no farther than three experts at Lime Rock Park.

Lesson Five. "Accelerate into the curve." This was the most difficult lesson to implement because it ran counter to my instincts. When I couldn't see what was coming, or was unsure of my ability to control the car, I would brake or ease up on the gas pedal. But it is on the curves that races are won and lost. And it's on the curves where businesses often set the pattern for success or failure.

Which is how I found myself sitting in a race car, being shouted encouragement by MacInnes—who was determined that I would speed into the curves and send the car screaming full throttle down the straightaway. It wasn't just about using the car at 100% of its capacity—it was about using 100% of me.

So I slid down my visor, threw the car into gear and curved out onto the track. A little tire squeal, a little smoke. OK, good enough. Into the hairpin turn, then into a series of turns, upshifting where I was supposed to, trying to be a little more aggressive while still hitting my marks.

On a back straightaway, two cars fly past me. I upshift into a curve, pressing the accelerator. Up a hill, into another curve, still fighting my instincts, down a steep hill into another curve, then a straightaway. I feel like I'm not so much driving as hanging on for dear life. I see two other cars, both gaining on me. I throw the car into fourth and floor it.

It was at that moment, Murphy joked later, that "the mild-mannered reporter became the full-throttle man." I'm not sure who was more surprised—the coaches, the two guys who couldn't catch me for the first time, or me.

But it was that one moment of full throttle that I'm using to define my three-day racing-school experience. And to use as a model for how to approach business, even life. It was an extraordinary three days of remarkable lessons.

Speed into the curves. See the big picture. Get outside the comfort zone.

Full throttle. ■