

Is Your Supercar Making You Slow? Why I Traded My GT3 For a Couple of Hamsters

By Diane Cafferata

“Why would you ever sell that car?” my friend asked. It was a great question, I had to admit. “Greta,” my 2015 991 GT3, was downright magical. She could do zero to 60 in 3.3 breathtaking seconds, with 475 horses and 325 ft/lb of torque. She was stunningly beautiful, with her aggressive stance and huge white wing. She was an absolute monster and made me feel all-powerful—the perfect antidote to my stressful, demanding job. What’s not to like?

Now just after I had ordered the car in early 2014, my friend, Tony Callas of Callas Rennsport—a former Le Mans crew chief and former crew chief for the Porsche factory team—had advised, “I’d really prefer to see you in something slower so you can learn to drive.” I asked, “Like what?” He said, “Oh, like a Honda maybe, or a Miata or Boxster.” I laughed. Just looking at pictures of this car literally made my heart race, and I rationalized to myself, “How much difference can it make? I can learn to drive in anything. He’s just worried about a beginner killing herself—I will be very careful!”

So when the car arrived, I threw a track bra on her, equipped her with Suzuka racing seats, six-point seat belts and a roll bar painted to match my calipers – and the fun started. It was a blast for two years, both autocrossing and out on the big tracks. As I got more comfortable with Greta and her substantial capabilities, my lap times rapidly improved, and I quickly advanced into the red Time Trial group, often getting one of the top times for the weekend. “Not bad for a newbie!” I thought. We were killin’ it! The PDK was unflappable. The PCCB brakes gave me confidence. Greta could smoothly decelerate from lightning speed to a crawl for a turn and recover immediately.

Now I knew the nannies were kicking in sometimes, but so what? I was achieving great times and learning a great deal in the process. For example, I was feeling so much more secure around the narrow end of the Roval at Auto Club Speedway now that I had overridden my desire to brake and forced myself to apply throttle instead. I looked at it this way: “I’m simply learning to drive the car at its incredible limit, and all the nannies are doing is making sure—assuming I don’t make some colossal error—it’s a safe process. This car has way too much power to ever take the nannies off on the track.” And why would I?

But as I advanced, more and more, the drivers that I looked up to kept telling me, “you’ve got to go slow to go fast.” I understood this at some level; I mean certainly if

you weren’t going 150 miles per hour, you’d probably have more time to process what was going on and make better decisions. And you’d have more time to “feel” what the car was doing, so you could be more responsive to it. Cool, but what does this have to do with me and Greta? We ARE fast.

Then one day about a year ago, I was talking with Dwain Dement of Vision Motorsports, and he mentioned that he had a 2000 Boxster for sale if I was interested. Something to have fun with while Greta’s engine was being replaced (she’d eaten up a lifter one day). It had no nannies, so gas and brakes (aside from ABS) were solely my responsibility; in effect, just a very heavy go-kart. The shock, spring, and sway bar settings were static, unlike the GT3’s dynamic marvel of suspension technology. Dwain would put a cage in it for me. Although it had about 220 horsepower, it felt like it was powered by two very diligent hamsters, when compared with the 475 I was used to. And with no PDK, it would be all me when it came to managing the transmission, too.

My PCA and POC friends all jumped on the bandwagon. “Buy it,” they said. “You’ll learn so much!” Marcus Kramer and Peter Carides had bought the nanny-less “Smurf” and told me how much they were learning from it. But still I couldn’t properly value this supposed benefit. What I did think was that at the crazy rate Greta was now burning



Unfortunate brake pad

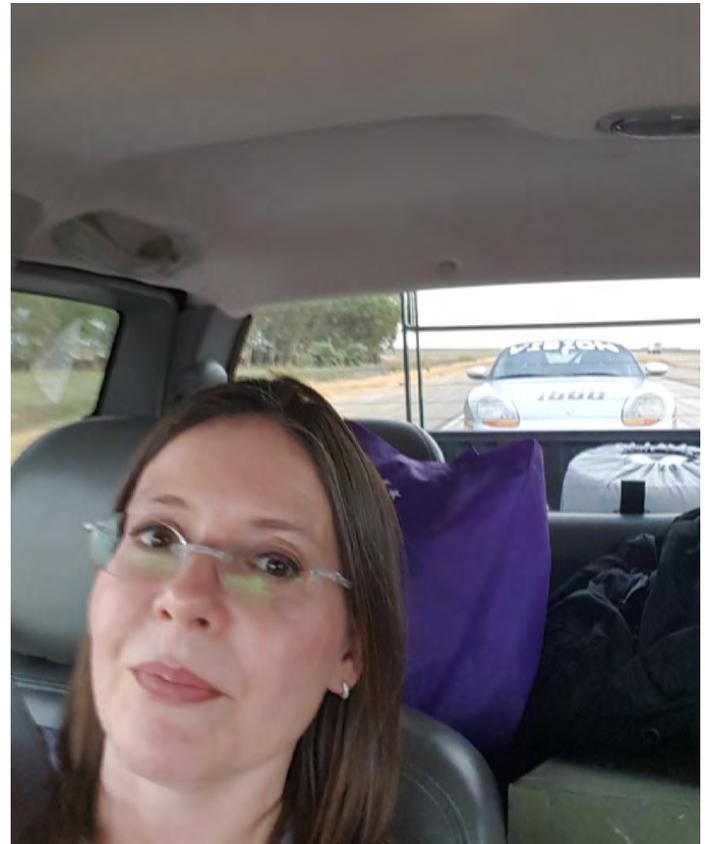


Diane and SP

through tires, I could get a whole lot more fun out of my racing budget. And maybe if I was going a bit slower, I wouldn't feel so much pressure. Making newbie mistakes at 100 miles an hour, rather than 150, seemed like it might be a good idea for a while, at least while Greta was getting her new engine. So I bought the car, and in recognition of her distinctly un-monstrous capabilities, named her "Sweet Pea."

And learn I did. I realized that it wasn't Greta burning through those expensive tires after all; it was me! I had been overdriving Greta, routinely forcing her to apply her supercar powers to defy the laws of physics and keep me on the track even when I didn't deserve it. I also quickly learned that a Boxster, unlike a 911, gives almost no warning: if you don't unwind, she'll let go all at once and spin like a top. Relatedly, I learned that it really doesn't matter when your 2000 Boxster has a little blemish from spinning into a berm at Willow Springs.

More importantly, I learned about momentum driving. I no longer had the luxury of screaming down the straightaway, parking it in the corner, and zipping away. There was no zipping. Sweet Pea taught me to smoothly brake, to maintain speed through the turn, and to line myself up to get on the gas as early as possible. I started to revel in catching up to cars with higher horsepower—cars that had passed me and my hamsters on the straight as if we were standing still—by smoothly and skillfully executing the turn to enable the earliest possible acceleration down the straightaway. As Sweet



Diane towing Sweet Pea to Laguna Seca

From the DE/TT Chairs:

We'd like to thank and commend Diane for her very insightful article. Over the 15 years we've been managing the Club's track events, Porsche technology has advanced massively. In the past few years, we've become increasingly concerned that our new students who bring their late model Porsches to the track cannot fully learn proper driving techniques because their cars are so advanced, they are constantly intervening. So much so that the student is unable to conceive of how their inputs would affect a less sophisticated car. Turning PSM "off", which may not be wise given the power and price of these brilliant machines, simply raises the threshold before the system kicks back in. Understandably, Porsche has ensured that it cannot be fully disabled.

Everyone can have fun driving at the track, regardless of car, and we certainly welcome all levels of driver, and cars anywhere on the sophistication spectrum. With that said, it's incredibly important that drivers of modern Porsches, who have not learned performance driving techniques on a PSM-free car, realize that their same inputs applied to a low-tech car would very likely take them off track almost immediately, and possibly violently. If one really wants to learn to "drive", defined as safely getting the maximum performance out of any car they might get behind the wheel of, there is no substitute for doing what Diane did and starting over with a low-tech vehicle. Porsche model years prior to 2005 are best for this purpose.

Think about Porsche technology as a spectrum. On one

end are early 911's, lacking even ABS. Taking it to the extreme other end, it's not too difficult to imagine a future 911 that is a fully autonomous trackable car, where the steering wheel, gas and brake pedals are completely ignored by the car's brain. Such a car would do everything a current model can do at the track, as well as taking over steering, currently the exclusive domain of the driver, and total gas and brake management, now only partially controlled by PSM. Hop in, say go, and you'll be riding in a car that is achieving the fastest possible lap time given current conditions, lap after lap, irrespective of whether you decide to turn the steering wheel or not. Very fun to ride in, no doubt, but no opportunity to use any driving skills whatsoever, even though you may feel like you are driving were you to actually grab the wheel. Today's Porsches aren't there yet, but they are well towards that end of the spectrum, significantly relieving the need for proper driving skills at the track.

If you just want to have fun in your new Porsche and are okay with limiting your ability to learn skills transferable to all cars, bring that 991 out to the track and enjoy. If you want to really learn how to "drive", good trackable cars to learn on can be had for about as much as the sales tax on a new high-end Porsche. The rewards of being able to properly pilot a car that does exactly what you tell it to do are many. And it will make you an even better driver when you get back behind the wheel of that high tech GT3.

Robert Baizer & Jack Miller

Pea and I got better acquainted, we not only stopped spinning, but started putting down times that were faster than many cars with double or more horsepower.

I learned that the nannies were not just a safety precaution, making it safer for me to skillfully drive on the edge. They were disguising my lack of driving skill. They were hiding my rather frequent failures as a driver, where my butt didn't listen to what the car was doing, and where I would have sent Greta and myself (and maybe another car or two with us!) off the track as a result. When I am driving Sweet Pea, I control all the inputs, without interference from any electronic stability control system, and this gives me immediate and unambiguous feedback on those inputs. This allows me a very clear understanding of what I did or didn't do, and what I can do to fix it. My learning process is pure and rapid. I am constantly rewarded for smoothness, in decreased lap times, more confidence, and less yelping (past instructors know what I'm talking about). And it is even more fun, because I have breakthroughs every time I am at the track, learning new skills and unlearning bad habits.

By the time Greta was returned to me with a brand new engine, I realized I still had more work to do with Sweet Pea, either in her present condition as a either in her present condition, or with a bigger engine, and that I was still having plenty of fun, perhaps more so, learning how to make the most out of Sweet Pea's limited resources. So I made sure Greta went to a good home – that of my friend, Angela Avitt, who first learned to drive at the track in a 1978 911 SC, and whose white blur now regularly screams past me on the straightaways. And I dream about the day when I get some more horsepower again and really know what to do with it! 

Diane Cafferata's earliest memory is of her Dad's 1969 911T. She has always loved Porsches regardless of their horsepower, and is a proud member of the San Diego, Orange Coast and Los Angeles PCA Regions.