

GTS Winter Update V – An introduction to racecraft

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Greetings,

Last winter I shared a series of Winter Update messages about a few aspects of racing I thought might have value to the GTS group as a whole. The topics were 1) Tips for Going Faster, (2) Tweaking your Car, and (3) Racecraft and the Start.

This winter, I thought I would do a series of updates focused on specific racecraft skills because while the start, which I covered last year, is certainly important, it is only a small part of what it takes to win a race.

As always, feel free to ignore any or all of this and my following Winter Update documents. As my father's homemade wine labels used to say, "To properly judge the quality, consider the price." And, of course, if you want to be removed from my distribution list or know of anybody you think should be added, simply say so.

With those disclaimers in place, I give you my Introduction to Racecraft:

An introduction to racecraft

We're now almost two months past the final Great Lakes race weekend of the season. If you joined us on track in October you found that, like on several other weekends this past season, we had a pretty full track. What's funny about full-track events like Putnam is that ahead of time there is invariably a lot of griping in the forums about the number of cars on the track and what carnage is likely to happen. Afterward, though, you usually see an endless stream of drivers (many of them the same ones who were complaining beforehand) gushing about how much fun it was.

The truth is, what's really fun about racing is not going fast--you can do that in HPDE or Time Trials--what's fun is passing. And, the more cars there are, the more chances you have to pass. The other thing a full track does is change the game somewhat. No longer is it just a race of let's-see-who-can-do-the-fastest-laps. With lots of cars, where and how you pass are suddenly much more important considerations. You have to manage traffic in ways you don't have to on a relatively empty track and suddenly the dynamics can all change.

A case in point: In Saturday's first race at Putnam last month, Mike Ward won the GTS2 race after I made a bad traffic decision and he made a good one, giving him the run he needed down the front straight to get in front.

The video will show that I was consistently faster on an open track, and MyLaps will show that my fastest lap was nearly half a second faster than his. But the podium, which is all that matters, will show that Mike came home with the win. He took better advantage of the traffic than I did to get in front and then kept cool under some pretty substantial pressure to maintain his position and take the checker. That, if I may say so, was excellent racecraft on his part.

While it's both easy and fun to pass a much-slower car, one of the big differences that characterize the best racing drivers is their ability to get past (and stay in front of) cars of comparable speed. Sometimes even cars of greater speed. They do it by using their racecraft skills which, as I have said before, are not the same as driving skills.

I thought I'd take a few minutes to start a conversation I will, hopefully, finish at a later date. To put into the back of your head a few ideas for the next time, like Mike and I were, you're fighting for position.

Why driving fast isn't enough

The first thing most drivers learn about racing is how to go fast. The next is how to turn that single blazingly fast lap into a stream of consistently-fast ones. One lap after another after another, all within a tenth or two of one another and all of them fast.

Being consistent but slow won't do you a lot of good. Being consistent and fast, on the other hand, is not only a lot of fun, also shows great skill and is excellent for bragging rights. Unfortunately, going fast is not all it takes to win races in closely-fought classes even though it's all some drivers think about in terms of skills development.

But that shouldn't be much of a surprise. Going fast is, after all, what snagged most of us into this sport in the first place. And, to be fair, it is almost exclusively what we teach in our HPDE and other forms of driver training. And, that is probably how it should be. After all, let's face it, whether you're at the front or the back of the pack, being able to turn fast laps pretty much all the time and pretty much without thinking about it is an important first step in finishing closer to the front, and hopefully, eventually, in winning races.

As we all know, there's a lot to going fast, including things related to both the car and its driver. For now, I'll assume your car is about right but if it's not you need to get that sorted out. I've talked about some of that before. Once you have the car right, what's left to work on is you and your driving skills, but let's assume those are pretty good, too.

After all, you're going fast. You know what you're doing. But maybe you're not finishing as far forward as you think you could, or should, be. Maybe it's just bad luck. Maybe you don't get the breaks when you need them.

Or maybe you're missing a weapon or two from your arsenal. Because if you're running more or less as fast as the fastest drivers in your class, you're running fast enough to win. So, speed is not the issue.

If you look at the lap times in GTS, there are often two, three, sometimes four or more cars within a second or so of the fastest car in the class. Again at Putnam in October, for instance, in the first Saturday race for GTS1, the fastest car in terms of lap times was Ed Baus with a 1:21.890. He finished third. The next fastest was Paul Milligan with a 1:22.259 who came in second. The third-fastest lap came from John Graber with a 1:22.390. He won the race in spite of being (very marginally) slower than both Baus and Milligan. In fourth was Christian Cook just sixty-five thousandths of a second back with a 1:22.455.

So, the best laps of the first four places in GTS1 were covered by a mere 0.565 seconds with the next-to-slowest winning the race.

Think that's an anomaly? Hardly. In fact, in the first races (both Thunder and Lightning) that day, the fastest driver did not win in GTS1, nor in 944 Spec, PTD, Super Unlimited, American Iron, GTS2, Factory Five, or GTS3. Seven classes in the first race were won by other than the fastest driver.

In the second races of the day, only SE30, Super Unlimited, and CMC2 were won by not-the-fastest drivers in their classes but my point remains: There is (often) more to winning the race than just going fast. Luck can be a factor, as well as mistakes (like going off course), but more often than not the difference-maker, particularly on a busy track like we had at Putnam last month, is racecraft.

Racing vs golf

If I may, for a moment, stoop so low as to use an inferior sport like golf as an example, maybe I can illustrate my point more effectively. All sports, even, sadly, golf, are about the development of skills on many levels.

It is entirely possible for a person to develop an awesome set of golf ball hitting skills merely by taking lessons and going to the practice range. Given that, you can learn all the physical skills you need to succeed. How to hit your shots consistently. How to work the ball from left to right and right to left. How to hit the tough shots. How to read putts and make them from all over the green.

You can learn all of that without ever actually setting foot on a golf course but there's more to playing golf than than just hitting the ball. On an actual golf course, you need all those skills but you need many more, too. You need to be able to choose your clubs based on the hole and the situation you're playing. You need to be able to form strategies based on the risks and opportunities each shot presents. You have to know when to go for it and when to play it safe.

So, on top of the physical skills need to be built skills related to course management, strategy development...even improvisation at times.

And then, once you get all that figured out and are consistently playing scratch golf, one day you'll get paired up with an arthritic seventy-five year old chain smoker who can barely bend over to tee up his ball and who, after hitting a few 125 yard drives off the practice tee will, in the middle of a coughing fit, ask if you want to put a few dollars on the game.

And then you'll learn a whole new side of the game. The hard way, probably.

Years ago, Yogi Berra famously said about baseball that, "90% of this game is about half mental." What you'll learn is that the same is true of golf and, also, about racing.

In racing, to get back onto ground I'm a little more familiar with, think of HPDE and lapping and even, to some extent, Time Trials as the driving range. They are our way of developing the basic set of skills needed to race cars. But you can be really, really good in your HPDE group and not have much of a chance in your racing class. Racing is the same as HPDE but different. It is HPDE with more. More skills, more knowledge, more experience...all layered on top.

Driving fast is about muscle memory and anticipation of known potential outcomes, like the fact the rear is likely to slide to the left when you crest the hill into Thunder Valley at Mid-Ohio. These are physical skills.

Racecraft is all of that plus a full set of mental skills.

These skills can be broken down into any number of groupings but over the next several months, I'll be concentrating on three major areas:

1. Driving through traffic
2. Passing
3. Staying in front

Hopefully, you'll find a few nuggets of value in one or more of these.

Stay tuned for more.

Cheers,

Scott