

GTS Winter Update VII – Passing

Greetings,

My last article, the *GTS Winter Update VI*, was about getting past people who aren't competitive with you. That is, getting through traffic. As promised then, today's follow-up is about passing drivers who a lot harder to pass than traffic: drivers who are directly competitive with you.

I talked about traffic first because traffic is something you need to be able to handle. Unless you are one of the two or three slowest cars on the track you're going to have to deal with traffic from time to time. And, the faster you are (or become), the more traffic you'll have to deal with.

So, getting through traffic is a necessary skill.

Having said that, where the rubber meets the road and where you really find out who's the better driver, is when you and another car are very close in speed and in skills and you're both trying to be the one in front. Think of some of the spec classes, Spec Miata or Spec 944, for instance. The cars are extremely close in terms of capabilities with virtually identical acceleration, braking, and cornering, and yet there are a few drivers who are consistently at the front. While, certainly, it's possible those drivers have slightly superior cars, I'm willing to bet that in most cases you could put the same driver in one of the mid-pack cars and he (or she) would still be running at the front.

So, why is that?

Part of it is simply driver skill. Forget traffic and passing, some of the drivers among us are more skilled than others at running fast laps. They can push a little harder, brake a little deeper (or a little less), and accelerate a little sooner. They're just fast. There's no discounting that.

But big classes don't have just one fast guy. There are usually several who can run pretty much identically-fast laps. And yet, there are some who more consistently end up on the highest steps of the podium. They may not always win, but they win *more*. And, while there can be a thousand small factors playing into that fact, very often that guy (or gal) who's consistently in front is a better passer.

Passing a competitor who isn't feeling cooperative

Anybody can pass a cooperative competitor. What's hard is getting past the driver who desperately wants to keep you behind. If you haven't already read my *GTS Winter Update VI*, you may want to read it now, before going any further in this one, because that earlier article covers a lot of the basics of passing which I not going to repeat here. You can find it here:

[http://www.scottgood.com/jsg/blog.nsf/2/SGOD-8BSPGH/\\$File/GTS%20Winter%20Update%20VI.pdf](http://www.scottgood.com/jsg/blog.nsf/2/SGOD-8BSPGH/$File/GTS%20Winter%20Update%20VI.pdf)

Given that, let's talk about getting past. If you can use momentum or any of the other techniques discussed in that earlier *Update*, by all means do. But what if you can't? What other options do you have? In fact, there are a number of ways to pass an equal car but they depend on you consistently doing a few things right. Specifically:

1. Staying close
2. Understanding your relative strengths and weaknesses
3. Being prepared to take advantage of opportunities
4. Thinking far ahead

Let's talk a little about each of these.

Staying close

There's no other way to say this: If you aren't close, and I mean *really* close, to the guy you're trying to pass, your chances of getting by are almost zero. Okay, sure, if he runs himself off the road then, yeah, probably you'll get past. But most of what you actually get to pick from in terms of passing opportunities are small mistakes; mistakes that cost your competitor feet, not yards, and certainly not car lengths. If you're hanging around a couple of car-lengths back, he's going to have to do something pretty stupid for you to have a shot.

That's a low-percentage bet.

How close should you be? Damned close. As close as you can get without hitting him. Now, granted, this takes a certain amount of trust to do. If you're following a complete Rookie or, for that matter, somebody you don't really know, you probably want to give them a little room. (I'm talking extra feet here, not extra car-lengths). But if it's somebody you know and that you know is pretty consistent in their driving, get *close*.

And, you need to stay close, which means not letting them pull away every time you come onto a straight. My rule of thumb whenever I'm following somebody is that I want to be on the gas before they, in front of me, are. When we're coming through the Carousel at Mid-Ohio with no more than a couple of feet between us, getting on the gas first takes some confidence that the guy in front will also be on the gas momentarily or else, well, I'll be filling out another Body Contact form for Mr. Cohn, but that's the only way I'll stay close enough to make something happen.

The alternative is to sit back a few feet further and try to get a run but with close competitors that's usually hard to pull off. Conversely, if you run really close but wait until the car ahead gets on the gas before you do, you've already given him an advantage and significantly reduced your chances of pulling off a pass at the end of that straight.

A side benefit of staying really close to the guy in front is that it absolutely un-nerves a lot of drivers, making it a lot more likely they'll make a mistake.

Understanding your relative strengths and weaknesses

You and your competitor may be turning identical lap times but the chances are you each have places

where you have an advantage. For instance, I've found that as a general statement I have an advantage in the fastest turns over most of my competitors but I've also found that several of them have an advantage over me in threshold braking.

It's good to know your general strengths and weaknesses but when it comes to the battle on the track, what you really want to know are the relative strengths and weaknesses of the car and driver you are racing. You want to know where you have an advantage (for when you're behind) and you also want to know where he/she has an advantage (for when you're in front).

While you should always be analyzing the person you're chasing during the chase, it's a great idea to try to start with some understanding of what you're up against. If I find I have a new and fast competitor, I try to spend some time during practice or qualifying following them around the track. I want to see where they're fast and where they aren't. As a side benefit, I may actually learn something new I can add to my repertoire. At the very least, I'll have a sense of what I'm up against.

Once you know who's faster where, you can work on minimizing your weaknesses while trying to maximize your strengths.

Being prepared to take advantage of opportunities

Knowing your relative strengths and weaknesses is important. Thinking ahead is important. Staying close is important. All of these can factor into getting your shot at getting past but usually you also need a little help.

Sometimes that help comes in the form of a slightly better than usual run on your part through a particular part of the track. Sometimes it's uncooperative traffic holding up your competitor. And, sometimes it comes in the form of a plain old mistake by your competitor. Whichever it is, you need to be ready to pounce, to take advantage of the moment because, usually, it is little more than a moment. You have to take the opportunities when they are presented because they won't last long.

Generally, your best chance to get past will be by taking advantage of a mistake. That requires your opponent cooperate by making a mistake you can take advantage of but this, after all, is amateur racing. We all make mistakes. And, very often, you can "help" with the mistake-making by applying pressure. A lot of racers, even pros, get rattled when a close competitor is dogging them. I'm talking about being all over the guy in front of you, making him drive his mirrors. A lot of drivers are really fast when they're the one in back but get totally rattled as soon as the other guy is the one doing the chasing. That's something you can take advantage of by being *all over* the car in front. Another reason to stay close.

All that dogging the guy in front will probably net you a mistake. The problem is, if you're chasing anybody who's very good, the mistake isn't likely to be very big. As great as it would be if he would run wide through a turn and slide into the grass or get too hard into the gas too early and spin, that rarely happens. If you get that, well, congratulations. That makes it easy to get past.

More often, the mistake you'll get will be small. A little extra oversteer or tire spin at the exit of the turn or a little late getting to the gas. Maybe he gets stymied slightly by traffic or locks the brakes up at the end of the straight or runs a bit wider than normal. These are more typical of the "mistakes" you're going to get and, in all these cases, the advantage they give you (assuming you don't make the same mistake right along with him) is both small and momentary.

Hence, the need to stay close and the need to be ready to take advantage of the opportunity whenever it happens.

Thinking far ahead

Although your car needs to be running close behind, your head should be thinking far ahead. Rarely do passing opportunities happen in a vacuum. Rarely are they single-turn deals. Much more often, a good pass on a close competitor is the result of several turns worth of work going perfectly, and possibly with the help of traffic.

I remember watching Jim Child's video from his 2007 GTS2 National Championship race at Mid-Ohio (unfortunately, I can't find this on-line anywhere or I'd point you to it). From the outset, Jim in his black 968 was in a close battle with Jeff Curtis and his pretty white 911. Jim had the initial lead but somewhere pretty early in the race, Curtis made it past. The two ran that way for almost the entire race, with the gap opening and closing as they negotiated traffic.

Late in the race, with Curtis still in the lead, Child's opportunity came. They were catching slower traffic as they came over Madness and into the twisties. Watching it for the first time, I remember thinking, as they came over the top of the hill, "Jim will have a chance in the braking zone just before Thunder Valley if he plays this right." And, in fact, that's exactly what happened. Curtis got stymied ever-so-slightly by a slower car and Child absolutely seized the moment to sneak past under braking, then maintained his lead for the last few laps to the checkered flag.

As an observer (of the video), I could see the opportunity developing about three turns before it actually happened. When I talked to Jim Child about it after I'd watched the video, he said he knew where his chance would be as soon as they left the Keyhole, three turns earlier than I knew what was happening. So, even though his move might look to the inexperienced as a spur-of-the-moment Banzai move it was, in fact, thoughtfully considered and beautifully executed. And, quite appropriately, earned him a National Championship.

Chess, not checkers

I've said before that racing, among the best racers anyway, is a game of chess more than it is one of checkers. The story above is a great example of what I'm talking about. There are a lot of things that play into consistently getting ahead of a close competitor. Staying close, knowing your strengths, being ready for opportunities. But the most important of all is thinking ahead. Keeping a part of your head working on what's to come and not just where you are *right now*.

As our 2011 season is set to be kicked off, I hope you can use a few of the ideas here to your advantage.

Have fun out there.