



THUNDERHILL RACEWAY Double National March 17-19, 2006

Friday, March 17th
Race No. 1 Practice, 2:35 PM

Within two weekends back to back we've had two double national events. The weekend before we were at Firebird in Phoenix in the rain and this weekend we're in Willows for who knows what. During our regular season, Firebird is the further we travel to the southeast and Willows is the furthest we travel to the north. Lots of mileage on our Jeep tow vehicle.

Because of some aggressive driving on my part, I needed to attend Traffic School. You guessed it: speeding. That's the bad news. The worst news is that I scheduled it for the Thursday night before the Thunderhill Double National weekend. This race weekend always begins on Friday afternoon and Thursday is used to tow the Evil Beast 10 hours up to the track. Lynn timer was kind enough to tow the car solo on Thursday so that I could make amends with the Harbor Municipal Court.

I flew into Sacramento airport Friday morning. It's an incredible feeling to get off the plane, walk out of the terminal and see your wife with the race car parked on the curb waiting for you. Together we left the airport for the track about a 1-1/2 hour away. On the freeway, a white Corolla pulls up alongside and honks. It's Jim Eli, who will be racing in our class this weekend. This is an omen of things to come – running alongside Jim at high speeds.

We could see the tail end of the storm that dumped rain Thursday on the track. Fortunately, we were well prepared; since we had rain tires already mounted from the previous weekend at Firebird.



The Starter Stand!

Looking at the entry list for this event, we would be racing against the Mazda 3's of Ali Naimi and Jim Eli. Jim has rented his Mazda from Josh Sirota, who has the car for sale. Russ McHugh has brought out his Mazda Protégé and it's for sale as well.

In our run group for the weekend, we are slated to run with the Vipers & Corvettes in Touring 1, the Subarus and Camaros in Touring 2, the Mazda RX-8 and Miatas in Touring 3, all the various Production cars and the Spec Miata class. For Friday's practice session, there will be 51 cars on course. This is the biggest field I've ever been in.

As we go out on course, I could tell that the track is still green from the recent rains. There's not a lot of traction available. My best time is about 3 seconds off last year's fastest lap. The course is slightly different from last year with additional asphalt run-off areas added at Turns #8, 11 & 13. Last year I went off course at eight and tried to plow the pasture.

Practice (Continued)

The additional asphalt will give some extra breathing room; since this turn needs to be taken flat out.

We see dark clouds off in the distance and we're not sure if they're coming or going.

Saturday, March 18th

Race No. 1 Qualifying, 8:15 AM

Upon seeing the large run group, the officials have elected to move the T1 and T2 cars out of our group and into another. This will allow some extra room on course. I spent too much time looking in my mirrors yesterday.

It is still a big group and it's imperative to find clean laps in the big field. I chose to go out last at the back of the pack behind Sean Ewing, who is renting Laura Olson's Miata for today's race. After several laps on course, I finally get one good clean lap and then the black flag-all is shown. There are several Spec Miatas strewn off track that must be brought in. The black flag means that all cars must go to the pit lane and wait for further instructions. If the clean-up takes too long; the session might be over. Within a few minutes the green flag comes out and it's time to charge.

I tried something that I learned at Firebird the previous weekend. On my 'out lap' from the pit lane, I'm going to change my line going onto the front straight. For one lap only, I will be able to launch at a faster speed and go on the straightaway faster to start a flying qualifying lap. My flying lap is the fastest so far for the session.



Cramped quarters in impound. Russ' Protégé is in the bottom left corner showing battle scars.

And as I pass under the Start/Finish line, the checkered flag appears; signaling the end of the session. The Honda seems to like to rest for a few moments in the middle of the qualifying session before setting a fast time.

As this is the first race of the season for the San Francisco Region and as this is the first time for their new Tech Steward, the post-qualifying impound is extremely chaotic as they try to sort out the huge field. Several of the cars have been hit by Spec Miatas. One of the Production cars had lost a rear fender and commented that his damage is worth more than the cost of one of the Spec Miatas.

As I get out of the car, Dan and his father-in-law, Dick, have shown up to lend support. After impound, they pitched in to change tires, brakes shoes and fix a broken brake shield.



The winds reached 60 mph winds in the afternoon!

Race No. 1, 10:45 AM

All of the Showroom Stock drivers signed a petition to have a split start at the beginning of the race. This means that the T3, Production and Showroom Stock cars would start in front of the Spec Miata field. As the cars go out on track a gap is created and two green flags would be waived, one for each pack. We had all assumed that we would start at the back of the Spec Miatas. But, because the T3 cars are the fastest; we must all start in front of the Miata field. We're concerned about this, since the Spec Miata drivers are driving very aggressively and are known for frequent contact between cars.

Race No. 1 (Continued)

As I pulled the car into the pre-grid area, I've been told that I have qualified second to Ali's Mazda. We enter the course and take our pace lap and as we approach the Start/Finish line, the yellow flag comes out because 2 Spec Miatas are off course. We go around one more time. As we're heading for the Start/ Finish again, our group is a little ragged and at the last moment, the Starter shakes his head indicating that no green flag would be given. We go around one more time.

On our next lap, we're lined up better and a late green flag is flown. As we go into Turn #1, Russ is able to pull off an outside pass. Going into Turn #2, Jim dives down into the inside and takes the position. We're still in two columns of cars as we head for the top of the hill Turn #5. This turn is an extremely tight 90 degree turn at the top of a small hill. As the group heads to the top, I'm hit from the rear. Luckily, I'm not pushed into the car in front. Our formation is that tight, nose to tail!

Jim is up ahead with Russ and Ali ahead of him, but Jim is battling with one of the T3 cars. This gives me an opportunity to make a run at Jim's Mazda. I'm able to pass him near Turn #7. It's time to go after Russ.

I get close to Russ just before the front straight. I have some more power than Russ on the straight, but I'm not able to make the pass. He does Turn #1 very well. It isn't until the next lap that I'm able to get on his tail at the start of the straight. I make the pass, but he's still close by.

The faster of the Spec Miatas have started to catch up to us. Going up the hill to Turn #9, one of the faster black Miatas nails me from behind. There's no reason for this and I make a mental note of his car number. I contemplate fire-bombing his car, slashing his tires or making fun of his manhood – the usual things you'd like to do when an injustice has occurred.

Ali has gone off track for an instant and I'm able to see his car. Full steam ahead; Jim is right behind as he has also passed Russ. During most of the race, the Miatas are passing in pair and groups of three and four. They have no patience and attempt to pass in the most inopportune locations. However, this is happening to all of us. I'm making a little ground on Ali, but not much. The Miata traffic seems to hinder him as much as me.



Post-race impound and the rear tire track is being measured by officials. No worries as the rear track on the Honda is narrower than the front.

On one lap, I lose five positions as I'm being passed by a small wolf-pack of Miatas. There are now four cars between Ali, who's ahead, and me. There are now three cars separating me and Jim. On the next lap, there's another wolf-pack and I lose another 5 positions.

After this Miata pack makes its way through things stay pretty even. There is only one car I need to pass to catch Ali and Jim is on my tail.

On my last lap, Jim is real close. I try and drive a little more conservative and I make sure I don't screw up. Later I found out that this was my fastest lap of the race! The race ends with Ali taking first, me second, Jim then Russ. Jim has set fastest lap. Ali, Jim and I all had fast lap times within the same second, 1 minute 17 seconds.

As we go into impound, I notice that my fuel gauge is lower than normal. To meet minimum weight, I must finish a race at half tank. Because of the two extra pace laps, I have used more gas than expected. With impound so chaotic, I try and drink as much water as I can to pick up some weight. The car is weighed and it's legal, what a relief. Time to find a restroom.

It was extremely windy and cool today. Winds were up to 60mph. There are a few damaged canopies in the paddock area.

Sunday, March 19th

Race No. 2 Practice, 8:05 AM

Today is somewhat warmer and less windy. With so many cars in our group, I thought about not going out for practice. But at dinner last night, Russ suggested that I could use some improvement at Turn #1. I believe his words were: "You suck at #1". I'll use the practice session to work on Russ' suggestion.

For some odd reason or some cosmic harmonic convergence, only half of the run group goes out for practice. I work on my lines and I'm bolder through Turn #1.

Mike Holmes has come to visit us today in his gorgeous blue Ferrari. He had just watched the Malaysian F1 Gran Prix where Ferrari took the win. He was inspired to come out to the track.



Mike's ride: How the other half lives!

Race No. 2 Qualifying, 10:05 AM

I'm going to use yesterday's strategy and try to go out last. I enter the pit lane and pull off to the right side and let everyone go by. I leave the pits right behind Laura Olson's Miata. Sean raced her car on Saturday and it's her turn today.

I'm able to get about 3 clean laps with each lap getting faster. The entire group receives the black flag-all again. Everyone heads for the pits while cars are removed from the track. I notice that one of them on the tow truck hook is that black Miata that hit me yesterday. Maybe justice has been served.

The green flag comes out again and Laura and I are the last to go out again. My next flying lap is my fastest so far. On my next lap, a Production car catches me on the back straight. He pulls up alongside but he doesn't have the power to make a pass. On the turn before the front straight we go side by side. I take an inside slower line and then go onto the front straight.

As I trip the lights, this is my fastest lap; then the checkered flag comes out and that as fast as I go.

The track has improved dramatically from Friday as more rubber is being laid done by all the cars.

Race No. 2, 1:45 PM

Had I not been held up by the Production car, I might have qualified better. I'm third in class. Intermixed with us are two Touring 3 cars. One is a Miata and the other is a Mini-Cooper. They should be much faster, but their lap times are similar to ours.

We're going to do another split start with the Spec Miatas in back again. Our pack finishes our pace lap and we're entering the front straight. We're in much better formation today and the green flag is waved. It's difficult to see since the field is so large. As we're heading towards Turn #1, Russ slams into my rear reminding me to get my act together. For a short moment, I'm alongside Jim's Mazda 3 and it reminds me of when I saw him alongside me on the freeway. Only this time, he's not smiling as much. A few of the other cars are able to get between us. The two Touring 3 cars are faster in the straights but slower in the turns. I'm exchanging positions back and forth with both cars as I watch Jim slowly moving forward. Ali has gotten away clean ahead of Jim. Both of them have picked up the pace today.



Our paddock space was adjacent to the back straight. In the background, is a Viper at speed.

By tangling with the Mini and Miata, I'm not able to put together fast laps. There's also a Production Datsun 510 that is being pesky as well. I'm alongside of him going into Turn #9, which is a blind uphill left hander. He doesn't make it and goes off track. I don't know what he's thinking; he's not putting on the brakes.

Race No. 2 (Continued)

He's flying through the pasture that is soaked with the previous rain and going downhill. He hits a few ruts and goes airborne and almost flips. He comes to rest at Turn #11.

Lynnie radios in that there is a pack of Miatas about to catch me in Turn #1. This is the fastest turn on the track. In the middle of the turn, one tries an inside pass while another is on the outside. In my mirrors, I see a third Miata go flying off the track and end up behind the corner worker's stand. Not a pretty sight. All the while I'm trying to mix it up with the T3 cars; the Miatas are coming through. In several turns, it's three wide. It's obvious that these T3 drivers are less experienced and I'm a little spooked on what could go wrong if these guys panic.

During the middle of the race there are about four cars separating me from Ali; who's running in first in our class. The next lap that grows to eight cars and on the following lap it grows to 12 cars. In the meantime, Russ is behind me; although not catching me. I'm racing against the wrong cars.

The race ends with me on the tail of both T3 cars. I had thought that throughout the race these two were in second and third place in their class. However, the lead car of Lynn Griffith's RX-8 had broken during mid race and can't finish. The battle for the Mini and the Miata was actually for first and second position. All things considered, I'm excited that I finished third in SSC. I kid myself that I also finished third in T3. Ali set fastest lap and took the win with Jim in second place.

As we entered impound, the T3 Miata driver got out of his car and collapsed on the ground. Emergency workers brought some cool towels to get him back in shape. Tow trucks are bringing in a few of the Spec Miatas. One of them was the black Miata again. Life is sweet!

Eleven hours later, Lynn and I arrived home at 2:30am after unloading the car at the shop.



Lynne Griffith's RX-8 was running first place in Touring 3 until transmission gremlins caused her to pull in.

SPECIAL THANKS

Thanks to:

- Lynn for putting up with adverse conditions at Firebird and now at Thunderhill and for her help with the radios. Also for towing the Honda on Thursday.
- Dan and Dick for coming out and lending a helping hand.
- Lynne for her batch of chocolate chip cookies. They were quite a hit.
- Russ for his advice on Turn #1.
- Laura for saving paddock space.
- Sean for listening to Husting's Helpful Hints.
- Mike Holmes for letting us see his Ferrari again.
- All the San Francisco Region workers.



**NEXT RACE
BUTTONWILLOW RACEWAY
DOUBLE NATIONAL
APRIL 22 & 23**