

Q & A: Todd Harris

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Every Friday, the Portland Tribune puts questions to a prominent – or not prominent – local person.

Todd Harris has yet to meet the man or woman who didn't like to push it, to test their limit, to speed. Which is fine by Harris, since, as owner of Pro Drive Driving School at Portland International Raceway in North Portland, speed is exactly what he has to offer. That, and the occasional skid.

Anybody with a driver's license and a few hundred spare bucks can sign up for one of Pro Drive's courses. A four-hour course in an open-cockpit Spec Racer Ford costs \$500 and concludes with an opportunity for the driver to go as fast as he or she desires. Top speed is about 125 mph.

There's also the high-performance course, which allows participants to bring their own cars and test them on the track. The most popular course is skid cars.

Harris has rigged up those babies with steel frames and hydraulic platforms that can turn your every miscalculation into an adventure, and an education in how to handle a car in an emergency. "It's like driving around on a sheet of ice all day long," Harris says.

Leave your cell phone at home, Harris says. And yes, Harris is insured. Boy is he insured. But he won't reveal the premiums.

Portland Tribune: Manual or automatic?

Todd Harris: You have to drive manual. And there's a difference between what people say, that they know how to drive a stick shift, and then you find out maybe it was 15 years ago and now you put them in a race car and there's a fair bit of gear crunching.

Tribune: What do people say they like the most?

Harris: What's kind of cool about the race car is there's no windshield. You're sitting 3 inches off the ground and you've got the wind buffeting your helmet and it makes for a decidedly different experience than driving any street car. It's a much more raw experience.

Tribune: Define raw.

Harris: You've got people driving along the back straightaway and a bug hits them in the helmet, and they said it felt like it knocked their head back.

Tribune: How do people respond to going so fast for the first time?

Harris: In their initial laps they're not going as fast as they think they're going. They may only be doing 80. They may have driven faster to the racetrack. It's because of the unfamiliarity of the race car. And then they start getting more comfortable and they naturally

start going faster. And then we find out that every single person has a competitive side to them. Because they want to know how fast everybody else is going.

Tribune: Drivers learn to better control their cars. What do you learn about drivers?

Harris: So many people overestimate their driving ability. Almost everyone. One guy, he was about 55, he didn't listen in the classroom and didn't believe in the technique of braking before the corner and he went into a corner and abruptly spun out. And then he asked me, 'Now, what was it you were saying about braking before the corners?'

Tribune: Men vs. women drivers?

Harris: Women listen better.

Tribune: Have you had any crashes?

Harris: Not in our driving school. Only in our race weekends when we have our most experienced people coming back.

Tribune: Wait a minute. The most experienced drivers are the ones who crash?

Harris: They're pushing for speed. When they get more comfortable and they're going faster and they're racing others, that's when you're more likely to see spinouts and accidents.

Tribune: Have you had customers bring in some really fast cars for the high-performance course?

Harris: We have all kinds. One of our most recent high-performance courses had cars ranging from a Toyota Prius to a Ferrari 430. They were on the track together. The Ferrari won, but the Prius driver had a big smile.

– *Peter Korn*