

THROTTLE SERVICE

TWO DAYS SPEEDING AROUND THE TRACK AT MAZDA RACEWAY LAGUNA SECA WAS A DREAM COME TRUE, WITH TWO BIG LESSONS: DRIVING A RACE CAR IS HARDER THAN IT LOOKS, IT'S ALSO A LOT MORE FUN.

STORY BY PAUL FERRISS PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAROYAN HUMPHREY



SAFETY FIRST
Like all participants in the racing school, Paul Ferriss wears a regulation helmet as well as a flame-retardant balaclava and driving suit

My first thought as I motor toward the line of five other race cars that are leaving pit row ahead of me is "Man, I love this." Then just a few turns later as I struggle to keep up with the pack, my next thought is "Man, this is tough." And then I spin out.

It was during the first lead-follow session. I was the last car in the pack of six open-wheel race cars following a cherry red Mazda MX-5 Miata, driven by an Allen Berg Racing Schools instructor. We started out fairly slowly, but the instructor quickly picked up the pace around Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca near Monterey, Calif.

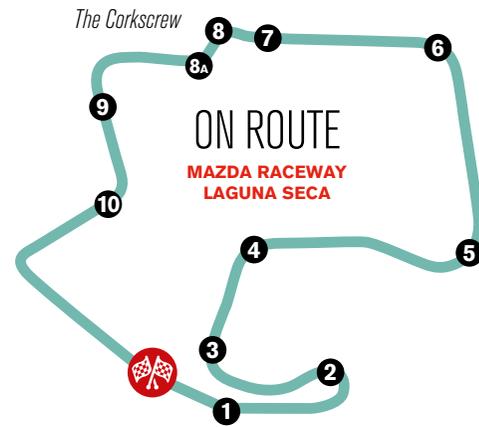
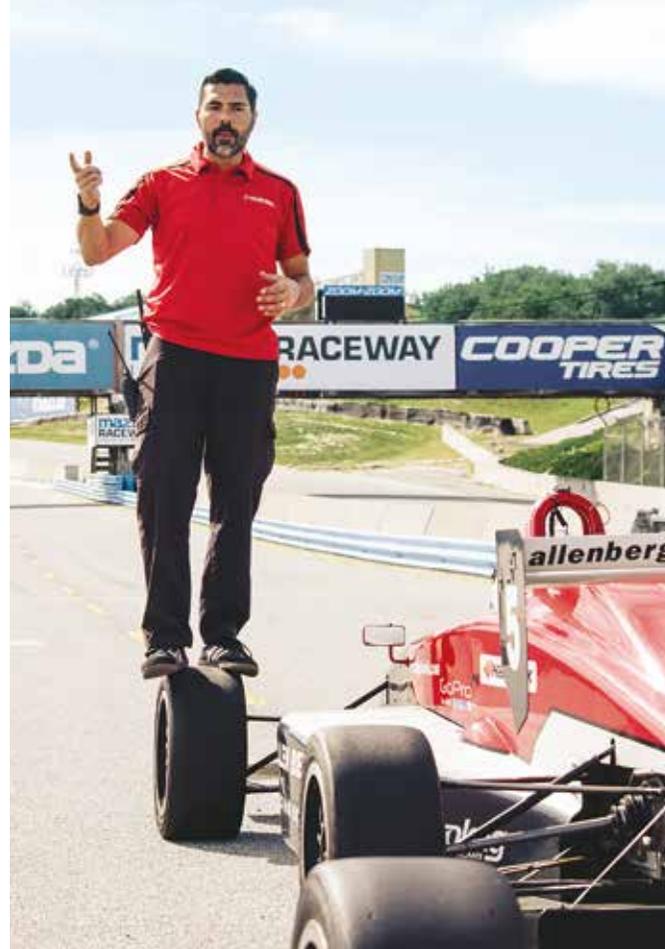
We'd had classroom sessions only an hour before, and I had a long list of instructions, tips and advice running through my head: brake in a straight line; apply the throttle smoothly to make sure you don't unbalance the car, but get on it quick as you exit each turn; downshift before you turn in; look far ahead through the turn; make sure two wheels are on the curb near the edge of the track or else you'll miss the apex (best driving line through a turn). Two hands on the wheel, always. Slow in, quick out. Oh, and aim the car at the tree when you enter The Corkscrew.

Right. The Corkscrew.

During that morning's track walk with Allen Berg himself, we paused for a few minutes at Turns 8 and 8A, the highest point on the track. The hard-left, hard-right combination is known as The Corkscrew and it's one of the most iconic, challenging and, frankly, intimidating turns in auto racing. From the entrance of Turn 8 to the exit of 8A, the track drops 18 metres—the equivalent of a five-and-a-half-storey drop—in just 137 metres.

Crouching down to mimic the vantage point I'll have behind the wheel, it becomes obvious that the track disappears once you reach the apex of Turn 8. Berg points to a tree on the opposite side. It has a faded ribbon tied around it and a pylon at its base. "Point the nose of the car at that," he says, adding that it will help us line up the car properly for the second apex, which we'll only see once the track has dropped away and the car heads downhill.

I'm pretty sure I held my breath the first time I went through The Corkscrew. I know I kept the car in fourth gear, but lifted my foot off the throttle and let the momentum carry the car down through it before getting back onto the throttle again. This was, after all, my first time in a race car like this, and if I was going to make a mistake, I didn't want it to be here. In his instructions during the classroom sessions, Berg speaks often of how important it is to maintain the car's balance. Too much braking heading into a turn will shift more of the car's weight to the front, potentially causing you to understeer and slide right through the turn. ▷



TRACK TALK
 Clockwise from top: Lu Bergandi reminds drivers about the proper passing procedure; Ferriss and his classmates walk the track; Allen Berg points out crucial landmarks; Bergandi gives a driver final instructions before they exit the pit





After The Corkscrew comes Turn 9, which sweeps downhill to the left. It's a turn that's as deceptive as The Corkscrew is obvious. If you head toward the apex too soon, you'll need to brake and correct your driving line because the banking can exaggerate your angle of approach to the apex. Stay up high and you not only risk losing traction, you can also be pulled right by the slight camber on that part of the track, meaning you'll be completely out of line as you exit the turn and be on the wrong place as you approach Turn 10. That would become my recurring lesson around this track: handle one turn badly and you'll need at least one more to sort out your mistake.

During my two days driving with the Allen Berg school, I never did figure out that turn. I was either too high or too low, never just right. But I took some solace from instructor Grant Ryley during one of our debriefing sessions after some laps on the track. "It took me eight or nine years to figure out Turn 9," he said. "You just have to establish the braking point you're comfortable with and keep trying it."

From Turn 9 it's on to the hard right-hander of Turn 10, followed by the left Turn 11 that sends you onto the pit straightaway. And that's where I spun. Running through the mantra of "Downshift. Brake in a straight line," I pressed on the throttle and the rear end of the car snapped around, leaving me pointing the wrong way. Track workers waved the yellow caution flag, and an instructor jumped over the pit wall to help me line up the car. I managed to get going again, but the track marshal pointed the red flag at me. I was being sent to the pits for remedial instruction.

FAST COMPANY
Clockwise from top:
Ferriss gets a pep
talk; orange pylons
mark the apex at
each turn; drivers
keep a firm grip
on the wheel; Berg
demonstrates proper
hand position

Pulling in, I stopped the car in front of Lu Bergandi, a no-nonsense operations manager and the man who gives us instructions in the pits. He leans in to the cockpit, close to my helmet. "What happened?" "I think I gave it too much throttle."

"Yep," he says. "That's what you did. Smooth application of the throttle, Paul. Smooth." He waves me out on the track again.

Smooth is easy to say but harder to execute. These Tatuus Renault Formula 1600 race cars are both fast and light. The throttle pedal ▷

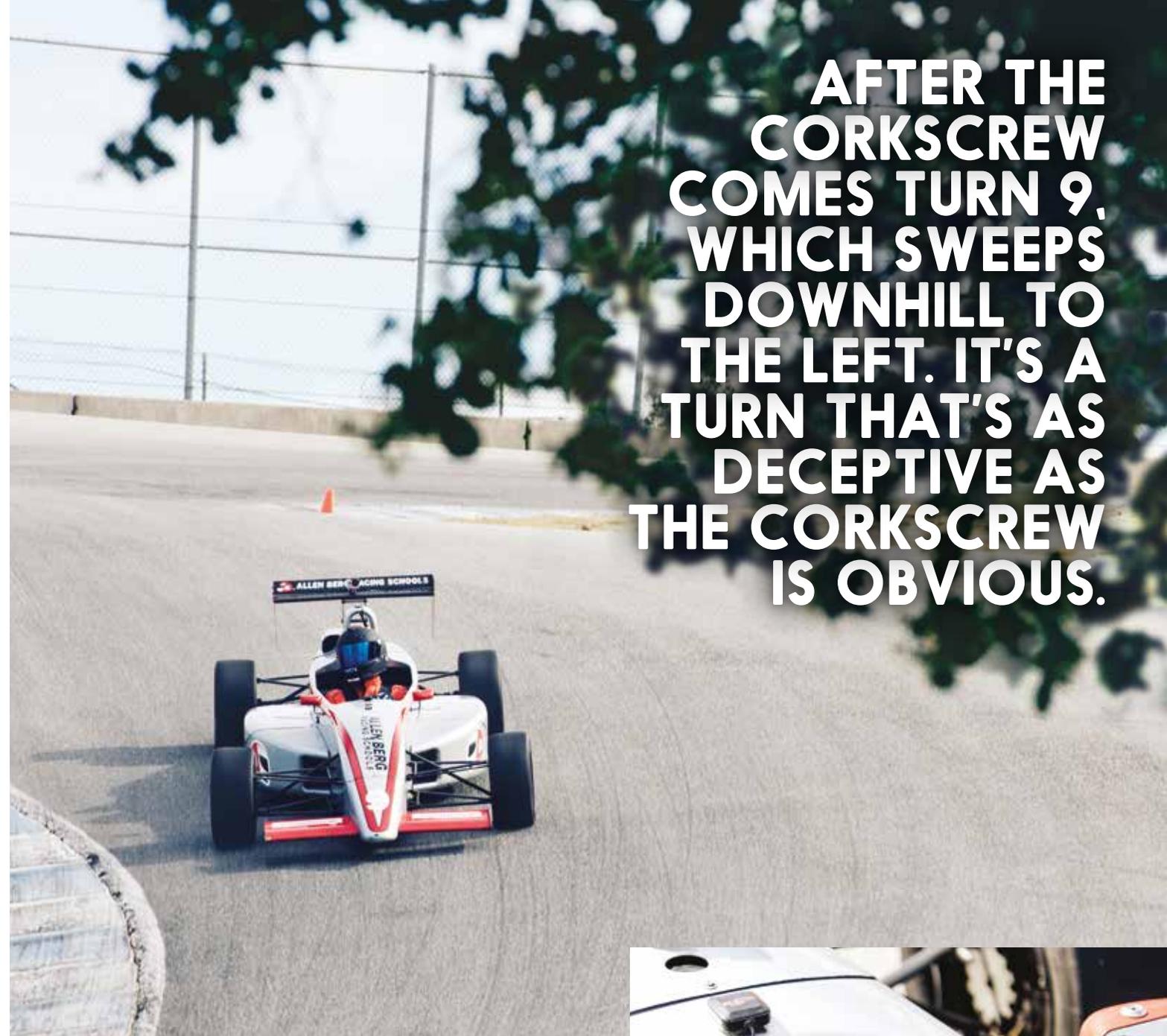
LEADER OF THE PACK

Allen Berg's skills as an instructor were honed by the years he spent competing in the top levels of motorsports. The native Calgarian first reached Formula 1 in 1986 (during the height of its high-speed turbo era) but his F1 career hit a snag when the 1987 race in Montreal was cancelled and his sponsorship from Canadian companies—which hinged on participating in the series—dried up. But he'd already enjoyed considerable success in smaller international series, including winning the Formula Pacific Tasman Championship as well as a win at Silverstone against Ayrton Senna and Martin Brundle in British Formula 3.

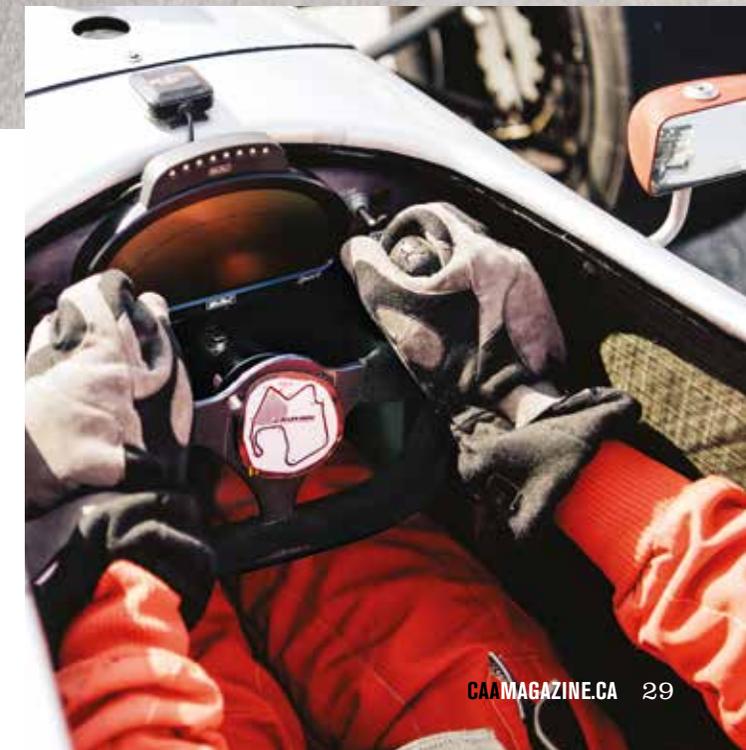
Before branching out on his own, Berg was an instructor for the Derek Daly Racing Academy, the Skip Barber Racing School and the Mosport Racing School. He also spent three years with BMW Mexico as the chief instructor for their driver training program. Though he still loved driving race cars and teaching, Berg was ready to put down roots. So in 2007, he started the Allen Berg Racing Schools.

A compact man, Berg radiates a quiet intensity and has a direct manner that lends itself well to dealing with people who want to go fast. He begins the in-class instruction by explaining vehicle dynamics, tire performance and by getting us to visualize how our hands and feet will move in the car once we're out on the track.

He's also a firm believer that drivers can easily adapt what they've learned on the track to their everyday driving. "There's a huge amount that's relevant to day-to-day drivers, from handling the vehicle to accident avoidance to knowing how and where to look," says Berg.



AFTER THE CORKSCREW COMES TURN 9, WHICH SWEEPS DOWNHILL TO THE LEFT. IT'S A TURN THAT'S AS DECEPTIVE AS THE CORKSCREW IS OBVIOUS.



THE BRAKES ARE INCREDIBLY POWERFUL, AND YOU HAVE TO HIT THEM HARD SO YOU CAN GET BACK ON THE THROTTLE QUICKLY, SETTING YOURSELF UP FOR THE NEXT TURN

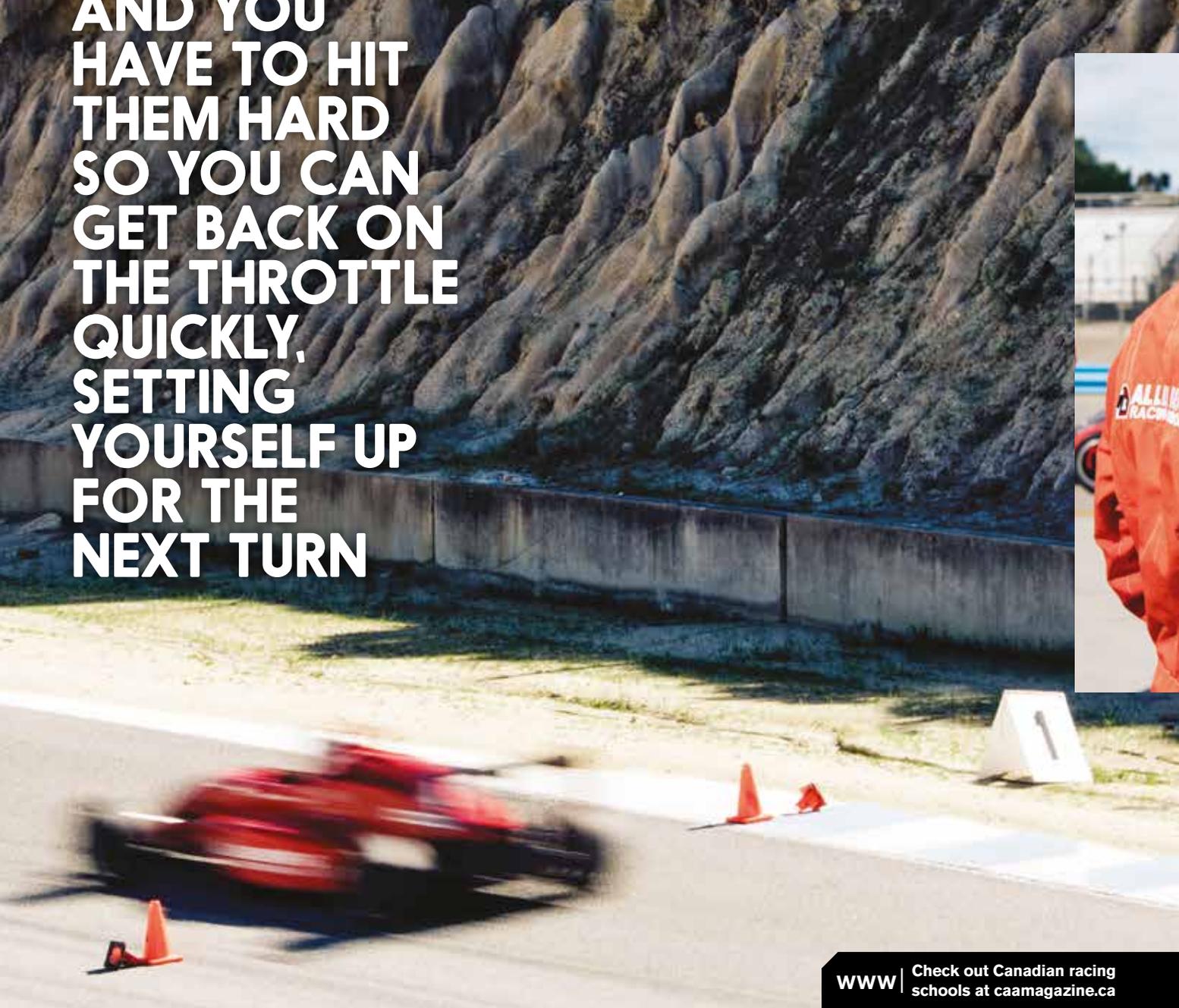


needs only a soft touch to propel you from zero to 100 km/h in only four seconds. You sit very low in the car, with the engine roaring behind you. Secured by a six-point harness, you're strapped in by instructors each time. Just when you think the belts are tight enough, they cinch them up a little tighter. In that moment you feel like a real race-car driver—strapped in, with nothing to focus on but the track and your rivals, waiting for the race to start. The brakes are incredibly powerful, and you have to hit them hard so you can get back on the throttle quickly, setting yourself up for the next turn.

Then there's the track. It winds through the Laguna Seca Recreation Area and the low rumble of the engines bounces around the hills, punctuated by a screeching tire and the occasional backfire. Although I felt like I knew it from watching IndyCars and IMSA sports cars tear around here on TV and in YouTube videos, I soon realize I don't know this place at all.

With 11 turns and a distance of 3.6 kilometres, it's longer and more complex than I had anticipated. In addition to the tricky Turn 9, there's also Turn 1, which looks more like a slight uphill kink, with a bump that makes the car hop to the left. It's a sort of teaser that prepares you for the much harder Turn 2, known as the Andretti Hairpin. After a few more lead-follow laps, Berg tells me I need to go faster. If I'm lagging behind the pack, I'll miss the driving line that the Miata is indicating for us. I'm struggling with the heel-toe shifting they'd taught us earlier in the day, which means I'm slower than I want to be, and having trouble keeping up with the pack. He sends me back out on my own to follow the Miata. This time, I'm keeping up, braking where he brakes and matching his speed. I forget about heel and toeing and instead just concentrate on shifting, braking, vision and the all-important smooth throttle. My pace picks up and I feel like I'm getting the hang of this.

At the start of my second day, I'm definitely more confident. I'm getting more out of my brakes and I'm accelerating faster. As the temperature rises and the track gets hotter, more rubber is scraped off the tires onto the track, particularly at Turn 11, where a few cars spin out like I did the day before. I was running through my mental routine of downshifting, braking and looking through the turn when a squirrel darts out onto the track. It jumps into the path of my right front wheel, and I know I could lose control if I swerve. I resign myself to the fact that it's about to become a victim of the sport. But just as quickly as it arrives, the squirrel doubles back and returns to the infield. Carrying on, I hit the brakes, catch the apex and head down the straightaway. Downshifting, braking, watching for squirrels. Just one more thing to remember. **CAA**



SPEED ZONE
 Clockwise from top:
 The light and fast cars can reach up to 210 km/h; Ferriss preps for his next lap; the car's low-to-the-ground design limits visibility from the cockpit; braking zones are marked with numbered signs counting down

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