

WOW! Wha

What Separates the Good from the Bad and the Ugly in Solo II Course Design

How To: Create Great Courses

by Danny Shields

You drift out of the final corner and charge across the finish line, tires straining, engine screaming, friends cheering as your time pops up on the scoreboard. Your heart is pounding, your arms feel too weak to drive even one more corner, but the fatigue blends with exhilaration as you savor the thrill of the competition. It is a run, an experience, you will always remember. Wow! What a course that was!

Solo events offer the opportunity for anyone to experience the thrill of driving their car at the limit, but just what is it that separates an average course from one that produces those enduring memories? What gives a course that "Yeehaw!" factor that gets the adrenaline flowing? And is that what makes a course great, or are there other elements required to satisfy the driver?

To get the answers, *SportsCar* turned to two of the most highly regarded course designers, then talked to National-level Solo drivers from a variety of classes. Their insight can help us all appreciate the nuances of course designs, just as one learns to appreciate fine wines or art. For those readers who have the opportunity to design autocross courses themselves, the philosophies of these experts can help you create more enjoyable courses.

For those whose concern with great Solo courses is only driving them, this discussion provides insight into the minds of course designers and their objectives. One of those objectives is to make drivers go slow when they could go fast. Unlocking the secrets of the course designer will help you read those tricks and go faster from your first run.

THE EXPERTS

Karen Babb, from Renton, Wash., not only is a top course designer, but also has won more Solo II championships than any other driver, male or female. Her victory in D Modified Ladies at Topeka last September was an unprecedented 16th title overall and eighth in a row. Her Lotus Elan has advanced from A Street Prepared to A Prepared and then D Modified through the years, facing ever-stronger competition.

Babb began applying her course design talents to Solo Nationals courses back in the early '80s, and has created a new design for almost every Nationals event since then, first in Salina, then Topeka. For her outstanding contributions to the sport, she and husband Ron were honored in 1997 with the Solo Cup.

Roger H. Johnson (the "real" one from Texas, not the "famous" one with the yellow Corvette from Ohio) attended his first Nationals in 1986, and says he actually

came away from that event with the goal of some day designing a Nationals course, which he achieved in 1990. Johnson was living in the Seattle area in the 1980s, and credits Babb with being his mentor. In fact, when Johnson was unable to attend the 1992 Nationals after his course design had been selected by the Solo Events Board, it was Babb who stepped in to set up his course, in his absence.

Johnson's course designs have been popular enough to be used at nine of the past 11 Nationals, and his on-line course design handbook has become an invaluable reference for course designers nationwide. Excerpts from it are presented monthly in *North American Pylon*, the monthly tabloid dedicated to autocrossing. In 1998, Johnson's fun-loving attitude and demeanor earned him the "Johnson Spirit of the Sport" award, named for, and presented by, his namesake from the Buckeye State.

Last September, Babb created the exciting North Course at the Tire Rack® Nationals in Topeka, which only a few competitors were able to experience before the haunting events of Sept. 11 brought the Nationals to a halt. The North Course area was subsequently used as an off-limits buffer between SCCA and the Kansas Air National Guard when action resumed on the South Course two days later. Johnson was the designer of that challenging South Course, on which most of the 2001



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