

# The Other September AutoX

By: Curtis Lee

The 1997 Solo II Nationals were run the week of Sept. 7- 12th. This is the second year that I co-drove Tom Ellam's DSP Mazda RX-3. We were planning to run the Pro Solo Finale held just before the Nationals, but since he was not in the chase for contingency money, we decided to run the Nationals warm-up event to get a better feel for the track surface. This strategy would maximize our chances for a good National placing.

Driving Tom's RX-3 is a real challenge. It is a completely different car from my 240Z. With the live rear axle and tons of negative camber in the front, it is like driving my car backwards. The car is fast, but it is hard to drive fast. The car is not very forgiving and will bite you by usually bringing the tail completely around. My seat time in his car this year consisted of the Boston National Tour event in June, which was a total of six laps. At Divisionals and National tours there are no "fun runs" to get additional seat time. Supporting Tom's bid for the National championship was the first priority, primarily being the first driver in the car to scout the track and get the tires heated up. Keeping the nose facing forward and getting a decent time would be the icing on the cake.

The warm-up event was held Sept. 6 and 7 with four runs on Saturday and three runs on Sunday. The best time from each day was combined to give your total time. Saturday was a blast with Tom and I leading the class. The car was getting good grip on the

concrete surface. I was building my confidence in the car. Sunday it rained and the car "bit me" twice in one run. My confidence in the car was quickly eroding. I put in a "safe" run and we still managed a one-two finish.

There were three days before our class was scheduled to run the Nationals. Those days were long. We walked the track at least four times a day and watched other classes run to get a feel for the course. Finally, Thursday came and we were running the North course first. The track layout was a little strange with a tight first gear turn, but the RX-3 has so much uncontrollable wheel spin that first gear was out of the question. The car was understeering though some of the turns so we just had to bear with it. Tom ended .6 seconds out of first place and I was in 8th out of a field of 40 drivers. Tom wasn't confident of making up the .6 second handicap, so for the South course work assignment I switched with him so he could get a better study of the track before we raced. I ended up in the announcer's van charting times. Friday's South course proved better to our liking. The racing was intense with the lead switching several times. When it was over Tom clinched first place by .256 seconds and I finished 7th. We accomplished our goal and just in time because the RX-3 is being bumped up to CSP next year.

Next year's goal: Bring my car up to the Nationals, any sponsors?