

Insights from The Exceleration Zone: One Participant's Perspective

by Matt Brady, PCA member, North Country Region

Are you an “abstract conceptualizer” or a “reflective observer?” Do you learn best through “concrete experience” or...gasp... “active experimentation?” Well, maybe you’ve never thought about learning in those terms, but if your next Driver’s Ed instructor is a graduate of The Exceleration Zone, those concepts will become very familiar. In fact, they’re the first tools I reach for now to scope out my students’ learning styles and shape my instruction accordingly. But let’s begin at the beginning.

Discovering The Exceleration Zone

Thanks to the generous sponsorship of Ira Porsche of Danvers, MA, about 20 North Country Region instructors and instructor candidates gathered at the Portsmouth Sheraton one Saturday to hone our teaching skills in The Exceleration Zone. The program is an interactive workshop for high-performance driving instructors developed by veteran racing educator and coach, E. Paul Dickinson. E. Paul’s 30-year history in motorsports and other high-performance driving environments is impressive. Among other achievements, he is a six-time SCCA National Solo Champion and a certified federal law enforcement driving instructor.

“Driving a prized asset around a race track at speeds exceeding 100 MPH, approaching its limits through turns, is the highest stress classroom on earth,” says E. Paul. “There is no real-time capacity to learn when our minds are so absorbed with just staying on course.”

Believing that driving instruction must become a more effective and efficient process, E. Paul developed The Exceleration Zone.

A workshop like no other

Chief Instructor Ellen Beck arranged the event after meeting E. Paul at Zone One’s Tech Tactics. The workshop is highly participatory and our enthusiastic instructors made for a lively time — with no shortage of opinions or reluctance to express them. The Exceleration Zone is unique in that it is not so much about driving as it is about teaching. E. Paul’s philosophy is to identify a student’s learning style and fashion instruction to fit. Hence the four categories I noted above that make up a continuum of learning by feeling, thinking, doing or observing.

Profiling for progress

Applying E. Paul’s approach begins with a High-Performance Driver Evaluation that yields the Six Success Factors for High-Performance Driving. This student profile rates four vital driver characteristics and two related to the car and car control:

- Willingness — the balance of emotion and temperament
- Skill — the ability to apply technique
- Judgment — the ability to make correct, split-second decisions
- Track Management — the understanding of speed, position, line and environmental variables
- Responsiveness — the car’s maximum capability to change direction and speed
- Adhesion — tire dynamics in relation to load

(Note: You can try the High-Performance Driver Evaluation for yourself at www.epaul.com)

E. Paul’s second major tool is the Learning Style Inventory, a multiple-choice exercise that profiles the way an individual learns best. For instance, a person who learns mainly through abstract conceptualization relies on logical thinking and systematic analysis. For him, understanding track terrain and vehicle dynamics will be important elements for improving his driving performance. In contrast, a person who “gets it” through active experimentation learns best by doing. For her, an effective approach to learning a new line would be to go out and try it on the track (within safe limits, of course). So while the High-Performance Driver Evaluation helps an instructor target the skill sets that need work, the Learning Style Inventory points out the best way to get the work done.

Bonus points

In addition to the core curriculum, E. Paul dropped many interesting nuggets along the way. One such gem is that practice doesn’t make perfect. This is particularly true, he points out, if one earnestly practices something in a flawed manner. The inevitable outcome is an uncanny ability to do it wrong every time. “Perfect practice makes perfect” is the point. So if you want to rapidly drive a certain series of esses, for example, determine the right way to do it first; then practice to your heart’s content.

The workshop also covered core Driver Competencies, twenty-one in all. Among them are multi-task functioning and proper eye placement, as well as more familiar ones like threshold braking and throttle control.

E. Paul got everyone’s attention with a discussion of the Fog Factor, reminding us that at 100 mph, a car travels 150 feet each second. If our reaction time is one second, there is nothing we can do to affect change over the next 150 feet of travel. “The first 150 feet in front of your vehicle is history,” he says, “so the lesson is to keep your eyes sufficiently up the track.”

Lest you think the day focused only on high concept teaching theory, let me assure you there was plenty of track talk as well. E. Paul’s conveyance of choice is an early lightweight 911 with later motive power, fully set up for the track. Some of his war stories had our track-hungry group straining to get out and drive.

Lessons learned

As darkness descended on Portsmouth, workshop participants fanned out across the region, brains bursting with learning styles, skill profiles, core competencies and visions of well-satisfied students. An experience both educational and enjoyable was the consensus, with takeaway tools that will be priceless in the real world of PCA Driver’s Education.



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