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DRIVING

Start Your Engines, but Check Your Antifreeze

By BRUCE HEADLAM

Here is the chief difference between auto racing and auto racing on ice. If you spin a car 360 degrees on a dry track, your life will flash before your eyes. Do a 360 on a large frozen lake, and you just count the ice-fishing huts whizzing by until you slide to a stop.

Last weekend, 62 drivers from the Boston chapter of the BMW Club of America converged on southern New Hampshire to test their mettle on the surface of the frozen Newfound Lake, north of Concord, and the wipeouts were plenty. The club meets here a dozen times a year, weather permitting, and while no one feared going through the ice, which was fully two feet thick, the surface itself had them talking.

A subzero wind the night before had blown most of the snow off the lake, leaving a sheet of sheer ice smooth enough for the Ice Capades but seemingly impossible for drivers who wanted to steer their cars through an intricate course at speeds over 60 miles per hour.

Race? By 10:30 in the morning, the ice was so slippery it was difficult even to stand.

Among those who had gathered on a day when the temperature fell to just above zero was Steven Bernstein, a business analyst from Queens, who has been a regular at the New Hampshire ice races for years.

"Let's put it this way: I drove five hours to get here, and I'll probably spend four and a half minutes on the actual track," he said. His car, a 1988 BMW 528, was probably the oldest in the race, and, he said, "the most maligned."

"My feeling is this: Rust makes the car lighter," he said while he tried to get a few drops from the frozen ball of dark liquid that had formed in his bottle of Diet Coke as he waited his turn at the starting gate. "Ice is the great equalizer," he said. "Tires matter, but horsepower doesn't mean a thing here."

Ice racing, in common with any basement game invented by bored 8-year-olds, would seem to be driven by supply rather than demand. You have a frozen lake, dozens of high-performance cars and, this being New Hampshire in February, long stretches of time with nothing else to do.

"Everybody does doughnuts in the parking lot when you're a kid," said Adam Wales, a ski instructor from Vermont, who by virtue of his bushy goatee is the only driver who might look out of place at a 4-H meeting. "But that wears kind of thin after you graduate from college."

In France and some parts of Quebec, ice racing is a blood sport. Cars and even

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Chris Maynard for The New York Times
VROOM A strong subzero wind blew most of the snow off Newfound Lake last weekend, leaving a racecourse of wickedly slick ice.

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motorcycles race bumper to bumper around courses built like luge runs, and the last one to crash is usually declared the winner. By contrast, the New Hampshire event is a civilized one. (After all, this is one race in which the cars drive faster to get there than they do on the actual track.) Most of the drivers take their everyday cars onto the ice, and there was only one entry that looked remotely like a racecar.

One by one, the cars — mostly BMW's, some Subarus, a handful of Audis, a Jetta and at least one station wagon — lined up at the starting blocks and raced against the clock through a milelong course featuring several narrow gates, two straightaways, a twisting slalom and several tight, potentially disastrous corners.

Most of these drivers are used to pushing their cars at twice the speed on dry tracks, but that's precisely the point: to learn to control a car on a near-frictionless surface. People who love racing appreciate ice racing in the way that people who love baseball show up early for batting practice.

"You can practice exactly the same skills you need in racing slowly so that your brain has time to process what you have to do," Mr. Bernstein said.

To test just how slowly the human brain can receive signals, I decided to try my own luck at ice racing, beginning on the practice course just south of the main track. For my first run, I borrowed a BMW from one of the racers, one with studded tires.

Slowly, I made my way through the first gate and toward the far turn, leaning with what I imagined was the weight shift of the car, skidding into the turn. "Not bad," I was told. Even if my speed was grandmotherly, my technique was sound.

Feeling better, I went back out to the practice track in the car I drove to New Hampshire — a brand-new, electric blue PT Cruiser (not my own, of course: a rental). This was a mistake. I started more quickly on the all-weather radials but instead of leaning into the first course, I spun once, twice, three times, trying to regain my footing like a deer in hockey skates.

I righted myself in time to approach the second gate but slipped again, this time shattering a frozen orange pylon while trying to steer in the direction of the skid, which is difficult, I discovered, when the car is going backward. By the time I crawled back to the parking area, I was told that the sight of an electric blue PT Cruiser destroying the practice course "had been noted."

By 11:30, Mr. Bernstein was ready for his first run of the day. As he was counted down, he lowered his windows slightly to hear the engine and wheels better, then took off through the first gate. Unlike some of the newer cars, his car has a vintage braking system and no computerized traction control, so Mr. Bernstein has to do the math himself, pumping the pedals while making hundreds of tiny steering adjustments.

For traction, most drivers try to catch their back wheels on the few drifts of snow, but Mr. Bernstein, who has studs on all four tires, just aimed for the gates. On the first straightaway, he got the needle over 60 before sliding — nearly sideways — within two feet of the first pylon.

After three rounds, winners in each division (broken down by a combination of car and tire) were determined by the two best times, minus two-second penalties for each orange pylon hit along the way. Mr. Bernstein's time in the first heat: 1:36, good enough for first in his division.

The ice races were started 20 years ago by Stan Jackson Sr., a former engineer from Massachusetts who now spends part of his retirement as an instructor for the BMW club, and his three children, Stan Jr., Sarah and Steve, all of whom were

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Photo: Speed racer burns up the track, 1930's

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racing last weekend. But even at the age of 71, Stan Sr. can beat them all.

"People call our family the Icemen," Stan Jr. said (needlessly, since that's the name on the vanity license plate), "but my dad is the Iceman."

The Jacksons' favorite story about their father is the one about his second date with their mother: he took her along in an ice race, and when he got stuck in a snowbank, she had to get out and push.

"The most important thing is learning how to handle your car during the winter," said Stan Sr., who was idling in his wife's Subaru (license plate: NHLOV). He taught his children to drive (at age 12) by putting them on a patch of ice in the driveway.

Under Stan Sr.'s light foot, driving on ice seems to be governed less by rules than by shared values, in this case the values of the engineer, not the speed demon. On ice, control trumps power, which means that for one day the rust bucket can catch up with the Camaro, and most of the casual talk on the lake is about adhesion limits and threshold braking.

Some drivers — Stan Sr. calls them "hot shoes" — just want to fly out of the gate and wipe out. "Sure, it's fun," he said. "It's spectacular." But eventually "they get tired of coming in last."

For Steve Bernstein, who lived in Belgium for several years and raced on tracks in Europe, ice racing throws into relief the two schools of driving: German (control) and American (chaos). It's not that Americans drive too fast, he said, it's that they are too individualistic, too antisocial in their cars (think Camaro), while Germans, even at high speed, are conscious of everyone else on the road. Here, driving is freedom; there, it's an industrial strategy.

"I've driven 145 on a German autobahn and felt completely safe, but at 50 m.p.h. on the Long Island Expressway, I feel out of control," he said.

But in Mr. Bernstein's second race, his inner American seeped out. Going around the final curve a little too eagerly, he slammed into a gate and finished the race with the orange pylon stuck in his front wheel well. His time: a dismal 1:57, and after the race, he had to dash back out on the course to replace the pylon before the next racer came through.

The result left him tied with Steve Jackson, the youngest of the Icemen, going into the deciding match in the late afternoon. (Because there were so many wipeouts, there was only enough time for three heats in each division.) Lining up, he said he would need a clean race well under 1:40 to win. The first three-quarters of the course obliged until he came around the same gate he crashed before.

"Ugh," he grunted as his wheels gave out again, and although he didn't take a pylon home this time, he was disappointed with a 1:37. "I lost a few seconds there," he said.

After his run, Mr. Bernstein parked his car and made his way to the timekeepers' hut to watch Steve Jackson's last race. "He's got a good run going," he said a little dejectedly, as Mr. Jackson raced toward the final gate. Then, a small swerve, and the car hit a pylon: a two-second penalty.

"Not even close, dude," Mr. Jackson said to Mr. Bernstein, who then knew that he had won. But since he was staying with the Icemen for the weekend, he wasn't in a position to gloat. He did put his palm upward in a miniature "raise the roof" gesture. That's as close anyone got to trash talking: on the ice, you never want to be completely out of control.

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