

TALES OF TOPEKA - One Man's View of His First National Championship Experience by Charles Cox

Brief Background

I have wanted to go to the Solo Nationals since I decided to get back into solo after a 30 year absence from motorsports. I viewed the Nationals as the ultimate competition to gauge both the car and my performance against the best.

My auto racing background is in road racing starting in an H Production Sprite progressing through various small sedans in both SCCA and IMSA so somewhat reverting to my "childhood" if-you-will, I decided to pursue building a production-based (prepared in autocross) modified class. Through the trials and tribulations of going from having a fun street car to fill that sporting urge and mid-life crisis thing, into the full blown "got-to-make-a-race-car-out-of-this-car-one-way-or-the-other" mode, here I was back into the focused drive to build a competitive car I thought was out of my system so long ago and finally, through the ambitions and help of my new friends and partners, Gary and Liz Dranow, was able to experience my first National Championships.

The Preparation

Once we decided to go to Topeka, we had a lot of work to do like everyone but given the DP Miata had reasonably stopped its development back in May due to a number of circumstances, getting it ready for Topeka was no small task as the car was now in Salt Lake City and I was not far enough along setting the car up for the low-grip surface anticipated at Nationals. Others though, indicated that the surface at one SLC venue called E Center, was pretty darn close to Topeka so that is where we were trying to get the car to handle on. Unfortunately, by the time we had that direction, it was only a couple of events before having to leave. Fortunately, I was able to make it out to SLC a couple of times in advance and Gary was able to bring in Charlie Shelton to drive the car for additional input on its handling and grip. With a change in alignment, corner-weighting for Gary (considerably lighter than me) and a few shock, tire pressure and wheel spacer changes, I was able to find the elusive grip and balance that we hadn't had before but unfortunately not soon enough to get enough seat time or that necessary confidence in the car that was missing before. I really had the car set up for grippy concrete which we had in abundance at Atwater out West...but that's the only place the car handled well until now. Gary, Charlie and I were all happy with the handling so off we went.

In the meanwhile, Gary and Liz's Mini which both Liz in GSL and Matt Linford in GS were going to run, had its share of last minute and untested modifications completed just to make it in time. So as un-prepared as the cars were (felt pretty good about the Miata though), we decided to utilize the trip as a fact finding mission and a precursor to next year and damn the torpedoes...let's go and have some fun!

Gary and Liz had purchased a "toy box" type 5th wheel trailer to use as the hauler and a place to both hang out and stay at the events which was a God-send. So as prepared as we could be, packed up and ready.

The Start and Trip

It was decided I would fly in to SLC and help drive the rig out to Kansas, no problem, I was up for it (after a bit of friendly harassment and persuasion, I might add). Arriving at O-Dark-Thirty in San Jose for the flight out, after the push-back we were told that the aircraft had some

“computer problems” and we had to go back to the gate to have some mechanics see if they could fix the aircraft...Delta-it is starting in. Interesting start to the trip but what the hell...no big deal...an hour or so delay and we were on our way...had a day buffer anyway.

Finally landing in SLC and fortunately getting in touch with Liz enough ahead of time so she wouldn't be waiting needlessly at the airport, we headed up to Park City to get ready for the next morning's departure.

Oh, forgot to mention...Gary had gotten sick and finally found out he had pneumonia...so we were hoping he'd have some time to rest on the drive out and be well by the time we had to run. His never-say-die drive kept him on the path and going regardless so Liz and I did our best to keep him resting, mostly unsuccessfully.

So, first light, letting Gary get as much rest as we could in the AM, we finally departed something like 10:00 the following morning.



Gary took the first drive but after not too long, it was obvious he needed to rest so we gassed up and I took the helm.

Fortunately we had a tail wind most of the way and trying to get somewhat past half way, we stopped in some place in Nebraska called Ogalalla which we calculated gave us a shorter trip the next day. Got a super 8 for me, Gary and Liz in the 5th wheel over night. (Did I say that Wyoming sucked?...enough said)

Worked out just fine, up in the morning and off to Topeka. Having done a MapQuest directions search for the track, we followed the directions, promptly getting lost when turning South at Lincoln, missing whatever jog over to highway 75 we were supposed to get, instead, heading South on I think 77 until finally realizing we were on the wrong road. Once discovered and there was no-harm-no-foul, headed East again on 36 to 75 then South again. The directions on the Map Quest sheet (yes, my fault entirely) were a bit sketchy but after following them into Deliverance country, dirt roads and an obvious drive to hell and maybe not back thing, I decided to ask directions from anyone that would stop that came along the dirt road after turning around. A very strange guy with not all his teeth, weird look in his eyes and an indescribable grin (get out the guns)...told us we were about 30 miles North of where we should be, we went ahead and got the hell out of there and back South on 75.

Arrival

I don't remember how we decided to go where we did, but knew the address of the track and somehow stumbled on to the right highways and direction with, shall I say, a bit of “encouraging” dialogue about the error of my MapQuesting (with Liz dutifully taking the blame while I kept my mouth shut-mostly...thanks Liz), we oddly enough, once our inner radar started working, found the track, got our R/V spot and parked the rig, not quite in time to do tech or registration we had hoped for which as I recall closed at 4:00.

Unfortunately, the R/V spot, even though situated perfectly for a straight shot in from the perpendicular street, was too short to be able to get the truck off the trailer, so there was no way I could use the truck as a pit car for going back and forth to the hotel, so Liz started frantically trying to see about renting a car. What she found was Topeka on Saturday night, was no place to try and rent a car...all said the rental car offices weren't open until Monday, so be it...cab it was.

Unfortunately, we hadn't reserved the hotel early enough and not knowing the lay-out of the area, where hotels were, etc., the only place we found on Topeka Blvd with a room added new meaning to the term "HO-Tel". Felt I was in East LA and needed a concealed weapon...that after being taken by an apparently Bombay trained cab driver (scary just that...) in the un-air conditioned cab-van thing you couldn't see out of the dirty windows and wreaked of some kind of incense or something...(didn't smell good, should-I-say...) that I didn't even want to try and identify. Driving up to the Ho-tel, my life flashed before my eyes with thoughts of whether my will (living or not) was in order...wondering what bail would cost in this neck-of-the-woods and many other ramblings through my mind. Oh, well, I've lived a long life, what the hell. Anyway, having traveled a bit, once able to figure out how to communicate with the hotel clerk using a lot of hand gestures, speaking slowly and guessing what he was saying mostly...I finished checking in and hoped for the best. Place actually didn't look too bad (in the dark) once past the front but the door to the room had a lot of the lower veneer missing and I wondered about that until having to kick it pretty hard to get it to open. Once inside...actually, won't go into it too much except to say, my shoes sticking to the floor set the tone for the (thank God) one and only night spent there until begging for Liz to source another place, no matter where; which as my savior, did, on the now-we-know-where-to-be-street, Wannamaker (yes, we learned a lot on this trip!).



First day events

First night down, next day's activities under way. Once the "cabbie" dutifully showed up as he promised in the "cab" to pick me up at 5:30 am, made my way back to the track to get under way.

We couldn't have asked for a better first event from the weather to the format. We arrived on Saturday, had test and tune on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday some inclement weather (rain) and we didn't have to run until Thursday and Friday...the Gods were shining on us on it seemed.

Given that was Sunday, we were there to do "test-and-tune" to get an idea of the track surface, how the car handled and see if we were going to be ready for running on Thursday and Friday.

After registration, weigh in (by the way, the class limit for the Miata is 1997#...on the Topeka scale we weight exactly 1997# but were a bit low on fuel...decided though, to add some ballast for safety) and sign up, we lined up to test and tune (this was Sunday).

Gary took the Miata out first and said the car felt just fine (unlike Gary who was still feeling lousy). He got his 5 runs in but the last two, the car started crapping out with a rather increasing "lean spot" just off idle from 1500 rpm or so. It progressively got worse of course just in time for

my runs where the flat spot ended up being from around 1500-6000 rpm...not good. I wasn't too worried, figuring I could either "tune" it out (different altitude and baro pressure) or otherwise sort it given two days until running) but decided not to flog the car in its un-drivable state and only did two practice runs.

Monday and Tuesday comprised of mostly Gary resting with Liz and I running errands, getting the lay of the event comfortable with the needing to have a few Thursday. We were battery possibly being discharged state when battery switch was left from the previous overnight Saturday but we were concerned it. Given it was a



and generally getting setup and the car things done before we finally noticed the a problem given its on, discharging it fully event. It did charge up didn't seem "happy" and we might need to replace "rather large" PC2150

(expensive and not readily available) battery, I was reasonably sure I couldn't find one but had no doubt a suitable replacement would be available if necessary. We did source a rather large battery at a parts store down the street (which in Topeka can be a 'rather' long way and take some time) just in case and decided to pick up one of those jumper batteries to help with starting the car to take the load off. I also decided to change the spark plugs (they were due) and do a little mapping on the accelerator pumps to see if I could map out the flat spot, which I was successful in doing. Seems the car likes to eat spark plugs even though they look perfect when they come out...they just seem to need replacing every 3 or so events. We also decided to hedge the car's weight to make sure we didn't get caught with an underweight car so we went to a number of parts stores to see about finding some lead shot for ballast and a curry comb to clean the tires off...needless to say, it was quite an adventure trying to find anything but eventually we did. Speaking of deliverance...the "local" archery shop we found when looking for lead shot was quite the experience. What we thought I can't express except to say that once again, I would have been more comfortable being armed and had quite the visions bouncing through my head when asking if they had any lead shot to sell. Even in the presence of being

scared s(*)&)*(&less, I was able to negotiate with the owner of the shop to bring in a bag of shot he had at home the next day for a good price which turned out just fine and we picked it up the next day...from further comment on that experience, I digress (expletives deleted).



With the car running well and things in order with the Miata, our focus turned to the Mini, which hadn't arrived yet. Matt was driving it out from Salt Lake and left Denver Wednesday morning

with a Deadline of around 4:00 as I remember, to get registered and teched. He made it in "plenty" of time, flew through tech and the team was in business...(I was kind of wondered if Liz was hoping the car wouldn't make it)...

So next came the events. We all ran on Thursday and Friday so it was very busy and we had little time to help each other due to the run group structure but did the best we could supporting each other during our runs. Everyone did well but all were hoping to do better (which is normal). I'd say yours-truly was the only one that screwed up when, after getting a re-run in my last run on the first East course, I brain-faded after what I felt was an excellent run and DNFed after the finish going around one of the cones the wrong way...stupid move that cost me 5h place in the trophies over the 8th place I ended up with. My consolation is knowing the car handled excellently, fast (faster than we were it would seem), the potential to be competitive with the fastest cars in the right hands (not ours on that day) and was certainly one of the best prepared (if not the best) cars there. That being said, the competition in DP was very tough...excellent drivers, fast cars and very fast class...I love this class!



Liz and Matt did the best they could with the Mini not handling terribly well. There was just no time to do any development on the new suspension setup so it exhibited some weird handling characteristics that we just didn't have time to sort.



Liz improved each of her runs and seemed to smile the whole time...Matt seemed a bit frustrated in not getting a handle on the car's handling...oh, well...wait 'till next year!

Deciding to bow out of the banquets, we had a team BBQ at the R/V before Matt left (driving) for Denver (youth is a wonderful thing) and after beating up on yours-truly for screwing up, had a good time celebrating the event and just being there.

The drive back

We then started loading up getting ready for the return to Park City. One more night in the hotel and hopefully a relatively early start taking the rental car back on the way and away we go, right? Well not quite so easy. Gary had installed an electric fan to help cool down the condenser (hopefully making the A/C work) for those long uphill pulls, given the weight of the rig. Evidently, yours-truly, when parking the truck, failed to turn it off (yes, a manual switch) and drained the truck batteries fully. After loading and getting ready to go, low-and-behold, the truck wouldn't start. We tried jump starting, battery charging, etc., and given the time it may have taken to charge up two truck batteries (all day) we decided the best thing was to go back to the wayward parts store where I previously sourced the Miata battery we never used, and get a pair of batteries (hopefully they had a pair that would fit) to throw in so we could get on the road. Visions of battery cables breaking, bolts stripping and all those things came to mind. Got some WD-40, a pair of batteries and changed them out with no problems (something scary about a fix

that goes smoothly...)...truck then started right up, cleaned up and off we went. Took the rental car back, and on our way North up 75, going back the way we should have come down.

First day drive was pretty routine...Gary doing more than his share behind the wheel even though still sick...quite the trooper. Ended up staying in Sidney this time, which was a bit more than half-way back the other direction (looks like that may end up being the routine). Nice hotel and good rest, uneventful first day...we were to catch up on the second.

Second day run, everything went rather routine until we got to Laramie where we found Highway 80 was closed...great! What to do. No one knew anything, trucks were backed up for as far as the eye could see, the stupid radio stations were useless, we were about out of gas and potentially blocked from getting either off the highway to get gas or find an alternate route. Fortunately, we were just able to find a turn around, went back to the previous off ramp, got gas and then decided to get back on the highway, go as far as we could then pull over and wait it out. After all, we did have an R/V, food and could hang out as long as necessary until being able to carry on. We did some online work, having some wireless cards, hung out a while, took the dogs for walks and about 1.5 hours or so the roads opened and started moving...the trucks were backed up for miles. The only thing we were able to find out is that there was snow, wrecks, helicopters for rigs that crashed, etc. After getting home I found out it was really closed during a hunt for some escaped convicts that were in the area...not sure if they got caught or what but it was true there was a lot of snow around too.

Once we got going and the truck blockade thinned out it was back to the routine road work. Stopping for gas I think one more time before we thought getting home in a reasonable time.



Well wasn't quite to be. Finally making good time after all the bloody head winds, one of the trailer tires blew out just before (or was it after...don't remember) getting to Utah. Gary was a bit panicked, trying to get AAA to come...was pretty hopeless. I wasn't too concerned figuring we had the tools to change it and finding out we had a spare...no problem I said. It was a bit touch and go at first, the tool for lowering the spare tire wouldn't work but was able to jury-rig a socket to get it done. Biggest concern was how to jack the darn thing up but

putting an awful lot of "English" on the floor jack eventually got the job done. Tire off, spare tire on and back on our way.

We did get in to Park City before dark as I recall so even though we had our issues, we made it with a collective sigh of relief.

Flight back

Having an extra day buffer was very good planning. There was a lot to sort, unpack, and get Gary and Liz ready for the next weekend's event (yes, Topeka wasn't enough...they had an event scheduled the following weekend in Idaho). We got the Miata out of the car, on the open trailer (it rained...why not) and pretty much as organized as we could for the day.

Next day my flight out was scheduled (Tuesday I think...the days start blurring together) out around 11...Gary had a doctor's appointment (finally) but decided to go down to SLC on my drop off to pick up the Mini from the tire store (don't remember what they were doing but think some shock settings were changed and checking for some clunking noise Matt was experiencing). Gary headed up to the doctor's in the Mini and Liz dropped me off at the airport. Not to let up on the "experience", my airplane broke down and couldn't take off...they said they were replacing it...I truly thought they might simply cancel the flight and I'd be stuck in the airport for who knows how long (thought about calling to be picked up and taken back to Gary and Liz's for another night but...) but after an hour and a half or there about, they did replace the plane and was on my way. After that, no further problems (as if that weren't enough).

So that was the Topeka adventure this year. Memorable, fun, challenging and all that...wouldn't have missed it for the world. Great people, the best team members and support that can't be beat. Can't wait until next year, starting to plan it already.

Charles

More photos are available on the www.ModernSoloRacing.com website

