

Put Me in, Coach

By Bob Pecori, PCA Club Racer (Allegheny Region)



I'm ready to play today", are the lyrics to the song Centerfield by John Fogerty. It is what I thought before I decided to take a coach with me to the recent PCA Club Race the Porsche Clash at Watkins Glen International (the Glen). I was ready to learn a few things about my car, my driving and myself - but not too much. You see, I considered myself an experienced racer.

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I have been driving PCA Drivers Education (DE) events since 1990, and instructing DE students for about 15 years. I also have raced with PCA, NASA and the SCCA for 12 years. I am no pro, but I have won races and scored many podium finishes. I have been driving the same car, a 944 during all that time. Finally, I have been driving the Glen for more than 10 years. Sure, I was paying for and expecting



Photo provided by Bob Pecori

Bob Pecori and coach E. Paul Dickenson study the Traqmate data

my coach to help me find some time and refine my driving, but I was in for a shock – about four seconds of shock!

My coach E. Paul Dickinson is a friend, a client, a business partner and a professional driving coach. We had frequently discussed making me a

client of his but we never seemed to find the right time. The race at the Glen finally presented the right opportunity for both of us. For those who have not been to the Glen Club Race, the race format typically includes two sprint races and one Enduro for each run group. You get a ton of track time, which is the perfect opportunity for coaching.

At the Glen, I was racing in the very competitive SP2 class, a PCA class for 944 Cup cars. All of the cars weigh between 2600 and 2750 pounds and can have no more than 144 HP. My car makes 138 HP at the rear wheels. The cars in this class may not be fast when compared to some of the other PCA classes. In this Spec class the emphasis is on the driver, and let me tell you many of the drivers are fast.

Prior to beginning the weekend, E. Paul and I had a long discussion about driving, my experience and my goals for the weekend. Generally, I wanted to lower my lap times and learn a few things about my driving style. To analyze my driving, I would be using a data acquisition tool for the first time. When the price of several of the data acquisition systems became affordable during the past few years, my interest piqued. I was interested to see what such a system would show about my driving.

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I knew that the data would be a great learning tool, but I also knew that I likely would not be able to sufficiently interpret the data in order to help myself. I knew that E. Paul had vast experience with data acquisition systems and data interpretation, as it has been available for many years in the pro arena. The system that we used was the Traqmate Complete. This is the system with the in-car timing readout but not the extra sensors for throttle, brake, steering, and other data points. This system collects more than enough data for the Club Racer. In fact, you can become overwhelmed if you choose to view too much data.

My first on-track session on Friday was to be the session to set my baseline. While the data that

I was able to collect was useful, I was disappointed since the track was wet. When the track finally dried and I was able to put on the dry weather tires, I was able to get some better lap times. My best lap time was 2:24.3. This was not a bad lap time, but it was not as good as my personal best lap time of 2:23.2. Going into the weekend of coaching, my baseline was 1.1 seconds slower than my personal best.

When I came off the dry track with a smile on my face, E. Paul greeted me saying, “Well, let’s see where you are lying to me.”

“Lying?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

We looked at the data together. I found myself arguing with the data. “That can’t be right. I braked way later than that, and overall I was on the power much sooner.” Or so I thought.

“Are you sure that this data thing is working right?” I asked.

If you are new to data acquisition systems like me, you know that the data is very humbling. What we found the first day was that I was extremely consistent - consistently LOUSY! I was braking too early and too hard. Because I was screwing up my braking, I was also turning in to the corner too early, wasting time and making more steering corrections than needed.

I was crushed. This could not be happening to me. We continued working together. Using what we were uncovering in the data combined with my coach’s practiced eye while I was on the track, we established a game plan for the next day. I was very angry with myself so I was motivated and focused for the sessions the next morning. Unfortunately, I had a fuel pump failure on the grid and lost my track time for the first session. I also missed the first sprint race sitting in the paddock while a new fuel pump was installed.

I had dropped a consistent four seconds off of my previous personal best lap time...

The second sprint race would be my first attempt to fix my driving ills. I had to start last on the grid since I had no qualifying time from the first sprint race. I started from the 22nd position in the split start, 12th in class. During the race, I was able to climb as high as third. I had a great race dicing with the fourth and fifth place cars and eventually finished



Bob with his SP2 classed 1985 944

sixth with a best lap of 2:20.4 — Wow!

That best lap time is almost three full seconds quicker than my previous all time personal best lap time. Hey, this coaching thing works pretty well. More importantly, my driving was much improved. The braking issue which was the brunt of most of my problems was much better. Though I was still making mistakes and leaving time on the table I knew where it was on the track. I could see it in the data, and with the coaching I knew WHAT to do to go get it.

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My next opportunity for improvement was the Enduro held the next day. I drove the first stint of the Enduro and planned to turn the car over to my co-driver after about 50 minutes. Because I had the fourth fastest time in class during the sprint race, I started the Enduro fourth in class. I was able to work up to third position. I was catching the second place car and keeping a nice distance ahead of the fourth place car by working traffic effectively. The coaching was also very helpful during the race. E. Paul used the radio to call the flags, spot for me, and provide race craft advice. While in third place, I turned the car over to my co-driver Tony Sciarrino. After the stop to change drivers, Tony re-entered the race in fourth position. Tony was able to maintain quick consistent laps and we were challenging for the podium. Unfortunately, the motor blew two-thirds into Tony’s stint. Our day was done.

My disappointment about the motor however,

was offset by finding yet another second. I had driven a best lap of 2:19.2 and backed it up with a number of other lap times within tenths of a second. I had dropped a consistent four seconds off of my previous personal best lap time and dropped five seconds from my initial baseline time for the weekend. I was ecstatic. I was never so happy after a race with a broken car. Even better, from further examining the data, I know where there remains another two to three seconds that I can actually take off my lap time.

*“Practice does not make perfect.
Perfect practice makes perfect”.*

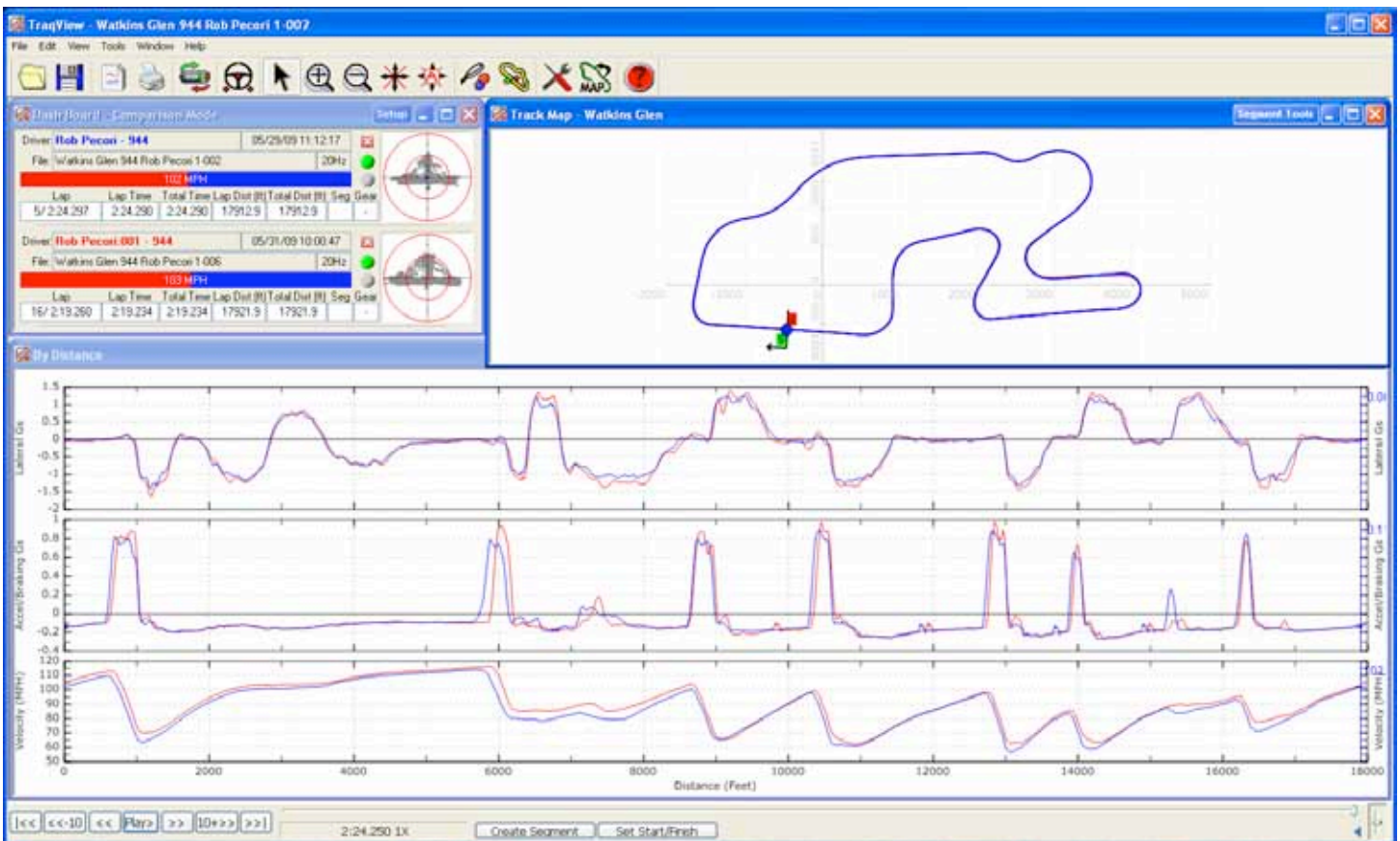
So, what did I learn from the coaching weekend? First, an E. Paul mantra: “Practice does not make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect”. I was proof of that. Second, I had obviously developed bad habits over my years of experience. Third, I was reasonably fast but I had reached a plateau and was unable to get off of it by myself. I was no longer improving on my own. I was able to shake some of my bad habits over the weekend and I still have work

to do so that I do not revert. I now know what and how to work on those bad habits. Fourth, I learned that data is invaluable but only if you know how to interpret it to find what needs improvement. Then after discovering what needs improvement, I learned how to improve it.

Without E. Paul as my coach, I would have been lost trying to interpret the data. His insight on what I was doing corner to corner, using the data and my descriptions was uncannily accurate. Based on his observations of me driving on the track coupled with the data, he was able to quickly formulate a game plan for each successive session. I could have never done this on my own.

Two things came to mind as I was packing up Sunday afternoon. Throughout the weekend we made significant improvement – four seconds of improvement! Had I not lost three sessions to rain the first day and another two sessions to a mechanical problem the second day I wonder how much more improvement I could have achieved.

Since that weekend, I have continued to think about what I was able to accomplish and what I hope to do to continue to improve. The one thing I keep coming back to is how much money I have wasted



The Traqmate data above shows how Bob reduced his baseline lap time by five seconds during the weekend

over the years. Like many racers, I have thrown money at the latest “go fast” bits for my car from the latest and greatest tires to rebuilt motors to the newest hot shocks. I can tell you unequivocally that all of those “go fast” bits combined never took four seconds off of my lap time. They also cost me far more than I spent on coaching at the Glen.

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Interestingly, during the entire weekend I never so much as changed tires pressures. All the work we did was with the nut behind the wheel, not under the hood, not with the suspension, nor using fresh tires. My next step after getting my car back on track, is to schedule another weekend with E. Paul. I am still not over the rush of finding four seconds on a track that I know so well. However, I want those additional two or three seconds that I know I left behind on the track. This time, rest assured,

“I’m ready to play.” 🏁



Photo provided by Dick Dobson

A day at the park
Fans lounge on the grass at Lime Rock Park

Impeccable Timing

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stop requires an additional trip down pit road for a stop-and-go penalty where the penalty stop time equals the length of time the original pit stop was short of the mandatory five minutes. This penalty stop can ruin a good race for a competitor that shorted the pit stop by a few seconds or even fractions of a second. Each racer must weigh the consequences of a quick pit stop and the penalty incurred for cutting that stop short. 🏁








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