

Driving Where You Look

February 2011

2Windy

We'll get back to more technical stuff next month, I promise! I'll share some thoughts about suspension and wheel/tire upgrades and what we're doing to Jim Miller's Copper Red '08 PRHT. In the meantime though, I'd like to share a recent "adventure" with the thought that you might glean something useful from it. Thanks for indulging my little writing habit! :O)

It was a dark and stormy night... really. But that's not where the adventure begins. No, the story starts with the recent Tuesday ice storm we had, and me coming home from work that evening in my Silver '99. I'd had a class that day and was coming home via a few back roads that were not my normal route.

In the realm of motorcycles, they say there are two types of riders; those who have put a bike down, and those who haven't put a bike down... yet. In my case, we're talking about going off the road and I joined the "have gone off the road" group after 30-ish years of driving. Said a different way, after a number of years of Autocross, I got my first taste of agricultural racing!

I'd been getting along the roads fine, taking things nice and easy. I'd just turned south onto Middle Pike when I came across the most beautiful ice rink you'd care to see. It was a perfect place to stage a fight, err I mean, hockey game. The problem, of course, was that instead of a blue line across the middle, it had a yellow line down the middle... a double yellow line, in fact.

I entered the rink at about 20 MPH and all four wheels lost traction at the same time. I began a long, lazy slide as the road began to curve slightly to the right, putting me on a course to exit the left side of the road. Steering was futile; the wheels went back and forth with no effect on my direction, which was inexorably leading me toward... a telephone pole.

The slide was so slow I had time for many things to run through my mind. My thoughts went something like this: *Crud! Great, NO steering... Telephone pole coming up... Don't look at the pole, look where you want to go, stupid! Hey, maybe I'll have a donor Miata for that Lotus 7 project I've always wanted to build. Okay, if I'm going off the road, I'm doing it with the wheels straight. Maybe I can steer through the ditch. Look AROUND the pole!*

And that's about when the front wheels dropped off the shoulder of the road and down the embankment. I kept looking just to the left of the pole, which would take me around the back of it. A little flick of steering to the left and the front wheels dug in just enough to point me where I wanted to go.

Sure enough, the car slipped around the back of the pole and I was heading along the edge of the corn field, parallel to the ditch and the road. I was bouncing along at about

10 MPH and had thoughts of simply driving out at the next crossover. But even frozen corn fields require some ground clearance, which the Miata has in short supply. After about 100 feet, the car stopped; high-sided on a corn row that veered into the little bit of flat ground I had been driving on.

Providence being what it is, a Sheriff's Deputy pulled up just a minute later. He gave me a ride home, but not until we spent a good 10 minutes getting his car turned around and through what I'd just come through. We joked that we might both need a ride home!

So what about the dark and stormy night? Well, a few hours later that same night found Jim Miller, my niece's husband and I freezing in that field in a driving rain. We were soaked for about an hour and a half as we first tried to tow, then push, then pull, then push and push some more, before finally driving the car through the field and out a driveway about 50 yards back from my original resting place. Our little adventure ended when I pulled the car into the garage. No visible damage and the car drives OK. It took at least a few days for both my car and Jim's truck to dry out though!.

Can we glean anything from this little escapade? Well, providence is a good thing. And it's good to have friends and family, especially those with trucks, chains and strong backs who are crazy enough to brave the backside of an ice storm to wade around in the driving rain to push out someone else's car. It also helps to look where you want to go, not at what you're headed for... driving schools teach that you drive where you look, the hands follow the eyes. It works.

Disclaimer: *Agricultural racing isn't all that it's cracked up to be. It's slow going and the surface doesn't help matters at all. Ground clearance is sometimes a good thing. Going off sometimes can't be helped, but it's still no fun either way.*