

Performance school hones teen skills

High Performance Teen Driving Experience at Radford Racing School

Experienced by Kimatni and MiKaiya Rawlins

My high school teen MiKaiya Rawlins (Mika) just graduated from Paint Branch High in Silver Spring, Maryland, so my gift to her was a trip to the Grand Canyon State for a full day on the track behind the wheel of her favorite automotive brand, Dodge. Yep, she's been talking about the purchase of a pink Charger for the last two years. But, thanks to Radford Racing School instructors, Mika currently knows how to operate the muscle car, specifically the Dodge Challenger SRT Hellcat Redeye!

"Brake, control that wheel. Slow wheel. Power unwind. Control it; look where you want the car to go, turn, release," commanded Mika's instructor BJ from the passenger seat before letting her take the 1.65-mile, 15-turn circuit on her own for about 12 laps. Emotional exhilaration took precedence as I was both nervous and exuberant that my first-born—who has only been driving for a year—kept

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up with grown men while controlling the aggression of a supercharged 6.2-liter HEMI Hellcat V8 engine dispersing 797 horsepower and 707 lb-ft of torque, allowing the Redeye to sprint from 0 to 60 mph in a blistering 3.4 seconds. Its top speed is 203 mph, something you typically see in supercars.

As the Publisher of *Automotive Rhythms* and an auto journalist of 25 years, I cannot overstate the importance of advanced driving schools for newly licensed kids to help them understand vehicle dynamics and car control, proper positioning and preventive safety techniques. Radford is Mika's third practicum, including the 2-Day BMW Teen Driving School in Greenville, SC. My goal is to build her confidence and reaction time, so specific adjustments like counter-steering and object avoidance come naturally in real-world scenarios.

For familiarization, the Radford Racing School, formerly Bondurant High Performance Driving School, is the Official High Performance Driving School of Dodge//SRT, offering world-class experiences utilizing more than 100 race-prepared vehicles: sedans, SUVs, Ligier JS F4 single-seaters, and gas-powered go-karts. In addition, new Dodge//SRT owners can opt-in for a one-day session of tactical control of their new muscle once they take ownership. It's Dodge//SRT's small token of appreciation for becoming an elite Hellcat Kingsman! These owners represent thousands of students who come to Radford annually to study high-performance vehicles' optimum capacity in contained conditions.

Our "1-Day High Performance School" began with a 45-minute classroom session led by Danny, to go over proper hand positioning, seating adjustments and positive driving habits such as setting your eyes down the road. All of Radford's tutelage revolves around maximum car control, whether it's teaching a teen to be a better driver on public roads or improving experienced drivers' racing skills. Their two key mantras are learning the importance of "vision" and "weight transfer." Objectives include:

Always look up and ahead to see your environment and the fast-approaching changes of said environment. This will allow you to respond to variations sooner and avoid looking ahead; it also allows you to see where the car is going, compared to where you want the car to go. Avoid becoming a victim of "target fixation," basically worrying about hitting something you are fixated on. Conversely, look at the open area and away from the object you don't want to hit.

The "3 and 9" steering hand position is better than "2 and 10," since it gives you 200 degrees of motion. Moreover, do not grab the wheel underhanded since airbags deploy at 200 mph and can easily break your wrist. Lastly, do not steer with

one hand because you have now reduced control by 50 percent.

Drivers need to have a good sense of awareness to be prepared to make evasive maneuvers if necessary. If everybody drove on the street with the same level of focus as when driving on the track, then accidents would be reduced.

Weight transfer plays a considerable role in how your vehicle handles. Hard acceleration transfers weight to the rear contact patch (the amount of tire hitting the ground), and hard braking shifts it to the front. When steering, you want more weight up front for proper steering control. When it's moved to the rear, more traction is provided. However, you want the transfer to be smooth and balanced, not abrupt on each end. Therefore, brake into a turn and accelerate out of turns to shift traction back to the rear. Never accelerate into a corner!

Afterward, we hit the track to put our new-found knowledge to use. Mika applied the schooling to the slalom, three-lane accident avoidance simulation, autocross cornering control, emergency braking, and a lead and follow around the race-track. The warmup slalom set the tone for the rest of the day, since we had to keep our eyes up and hands and arms relaxed while maneuvering left and right through the line of cones from 25 mph to 40 mph. Mika also learned how to correct over and understeer on the skidpad. Understeer is when the front tires have lost traction, and subsequently, the vehicle will not respond to steering inputs. Oversteer is when the driver has lost grip of the rear tires. Thus, Radford taught her how to counter-steer, reduce speed and regain control.

Mika finished the day as a graduate and received her certificate. At the moment there is talk of when she can get a Hellcat of her own. "No time soon, baby girl," I iterated. Parents, please sign your kid up to as many driving schools, clinics, and programs as possible. The investment is well worth the commitment due to the exorbitant amount of teen driving deaths in the United States. Think safety over convenience first. ■

For more Radford Racing School information, visit www.RadfordRacingSchool.com

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