

Certifiable

PMW track-tests the driver training and license testing services at Brands Hatch

WORDS BY GRAHAM HEEPS

When it comes to track driving, everyone has to start somewhere. And in the UK, whether you're a teenage karting veteran, a gentleman driver with an eye on GTs, or a magazine editor who's never raced, that means obtaining an MSA National 'B' race license at one of the 17 Association of Racing Drivers Schools (ARDS)-approved establishments.

I opted to take my test at Brands Hatch in Kent, one of four racing schools operated by former F1 driver Jonathan Palmer's MotorSport Vision (MSV) organization at its circuits around the UK.

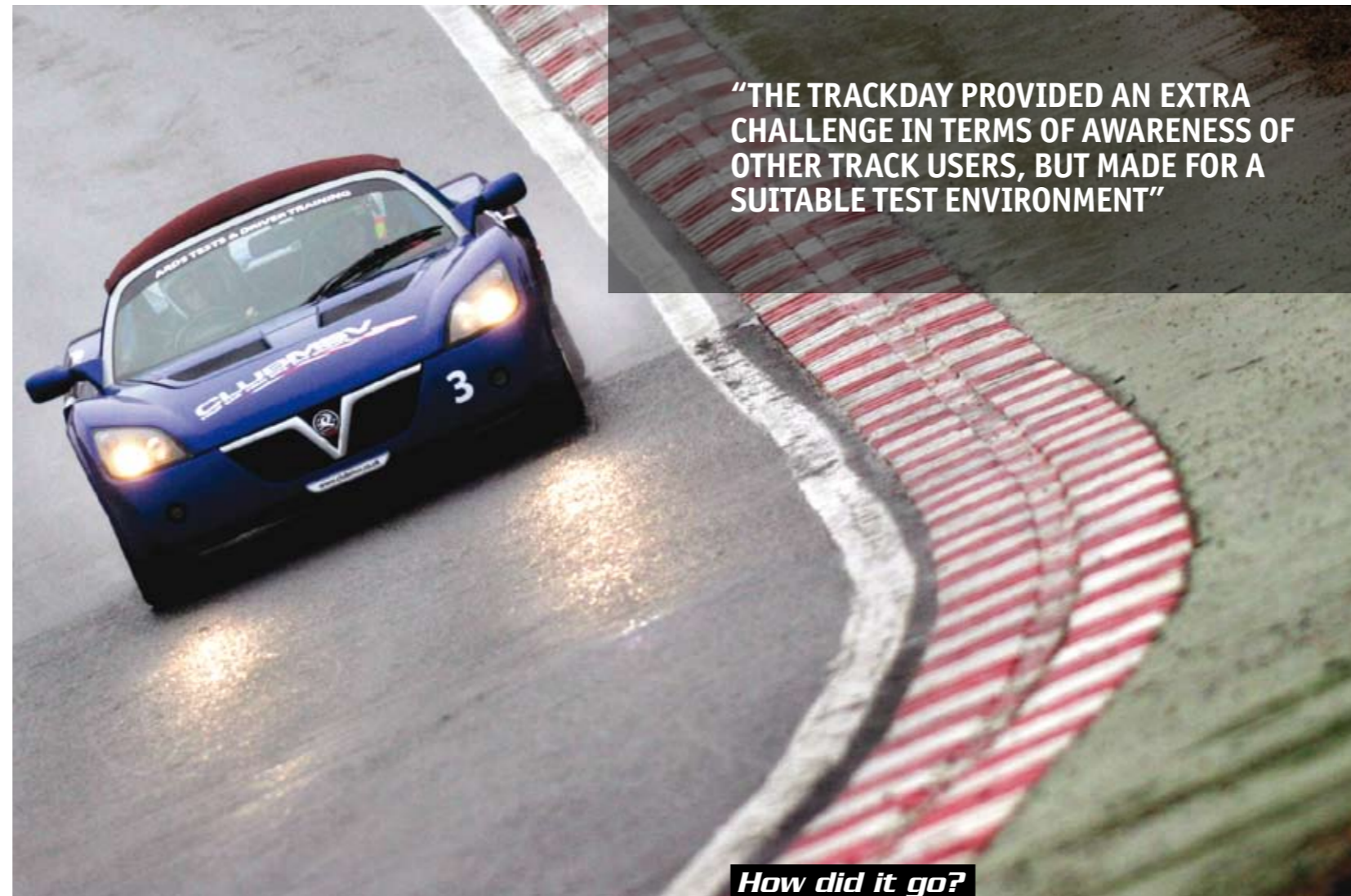
Instruction and the test itself are held on Brands' Indy loop rather than the full GP track. Having never driven there before, I decided it would be prudent to have some on-track tuition before taking the practical element of the test. A one-hour, one-to-one tuition session at Brands is priced at £250, as is the ARDS assessment. These Club MSV rates are competitive with those of other racing schools in the UK's southeast, such as Thruxton Motorsport Centre (where several other PMW staff have passed their ARDS tests) or Mithril at Goodwood.

The booking process is straightforward via MSV's website or over the telephone. I was also offered, but did not take up, an examination in the circuit's medical center (required

for the license application) on the day of my test, priced at £60. In an otherwise transparent process, the guidelines on ARDS medical examinations weren't clear to me initially. The information in my Go Racing pack (ordered from the MSA before booking an ARDS assessment, price £65) stated that a medical would be required before the test. MSV staff at Brands later made it clear that this was not the case.

I took my test on a foggy, sopping wet day in February. First up was the classroom session and written assessment under the eye of MSV chief instructor Peter Alexander, a former Formula Ford champion who's been teaching race driving since 1992 and also drives a Simtek F1 car in EuroBOSS. Along with six other candidates (approximately twice that number formed a second group later in the day), I sat through the MSA's aging Go Racing video.

Alexander then made various helpful comments about the video, drawing the candidates' attention to sections likely to be assessed in the written exam, clarifying areas that were ambiguous in the video, urging care with the flag section of the paper (for which the pass mark is 100%), and taking questions. In short, he did everything permissible within the rules to ensure his candidates would be successful in the exam.



"THE TRACKDAY PROVIDED AN EXTRA CHALLENGE IN TERMS OF AWARENESS OF OTHER TRACK USERS, BUT MADE FOR A SUITABLE TEST ENVIRONMENT"

How did it go?

Instructor Darren Burke (below left) offers advice in the pits and out on track (above)

With the classroom session complete, it was time for the track-based part of the ARDS test. After a briefing from Alexander, each candidate was paired with an instructor and allocated to a Vauxhall VX220 Turbo or BMW 1-Series. A regular trackday was in operation alongside the instruction and assessment, featuring everything from a stock Ford Mondeo to a rapid Juno sports-prototype, with up to 25 cars on track at any one time. This provided an ARDS rookie like myself with an extra challenge in terms of awareness of other track users, but I felt it made for a much more suitable environment than an empty airfield for an assessment that is, after all, aimed toward participating in a race.

Unfortunately, when combined with the extremely wet conditions, the busy racetrack generated more than a handful of red flags, which served to interrupt and delay some of the

"Magazine Editor Not Great On Track" is hardly breaking news, but for anyone who's interested, here's how I got on in my ARDS test.

I was relieved to pass the written paper with a perfect score, but for me at least, the practical element was the greater test, and I was glad of the extra time the one-to-one instruction gave me to familiarize myself both with the car and the lines and braking points of the Indy circuit.

I was suitably wary of the wet conditions, but a premature squeeze of the throttle at the apex of Surtees, with a driven rear wheel of this mid-engined car still on the slippery curb, was enough to put the progress I'd made over the previous half-hour firmly in perspective. The little Vauxhall's back end snapped away, and we went spinning up the hill

through McLaren. In the instructor's seat, poor Darren Burke tried hard to retain his composure, but eventually lost it after the second rotation, when we slid off the track and onto the slippery grass, accelerating again toward the tire barrier.

Fortunately, car and occupants survived unscathed to recover to the pits. Burke subsequently told me I took it easier in the ensuing final session. That's hardly a surprise given the knowledge that a spin during my test would result in automatic failure, but I'd been trying to drive exactly as before. And so having mastered the physical side of driving well enough to earn an 80% pass in my ARDS track test, I'd inadvertently proved that the mental side can have just as big an impact on performance. Next stop: a sports psychologist...



Top: **Sound advice!** Above: **The written test. Candidates must score 100% on the flag section**

instruction sessions and ARDS assessments. Club MSV did try to keep on top of the situation though, for example by reminding all drivers to respect the conditions, and issuing individual warnings to those who transgressed.

My instructor for the one-to-one tuition was Darren Burke, a former European championship karter. He was patient and constructive with his feedback, encouraging a smooth and consistent style, albeit with mixed results... He also brought us back to the pits for a short break and debrief every 20 minutes or so, which kept things fresh and allowed me to take stock of what I'd been learning.

Despite my 'off' (see panel, left), I felt that the dual-control, mid-engined Vauxhall VX220 Turbo made for an excellent learner vehicle: mid-engined, rear-drive dynamics; good acceleration and stable under braking; but not too fast for a novice.

With the hour of instruction out of the way, Burke felt I was ready to move on to the test itself, and we progressed seamlessly into the assessed laps without unnecessarily building the tension by pitting again. When it was all over, I headed back inside for the verdict, and for the efficient Alexander to tie up the paperwork and ensure there were no outstanding questions. I passed! <

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION GO TO:
www.clubmsv.co.uk/pmws

