



Drifting down the Creek

Written by: [Dylan Campbell](#) | 30/03/2007

What's all this about, then? Our man gets behind the wheel of some dedicated drifting machines and finds out what all the fuss is about



This is insanely fun. We're completely sideways like a panicked crab, and it feels like we're out of control. It is so much fun that I don't even realise I am laughing uncontrollably.

I'm riding shotgun with one of our drifting instructors and the lateral g-forces press me against the Nissan S14 200SX's bolstered bucket seats. The bitumen is coming at me not through the windscreen, but through the driver's window. I peer down at the tachometer – it's reading 7700rpm, nearly off the end of the dial, deep into the red zone, and it stays that way the whole time. The 2-litre turbo four-cylinder is screaming its brains out in agony.

The tyres sing a squealing symphony and emit their blokey pheromone of burning rubber, as the Nissan coupe hits the occasional dry patch. They're mostly relieved, however, thanks to the rain. The wipers whip and dart backwards and forwards over the glass, combating a spell of the on-and-off rain we've been having all day.

We're drifting. And it's so fun you cannot help but burst out laughing. The feeling of going sideways is both confusing to the mind and exciting to the body.



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I'm at Sydney's Eastern Creek Raceway to learn how to drift with Safe Drive Training's Physics in Motion Drift School. The course goes for four hours and includes an overview of the exploding motorsport of drifting, driving techniques, emergency techniques, and more. But, more importantly, the emphasis is on driving and you're encouraged to get as close to the steering's bump stops as you bloody well can.

And don't worry if you spin. Everyone will spin at least a dozen times. It is so wet at times that even the instructors overcook it behind the wheel.

We get to drive both the mid engine, rear-wheel-drive SW20 Toyota MR2 and the front engine, rear-wheel-drive 200SX. It's my turn behind the wheel of the Nissan.

I drop into the deep and supportive seats and they hug me firmly. My instructor gives me the thumbs up. We're good to go. I head out onto the saturated figure eight skidpan and nail the throttle into the first corner. The turbo donk roars and snarls at me, and in a flurry of too much opposite lock, too much throttle and too much rain, I'm facing the wrong way. I've spun. And it won't be the last time.

It's only after a few spins, a few laps, and a few constructive words from my instructor that I begin to get the hang of it. You must learn to feel absolutely everything the car does and carefully input your commands via the wheel and right pedal. But it's still tricky and practice very much makes perfect in this unusual motorsport.



Suddenly, I find myself walking towards the open driver's door of the MR2. The white machine idles quietly. As the owner of a first generation MR2 (the model that resembles something of a flying door stop wedge), I understand that these mid-engine machines can be difficult and sometimes unpredictable wild animals. When poked, they might just bite your finger clean off.

I jump right in the deep end without my floaties on and before I know it, I'm using the rear view mirror to see where I'm going. It's all understeer in the wet if you try to jump on the throttle, and it's a lot harder than the kilowatt savvy Nissan. It's only until I discover lift off oversteer that I start getting sideways, but overcorrect and you can get into a savage tank slapper.

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Everyone spins both cars many, many times. Some guys suddenly think it's a rally course and head bush over the grass infield, covering the cars in mud, to the dismay of our instructors. We all cannot believe that people are out there teaching themselves this difficult form of driving, by trial and error, on public roads.

Although the program has clear benefits to one's overall driving skills and also to keeping would-be drifters off the streets, the course isn't marketed as a defensive driving course. "This specific course is probably something you wouldn't normally teach a young bloke to start with," says Drift School instructor Ian Douglas (pictured). "A defensive driving course would be far, far more valuable to a novice driver."

But the course hasn't received universal thumbs up. In June 2006, the Queensland Government's Mount Cotton driver training facility banned the controlled teaching of drifting skills to everyday drivers at their facility. "I think it's sheer stupidity," says Douglas. "They want to stick their head in the sand and assume everyone will abide by the rules and the laws ... they need to have a look at maybe the misbehaviour they went through when they were young and realise that it's only got a stage further because modern cars have the ability to go faster."



The powers that be cannot see the merit in taking reckless driving off the road, says Douglas. "Get them off the roads, get them into a controlled environment [like a skidpan], and get it out of their systems there. And when they drive home, the more they know, the slower they'll go," he says.

Skill instilling or not, the course's main appeal is for where it rates on the smile scale. "I wouldn't say I'm a full 'drift king' yet, but it's certainly a start, and it's a lot of fun," says 33-year-old participant Mark Elliot. "It gives me an appreciation for the people who do it."

But can the course encourage participants to practice their newfound skills on the streets? "Not me, because I'll end up hitting a gutter and it'll cost me thousands of dollars," says Elliot, who pilots a red Mazda RX-8. And after I drove out of Eastern Creek's pit paddock, I was left with a new feeling of respect for my car and how easy it is to become complacent on the roads. I certainly wasn't running my finger down the page of a street directory to find the local industrial area in which to put my new skills to practice.

I came away with the sort of skills I would only draw upon on the track, or in an emergency on the street. But the skills I walked away with were just bonuses.

Like everyone else, I was there for another reason. Driving sideways like a panicked crab is both confusing and exciting. It instills a respect for both machine and road. But the bottom line is, it is insanely fun and my cheeks are gonna hurt for weeks.

COURSE INFO

Contact: Safe Drive Training, www.sdt.com.au, (07) 3801 3222, info@sdt.com.au

Venues: Eastern Creek (Sydney, NSW), Armidale (NSW)

Conditions: Must be over 21, or have completed a defensive driving course

Duration: Four hours

Cars: Toyota SW20 MR2, automatic, 3SGTE (2.0L DOHC EFI inline four) with disabled turbo, LSD; Nissan S14 200SX, automatic, SR20DET (2.0L DOHC EFI turbo inline four), locked diff, hydraulic handbrake.

Photos: Dylan Campbell

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