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BUT THE NÜRBURGRING ISN'T JUST ANY TRACK.
IT DEMANDS SOMETHING BEYOND INNATE SKILL: DEVOTION.

BY JACK BARUTH | PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATE HASSLER

HE WAS THE LAST MAN on the Nordschleife and a faithful servant of the one true goddess who rules over the tarmac and steel within. It was more than 30 years ago,

after the track had disappeared from the Formula 1 calendar but long before the Godzilla GT-R and the so-called production-car records. Before the PlayStation brought a digitized version of the Nürburgring's old North Loop into millions of homes. Before the lawsuits, before the shopping center and its empty storefronts, before the 99-mph roller coaster that operated for a grand total of four days and then closed for good. Before the Nürburgring was a sticker, before it was a brand.

In those days, you found the Ring by accident or through word of mouth or perhaps not at all. There was an old entry down near the T13 corner, mostly invisible from the road. A single marshal stood between you and the track. You handed him your ticket, and he punched a hole in it before waving you on. There were no flaggers, no safety workers, no yellow Bongard truck to charge 200 euros for a 20-minute flatbed ride back to the pits. You were on your own in pretty much every sense of the

phrase, among the drivers who still remembered and venerated the old track.

The man is Ron Simons. A successful Dutch touring-car racer with an effortless command of multiple languages and an entrepreneurial bent, Simons had fallen into the grip of an unusual but seductive idea: namely, that the recently introduced Alfa Romeo 75 (known as the Milano on our shores) was the perfect car with which to tackle the Nordschleife.

He wasn't alone. A polyglot group of European Alfa fanatics coalesced and began hanging out at the Ring in the afternoons, running the blunt-faced sedans grille to tail at full throttle, daring one another to push harder, trailing a cloud of burning oil and suicidal Italian engine accessories. "We were more or less alone out there," Simons recalled, laughing, seated in the office above his shop just a few hundred yards from the Nordschleife's public entrance. Out front, there is a fleet of more than 50 cars, ranging from a humble Renault Twingo to a snarling, fully caged 911 GT3 RS, all of them close to showroom fresh and sporting the livery of Simons's RSRNurburg operation.

Tucked out of sight behind that building, however, Simons keeps between 30 and 40 of the old Alfas that served him and his friends in the early years, and which eventually formed the backbone of his driver-coaching program, 75 Experience,

which grew to become RSR. The Alfas are worth money to somebody, but he won't sell. Too much emotion. Too many memories.

"Most nights, we were alone on the track," Simons said. "It was very informal, very much a laid-back atmosphere. Sometimes, though, a few other drivers would show up and head out to do laps, and they didn't always make it back in. So at the end of the night, I would do a final lap for the local marshal, to clear the track and make sure there was nobody broken down or crashed out there. Once I came back in and gave a thumbs-up, the marshal would close up for the night and go home."

Ron Simons (opposite) shares the Ring's secrets. His school offers everything from a single lap in a Renault Twingo for about \$150 to multiday programs costing \$6000 or more.





Simons was more than just the last man standing; he was one of the first drivers to understand the fundamental difference between the Nordschleife and everywhere else. At most tracks, it's not uncommon for a first-rate professional racing driver or even a talented club 'shoe to be up to speed after as few as a dozen laps. Experienced drivers have a library of corners in their head that can be rapidly adapted to serve the needs of the task at hand. If you are capable of setting lap records at Road Atlanta, for example, then you'll be just as capable of setting lap records at Sonoma Raceway—once you've sussed out the pair of blind hills in the first half of the course.

Not at the Ring. You could say that it is under the power, or under the protection, of an ancient Greek goddess. Her name is Mnemosyne, mother of the nine muses, and she is said to have power over remembering and forgetting. It is from her that we

If you breathe off the throttle when you should have kept it pasted, you'll lose 10 to 20 seconds just like that. Stay flat when you should have lifted, the rest of your lap will be on the yellow Bongard truck or in an ambulance.

get the word “mnemonic,” meaning “to aid the memory.”

Without the help of Mnemosyne, you won't set a bragging-rights time at the Ring. You won't come close. It doesn't matter how sharp a driver you are; it doesn't matter how capable your car is. The Ring has more than a dozen blind hills and corners. If you breathe off the throttle when you should have kept it pasted, you'll lose 10 to 20 seconds just like that. If you stay flat when you should have lifted, you'll find yourself facing the Armco at 150 mph or more. The rest of your lap will be on the yellow Bongard truck or in an ambulance.

Your first task, therefore, is simply to remember what comes



Interest in RSRNurburg is such that instructor Ross Bentley is considering bringing two U.S. groups to the school in 2018.

next, on a track that contains so many corners that there is no general agreement as to their number. (Simons says: "About 170.") Master that, and you'll be within a minute or so of your fastest possible time. Congratulations; that was the easy part.

If you want to get that last minute, you'll have to do what Simons and his friends did 30 years ago: drive hundreds, perhaps thousands, of laps, learning the ripples of the pavement, the changes in traction over the surface patches, which curbs you can hit with abandon and which ones will snag a wheel and pull you into contact with the rails before your throttle foot has time to relax. In other words, you will have to serve Mnemosyne until she is satisfied.

If you do it by yourself, the chances are high that you will eventually make a very expensive, and possibly fatal, mistake. Which is where RSRNurburg comes in. If you insist, Simons will be happy to rent you the car of your choice and set you loose on the Ring, but he would prefer that you also engage one of his coaches. "If you have time and money to drive thousands of laps, then sure, do it yourself," he said. "But if you are here for

a short time and you want to be fast, then you need help. The problem is that many drivers, particularly Americans, come over here not knowing how to get that help."

I can relate. Eleven years ago, I made my first and only pilgrimage to the Ring, knowing nothing besides what I'd read on a couple of thoroughly nonauthoritative websites. I rented a Mercedes-Benz SLK200 from Avis in Cologne, followed a paper map to Nürburg, missed the entrance to the track half a dozen times, finally found the ticket machine, bought 10 laps, and proceeded to accomplish not very much in partly rainy conditions before calling it a day. I didn't even have a helmet. My best time was an unimpressive nine minutes, 14 seconds, measured between the bridge after the pit-lane exit and the gantry before the pit-lane entrance.

That hardly made me a Ringmeister, but in at least one important respect I'd managed to outdo many of my countrymen. "Fairly frequently," Simons noted, "we get a call from American customers who have arrived in Nuremberg but cannot find the entrance to the track." Nuremberg, of course, is



of high-net-worth clients who are all too happy to put him on a first-class flight so they can obtain the benefit of his wisdom at circuits from Silverstone to Suzuka.

A few years ago, Simons reached out to Bentley after reading one of his books, and the two became fast friends. Shortly afterward, an American Ring rat named Tom Roberts pitched Bentley on the idea of doing a guided trip to the track for American customers. Bentley would advise and prepare the drivers ahead of time, then travel with them to the Ring where RSR would supply track time, rental cars, hotel rooms, meals, and instructors with Nürburgring knowledge.

The resulting event, billed as “a drive of a lifetime” by Bentley’s Speed Secrets operation, sold out within days via word of mouth, despite a starting price of more than 5000 euros (about \$6000), not including airfare, with the potential to option it up to a price 10 times higher.

For 2017, Bentley expanded the program to 20 slots and made enrollment available to his entire mailing list. Five days later, all the spots were gone. One of them, to my immense surprise, was taken by my wife Charley, known around the house and the track by the nickname “Danger Girl.” “I’d really like to drive the Ring,” she said, “and I trust Ross to keep me out of trouble. You should sign up as well. You might learn something.”

“I don’t need any coach to show me around the Ring,” I snapped. “I’ve driven dozens of racetracks around the world, and I’ve stood on podiums. I could go by myself and figure it out.” Before I knew it, I’d agreed to an ad hoc challenge. Danger Girl would participate in the complete Speed Secrets and RSR curriculum, while I would just show up and try my best without any help. I expected that my considerably greater experience as a driver and instructor would trump any amount of help she could get from Bentley and Simons. Not only would this give us something to argue about at dinner for months, it would settle a question: Which matters more around the Ring—flexible skill or rote memorization?

After some persuasion, Simons and Bentley agreed to let me show up and stick my nose into their event. Still, when Bentley

on the far side of Germany, more than four hours to the east.

Much of the RSR operation has been assembled with English-speaking drivers in mind. Simons provides plenty of English-language documentation, both on his website and on the RSR premises, and the majority of his instructors

are reasonably fluent in English, even if they don’t have Simons’s mastery of it. As a consequence, RSR has a high profile and an established reputation with drivers from the U.K. Still, customers from the States have been few and far between.

Enter Ross Bentley. In the 19 years since the publication of his first book, *Speed Secrets*, the affable Canadian has managed to build a sterling reputation as a first-rate driver coach whose curriculum goes past the usual brake-here, turn-there instructions to embrace everything from pre-race visualization skills to business advice. He now boasts an international roster

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and I had dinner a few months before the trip, he tried in his gentle way to talk me out of it. “Like any track, there are references that a driver can use to let them know exactly where they are, where the car should be positioned, and what the driver should be doing. Jack, the difference here is, there are easily 10 times as many of those reference points, spread out over 14-plus miles. And that takes a deliberate process to learn and memorize them all—after you know what to look for. The biggest difference between the novice Ring driver and the Ring masters is the quantity and quality of those references.”



Baruth took about 20 laps of the Ring in the Evora Sport 410. Most RSRNurburg students get in 15 laps per day.

Simons, on the other hand, was openly skeptical, if not contemptuous. “It’s not like any other track,” he told me via phone. “You need to learn it before you can really go fast.” I laughed behind my hand at this, because I’d already arranged to stack the deck a bit. My wife would be driving a mostly stock Renault Sport Mégane R.S. 265, provided by RSR. I, on the other hand, had a rocket ship. I was bringing an AK-47 to a knife fight, and the weapon in question was coming factory-fresh from some noted gunsmiths in Hethel.

The Lotus Evora 400 is one of the finest combinations of road car and track-day tool ever devised. The SRT Viper ACR beats it around a road course, and the big bruisers from AMG have the edge in long-distance comfort, but if you need to drive a few thousand round-trip miles to a track day and enjoy the hell out of every moment, there’s not much (if anything) that can beat the Evora 400. Except, that is, the brand-new Evora Sport 410, which extracts a few extra horses from the supercharged V-6, firms up the suspension, and ruthlessly adds lightness via

a slew of bespoke carbon-fiber parts, special forged wheels, and a flame-blued titanium exhaust.

In the months before our trip, Danger Girl bought the recommended Xbox setup and drove the Nordschleife night after night in a car computer-modeled to match her Mégane. I drove one lap in the game, hit a wall, then went downstairs to order pizza. She sat down with a map of the track every evening and recited the turns in order. I went to Road Atlanta and ran out of fuel trying to win an eight-hour enduro. She studied the notes Bentley and Simons had provided about certain dangerous sections of the track, the bumps on the inside of the flat-out Schwedenkreuz corner, and the right way to enter each of the concrete Karussell sections. I rewatched the last season of *The Wire*—you know, the annoying one where McNulty makes up the existence of a serial killer. On the plane trip over, Danger Girl quizzed me about the various corners and elevation changes. I got every question wrong. I was in no way worried by this.

A quick warm-up day at Spa-Francorchamps on the way to

the Ring demonstrated the Sport 410's impeccable combination of power, grip, and sublime at-the-limit handling. I was convinced that any idiot could set record lap times in this electric-green Lotus, self included. It was all I could do to remain ever vaguely humble as I sat down for dinner with Danger Girl and the rest of Bentley's customers.

It was a surprisingly diverse group, including a 61-year-old woman with a debut-edition Nissan GT-R in her garage at home and a former state senator who brought his older brother and his son with him to drive. I conceived an immediate affection for Ron Cohn, an aristocratic-looking former open-wheel and IMSA professional racer who walked away from the sport back in the Seventies but had recently started doing track days for fun. "I'm 70 years old—this is how I stay active," he laughed. Cohn had chosen a modified, V-8-powered M3 capable of reaching 170 mph on the main straight.

Across the table, a powerfully built, purposely bald fellow was holding court on his Porsche obsession. "I've spent maybe \$3.5 million on them in the past decade," Leon Lewis explained. "I do 30 events a year in the U.S., but I'm moving here, so I figured I'd come up to speed. I'm looking to beat eight minutes." His day job: international financial executive. His car for the Ring: a fully caged GT3 RS. "I've got a \$15,000 deposit that I want to get back. I'll be fast but safe."

I asked him why he chose this group. "Ross teaches visualization, focus," he said. "Ross teaches that you are in control—of the car, of the situation."

We started the first morning lined up on the front straight for lead-follow laps. Although the track was closed to the public for the week, our group of 18 drivers would be sharing the Ring with more than a hundred boisterous Europeans, mostly from the U.K., who were treating the event like a 48-hour party. They'd brought every sort of car imaginable, from a four-cylinder E30 BMW wagon to the expected flotilla of tuned Nissan GT-Rs to a lone Maserati MC12 Corsa. A surprising percentage of the vehicles had arrived on a trailer.

The first clue that I was in trouble came when I got dropped. On the lead-follow lap. By a Mégane. My nontrivial experience of tracks around the world had combined with some rose-tinted memories of my 2006 Ring trip to convince me that I'd have no trouble remembering which of the long, fast turns were flat out and which required a massive shove of the brakes to avoid an ambulance ride. I was wrong.

Then the lead-follow was over and it was time for the real thing. "Be aggressive," I told myself, and I glued the Evora to the back bumper of a race-liveried GT3 RS on slicks. As I'd expected, the little Lotus was able to hold its own with pretty

much anything and everything, as long as I could see the road ahead. In the long run to Schwedenkreuz, the Porsche gapped me just a bit as we went off-line together to pass slower traffic.

That was when I hit the bump. Intellectually, I knew that there was a big pavement wave to the inside of that curve, because I'd heard Danger Girl nattering on about it during the flight. But I was in no way prepared for what would happen when I hit it at about 130 mph. The Evora went hard sideways in one direction, then the next, as I struggled to catch up. There was a blink from the dashboard, and then things settled down. I'd been stupid enough to approach the Ring cold, but I hadn't been stupid enough to do it with stability control turned off. With a sigh and a shudder, I stepped hard on the brakes for the

next left-hander. The GT3 RS was a speck in the distance.

The rest of the day was more of the same. Everywhere I could see the track in front of me, I shaved time. But I was still braking in places where the cars around me were shifting into fifth gear. On my sixth or seventh lap, I looked in the rearview mirror and saw a white Mégane with purple stripes. It was Bentley. Through the Ex-Mühle section and the Lauda-Linksknick, I dropped him, confident in what was next. At Bergwerk, I looked behind and saw an empty mirror. But through Kesselchen, when I was cautiously trailing the brake, the Renault's nose appeared once more.

For the next nine kilometers, we played the same game. I'd drop him everywhere I had visibility, then sheepishly find myself lifting where he was flat. It wasn't until Döttinger-Höhe opened up onto the main straight that I was able to use the Evora's supercharger to walk away.

In the pits afterward, Bentley asked, "Did you have fun?"

"Uh, yeah," I replied. In truth, I was furious. I'd used my in-car video to check lap times. My best was just a touch under nine minutes—easily 75 seconds off the Evora's potential pace.

I was bringing an AK-47 to a knife fight, and the weapon in question was coming factory-fresh from some noted gunsmiths in Hethel.



Bentley smiled, and in that moment I caught a glimpse of the master motivator who effortlessly directs and coaches everybody from multimillionaire brain surgeons to European aristocrats without ever raising their sensitive hackles. “Do you think,” he asked, as if the idea had just come to him, “you’d like me to come with you and show you the track?” Before I could ruefully concede the point, my wife bounced up and started chirping at Bentley about Hedwigshöhe this and Fuchsröhre that. “I’m doing great!” she beamed. “I passed somebody, and I hardly got passed at all. How’s it going for you?”

“Just for the sake of my story,” I graciously allowed, “I’m going to let Ross ride along with me.” Out on the course, just as I was yielding for some GT-R driver who came barreling out of nowhere with what seemed like an SR-71’s worth of momentum, he said, “You know, you can go absolutely flat from this 11-kilometer sign here all the way to after the 13-kilometer sign.” This was ridiculous advice—I knew from my own laps that there were at least three places in this stretch that required major braking. It’s his funeral, I thought as I buried the Evora’s throttle all the way to its lightweight, short-pile carpet.

Two minutes later, the GT-R was broad-beamed in my windshield and Bentley was visibly chuckling behind his helmet visor. A lap later, I finally caught and passed Danger Girl as her Mégane lifted the inside rear wheel through the sharp left-hander at the beginning of Adenauer Forst. It didn’t count. I might have brought a gun to a knife fight, but without some

Simons was the rhythm player, offering pithy patter on car placement, eye position, and traction. Bentley was lead guitarist, expanding that advice to include mind-set and hand-eye coordination.

help from Bentley, I was effectively shooting myself in the foot.

Meanwhile, some of my fellow drivers were reaping the rewards of their preparation. “Easier than the simulator,” gloated Lewis, the GT3 RS-driving financial exec. “I did several laps in a row, way under eight minutes a lap.” Former IMSA racer Cohn was more reserved. “Trail braking does not work in most of the corners, and more dramatic braking pressures are required. How would I describe the track? I say, think of the old Road Atlanta, Bridgehampton, Watkins Glen, and Mosport. Then,” he smiled, “multiply by 40.”

Paul Friedman, a gregarious but conversationally precise medical director who alternated among a BMW M3 and two M235is on track, laid in some quick laps but chided himself for lack of preparation. “Should have gotten a high-end simulator. I think I’ll do that before next time.”



At lunch, Bentley and Simons sat down with my wife and another driver, Matt Gaworski, to debrief their laps and help them find time. Gaworski is an orthodontist who exchanged a sport-bike track-day habit for a highly curated Porsche collection and a laser-like focus on excelling at the Ring.

The author relaxes in a recliner during lunch while his wife pores over a track map.

Bentley and Simons worked both sides of a laminated Nord-schleife map, answering rapid-fire questions from Danger Girl and Gaworski—two different, but complementary, styles at work. It was like watching a well-rehearsed rock band: Simons was the rhythm player, offering pithy pinpoint patter on car placement, eye position, and available traction from the exit curbs. Bentley was the lead guitarist, expanding Simons’s advice to include comments on mind-set and hand-eye coordination. Simons could tell you how; Bentley could tell you why.

“It’s kinda scary how Ron and I think alike,” Bentley had told me earlier that morning. “It’s a bit like finding out there is someone on the other side of the world,

almost literally, who is the same as you. Many times, he and I will talk about the same things and describe driving in the same way.”

Not surprisingly, the tag-team instruction was working wonders. “This is my second time here with Ross,” Gaworski told me later. “My goal was to get under nine minutes. I did that early in the game. I’m off the hook. But I’m going to drive a really clean lap—that’s the goal.”

In the afternoon, I followed Lewis around the track, matching my Evora against his GT3 RS. By piggybacking on his track knowledge, I was able to sneak under that eight-minute mark—but it felt more like his accomplishment than mine. So for the rest of the afternoon, and for the morning that followed, I sought out and received coaching from anybody who was willing to give it—Bentley, Simons, two of his instructors,



and a Belgian Lotus fanatic with inch-perfect knowledge of the track, who didn't flinch when I came within a foot of the Armco at the exit of Pflanzgarten. At lunch, I reviewed some video and saw that I'd done a lap from the standing pit exit and coming to a halt at the end of the pit entrance in just a hair over eight and a half minutes. The seven-something-minute flying lap was

The seven-something-minute flying lap was within my reach, if I threw caution to the wind and pushed as hard as I could. Instead, I parked the car and walked away. It was time to quit. I'd learned just enough to know what I didn't know.

within my reach, if I threw caution to the wind and pushed as hard as I could.

Instead, I parked the car and walked away. It was time to quit. I'd learned just enough to know what I didn't know—namely, the arcane awareness of surface and curb acquired by Simons on those long evenings 30 years ago. Until I came back and truly devoted myself to obtaining that awareness, I'd be playing Russian Roulette every time I truly pushed the car.

To be honest, I don't know if I'll bother. I'm not the kind of guy who climbs Mount Everest just because it's there. I want to race head-to-head against other people, and I don't care if it's at Laguna Seca or at a ragged old kart track. I understand and respect the determination that leads people to put in a thousand hours in search of the absolutely perfect Nordschleife lap, but I don't share it.

Cohn agreed. "I wouldn't want to race here. The safety, track layout . . . it doesn't measure up to modern standards." Lewis, on the other hand, had already booked another trip with RSR.

"The addiction has taken over," he laughed.

Later that night at dinner, as Simons lectured the group on the superiority of German wine, I caught Bentley taking a moment for himself in a remote corner of the restaurant. "It went pretty well," he admitted. "No serious damage to any of the cars. And I think everybody learned quite a bit. But there's

always something we could do better. I'm already thinking about next year."

As was Danger Girl. She's fallen in love, much the way Simons must have all those years ago. As we walked back into the Hotel am Tiergarten, she pointed out a

poster that read "Save the Ring." It's been a tough few years for the track, courtesy of ownership changes and some aggressive, debt-driven plans to turn it into a sort of amusement park. She frowned and her body language became agitated. "What if the Ring closes before I have the chance to . . ." and it was a bunch of Bergwerk this and Wippermann that.

She needn't worry. One day in the far-flung future, all the racetracks will probably close—but the Ring will be the last one to go. It will stick around long after the Miatas stop circling Mid-Ohio, long after the stock cars go silent in Tennessee, because it's more than just a track. It's a personal challenge, a lifetime obsession. The Nordschleife is, truly, the ultimate track, the last track. And when it's finally time to close, don't be surprised if that last lap, the last drive, takes place in an old Alfa Romeo, in the evening's last light, with Simons behind the wheel. ■

To learn more, visit rsrnurburg.com and speedsecrets.com.