

Memorial Day racing can't get much better

Well, maybe a podium would have been nice

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Newton Family Racing had a fantastic outing Memorial Day weekend at the Northwest Region-Montana Region 27th Annual Double National Races at Pacific Raceways. We've done this race "every other year," skipping 2004 due to rain (i.e. wussing out) and skipping 2006 due to new-house-induced-brokenness. But this year was by far the best of the three times we've been out to the event.

The weather was dry all weekend, albeit a little chilly at times, the track was in good shape and we had four Spec Miatas and an RX-7 all pitted together, using the Bushes' 40-foot enclosed trailer as a base of operations. It was quite the social scene — all that was missing were some pink flamingos and a DJ!

Saturday morning practice was really fun — I hadn't been on track down there since August, and really needed some seat time to get reaccustomed to the track. NWR delivered with a 40-minute mixed practice. I had a lot of fun skating around on ancient practice tires, keeping my eye on the mirrors because our group included everything from SMs to Porsches to GT1 cars.

After relearning the track, I bolted the good tires onto our No. 79 SM and dumped in a couple gallons of fuel for a quick afternoon qualifying session of only 15 minutes. The plan was for Greg Bush and I to work together and do some drafting in an effort to lower both our lap times, but some confusion ensued and it was kind of a mess. I never did get a good lap that session.

After beer and burgers at a Neil Bryant's house on Saturday evening, Sunday was a pretty relaxed day at the track. Our only session was a race at 3 in the afternoon. Before the race started I had my mind set on which Miatas I could-should pass in the first lap and which guy I really wanted to catch and run with later. As fate would have it, I did-

n't even get to pass the "could-should" guys, for a couple reasons: First, they were going just as fast as I was and second, I got totally hosed by traffic.

We requested a split start so the Miatas could stay out of the mix with the other cars, but (in my opinion) the officials waited a touch too long before sending us out after the first group, so the other group took the green while we were still on the back side and thus was closer behind us when we got the green than they should have been.

After just a couple laps the other cars started coming around and catching us, and everybody who's ever driven an SM (or other good-in-the-turns-but-slow-in-the-strights car) knows the pain of getting blown away at the end of a straight by a big horsepower car, only to lose time stuck behind them in the first corner. That happened to me three times in one 20-minute race, and each time the two Miatas I was chasing (who looked like they were having a great time) got further and further away. I finished the race a dejected seventh, but with a pretty decent fast lap time of 1:44.1, my fastest of the weekend so far.

Monday morning dawned (fairly) bright and clear. I arrived at the track in the NFR Pit Cart (my silver '91 Miata) and proceeded to get the SM ready. Just the right amount of fuel for another 15-minute qual, our best guess at the proper cold tire pressures (since there would be no time during the session to come in and set hot pressures) and we were off, first session of the day at 9:05 a.m. As usual, most of the Miatas were first to grid, which meant the faster cars started behind us. Sigh.

Luckily, Greg and I had a drafting plan this time, and it worked out a lot better than our first attempt. He led half the laps with me in tow, and we might have engaged in a bit of fore-aft contact, which is just too hard to resist in an SM. :-)

One lap I bumped Greg all the way down the front straight to a terminal speed of near-

ly 121 mph, which is cooking right along in an SM.

Later in that lap he missed a downshift going into turn 5A, going to fifth instead of third with me right behind him. Having nowhere to go, I slammed into the back of him, but luckily we were heading straight enough that both of us recovered without incident. It was quite a hit (his data showed he instantly sped up 10 mph when I hit him) but the nice thing about Miatas is the bumpers are perfectly set up for the occasional bumper-to-bumper touch, and there was nary a scratch on either car. In fact, that ended up being Greg's fast lap for the session, primarily due to the previous bumpdrafting on the front straight.

That qualifying session ended up netting my best lap of the weekend — a new personal record of 1:43.305, good for fifth and about 1.3 seconds off that session's pole time. Not too bad, especially when you consider the Craigslist engine currently in my car cost \$150 and four guys in front of me were running pro-built racing engines (\$\$\$).

Following qualifying we sat around, socialized, ate and watched some racing for six hours, then it was time for our final race of the weekend. We again had a split start, which was quite effective this time. I got an OK start, not great, but my qual partner Greg got a great start and blasted up the middle on my right, taking the position from me. The first lap was fun and uneventful, with plenty of clean wheel-to-wheel racing highlighted by Ken Sutherland (the National winner from earlier in the day) coming up from the back, as he didn't run the regional qualifying that morning.

I settled in to chase the two Miatas in front of me, head down, trying to run clean and fast laps, with my new mantra running through my brain: "Drive carefully, and with precision." I don't know where that came from, it popped into my head during Saturday qualifying and the more I thought about it and tried to