

FAST GIRL TRIUMPHANT

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One woman's love affair with high-performance driving led her from the classroom to the book circuit.

By Martha M. Bullen

If you met Ingrid Steffensen in her hometown of Short Hills, New Jersey, you might peg her as a stylish suburban wife and mother—and you would be right. She also has a PhD in art history, and has taught at Princeton, Rutgers, and Bryn Mawr College.

But Steffensen has an alter ego few of her neighbors know about. While running the household and teaching classes, she is also longing for her next opportunity to head to the race track, hone her driving skills, and share her knowledge of high-performance driving.

How did this mild-mannered art and architectural-history professor discover her talent behind the wheel? What persuaded her to leave her comfortable routine and transform into fearless Track Girl every chance she gets? You can blame (or thank) the BMW CCA—and her husband, Jeff Bruce. He became a devoted fan of the sport the first time he drove his M3 at the BMW Performance Driving School in Spartanburg, South Carolina, in 2001.

At the time, Steffensen was less than impressed with her husband's new hobby. "He kept going to track events," she remembers. "Frankly, I wasn't very gracious about it. He abandoned me at home with a little girl who was three when he started. I thought, *It's expensive and*



Bill Heiberger

▲ Off the track, Ingrid Steffensen doesn't look like a speed-addicted track junkie.

▼ Steffensen accelerates out of the Carousel at New Jersey Motorsports Park.



Klaus Schnitzer



Klaus Schmitzer

▲ A helmet is a necessity, and driving gloves are helpful.

time-consuming, and it takes him away from his family. This is kind of stupid, going around fast in circles. I put it up with it because I love him, and he loved it—but I didn't have a lot of sympathy for it."

Bruce invited her along to several events, but it was seven years before she accepted his invitation. Once their daughter was older and could be safely stowed at her mother-in-law's house, Ingrid decided to go along one weekend to see what kept calling her husband back to the track. "I thought just watching him drive would be dull," she says. "I've always liked little cars, and I had a Mini Cooper I really enjoyed driving. At last I said, 'Okay, sign me up. I'll give it a try.'"

At the end of August 2008, Steffensen

took part in her first driving event, run by the Genesee Valley Chapter at the historic Watkins Glen International race track in upstate New York. Grouped with other beginners in the novice run group, she attended a classroom session and learned such key concepts as the meaning of each of the colored flags that might be waved at her, and *the line*—the most efficient way to drive through any particular part of the course.

Then it was time for her first session on the track.

"I was terrified out of my mind," she says. "I'm a professor, and my life-long hobbies have been cerebral. I like books, music, food, art, and travel. So the prospect of all this aggression and speed—and what looked like absolute lunacy—was incredibly intimidating, and just

really scary. I worried so much I couldn't sleep for days ahead of time. But I'm also pretty stubborn, so I decided to go through with it. When I got to the track, I was literally shaking with trepidation and nerves."

Fortunately, her first instructor, Ike Nielson, sensed her obvious panic. "He was very, very calm

and understanding. He told me to breathe, and he drove me around the track the first few times so I could get a view of what I was about to do. He eventually suggested that maybe I should drive my own car."

Although she was tempted to change her mind and flee, Steffensen managed to resist. She put on her borrowed helmet, strapped herself into her car, and headed out onto the track. "This was the moment," she recalls. "It was like standing on the high dive, looking down and thinking, 'How could I possibly jump off of this?' But I did it anyway."

While the other drivers were zooming by at high speed, Steffensen doggedly kept driving and applying the lessons she had learned in the classroom sessions. Her breakthrough moment came in the last half of the day, when it started to rain. "Suddenly, not everyone was faster than I was," she says. "For the first time, I started passing some people. Rain is a great equalizer on the track! I got to the very end of the last session, and Ike said, 'We won.' I got out of the car and I thought, 'Thank God I don't have to do that again!'"

But something had shifted within her. On the five-hour drive back home, she kept replaying the weekend in her head—and for days afterward.



Klaus Schmitzer

◀ Do your own thing: Steffensen unpacks in the New Jersey Motorsports Park paddock.





▲ From stripped-out M3s to stock Minis, all are welcome at BMW CCA track schools.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about what I’d done. I finally said to Jeff, ‘I have to try this again.’ And that was that,” she says.

Since that first weekend, Steffensen often feels as though she has developed a split personality. “Sometimes I’m pushing a shopping cart at the supermarket, and I have this pleasurable secret,” she reflects. “I live this very ordinary suburban life—the green lawn and the child and the dog, the yoga and the book club, and all of that. And yet, when my alter ego is revealed, people are always surprised. It’s fun to surprise people in that way—and I surprised myself.”

A DRIVING OBSESSION

That first track weekend turned out to be a turning point. Steffensen found herself, at age 41, rearranging her schedule and counting the days until her next track-day event. She became, as she puts it, a full-fledged “hopelessly addicted speed freak.” This puts her in rare company: At most of the driving events she attends, only five percent of the participants are women. Steffensen was initially concerned that she wouldn’t fit in; she was grateful to find that the male Club members welcomed her, and says that they have been encouraging and supportive.

Hanging around with men taught her a lot about how men interact with each other—and a lot about herself. Steffensen has noticed that men are more overt in their competitiveness and their aggression. While intimidated at first, she came to realize that she could apply those same traits herself—on and off the track. “I realized that I’ve probably not been competitive or aggressive enough in my life,” she says. “For me, [driving events have] taught me how to be more upfront about what I want and what I can do—because I found that in the car, I am every bit the equal of any man out there. And they don’t treat me as anything less than that.”

After attending as many track events as possible, she still feels anxious about the potential dangers involved. But she has found that conquering her fears is empowering—and track driving is safer than it appears. She also appreciates the quality of the BMW CCA’s driver training, and its focus on safety.

Steffensen has learned, she says, that “the race track is a highly controlled environment—unlike the homicidal cocktail of, say, the New Jersey Turnpike, where people are sipping their lattes and texting their friends or simply zoning out. At the track, everybody is paying attention. They’re focused on

Six Lessons From the Race Track

Why would you want to risk driving your beloved BMW on a race track? Ingrid Steffensen shares six valuable lessons that she’s learned at high-performance driving events:

▶ **You’re never too old to learn something new.** Clichéd, but true. Our bodies and our brains need to be exercised to keep them strong. Acquiring an entirely new skill set was both a pleasure and a challenge that reinvigorated my intellect and my love of learning.

▶ **Dare to venture outside your comfort zone.** I was terrified nearly out of my mind before I settled behind the wheel, and after four years, I’m still a bundle of nerves before every driving event. But embracing that fear—and doing it anyway—can be an enormous source of pride and strength.

▶ **The race track is not as dangerous as you think.** As scary as they look, BMW CCA driving events are a very controlled environment, where everyone involved is focused on safety and driving well. Once you realize that high-speed driving is a learnable, teachable, repeatable skill, it becomes much less intimidating.

▶ **Driving is an art.** You might think that learning the techniques of high-performance driving would make you overconfident and blasé about driving on the street. Instead, it increases your alertness and awareness of what you are doing on the road, and makes you appreciate the act and art of driving.

▶ **Driving is like sex.** Any yahoo can get the job done, but when executed with awareness and skill, it’s not merely a means to an end—getting there—but a powerful pleasure in mastering the process—doing it well. Hence “*high performance*.”

▶ **Both you and your car are extraordinary machines.** You and your amazing BMW have deep reserves of power and performance that you ordinarily don’t use. Test them out, and surprise yourself!—*Ingrid Steffensen*



▲ The skid pad is a challenging part of some track events.

what they're doing, and on everybody around them. I swear, sometimes I feel safer on the race track than I do driving around in New Jersey!"

Steffensen has made other discoveries during the past four years as a driving enthusiast. From her very first session, she was surprised at how much brainpower is involved in driving at high speed along the track. "I loved physics in high school, and I've always loved puzzles," she reports. "The calculation of getting a car around the track in the most efficient and fastest way is like a giant puzzle. I found I'm extraordinarily engaged by that intellectual aspect of it."

She also became deeply attracted to the mental discipline and focus that the sport requires. "I'm a worrier," she admits. "But when you're on the track, you can't worry about anything else. So I found the mental energy that's required when you're behind the wheel on the race track incredibly therapeutic. For those twenty minutes, you can't worry about your kids or the shopping list."

The more she drove, the more she came to crave the need to be fully present in the moment. When she is rocketing around the track, she says, "My brain is very pure. There's a laser-like focus, and nothing else can intrude. I find that mental cleansing very addictive."

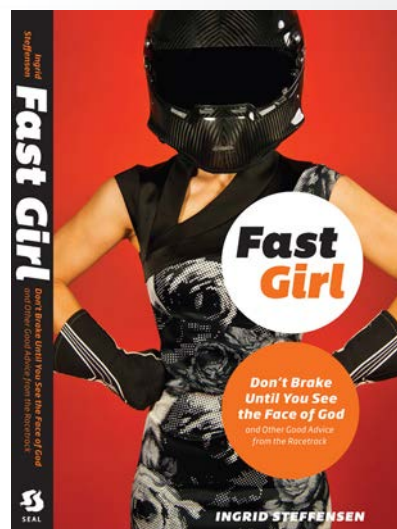
And she has come to cherish the sense of accomplishment the sport has given her. "Anything that gives you a sense of profound mastery is something we want to return to again and again. It is heady and exciting. It's less the inherent thrill of the danger, more the profound sense of mastery. Very few things in life, if you do them, you know right away you've done it really well—or not."

LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCES

Steffensen will never forget the day she progressed from being a novice to an intermediate student. "I was on the track with a black Porsche Turbo. I gradually gained on him, and I was seeing flames come out of the tailpipe when he downshifted. Then I got the point-by, and passed the flame-spitting Porsche Turbo. That was freaking awesome! That has to be one of the highlights of my life." That sense of mastery gave her a new perspective on herself and her capabilities. While Steffensen used to envision herself as "a nerdy professor," she now sees herself as brave and adventurous.

That newfound confidence has transferred to other aspects of her life as well. She confronted the fact that her academic career had not gone the way she had originally planned, and began thinking about trying a new profession. That's how she came to write *Fast Girl*, and to persevere in finding an agent and a publisher. "The whole driving experience has made me face my career, face my choices, and say, 'I don't have to settle for this. And I don't have to define myself in that way,'" she says. "Performance driving unleashed a creative place in me that I didn't really know was there."

Steffensen currently drives a golden yellow Lotus Elise as her track car. She earned her instructor credentials at a rigorous BMW CCA instructor-training school in 2011; now she enjoys initiating other novice drivers into high-performance driving. Asked what parting message she'd like to pass along to *Roundel* readers, she replies, "Challenge yourself and explore something—anything—you're afraid of, but intrigued by."



Fast Girl By The Book

Recently published by Seal Press, Ingrid Steffensen's new book, *Fast Girl: Don't Brake Until You See The Face Of God, And Other Advice From The Race Track*, was inspired by her desire to share her newfound passion with others. Steffensen describes *Fast Girl* this way:

"One day, I was a mild-mannered mommy and tweed-jacketed—true!—college professor, and the next, irradiated with the go-fast isotopes, I was Track Girl, able to negotiate high-G turns on squealing rubber and slay Corvettes in a single lap. Okay: not true. It may have taken only one weekend to be bitten by the radioactive spider, but it took over a year (and counting) to cultivate all my superpowers. This is the chronicle of that year and of the transformations it wrought."

Publishers Weekly praised her "entertaining, tongue-in-cheek" writing on "the feminist release, Zen-like concentration, and simple fun of high-performance driving." Visit www.ingridsteffensen.com for more information about Steffensen and *Fast Girl*.—Martha M. Bullen



Bill Heubner