

Silver State Challenge

By

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It's early Sunday morning. The road is dry and clear. Visibility is excellent. The thought runs through your mind "How fast could I go if I didn't need my driving license to make it to work on Monday"?

Well Bob Dean, Paul Lyons and I had fun with this idea over lunch one day and as with all good ideas (and bad ones too) the seed was sown.Do you want to *watch* the movie or do you want to *make* the movie. Do you want to be the bug or do you want to be the windshield? Do you want to say "someone once told me" at the beginning of the tale or do you want to be able to say "*T*"?

So here's the 700 billion dollar question: Where can you drive fast nowadays without risking personal liberty, the safety of your Grandma in her 1978 LTD with it's defective turn signal, or your neighbor with the three kids in the minivan with the dented rear bumper and the Kerry/Edwards sticker? And heck, where can you drive fast for 90 miles non-stop without being the lead story on the 10 o'clock news?

Ever heard of the Silver State Classic? No, we hadn't either but thanks to the brilliance of Al Gore's Internet invention we found the website for this 21-year old event at: www.silverstateclassic.com. Check it out – the site is quite comprehensive. Seems that a dedicated bunch of speed-aholics must have compromising pictures of someone senior in the Nevada Dept of Transportation, because NDOT willingly shuts down a 90-mile section of Highway 318 twice a year in order for you and I to drive fast in relative safety and without risk to Grandma or the neighbor's kids. How thoughtful! Must be some goood pictures!

So Bob (SL55), Paul (NSX-T) and myself (996 C2) decided that we hadn't done anything *r-e-a-l-l-y* stupid in a while and therefore our significant others didn't have a good enough reason to say "No". After a little homework we signed up for the 110mph group which is the fastest that rookies can run unless their name is Juan-Pablo, Dario, Jacques, or similar. The only mod we would have to make to our cars was the addition of a fire-extinguisher (cheap) mounted on a metal bracket (expensive). We were "*IN*"!!!
....Man-cation alert!!!



Staging before the Parade



Post race – rookies no more!

Because of our rookie status we were obliged to attend the Mario Andretti/Jeff Gordon driving school at Las Vegas Motor Speedway on the Thursday prior to the event to learn how to brake, turn, and accelerate under race track conditions, with some modicum of coordination and without harming our in-car instructors. Seemed reasonable under the circumstances. Now we each have a spiffy looking certificate with a picture of Mario Andretti that asserts to our talents and that we can share with the nice people from the Highway Patrol next time they lean in our window and ask “Just what the heck made you think it was OK to be driving like that?”

After a night in Vegas we caravanned to Ely Nevada with a bunch of other speed freaks and gear heads. The trip included a reconnoitering drive the “wrong way” up the 90-mile stretch of 318 where the event was to be held. Frankly, I was stunned by the spectacular scenery and excellent road conditions. Beautiful high-desert landscapes combined with long straights and high speed turns running between two picture postcard mountain ranges. The course also includes a tight section of river gorge turns known as “The Narrows” that commands respect and admiration. If this isn’t one of the tracks available on Grand Turismo 3 or Grand Theft Auto, then the gaming geeks have overlooked a great opportunity.



Front Row Parking at Hotel Nevada reserved for SSC entrants: Pantera, Porsche, NSX, SL55

Once lodged at the rustic Nevada Hotel in Ely we were kept busy with; welcome event (with hosted bar), cleaning off the bug splats, applying sponsor stickers, getting the cars through tech inspection, the car show, the parade through town, the Optima Batteries shoot out, the Royal Purple/Racepack speed stop challenge, the welcome dinner (with hosted bar) and finally, scientifically motivated research into other fun stuff not considered legal in most states in our great nation. Before you leap to judgment please consider that the largest and most extravagant trophy up for grabs is the Hookers Choice Award sponsored by the delightful young ladies at the Big Four who, with hearts of gold and genuine interest in all things automotive, hold a “car-they’d-most-like-to-drive” contest on Friday evening. During the announcement of the results there was such anarchy and pandemonium inspired by the humor of veteran driver and SSC board member Kelly Gibbs that I’m still not sure who won the trophy. I imagine that it must have been a Porsche because that’s always the first choice of all ladies of character and discernment.

One of the highlights and perhaps the best part of the event was the camaraderie found within a group of 200 people with shared automotive interests and a passion for speed.



Bob Dean, Zach Dean, Gerry McFaul & Paul Lyons - staying hydrated.



Ray Alexander's SRT8 outside the Big 4.Where's Ray?



Philip Bowser's beautifully prepared 993 C2 Turbo, ready to run in the 150mph group. Phil and his navigator/daughter Amy crossed the finish line only 0.4370 seconds off target after driving 90 miles, which calcs out to an average speed of 149.9697mph – nice!

On Sunday morning we had to be in our cars at the staging area in Ely by 6:00am ready to drive together to the truck stop pre-event staging area. The early start was not much of a problem for those of us who'd had the "night before finals" kind of sleep. Fortunately, the Starbucks inside the Hotel Nevada was open and life was good. I guess we weren't the only people sleeping light because arriving at 5:45am put us near the back of the line.

After a drive out of town we next staged at the truck stop just north of the start line. Time for final checks, words of encouragement and calls of nature. Anticipation was thicker than an Exxon bank statement and the playful banter didn't fool anyone. One at a time we left the truck stop and crawled the last few miles through the 25mph speed limit in Lund to the start line where we staged for the third time that morning. Yes, hurry up and wait was our morning

mantra but probably the best thing for der fixin uppen of der butterflies and der most good verkin of der brainen.



Outside Ely Nevada, Paul Lyons and Bob Dean all stickered-up and ready to roll

God bless the Silver State organizers who had a team of people on their hands and knees right before the start line, checking every tire on every car for nails, etc.

There were also two airplanes flying over the entire 90 miles of Highway 318, course workers in sight of every inch of the run, 8 flag stations ready to relay info, and walkie talkies issued to every car for safety communications. We had all received extensive pre-event training combined with dire warnings about consequences for any misbehavior, up to and including “I will burn your car to the ground”, one of Blue Offut’s (Rookie Liason) personal favorites,a threat he always delivered in a most convincing tone of voice.

There is lots of good detail information about the event and the rules, regulations and run groups on the Silver State website www.silverstateclassic.com so I’ll limit this story to some personal insights, errors made and items I don’t remember reading about on the website:

The Start: Cars are staged side by side on the start line in clear view of a large digital GPS clock. One of the two cars is flagged off every minute and the individuals’ time starts running at the zero-seconds clock position, regardless of whether the car starts moving on time or not – the poor fellow next to me forgot to put his car in gear and at the designated time and wave of the flag all we could hear was a sweet sounding V8 happily revving under no load conditions.

The Road: Nevada 318 is a two lane road out in the boonies, not especially wide but in excellent condition (shame on us in Ca). The start line is at almost 6,000 feet and the finish line is at 4. In places there is a noticeable crown in the center of the road that makes it slightly awkward at times to track straight down the middle as the car “hunts” on the sides of the crown. Some of the corners are blind and/or over a crest which makes it tough on the higher speed groups but no problem for a factory stock 996 C2 running at 110mph. Frankly, with a little driver track experience/skill, I believe that the Porsche could carry 110mph comfortably along the complete course with no slowing required anywhere.

“The Narrows” is the tightest/twistiest part of the course and begins at approx 70 miles into the run. Some cars and some drivers may have not been suitably prepared to run this section

at 110mph and I'd certainly recommend that rookies such as myself plan to take this section at a significantly lower speed.

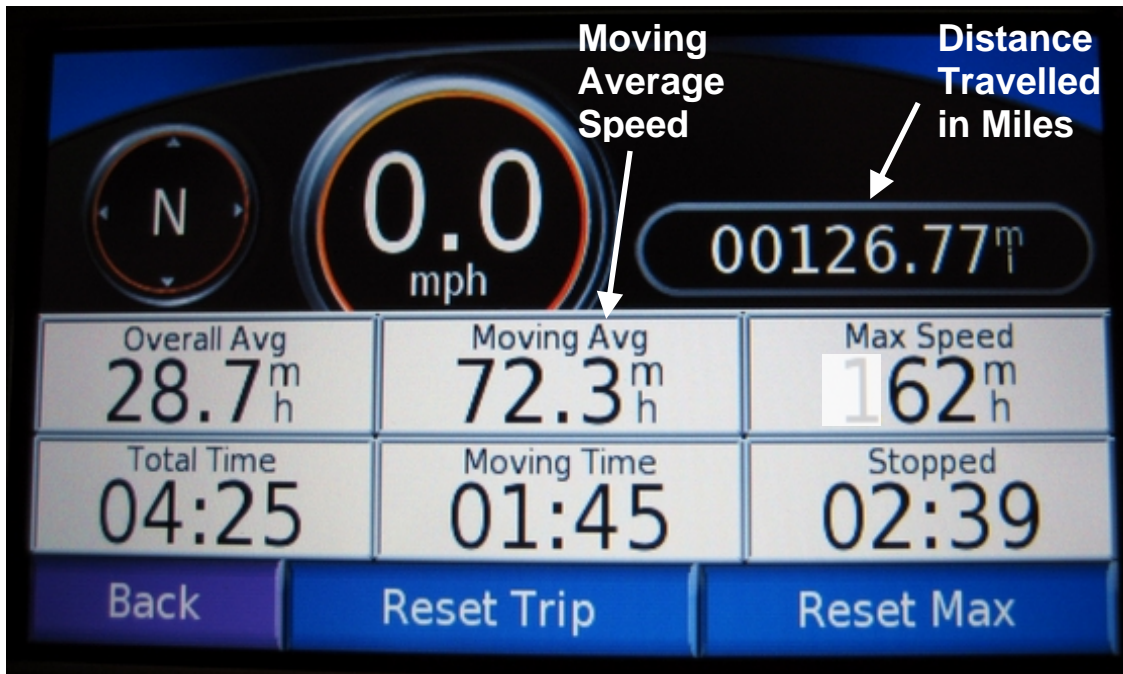


Porsche 996 C2 in the Narrows

The Strategy: Each run group has a max and min speed limit as well as a target speed. In the 110mph group which had 26 entrants, the max allowed speed is 124 and the min is 80. We were told that there were 8 speed traps on the course and we had to remove any radar detectors before passing tech inspection.

The most common strategy being discussed amongst drivers was to run the first 70 miles above the target speed, slow down for the narrows and then adjust speed in the last 17 miles to the finish line. Many drivers reported timing themselves against the mile markers on the side of the road and there are various “cheat sheets” floating around out there with target times at key mile markers. (Note: mile markers are not always exactly one mile apart). Measuring times against mile markers may be doable with the help of a navigator but for a first time driver with no navigator and little familiarity with the road, I was not convinced I could pull it off. On the Saturday evening before the event I decided to simplify my life and adopt a different approach. See “The Plan” below.

The Equipment: I'd borrowed my daughter Melissa's Garmin Nav system which displays distance in miles to 2 decimal places + my wrist watch has a Chrono function that displays seconds to 2 decimal places. The Nav was reset to zero in the 2 minutes spent sitting at the start line. The Chrono was started as the GPS Clock at the start line rolled over onto zero and the green flag was waved.



The Garmin Nav was essential equipment (for me) because the indicated speed, odometer and trip computer on my car contain a disparity too large for this event. The Nav's "Moving Time" was unreliable by approx ½ second each time the car stopped and started. OK for an event that includes a start and a stop but not accurate enough for standing start and a moving finish. If you have a Garmin just touch the time displayed on your home screen (bottom left) to reach the display format shown here.

The Plan: It wasn't too tough to prepare a list of time vs. distance (virtual) checkpoints based upon speeds to run for each section. The plan I ran had 4 sections run at different speeds and the frequency of check points steadily increased as the mileage to the finish decreased, so that repeated "fine tuning" could be accomplished near the end of the run. Furthermore, by aiming to hit marks beginning at 10 miles into the run, the amount of adjustment required near the end should be minimal. It's worth considering when making your plan that it gets harder and harder to adjust *average* speed the farther into the run you travel and that any speed change you make cannot be instantaneous.

Mistakes and Results: How did this approach pan out? Well, starting from zero mph immediately puts a kink in the average speed plan and so it was important to run near to max speed early to eliminate that deficit. By running close to 120 early on and using the average speed indicated on the nav system, the car can be throttled back to target speed once the average has been elevated to match target. At the first check point timing was off by several seconds. No problem, slow down by one mph and wait to the next check point. At the second check point the margin of error had increased – I had misinterpreted the time/distance readings and had adjusted speed in the wrong direction. Luckily I'd made this mistake early and had time to recover. Another less fortunate driver made the same mistake *after* the Narrows and did not have enough time to regroup. The first 70 miles of the run was a delight, beautiful blue skies, clear open roads, no Grandmas in '78 LTDs or Moms in Minivans, no Highway Patrol waiting to check my Mario Andretti signed certificate, and no cross traffic or oncoming vehicles. The Porsche was not even breathing hard, in fact the coolant temp was running slightly lower cruising at 110mph than when idling at the start. What a great car, what a great location, what a great event, what a great bunch of folks and what a lucky guy I am to be right here, right now. In between check points scanning inside and outside the car

helps to stay focused and a couple of relaxation exercises helped with the general feeling of well being that comes from driving a Porsche.

At 70.2 miles distance there's an off-camber right turn that is popularly referred to as the "most treacherous blind turn on the course". With the theme from Jaws running through my mind and the wick turned down to 90 the Porsche took a set and tracked effortlessly through the corner following the classic line. The Jaws music turned to Satriani and for the next 2 miles we practiced carving text book turns between the rock walls of the Narrows – entry point, ...apex, ...exit point, ...sweet. Even at a relatively modest 90mph this was high octane F-U-N. Just check out my smile in this classic-style black & white picture – those teeth whitening strips really work!



Gerry McFaull, 2002 C2, 21 September 2008, The Narrows, Highway 318, Nevada.

The next 17 miles to the finish line disappeared faster than a Politician's Promise. Distance and time measurements came faster and faster; five miles, two miles, one mile, half mile, quarter mile, until suddenly, there was the finish line and we were going to be early. Now if anyone makes good brakes it's Porsche and this car is no exception. As we crossed the line in full-on nose down, tail high, hunting dog posture it was close. The Silver State veterans say that getting within a second or two is skill but getting closer than that is luck, and so luck was on our side. The Porsche broke the timing light 0.1265 seconds early for an average speed of 110.0047mph and an average fuel consumption of 20.6mpg. Do these guys build great cars or what?!

Bob Dean and his navigator/son Zach, crossed the line within less than 1 second of target at an average of 109.9627mph proving once again that Mercedes builds good cars but not quite as good as Porsche.

Other random things that are still stuck in my mind:

There were more than 150 cars entered and only 6 Porsches.Huh? A Porsche is the ideal vehicle for this event.

Corvettes were by far the most common vehicular selection. What does this suggest about Corvette drivers vs. Porsche drivers? Not looking good for the import crowd.

We did also see other exotica including Ferrari, Lamborghini, DeTomaso, a Ford GT, an Aston Martin, an Audi R8, a Lotus, some W-I-L-D stuff in the higher speed groups and a lone Saturn SC that won the 95mph group.

Steve and Gail Waldman lead a wonderful group of volunteers who stage this event twice a year. This is a quality operation with quality volunteers, quality events and just the right

amount of carnival atmosphere layered on top of the serious nature of such an event. Blue Offutt does a great job of riding herd on the Rookies and there were on-site training classes for drivers and navigators.

Many participants had been on an intense schedule getting their cars ready for the event and appeared to be vaguely uncomfortable or apprehensive.Just buy a Porsche guys and relax! I saw a Corvette, a Mustang and a Pantera pulled off the road at various points along the way but all of the good doctor's cars crossed the finish line.

Bjoern and Ronny arrived from Norway to drive their 1979 Mercedes 6.9SEL and win the 100mph group finishing 0.085 seconds from target time and Jeff Jorgenson got the closest to a perfect time, his '97 Mustang missing by only 0.0057 seconds in the 130mph group – wow!!! The fastest car in the unlimited group was listed as a 1996 Chevrolet Camaro (yeah right), driven by Richard Hille who averaged over 198mph completing the 90 mile run in just over 27 minutes. Is there anyone out there with a 917 who wants to blow the dust off give the unlimited guys some serious competition?

Well, to answer the original question that started this article “How fast could I go if I didn't need my driving license to make it to work on Monday”? In California it's probably something less than 10mph over the posted speed limit where you're driving. Pretty boring huh? However, if you really want to go fast in a well planned, well staged, well managed and legally sanctioned event, you should give the Silver State Challenge serious consideration. Your max (tech) speed the first time you run will be 124mph unless you can prove previous relevant experience. After the first time you run then the limit becomes about striking a healthy balance between your ego and your check book. A quick review of the website www.silverstateclassic.com shows that after the 110mph group, the second most popular run group is 150mph which has a max (tech) speed of 165. If you want to drive faster than that then I'll be the first to shake your hand.

Peace, Love and Understanding.

Gerry