

Caterham Graduates - New Drivers

First Race (19 March 2005)

Hi again

With the first race less than a week away, here is some information which will give you an idea of what to expect from a weekend racing with the Caterham Graduates. As with the last email, some of this will be obvious to the ex-Academy guys, but you might like to note the sections on catering, prize-giving etc. For those people whose first ever race it is, hopefully this might explain a few things and make you feel a bit less nervous!

Preparation before setting off

Goes without saying, but once again, make sure your car is ready. I would put as many of the stickers on as you can before leaving home rather than be messing about at the circuit and worrying that they might fly off mid-qualifying as the glue hasn't set! I have two lists of things to help me not to forget to take things with me. The last thing I do when I leave the house is check both of these lists.

List 1: things which will prevent me racing/testing if I don't have them - ignition and red cut off key, suit, boots, underwear, gloves, helmet, balaclava, arm restraints, licence (signed with photo!!!), scrutineering papers, confirmation of race entry, car and people entry passes, supplementary regulations, timetable, testing confirmation, BARC membership card (grey plastic one), BARC Championship registration card (the white cardboard one that came attached to your championship and entry forms pack - mine was paper-clipped to the cardboard outer) and directions to the circuit

- I once ended up driving round the Lincolnshire countryside for some time :-o. I don't wear glasses but if you do, don't forget them. It can be a long drive home and back to go & pick any of this lot up.

List 2: things I'll need for the non-racing elements of the weekend - i.e.

food & drinks I'll need (e.g. plenty of water for hot race days, hot drinks for cold ones!), charged-up camera and leads, any bedding, waterproofs, towels, clothes, camping gas, matches, money. Make sure anything that needs charging is charged up etc... I'm sure you get the idea...

If you haven't got one yet, you should also assemble have a basic 'kit' for racing including things that everybody needs, like a spare wheel or two (or even a set), a couple of jerrycans for carrying petrol, a footpump, a good tyre pressure gauge (not the one on the footpump!), a jack, a torque wrench to tighten your wheels to the right level and some basic tools - e.g.

screwdrivers to take the nose cone off and tighten up anything that comes loose, and a basic spanner set. A can of WD40 and a litre of (the right) engine oil should be in the kit, as should the most essential items for Caterham racing - cable ties, gaffa tape and a hammer!! (Yes, a hammer!). I keep all this lot together and if ever I take anything out at home I put it straight back in afterwards. Some people have a big plastic box to keep it all in, then you don't have to think about it, you just put the 'kit' in the boot of the car before setting off to each meeting.

Arrival at the circuit

This kind of depends when you're getting there. If like Combe there's a track or test day on the Friday, you can park where you want in the normal paddock area for the trackday, then move to the Grads area at the end of the day, or you can pitch up where you're going to remain for the rest of the weekend. It's likely that McMillan Motorsport will try to base themselves where they are going to be for the whole weekend if they can, so that is where you'll find the Grads' drivers' awning, Nick Frost's motorhome and most of the Grads activity. To be honest most people try to park up once and stay there as it's less hassle.

If you're getting there Friday evening or Saturday morning, it goes without saying that you should park in the Grads area shown on the paddock plan you'll get with the supplementary regulations. It looks like we're up by the Circuit Office/Parc Ferme and the Scruineering Bay (4 areas!), so pretty conveniently located for the morning! You can park (within reason) where you like within that space, but please try to park close to the car next to you, in the same sort of line, and save space where you can. It may not look it when you arrive, but there will be lots of Grads cars turning up and space is normally at a premium. You should get an idea of how to park (i.e. which way round) from the other cars/trailers or if in doubt just ask one of the drivers who is already there as they may have already had a chat with one of the circuit officials with some instructions. It looks really nice if everyone can park their racecars 'nose-out' to the road, and right next to the road, with their tow-car, trailer, awning etc, behind the racecar. We did this at Thruxton and other circuits last year - see last year's post and picture on the website at <http://www.graduates.org.uk/default.asp?offset=32>

I will be there from early Friday morning so any new drivers are very welcome to park near me and use my camper van as a point of reference/meeting/questions etc. It is a 21-ft Swift 'Royale' on a Peugeot chassis, N-reg, towing a Brian James Minno with a high-level tyre rack and an all-black caterham - maybe with my name on the side and numberplates saying 'Coyote' and race no 55. And if anyone is having a first race panic towards the end of the week, by all means give me a call on my mobile 07769 547636 and I'll try my best to help - or at least advise on how you might get help from someone who knows what they're doing like Nick, Graeme or Andy McMillan!

Oh, and make sure you go in at the 'competitors' entrance - about the third one along if coming from the east.

Staying overnight/camping/leave your car & trailer: Normally you can camp the night before a test day (usually the Friday) and the night before race day. Combe is a little different as the test day is actually the Thursday, and Friday is a track day run by the circuit. If you're booked for Thursday, the gates will close at 6pm and reopen on Friday morning. I would imagine you can leave your car (but check with the circuit) at your own risk. You can certainly camp/leave your car on Friday night, indeed those of us with vans/motorhomes etc probably will be camping - and taking our heaters if the temperatures don't pick up! If you are staying in a local hotel/B&B, most drivers reckon it's safer to leave their car and trailer at the circuit than in the hotel car park - those of you staying at the £10 Travelodge on the motorway may be glad to hear that...!!

Don't forget to put your vehicle paddock passes in your towcars and/or support vehicles' windscreens. Your racecar doesn't need one of these.

Circuit facilities

Check on the circuit's website what facilities they have there - e.g. petrol, food, water etc. Most circuits do have super-unleaded but it can be a bit of an outrageous price (e.g. at Silverstone!) and some only accept cash, no cheques or cards. Most drivers, rightly or wrongly, seem to believe that there is some performance advantage in super-unleaded fuel, and that it's worth the few pence a litre extra. Optimax seems to be the fuel of choice for Graduates in all classes as it's 98 Octane (where most super-unleaded are 97) and supposedly is more 'advanced' - don't ask me how, I don't know anything about fuel technology but I do buy it! For Combe, there is a Shell garage which sells Optimax between jn 17 of the M4 and Castle Combe just before you turn off onto the local road for the circuit, so very convenient! See <http://www.multimap.com/map/browse.cgi?client=public&X=387500&Y=175000&width=500&height=300&gride=389040&gridn=174586&srec=0&coordsys=gb&db=pc&addr1=&addr2=&addr3=&pc=&advanced=&local=&localinfosel=&kw=&inmap=&table=&ovtype=&keepicon=true&zm=0&scale=50000&out.x=10&out.y=12> There's also 'Circuit Motors' literally just outside the circuit's gates, but I don't know if they do super-unleaded. If you are testing or trackdaying, remember you'll need a lot of fuel, so I'd recommend bringing about 40

litres in jerrycans + whatever you've got in the car. You may still need to go out and get some more for raceday - I usually count on about 15-20 litres for qualifying and racing.

It's always a good idea to familiarise yourself with where things are at the circuit during your test/track day. For example, the assembly area (also called holding area) where we need to congregate before qualifying and the race may be nowhere near the pitlane that is usually used to get onto the circuit on test days - although at Combe it looks to be right by it and quite obvious. I almost fell foul of this at Silverstone last year - driving round frantically looking for the assembly area while your qualifying time ticks away is no fun!!! Another tip - try to walk the circuit if you can. You can usually get onto it once the test or trackday activities have finished, or very (and I do mean very - i.e. 7am!) early in the morning on race day, subject to the circuit officials allowing it.

Other general information about the race weekend Before we get onto the mechanics of the raceday itself, it's worth covering a couple of other things about the Grads setup.

McMillan Motorsport support: As has been said many times, bring your car to the track ready to race. If, however, you have a problem at the test/trackday, or on raceday, McMillan Motorsport are there to help you.

Take your car (if you can get it there) to the MMM awning and find Andy McMillan (big blond bloke), Andy Adshead (dark hair & glasses) or Ray (no hair at all!) and ask them to look at it for you. Also make them aware how pressing the issue is - e.g. you're out qualifying in 10 minutes - as they may have a number of cars to work on and need to prioritise their time effectively. It goes without saying that you should take it to them as soon as you notice the problem rather than waiting until half an hour before the race and expecting them to be able to drop everything and work miracles!

If you have a problem which seems like it may not need the expertise of the master mechanics, but just a little more expertise than YOU have, try asking any of the other racers for help or advice - anyone with a nice display of shiny tools and stuff by their car probably knows what they're doing (or likes to think that they do!). Examples of this sort of thing would be checking and replacing brake pads or changing A-frame bushes. I'm a lot better with this kind of thing than I was when I started (when I knew nothing) and thus see hope to see less of Andy and Ray than I used to!!

Also remember not to take MMM for granted - they do their best to get everyone back out racing if at all possible, so as a courtesy make sure you thank them if they have fixed your car, and that you get Andy and Ray cups of tea and the like while they're working on it! And if you see them later in the day or in the evening at the hotel, a beer or two is unlikely to be refused... :-)

Catering: Grads driver Sheila Marshall provides a fantastic service to Grads drivers as part of your membership subscription - food on race day! What that means is breakfast in the morning - cereals, fruit, tea & coffee etc (if you want bacon sarnies you'll need to bring your own!) - a buffet lunch (see noticeboard for time), and afternoon tea & cakes at prize-giving. If you have any special dietary requirements let Sheila know in advance and she will do her best to help - and no, this doesn't mean what brand of cakes you prefer...!

Things to note about catering - you need to clear up after yourselves - put the paper bowls, cups, plates etc in the bin, and if the bin is full please empty it. If you see Sheila or others putting chairs out or away, offer to help! And that Sheila buys food to cater for the driver and one other person (helper/partner/mechanic etc). If you have any more people than that coming along you need to do two things - (1) Let Sheila know the numbers in advance (she will normally post on the forum in the week before the race), and (2) Pay her £5 per person for each extra person. Make sure you catch her at the circuit - she's not hard to find - though remember Sheila is a driver too and does this in addition to her racing, so clearly don't thrust money at her while she's driving to the holding area for qualifying!!!

On test and track days there's normally tea and coffee available, but no catering as such, so you'll need to make your own arrangements or visit the circuit's cafe/burger bar - there will always be one! If you have any vegetarians in your group on test days I can assure you from personal experience that it's probably best to bring a sandwich or something!!

The Grads awning: The Grads club awning, which is next to the MMM mobile workshop and Nick Frost's motorhome, is where drivers and their entourages can congregate, and shelter from the rain/sun etc. There are plastic tables and chairs, a noticeboard, copies of the qualifying and race results, and this is the usual meeting point for any Grads club briefings, such as the Driving Standards briefing on Saturday. Note that the Clerk of the Course's briefings normally take place at or near the circuit office - see the supplementary regs for the exact details.

First raceday - before you go out to qualify:

The main thing to say about raceday is that you need to be organised. You need to know where you need to be and when, what paperwork you'll need, and what the procedures are. This may seem complicated for the first event but believe me it becomes easier each time you do it.

Signing on: The first thing you usually need to do on raceday is sign on at the circuit office. In the timetable you'll get from the circuit you'll find details of when each class's signing on is - this isn't set in stone so you can sign on earlier if you want to, but don't leave it later or you may miss your scrutineering slot and therefore your qualifying! If you want your licence signed for upgrading later in the season, leave it at the circuit office and don't forget to collect it later!

New drivers' briefing: If you haven't raced before at a circuit (and track/test days don't count), you'll need to attend one of the new drivers' briefings, usually held by the Clerk of the Course. You need to attend this before you go out to qualify - failure to do so will almost certainly result in a fine and/or some kind of licence penalty. These are not usually that long or arduous, they cover things like any special features of that particular circuit, the warm-up lap and starting procedure, what to do at the end of the race etc.

At Combe we have a much better choice of times than we usually get, see item 7 in your Final Instructions, and pick one of 7:30, 8:00, 8:30, 9:00 and 10:00.

Scrutineering: Take your signing on slip, car, suit, helmet and any paperwork you will need (e.g. for running a camera at Combe, Nick's last newsletter gave you details of the lady to contact) to the scrutineering bay at the times indicated on the timetable. Allow plenty of time for potential queues, and you might also want to get there early to allow time to sort anything out that the scrutineers need you to tie down or change before they will sign you off as being 'OK to race'.

The first thing that happens is the scrutineer will ask you for your signing on paper and any paperwork - see above. They will run through the checks on your car I described in the last new drivers' email - before you go, make sure everything is tightly screwed down and attached. Make a particular note to check things which could have come loose - the top wishbone ball joint is a particular favourite apparently and cameras really do need to be securely mounted.

The scrutineer will check your helmet and suit, and if you haven't raced before or have a new or repainted helmet, will need to issue it with a sticker saying 'approved for racing' or similar. You'll need to pay around

£1-£2 depending on the circuit, so make sure you've got at least a couple of quid with you. Also take some cable ties and tape, they may pick up things like camera mounts or lights, and it's easier to tie it/tape it up there and then than it is to have to run back to your towcar and then go back later!

Once you've finished, the scrutineer will issue you with a scrutineering ticket, which you need to fix to your car in an obvious place so that the pit lane marshalls will be able to see it - I usually tape it to the metal behind my shoulder or people put it in the passenger seat area if they don't

have one. If anyone wants to see this on Friday or before scrutineering, just drop by and have a look at my car - I'll leave last year's scrutineering tickets on it until Saturday morning.

All this can seem a bit daunting on your first raceday, particularly as you're probably more concerned about what will happen on the track than in the paddock. If it helps anyone, I plan to attend the 7:30am new drivers'

briefing and then go straight to signing on and then onto scrutineering - if anyone wants to join me and go to the briefing, signing on and scrutineering together, please meet at my motorhome at 7:20am on Saturday.

Qualifying

Check the timetable, and make your way to the assembly area a good 15-20 minutes before your qualifying session is due to start. Clerks of the Course like to run meetings to time and try to get a bit ahead if they can, so the timetable can change and sessions be earlier than stated. Listen to tannoy announcements and make sure you're there in good time.

Turn up in the assembly area ready to go - i.e. having been to the toilet (yes, seriously!), with enough petrol for a 15-min session, all your equipment (remember your arm restraints!!), your scrutineering tickets, laptimer on and blanking set to about the right level etc. The marshals will hold you until it's time to go out. It's first come, first served in who goes out when for qualifying, if it's your first race I'd recommend staying somewhere near the end as the experienced boys will want to get out and get going quickly.

Once you're out, you've got 15 minutes to set your best time, but the first thing you need to do is to get 3 laps under your belt to be allowed to start, so in other words don't go mad straight away! Remember that your tyres, brakes and you will be cold when you go out, and generally times pick up during the session as all of these warm up. And qualifying is not racing

- there will be plenty of opportunity for that later!! Keep your eyes on the flags (blue ones particularly) and your mirrors if you do go out towards the end of the group by the way - those who went out first could be half a lap in front and be on their first quick lap while you're on your outlap.

I'm presuming that everyone reading this knows the flags - well you did on your ARDS day anyway :-) - but DO note where the marshals are around the circuit, and watch out for flags. The most important ones are red (session stopped, usually indicating a serious incident - so slow right down and come back to the pits) and yellow, which means there is an incident ahead, so slow down and no overtaking. If you persistently ignore the yellows it may well result in a black flag - and you don't want this with its associated trip to Headmaster's office (Clerk of the Course).

When qualifying is finished, you'll see the chequered flag. Do a cool-down lap and the marshals will direct you into the 'parc ferme' area. Don't take off your belts and helmet until you're stopped in here - another potential fine/endorsement if you do... The scrutineers - usually led by our BARC eligibility scrutineer, Keith Marchment (big bloke with a moustache, probably wearing a blue BARC shirt with his name on it) will then instruct you as to what to do - they may want to check some or all of the cars, or they may let you go. Either way, listen to their instructions and if in doubt, follow the more experienced guys or ask Keith.

If you are unlucky enough to have a prang in qualifying and the car is damaged but repairable, you MUST get it re-scrutineered after repair and before racing. And you probably should get the OK from the doctor. If your prang is so bad that you have to withdraw from the race - and let's hope this doesn't happen(!) - do it officially by telling them at signing-on at the Circuit Office. Technically, you need the Clerk of the Course's permission to leave the circuit before your race!

Between qualifying and the race

The first thing you'll want to do is to get back to your trailer, get out of the car and have a cup of tea or the like! You may feel like having something stronger(!), but a beer or two to calm the

nerves before the race is not recommended as the alcohol limit for racing is zero - and watch how much you drink the night before! You'll doubtless want to get the qualifying times and the grid positions - either from race control or from the Grads awning. These are usually available around half an hour after qualifying finishes - sometimes sooner, sometimes later. If you're first at race control and there seems to be a large stack of sheets, do everyone a favour - pick up most of them (but never all) and take them to the Grads' awning.

Driving Standards briefing: All new drivers to the three Grads series MUST attend the Driving Standards briefing at midday - see instructions on the website and/or the noticeboard at Combe.

Circuit drivers' briefing: At Combe we have a mandatory briefing for all drivers from the Clerk of the Course at 12:30 outside Race Control - see the Final Instructions, section 7.

Lunch - buffet as described above, time tbc on the noticeboard at the Grads awning.

You may also wish to use the time to fill up your car with race fuel, read the circuit guide again, make any last-minute changes to tyre pressures, get your video camera set up, go & watch the races before yours (especially any Grads races) or anything else to keep your mind off the race!!!

The Race

Listen for tannoy announcements as your class will be called to the assembly area about 30-45 minutes before the race's scheduled start time. They tend to call cars to the assembly area as soon as the previous race has gone onto the circuit to form up on the grid, so I usually watch what's happening with the other races to judge this - i.e. if the race before mine has been called to the assembly area, I know I'm going to be called very soon.

On arrival at the assembly area (again, ready to race, having been to the toilet, camera switched on, arm restraints on, fuel in the car etc!!) the marshals will direct you to where to park for your grid slot. Your partner/mechanic can accompany you into the assembly area by the way, mine usually does. When it's time to go out, the marshals will send you out to the grid and show you where to form up. You'll see a sequence of boards - 3min, 2min, 1min, 30seconds (these are never anything like 3 minutes by the way), and then they'll send you on the green flag lap - which is a lap to spot the marshals posts, and warm up your brakes and tyres a bit. Remember to stay in formation for this and pay attention to the regs about not weaving excessively or doing practice starts!

At the end of the green flag lap, you form up again, and when the whole of the grid is ready, you'll see the 5-second board. Make sure your car is in 1st gear and that you're fixed on the lights - I'm always nervous at this point and I am a bit nervous now just thinking about it!! The red lights go on, the revs rise, and when the lights go out it's time to go..!!! Don't make the mistake I made at Thruxton last year and wait for a green light which isn't going to come... I started 6th and got to the first corner in about 14th... :-o

You have to drive your own race - I can't really help you there - but a couple of things to remember. Don't go barrelling into the first corner, it will be congested and everyone will be on cold tyres and brakes. The last thing anyone wants is a first corner pile-up, you've got 20 minutes to race so there's plenty of time to show what you can do. Also remember what the Driving Standards guys have said - and if in doubt as to whether to attempt a move, my advice would be not to and only move when you're sure you can get by.

Watch for the countdown time signals on the pit wall as you're racing - they will tell you how many minutes you've got left, and when it's the last lap (L1 will be shown). Before you know it, the race will be over, and when you see the chequered flag, slow down for a cooling down lap, and make sure you wave and beep to marshals as a small thank you - they really appreciate these gestures and the Grads drivers have a good reputation for acknowledging the marshals.

Post-race scrutineering is much like post-qualifying, you go into parc ferme, Keith decides who he wants to see, usually you'll get weighed, the podium finishers may be interviewed by the tannoy announcer, and then it's back to your trailer to receive the love and congratulations of your friends and family!!

After the race

You'll want your results first and foremost - results sheets are available in the same way as for qualifying. And you'll also doubtless want to watch the other Grads races so you are able to follow the discussion and banter on the forum on the following Monday!

The Grads club holds its own prize-giving ceremony over afternoon tea after the last Grads race, which at Combe looks to be the Supers. As well as supplying beer and cake, they present the trophies for the podium finishers in each class, and the best improvers - which are the people who've made up the most places between qualifying and their race finish. Usually a nice touch at the end of the weekend and well worth staying around for.

Don't forget to collect your licence before you leave the circuit - although if you do, it will be mailed back to you within a few days.

And that's it - then it's back down the motorway to wait several weeks until the next one...

Hope all that is of use - if any questions just drop me a line or give me call if it's later in the week as I'll be at Combe at the trackday on Friday. You'll have a great time, and see you at the circuit!!

Kind regards

Andrew Smith

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