



Driving—The Need for Speed Imagine driving at speeds in excess of 140 mph behind the wheel of a NASCAR-style stock car with a 600 hp engine. That's the Richard Petty Driving Experience. Student drivers get behind the wheels of actual race cars and drive on real tracks during classes held eight weekends each summer at Michigan International Speedway in Brooklyn (pictured).

The class begins with an orientation, followed by on-track and in-car instruction. Students learn the basics, such as removing steering wheels and window nets, shifting gears and getting in and out of the cars—through the windows—while wearing a helmet and racing suit, which some say is the hardest thing to master. The real fun starts with those famous four words: Drivers Start Your Engines!

Student drivers follow the instructor in a staggered formation. "If your instructor goes high, you're gonna go high. If he goes low, you're gonna go low," says Brian Volk, track operations manager and pit road coordinator. "If

he comes into the pits, what are you gonna do? The only time you don't follow your instructor's line is if he turns right."

It's essentially a game of high-speed follow-the-leader, but there's more to it than just clocking in at 140 mph.

"You're thinking about so much more than speed," says Michelle Hampton, a student from Canton, Michigan. "You're trying to keep your lines, hit your marks and watch for hand signals."

Michelle is in the minority. Women make up almost half of NASCAR fans, but only 8 percent of Petty classes.

Ann and Bill Leche traveled all the way from New Orleans for the experience. "We were watching *The Today Show* and they aired this 'Live for Today' segment that really got us thinking," Ann says. "We went out to dinner and made our lists of the things we wanted to do and the driving experience was at the top of Bill's list."

Two years ago, Rick Waldrop from Almont, Michigan, made his first trip to the track, and he's back for more. He says, "I had so much fun... you couldn't slap the smile off my face for weeks."

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— Rick Waldrop, student driver

