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# Two Years on THE HILL

By Walt Peterson

*Speed is velocity.*

*Speed is not emotion.*

*Speed is the application  
of skill to sound principles.*

*- L. Paul Dickinson*

**E**arly August 2016, Polish Mountain Hillclimb, Saturday morning. Green light. Off the start line. No bog. No wheel spin. Then a smooth shift to second gear. Revs build like the Hill, rising quickly into the fast lefthander at Turn 1. In third gear at 4,500 RPM, I approach the apex. Sure and strong the Healey 3000's straight-six produces gobs of torque. Suddenly it happens: a red flag waves in my vision, like a sharp stick about to poke my eye. I react quickly and wrongly, lifting the throttle and stabbing at the brake pedal. The back end of the Healey comes all the way around, swinging the left front fender into the Armco barrier.

Like the corners of "Weatherly" and "Giants Despair," Turn 1 will make or break a run. Get a fast launch and a strong pull to take the first turn at speed, keep that rhythm and the time clock at the end will reflect the start. But my third run is going to be the finish of the competition this weekend. After the morning rain I was poised to break the class record in Vintage II, but now the weekend has become a flat tire, a crumpled front fender, and the bling of a broken headlight on this mountain road.

Polish Mountain is the fourth race in the Pennsylvania Hillclimb Association championship series. It is considered a very fast hill. Carroll Shelby won here

in 1955 in an ex-Grand Prix Maserati. Back then, the race was called the Breakneck Hillclimb. This event on public roads was stopped, then revived in 2006.

## Volunteer Angels

After the impact, corner workers are at the car immediately. I unbelt and climb out to catch my breath and survey the damage. A worker hands me the beehive turn signal lens, unbroken. I glare at the woman holding the red flag but don't say anything—just a case-hardened stare.

Unloading the Healey from the rollback in the paddock, people quietly stare, sorry for me but glad it is not their racecar. A hillclimb represents a unique type of motorsport. Drive hard enough and it is not a question of if you will go off the road in competition. You can count on it. And there are no soft offs, no getting back on the road and finishing the run. There are culverts, phone poles, guardrails, drainage ditches.

In August, the Appalachian roads look like a green cathedral with sunlight streaming through the trees, but an hour later the sun will move and the shadows will have shifted—and your depth perception better have shifted along with them. Each bend here has its own particular blend of dips and undulations, camber and obstacles.



Walt Peterson / 1962 Austin Healey 3000



I've always thought of the vintage classes as safe, rather slow, but beautiful cars—a Jag Mk II sedan, Mini Coopers, TRs, big and little Healeys brawling their valiant fight against age and gravity's pull—but my 100-plus-mph friend Mustang Mark points out, "I wouldn't drive an old car like that the way you do!" Fair enough.

### **I'll Take PHYSICAL SCIENCE for \$800. Alex**

Who was it that said a racecar should be driven only slightly in control? When the Healey's rear wheels slide out and the front fender and tire meet the metal guardrail abruptly, there is no rewriting the laws of physics. At the apex of a turn, the vehicle's weight is balanced on the outer two tires. Lifting off the throttle shifts more of the weight to the front right. Stabbing the brakes multiplies that weight shift. Immediately the right front tire is carrying most of the vehicle's mass. The right rear lightens and the wheel loses traction big time, the left front acting like the other end of a baton, spins into the inside of the bend and comes in contact with the guard rail.

Saturday afternoon brings distance and some perspective to the "shunt." The front fender can be pulled out and the headlight cavity decorated with duct tape, but there is a gash in the tire sidewall and no replacement is available locally. Yet, this weekend has always been about fun and the beauty of the mountains, as well as competition. Hillclimbing is built mostly on friendship. Other racers will work all afternoon to get you on the track if possible. But that's not going to happen today. So this weekend morphs into a mini vacation for Jade and me, and an excuse to head to Ottoviani, a cool restaurant in Cumberland.

Over a couple of beers after dinner, I decided I wronged the woman holding the red flag at Turn 1. The call that came over her headset was a red flag and the racer's bible admonishes the driver to bring the car to a safe, controlled stop on the side of the course and wait for

further instructions from the corner workers. In other words, I was the last one to touch the steering wheel and brake pedal. Kissing the guardrail was my responsibility, not anyone's fault, just, as people say, a racing incident.

After we retire to the night's lodgings, I sleep tolerably well considering Jade refers to our place as "the Bates Motel." The window AC unit must be powered by a Farmall tractor, and there is a cemetery a few steps from the door of our unit, number 10.

The next morning at the Hill, we hike up to Turn 5 where Amanda (I'll call her) is working. I heard an official had overreacted and given her hell Saturday night; this made my penance doubly important. My newfound friend and her significant other came up from Virginia to work the Hill. In her other life, she works for a publishing firm. She told me they now were on virtual lock-down, printing the latest Harry Potter book. Personal stories are the great thing about talking to people at an event, and this Hill is peppered with people like her, willing to spend their days off working to help you pursue this mountain madness.

### **Early August 2017**

For once-a-year events like this, I keep a notebook of thoughts, observations and facts. Sometime during the long, grey Pittsburgh winter, I recalled a tip from E. Paul Dickinson at driver's school: "Lesson Plans—do 'em before a competition and review 'em afterward."

Here is my version:

1. Forget the Incident—Remember the Lesson.
2. Check out YouTube. Brian Fritzler's white and red Corsair sports racer says all there needs to be said about driving Polish Mountain.
3. Visualize driving the course, just like slalom skiers before a run. How fast can I drive it while eyeing (you drive where you look, Bunkie!) the apex? I need to visualize a sudden red flag and not overreact.



*Bob Buchmann / 1967 Austin-Healey*



*Daniel Ahn / 1974 MGB GT*



*Adolf Battifarano / 1968 Lotus 7*



*Tom Knorr / 1964 Austin-Healey Sprite*





Dave Miller / 1962 Triumph TR4

4. Walk the Hill, replay different scenarios at each turn. Note changes of conditions from previous years.
5. Work up to speed gradually. With two days of competition, maybe fourteen runs, there's no need to counter-rotate the earth to show what a fearless competitor you are.
6. Expect to be quick, expect to be red-flagged. That's reality. With luck, speed will come and the flag won't, but it's a driver's responsibility to be ready. T-1 is only about 20-car lengths from T-2, a tight, blind right-hander, trees and a hill on the inside of the bend then hay bales, Armco and a 40-foot drop-off on the outside.

#### A Passing Grade

We didn't get to walk the Hill until Sunday at lunchtime. Still, competition runs Saturday were measured, safe, and steadily quicker.

After the first run Sunday afternoon tire pressures are building with the warmth—a sign that traction will improve dramatically. By the third run, things are smooth and fast. I couldn't believe the speed through the apex at T-1 and T-2. Further up the Hill, I have flattened the ramp into T-3 for more power on entering T-4, followed by the longest, most important straight at Polish Mountain.

The clock down at the start line flashed 78.6—that is 5/10ths faster than the 2014 record! I had done it,

hadn't I? "Maybe it didn't count, dude," my mind said. I convinced myself I needed a back-up run to prove it wasn't a fluke. Within 2/10ths of a second of the new record time was the mark I set for myself.

I don't remember much about the post-record run except coming through T-7 near the finish, I didn't up-shift to fourth, not wanting to disconnect the power from the wheels. I chose not to look at the redline-bound tach needle. The run was muscle memory, like Mark Knopfler jamming on "Telegraph Road." The clock flashed 77.179, 1.5 seconds faster than the record I just set.

#### Sultan of Slope, yeah.

I told Jade I need a last run—slow—to thank the corner workers with a flash of the lights and a wave, but sitting in the staging line with several race cars before me, I saw the grid marshal draw his index finger across his throat. I heard the radio at the announcer booth crackle, "Shut it down." Wrecker needed at Turn 4. It was late Sunday afternoon. There was some packing and the load-up to do before the tow home through the Appalachians. I'll have to save that run for the first weekend in August, next year.

Thank you, workers. *MM*



Bruce Whipple / 1963 Austin Mini Cooper S



Luis Potlucci / 1960 Lotus 7



Richard Good / 1972 Triumph TR6



Susan Salsburg / 1961 Jaguar MK2