

BUY IT LIKE YOU MEAN IT DRIVE IT LIKE YOU STOLE IT

BY JOE SAGE

Mention Bondurant anywhere in the world, and the cognoscenti are likely to grin and blurt out, "Vipers in the desert!" A new Dodge/SRT relationship with the Bob Bondurant School of High Performance Driving was announced in November, and its image has caught on as fast as an SRT Hellcat in Launch Control mode.

One of the first fruits of the relationship is that every customer who buys or leases a new Dodge SRT receives a full day of professional instruction and track time at a high-performance program christened the Bondurant Racing School, as a perk (with an upgrade option for two, three or four days).

We headed to Bondurant, south of Chandler, to try that SRT customer experience. We met the Dodge team in Paradise Valley and drove down in a Challenger R/T Scat Pack—one of our favorites, with a 485-hp 6.4L HEMI V8, priced at \$38,995, a great point in the Challenger's overall range from \$26,995 for a 305-hp V6 SXT to \$64,195 for a 707-hp SRT Hellcat.

Plus we would be driving Hellcats at the School all day, anyway. Or most of the day. We would also hit the track in a 645-hp Viper.

Proven race techniques and hours of track time are an unmatched way to gain hands-on experience that translates directly to street driving skills. Instruction includes skid control, accident avoidance and flat-out performance driving. You learn from world class instructors, and best of all, Bondurant programs are 80 percent seat time.

Dodge/SRT welcomes the extreme duty their cars receive here. Intense usage helps them learn about maintenance schedules, parts life and extreme thermal conditions.

CLASSROOM Presentations from School president Pat Bondurant, Le Mans champion race driver Justin Bell, operations manager and chief instructor Mike McGovern, and race champ Bob Bondurant himself emphasize concentration, attitude, vision, vehicle dynamics and line technique.

We are reminded of a key mistake most new drivers make on the track: they look at where they are or what they don't want to hit. Always look at where you want to go, zenlike, and look ahead by three to six seconds.

As big as any vehicle is, everything comes

down to weight transfer and the small contact patches of the tires. Reducing speed will transfer weight to the front, better for turning. Increasing speed transfers weight to the back, better for power in these rear-drivers. Master this before you hit the turns, where things get more complex.

"Be smooth with how you apply the controls," Bob reminds us all, as McGovern adds "take a break if it's not coming together."

SKID CAR One of the Bondurant School's most distinctive programs is its skid car training. Whether you may be headed to winter in the high country or sandy roads in the dunes, this will prove enlightening and is sure to improve your skills. For this, Charger Hellcats are equipped with specially engineered outrigger wheels that simulate skids in slick conditions. The car itself has duty-specific Goodyear tires and upgraded brake pads.

We drove a coned oval course, and at the instructor's sudden instruction would change over to a figure-eight, approximating the surprise factor of a moose, falling tree or other random surprise on a slippery road. Skills

gained in the skid car are quick and measurable. You will feel it, when you have crossed into the control zone.

TRACK Bondurant's purpose-built 1.6-mile road course is one of several tracks at the facility, and this is where we would take laps in all three cars: Challenger Hellcat, Charger Hellcat, and the Dodge Viper SRT TA 2.0.

The TA 2.0 bears a great many enhancements, and Bondurant adds a few more (see caption). It's a nimble 3390-pound track car with 1200 pounds of downforce at 150 mph.

SRT customers who qualify can also get their hands on the Viper ACR, the fastest street-legal Viper track car ever—with more track records than any production car in the world, thirteen, achieved in just its first year.

We discussed the event the night before with seasoned race driver Emilio J Lezcano, who said, "Usually people make a big mistake in this kind of event. I don't know if they want to impress, but people who don't have any idea what they're doing want to go fast! Don't go fast. Take one or two or three laps, easy. When you are in the major league of racing, like the 12 Hours of Sebring, you have to tolerate that somebody in front of you is warming the tires, pushing, then braking, to get the right pressure. Let me get the feel of my pedals and controls, then go fast. People who really know how to race take advantage of the first two laps and never go fast. They

KEEP RIGHT >>



The Dodge Viper SRT TA 2.0 is an enhanced model at about \$10 grand less than an ACR, with modified front dive planes, carbon fiber front corner splitters, extended rub strips, a larger rear wing, carbon fiber rear applique, some badging and special interior stitching. Bilstein two-mode suspension has unique spring rates and shock tuning, solid sway bars front and rear, and competition alignment. Unique Brembo brakes have slotted, vented high thermal capacity two-piece wide annulus rotors and pads, and anodized calipers with orange Viper logo. Matte black Sidewinder II lightweight track wheels at Bondurant bear Kumho tires, as on the ACR. Bondurant Vipers also have racing harnesses, roll cages and other modifications. The Bondurant Viper SRT TA 2.0 delivers 1200 pounds of downforce at 150 mph.

SKID CAR/SKIDPAD DODGE CHARGER SRT HELLCAT

ENGINEsupercharged 6.2L HEMI V8
TRANSMISSION8-spd auto
HORSEPOWER/TORQUE707 hp / 650 lb-ft
WEIGHT4570 lb
MPG13/22 city/hwy
BASE PRICE\$67,645

ROAD COURSE/TRACK DODGE VIPER TA 2.0

ENGINE / DRIVETRAIN8.4L V10
TRANSMISSION6-spd manual w/OD
HORSEPOWER/TORQUE645 hp / 600 lb-ft
WEIGHT3390 lb
MPG12/21 city/hwy
BASE PRICE\$109,490

ACCEL/AUTOCROSS DODGE CHALLENGER SRT HELLCAT

ENGINEsupercharged 6.2L HEMI V8
TRANSMISSION6-spd man / 8-spd auto
HORSEPOWER/TORQUE707 hp / 650 lb-ft
WEIGHT4469.6 lb man - 4476.2 lb auto
MPG13/21 man 13/22 auto city/hwy
BASE PRICE\$64,195

Vipers in the desert.
Chargers and Challengers, too.



look at the reference points, till they're good with the track. If I'm competing, I'm not going to risk my race trying to pass you in turn number one, because you may be better than me in that turn. But sooner or later, I find a corner where I am better than you, and this is my opportunity. Racing is patience. Any track has at least ten turns. I used to play baseball, and sometimes there is a batter a pitcher can't eliminate, or vice versa. Sooner or later, he has to deal with my curve ball."

We didn't throw our colleagues any curve balls, but we had a good half-dozen laps in each car—Challenger Hellcat, Charger Hellcat, Viper TA 2.0—enough to familiarize with each, then really open them up.

CONTROL Next were timed acceleration with an accident avoidance drill, then autocross, both in the Challenger Hellcat (also with Goodyears and upgraded brake pads).

We had done quarter-miles in the Hellcat on the track in Oregon, and eighth-mile runs at FCA's Chelsea Proving Grounds in Michigan, both with the option of using Launch Control mode, which guarantees a heroic start to the run. At Bondurant, we ran without Launch Control, so any heroics were our own. At the end of a max-acceleration straightaway were three coned lanes with traffic signals above. At the last split second, our coaches would switch the lights, and it was our responsibility to hit the green lane (and no cones)—a quick chicane.

Adjacent to that was an autocross course, with turns tight and broad, one decent straightaway and demands on our hot brakes—all with the clock running.

We came out of our day nicely seasoned, tasting, as Pat Bondurant said, "a teaspoon of the School today." Full program participants will emerge highly skilled.

BONDURANT Bondurant is a destination school, with most participants flying in—four times as many this year already, even from Canada, Europe and South America.

More than 500,000 students have learned the Bondurant Method since 1968, ranging from racers to celebrities, teens to police.

Dodge/SRT customers have one year from purchase or lease to take the program (they handle their own flights and hotel). Non-Dodge owners can also purchase the same programs and drive the School's same fleet of Challenger and Charger SRT Hellcats and Vipers. For more information on the School's programs, visit bondurant.com. ■

