

Turn 9, Mazda Raceway, Laguna Seca

by Grant Ryley

Although not as famous as its corner mates—the Corkscrew and the Andretti Hairpin—Turn 9 at Mazda Raceway, Laguna Seca is one of the most exciting corners in the country.

Its combination of on-camber, off-camber, decreasing radius, elevation change and limited visibility make it one of the most technical corners I have ever driven. It has taken me nearly 10 years to truly understand this corner in all of its complexity and, even now, I rarely get the “warm fuzzy” feeling a driver feels when he exits a corner, knowing it could not be done any better. With all of that said, and for all of those reasons, it is my favorite corner in North America.

Laguna Seca’s 2.24-mile racetrack summits in the brake zone of Turn 8, the Corkscrew. From there, it’s a rollercoaster ride all the way down to Turn 11. In between is Turn 9.

After connecting the two apexes of the Corkscrew, track the car out at driver’s left as far as it wants to go. There is no need to pinch off the exit in order to get back to driver’s right to set up for Nine; you have plenty of time and the natural camber of the surface will help with that.

With the car tracked out, assertively transition to driver’s right. Done correctly, you will reach your desired position on the track just as you go under the pedestrian bridge... and this is where it gets tricky.

The racetrack runs downhill with a bowl shape to it. The edge or rim of this bowl lays about one-half to one car width away from the

right edge of the track. This means that setting up a traditional line along the right edge of the road will actually make the corner more difficult.

With the exception of low-powered, open-wheel cars or extremely high downforce cars, a speed correction will need to be made in the area between the bridge and your turn-in point. The timing of this speed correction will determine what the car does as you turn into the corner, through the apex and even out to the exit. As you probably know from simple vehicle dynamics, any speed correction will create a pitch change and transfer weight to the front of the car. This is not an ideal situation when approaching a high-speed, downhill corner, so the solution is to do your speed correction early. Some cars will require a lift, others a brake. Regardless of which hand you are dealt, get it done early.

Where you initiate turn-in for Nine is important. But one of Nine’s many idiosyncrasies is its lack of a traditional turn-in point. Due to the nature of the camber from turn-in to apex, the steering must be progressively inputted all the way down the hill. Simply turning once at a specific point will yield bad things, the least of which is an early apex. The turn-in point is found by using your eyes to look at the apex, which starts just after the beginning of the apex curbing and runs throughout the length of it. As the car naturally begins to turn left down the hill, help it out by turning the wheel very slowly. At this point, you should be back on some amount of throttle and squeezing slightly.


With the car now flowing downhill, in the bowl, continue to squeeze to more power. Your full-throttle point will be determined by how well

you kept the car on the tightrope while doing your speed correction (too late of a speed correction and the car slides to the apex, pushing you off line and limiting when you can get to full throttle). A balanced car at corner entry will help you get to full throttle at the apex or just before. The trick here is in knowing that nine times out of ten, you can be at full throttle earlier than you think.

Although corner exit is the most straightforward phase of Laguna Seca’s gem, still, it’s visually difficult because the corner decreases in radius and loses much of its camber. But this is not a problem if you have set up the entry correctly. Trust is the main issue here. Get to full throttle and trust the compression at the apex to give you the much-needed extra grip.

Many drivers fail to get the most out of Turn Nine because they fail to track-out all the way—and they compromise the entire corner because of this. Vision is generally the culprit here as the exit is difficult to see from the entrance and mid-corner. Use your warm-up laps wisely here to fix this problem and consciously track the car all the way out to the exit curbing. There is more room there than you may think and even in a Champ Car, you will have time to transition back to driver’s left for Turn 10.

Two caveats regarding the corner exit of Nine: First off, the exit curbing ends prematurely. However, they have added a triangle portion to the end of it that you can use. Secondly, beware when driving laps during the winter. Due to the nature of the geology surrounding the Monterey Peninsula—mostly the unstable sand—water tends to cut through the runoff area, digging vast valleys and making off-course excursions much more hazardous.

When done correctly, Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca’s Turn Nine is the type of corner that brings you back for more, lap after lap. Take your time, build up to speed and remember these two critical keys: Make your speed correction early, and make your hands and feet inputs as smooth as possible. Do that and you will come to love this fantastic corner as much as I do. 

A Master Instructor with Skip Barber since the late 1990s, Grant ran two complete Atlantic seasons in 2001 and 2002, earning two podiums and a pole position. Prior to Atlantic, Ryley competed in Star Mazda, finishing 2nd in the Western division championship, with three wins, six podiums and three poles. Grant started racing in the Skip Barber Western Race Series, taking 4 wins and 10 podiums in the 1997–1998 season. In addition to his Skip Barber work, Grant does a lot of private coaching.

