



ON THE SKIDS

WORDS: DAN SHERWOOD PICS: RDX DRIFT ACADEMY

EVER WANTED TO LEARN TO DRIFT? WE DID, SO WE WENT ALONG TO ROCKINGHAM MOTOR SPEEDWAY TO CHECK OUT A DAY AT THE RDX DRIFT ACADEMY TO HONE OUR SKILLS IN THE ART OF SIDEWAYS SLIDING

Looks easy doesn't it? When you're sat at home watching YouTube clips of your favourite drift drivers as they nonchalantly twirl the steering wheel and make their 700bhp monster machines dance a tyre-smoking ballet with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel, it's easy to tell yourself: 'I could do that'. The reality, of

course, is often very different, with countless bent rims, scuffed bodywork and rage-inducing frustration the more likely outcome when taking your first steps into the world of drifting. This can mean that those all too common rookie mistakes can soon add up, making learning to drift an extremely expensive pastime.



Then there's the police to worry about. If you don't fancy embarrassing yourself at your local Drift What Ya Brung event and prefer to get a grasp of the basics before you mix it in front of a crowd, you need to be aware that Mr. Plod will take an extremely dim view of any sideways sliding antics should he catch you in the act on a public road, leading to fines, bans and possibly even jail time! But if your heart is still set on acquiring quite possibly the coolest skill on four wheels, then don't let these challenges put you off, as there is another way to get your skid on...

Based at Rockingham Motor

Speedway, RDX Drift Academy is a new drift school experience where you can learn to master the art safely, with the added bonus of professional instruction thrown into the mix.

RDX Drift Academy is the brainchild of British Drift Championship driver Matt Denham, whose love of drifting has pushed him to teach the skills to others so they too can get the thrill of sideways driving, without the associated risks.

'I started out drifting on my Sony PlayStation,' laughs the 31-year-old drift guru. 'I had the full setup at home with bucket seat, pedals and force-feedback steering wheel and loved it so

much that I went out and bought a drift car in real life!'

Matt spent out on a mildly modified Nissan S13 to get his kicks and immediately tried his hand at a drift day at Birmingham Wheels.

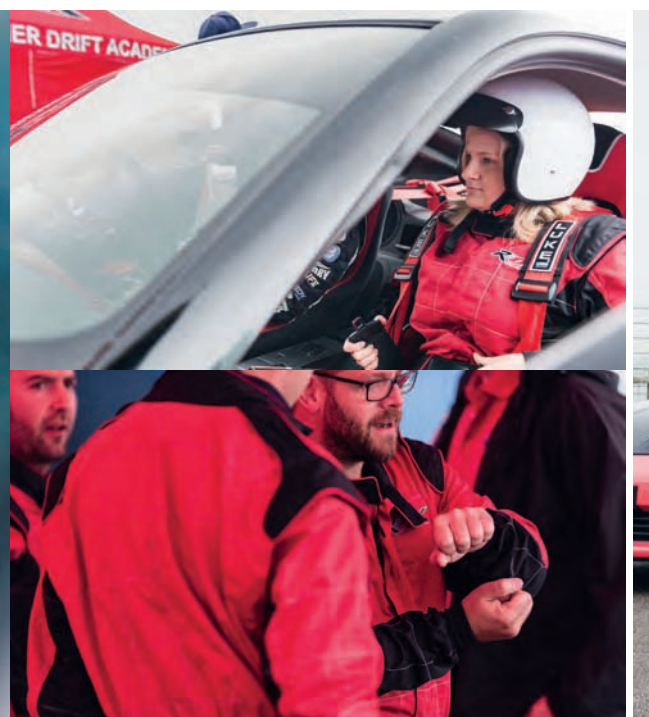
'The time spent on the PlayStation must've helped, as I picked up the knack very quickly,' Matt remembers. 'In fact, the organisers asked if I wanted to enter a drift competition they were running that very day. I said yes and promptly went and won the event. I couldn't believe it!'

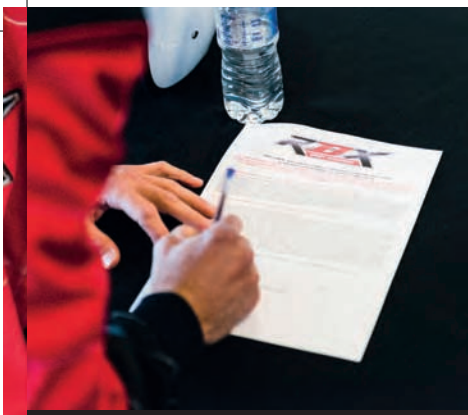
And if that wasn't enough, soon after, Matt had completed his BDC licence and started

competing with the big boys.

That was around four years ago, before BDC wannabes had to complete a season in the mandatory feeder series Drift Cup, so Matt really was thrown in at the deep end.

'I've done pretty well in the BDC, only narrowly missing out on last year's title by two points due to an unreliable car. But I've been lucky and am definitely more of the exception than the





rule, and I'd always advise people to get in plenty of quality seat time and experience before entering any kind of competition.'

And it's this quality seat time that RDX Drift Academy is set-up to supply in abundance.

'Unlike most drift days, we also have instructors that sit with you and teach you the skills and techniques to become a better drifter, which can take much of the trial and error out of learning and avoid you getting into bad habits,' says Matt. 'Not only that, but our instructors are all ex- or

current BDC champions, so you know you're getting tuition from the best in the business.'

RDX uses Rockingham's outfield paddock, where a series of cones are used to mark out the various obstacles and course layouts for the day.

'The good thing about using a large open area and cones is that it doesn't matter if you get things wrong, as there's nothing to hit,' Matt laughs. 'This takes a lot of the pressure off, which is crucial when you are trying to push your limits and learn about car control.'

Which brings us onto another excellent reason to try an RDX session – the cars.

Rather than having the expense of buying, running and potentially fixing your own drift car, on an RDX Drift Academy session you will be driving one of the Academy's own fleet of drift prepared Nissan 350Zs.

'The 350Z has 300bhp out of the box, is extremely reliable and features perfect 50/50 weight distribution, making it an excellent drift car for novices and skilled drivers alike,' says Matt. 'We simply weld the





differentials, fit a set of HSD Mono Pro coilovers, a hydro handbrake, a drift steering wheel and bucket seats with harnesses and they become extremely competent machines indeed.'

At present RDX offer three levels of tuition package, bronze, silver and gold. Bronze is the most basic and costs £199 for a three-hour experience. Next up is silver, which is more advanced and costs £299 for a three-hour experience, and finally the gold course, which is the most advanced and technical of the three and costs £599 for a six-hour experience, which will take you through everything you need to know about drifting, including pitting you into a simulated competition where you will be judged on your runs and technique just like the pros!

As relative drift novices, we decided to have a crack at the bronze package and see if we could go from zero to hero in just three hours...

We meet up at Rockingham at 8.45am where we're ushered out of the rain (typical!) for a cup

of coffee and our safety briefing. This is also where Matt and the team explain what we are going to be doing and give us a chance to meet our instructors.

Along with another two drivers on the day, we get teamed up with Paul 'Smokey' Smith. Paul, who drives as part of Team Japspeed, was crowned the BDC champion in 2012 and has been at the forefront of the drift scene since 2005, so really knows his onions. Some of the other instructors at the RDX academy include fellow Japspeed driver and current BDC Champ Matt Carter, and Driftworks driver Martin Richards, which

represents only part of the extremely talented teaching team at the Academy.

The first exercise we're tasked with mastering is the basic doughnut and figure of eight. This is a great way to get familiar with the car and hone our throttle application and clutch control to get the car to break traction and steer from the rear in a perfect circle around a cone. Once that's nailed, the figure of eight adds a transition element to the mix, where the car must change direction using a combination of weight transfer, throttle modulation and steering input in order to scribe a controlled figure of eight around

two cones. These are essentially the two main techniques you use in drifting and, while they sound easy, they can take a while to be fully comfortable with the technique and to get the feel for what the car is doing. Having an experienced driver like Paul alongside means any issues with poor technique can be ironed out straight away on the spot, before they become frustrating and hinder our progress. It's also great to have someone fully explain what is happening and why, as it



RDX DRIFT ACADEMY
FOR MORE INFO OR TO BOOK YOURSELF ON A
COURSE, CHECK OUT WWW.RDXACADEMY.CO.UK





MATT DENHAM'S TOP DRIFT TIPS

1. LEARN IN AN UNDERPOWERED CAR

YOU WILL LEARN A LOT MORE ABOUT CAR CONTROL AND DRIFTING TECHNIQUE IN A LOW POWERED REAR WHEEL DRIVE CAR, LIKE AN MX-5, THAN YOU WILL BY SIMPLY JUMPING INTO A 500BHP SUPRA. GET THE BASICS RIGHT AND WHEN YOU PROGRESS TO A MORE POWERFUL CAR, EVERYTHING WILL SEEM THAT MUCH EASIER

2. WATCH AND LEARN

BUST OUT THE YOUTUBE VIDEOS OF THE PROS AND WATCH THEIR HANDS. SEE HOW THEY LET THE THROTTLE DO THE WORK WHICH MEANS THEY ARE PUTTING IN MUCH LESS INPUT WITH THE STEERING WHEEL. CHECK OUT THE RELEASE AND CATCH TECHNIQUE THAT THEY DO WITH THE STEERING WHEEL THAT IS SO ESSENTIAL IN DRIFTING

3. LOCK THAT DIFF

ANY REAR WHEEL DRIVE CAR CAN BE DRIFTED, BUT THEY WILL ALL BENEFIT FROM A LOCKING REAR DIFFERENTIAL TO TRANSFER POWER TO THE REAR WHEELS EQUALLY YOU CAN BUY A LIMITED SLIP DIFF FOR YOUR CAR OR A CHEAPER OPTION IS SIMPLY TO WELD THE GEARS IN YOUR OPEN DIFF TOGETHER SO THEY ARE PERMANENTLY LOCKED. THIS MAY NOT BE THE BEST SOLUTION FOR ROAD DRIVING, BUT IT WILL MAKE DRIFTING MUCH MORE CONSISTENT

4. GO VIRTUAL

MATT LEARNED HIS TRADE BY PLAYING PLAYSTATION, BUT STILL KEEPS HIS HAND IN THROUGH THE WINTER AND THE OFF-SEASON BY PRACTISING ON HIS PC SETUP WITH A REALISTIC DRIFT SIMULATOR SUCH AS ASSETTO CORSA. MAKE SURE YOU PRACTICE WITH A WHEEL AND PEDALS SO YOU GET THE MOST REALISTIC EXPERIENCE POSSIBLE. WHAT IT LACKS IN FEEL, IT MAKES UP FOR IN LIFELIKE VISUALS AND PHYSICS

5. SEAT TIME

NOTHING BEATS GETTING PLENTY OF EXPERIENCE BEHIND THE WHEEL, WHICH IS EXACTLY WHERE THE LIKES OF THE RDX DRIFT ACADEMY CAN HELP IF YOU'RE JUST GETTING INTO DRIFTING, THE CHANCE TO PRACTICE WITHOUT CONSEQUENCE AND WITH PRO-LEVEL INSTRUCTION IS INVALUABLE. BUT EVEN IF YOU HAVE YOUR OWN CAR, THERE'S NO BETTER WAY TO LEARN HOW TO DRIFT THAN DOING IT FOR REAL

makes the process much easier to understand and put into practice.

Next up is to tackle a long left- and right-hand single corner. The sweeping arc is marked out with cones and it takes more speed and the use of a clutch kick (quickly depressing the clutch pedal while maintaining hard throttle) to spike the revs and kick the back end into oversteer. This rear end momentum then needs to be caught with opposite lock and balanced on the throttle to gracefully arc sideways around the bend. Or at least that's the theory. In practice, it can be

tricky to gauge the amount of each input we need to keep the car on course, and learning to control the car's direction with the throttle, rather than the steering wheel, is key. Once we've gone one-way, it's a case of turning around and going back in the other direction. And we have to admit, a few cones may have been harmed in the making of this feature!

The third exercise of the day involves all of the above techniques put together to link our way around an impromptu drift track marked out with cones. This is where mastering the transition becomes

paramount as the tight and twisty kidney-shaped track that we tackle means you are constantly linking left and right turns one after another. It is easily the hardest task of the day, but we can see our technique and understanding has improved greatly from the start of the day, which is extremely encouraging, even if by the end we are still some way off completing a perfect lap.

Finally, to show us how it is really done, we are all treated to high-speed passenger laps with the instructors. This is a real taste of what pro-level drifting is all about with the instructors

going flat out and door-to-door around the circuit. It's white-knuckle stuff, and a real inspiration for what can be achieved with enough practice behind the wheel.

So did we come away from the day rivaling Keiichi Tsuchiya for the title of Drift King? Well, not quite, but we did learn some valuable techniques to practice and above all we've had a brilliant time. And, when you think about it, where else can you kick the arse off someone else's car, destroy their tyres and be encouraged to do it for three full hours, all for £199? We'd say that's money well spent! **JP**