

AutoInterests: My Reflection

Written by *Sarah Kennedy*

How It All Began

For those who don't know, Jason and I made the tough decision to make the 2025 season our final AutoInterests season. We're in talks with potential buyers and hope to sell to someone who will continue the legacy.

Last year was AutoInterests' 20th anniversary, so that makes this year 21 of providing HPDE to the Midwest auto-enthusiast community. Jason started this back in 2004, and when we met in 2011, I quickly became a huge part of the business – and it became a huge part of me.

In 2014 we started NEO Cars & Coffee as a way to bring the local car community together and feed into AutoInterests. A year later, with the first CARFEST fast approaching and still a mountain of work to do, we realized AutoInterests could no longer stay just a side gig. I left my engineering career and dove headfirst into AutoInterests, NEO Cars & Coffee, and CARFEST.

From five event days a year, we grew to a max of **32 event days in 2019**. Since 2015 we've averaged 22 per year – almost every summer weekend. Summers were consumed by this work, and yes, I often missed other activities and events. It was hard, but we poured ourselves into building something amazing. And build something amazing we did.

Building Something Different

One of the things I'm most proud of is how much we innovated and shaped the HPDE world.

- We built an entire **online registration and event platform**, transforming from paper to fully digital.
- We created a **structured instructor program** with incentives, raising the bar for safety, consistency, and quality.
- We developed a **robust run group structure** with checks and balances to keep everyone safe.
- We introduced a **full learning curriculum** so students could build custom learning plans, while instructors tracked skills and progress.
- We layered in **approvals, personalized schedules, live event schedules**, and half-day intro programs.
- We launched **driving rewards, HPDE Points (an industry-first loyalty system), track packs, season passes, and volunteer credits**.

Every year we built, refined, and streamlined – not only for our drivers, but for ourselves. We truly lived our motto: Driving Perfection.

I'll never forget the "old days" – stacks of paper waivers, chaotic wristband boxes, sad little merch displays, and that awful cash register. (Chrissy, I'll always remember that GingerMan event where drivers were helping themselves to wristbands – I swore, never again!)

Today, we have custom purpose-built carts (most of which Jason, my dad, and I built together), a fully equipped trailer, and streamlined processes that turned our operation into a well-oiled, turnkey machine. People always ask what car we haul in the trailer – the answer is, there's no room for one. Every square inch is dedicated to the equipment that makes these events run.

The People

AutoInterests was never just about cars – it was about people.

We grew a family. I've watched kids grow up here – instructors' kids, drivers' kids, young enthusiasts who got their very first taste of the track with us:

- **Matan** – started with us at 13, eventually became our youngest instructor, and is now the 2024 GLTC Champion at only 20.
- **Ivan** – began at 11, grew into a respected instructor and run group leader.
- **Uli** – his sister, also drove with us as a young enthusiast.
- **Oliver** – this year, at just 11, went from car control drills to driving in novice group.
- **EJ** – karting now, but there's no doubt he's up next.

These stories are why we allowed passengers, why we encouraged young drivers, and why so many families became part of our weekends.

Along the way, we shared in life together: birthdays, anniversaries, retirements, and two marriage proposals at the track. We also mourned together – Todd, Lauri, Brian, David – and carried each other through hard times.

Final Weekend Reflections

Our final weekend at Pitt Race was far more emotional than I expected. Thursday night, even before the event began, people were already coming up to thank us. Throughout the weekend, drivers, instructors, volunteers, and guests shared their stories, appreciation, and memories.

I usually spend mornings in the tech garage, so I miss the meetings. I'm sad I was not at Friday's instructor meeting when Dale's retirement banner was unveiled, or Sunday's driver meeting when Robert's kind words made it difficult for Jason to finish the driver meeting.

On Sunday I had the chance to ride with Dale in the advanced session. It had been a long time since I was out on track, and I was blown away by how seamlessly that group worked together. The precision of their point-by's, the fluidity of their passes, the way each lap seemed to flow into the next – it was beautiful to watch, almost like choreography.

That weekend I realized just how different AutoInterests is from other groups. Drivers told me how much it meant that we allow passengers – letting family members ride along and experience the track at speed. Others reminded me of our role in welcoming and nurturing young drivers, giving them a place to start where few others would.

Those moments made me see the true uniqueness of what we've built.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Looking back, I'm sad I didn't give myself more time to enjoy things – like ride-alongs or late-night hangs in the paddock. I would have loved to have gone through the program myself with an instructor right seat. I wish I'd captured more photos of everyone, not just their cars.

But more than regrets, I have gratitude. Gratitude for the lessons in business, professionalism, marketing, and leadership. I'm thankful for everything I learned along the way – from software development and testing, to running a print shop for decals and wristbands, designing graphics, embroidering staff and instructor shirts, and creating merchandise for sales and Fast Pass holders. AutoInterests gave me so many ways to combine my love of creativity and making things with building a business. And through it all, I'm grateful not only for the countless hats I've worn, but also for everyone who wore theirs alongside me.

I feel guilty stepping away, but I also feel hopeful. Just as when we stepped back from NEO Cars & Coffee, there's a weight lifted – and also a responsibility to trust that others will carry the torch. I can't promise what's next for AutoInterests, but I hope someone continues the legacy.

What I do know is this: AutoInterests gave us the foundation for **Trackside Systems**, the software platform we launched in 2019. All the tools we built for ourselves became the starting point for something bigger, and now we'll carry that passion for innovation into modernizing motorsports more broadly.

I'll miss this community dearly. But I know the reunions will come.
And as Chrissy would say – love your guts. ❤️

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