**ABOVE:** It's not often you see a rally instructor looking worried. I guess the surname 'Solberg' will strike fear into the heart of any man!

# TEACHER TRAINING

I'm not a huge fan of answer phone messages, always delivering news of work or problems that need dealing with when I'm already flat out instructing. However, picking up a message as I left Brands Hatch in late February disproved my theory!

Andrew, Motor Sports Now magazine here. Chris Moore at Innovation Motorsports has asked us to send someone to Norway next week to drive on a frozen lake for a couple of days. We know it's late notice, but is there any chance you could go?"

Cue immediate crossing out of everything in my diary and speeding home from Brands to log onto Ryanair and book my return flight for £70. A few quick phone calls to my fellow instructors to rub in the news, (sorry lads) then panic started to set in. Snow? From the airport? The light sprinkling outside my house on the Sussex coast appeared to have bought the country to a halt! Time to ring Chris Moore at Innovation Motorsports for some local info.

Chris of course proved to be far more informed on the conditions in Norway, having lived there for the past two months and spent eight months planning and promoting Innovation Motorsports' winter activities. My mind was put at rest with the news that all hire cars come equipped with studded snow tyres and that Norway's government are a little more clued up on winter weather than my local authority!

Using www.norwaydirect.co.uk and a (real) hire company called 'Rent a Wreck' I booked a Toyota Yaris for 3 days for £140, including a collision damage waiver (rally driver plus frozen lake? Need you ask?) and a map of Southern Norway. Finally, a spot of bag packing, which on Chris's advice included proper thermal underwear, hats, gloves, decent boots and everything else I could squeeze in to deal with daily temperatures of between -2 and minus -10.

Despite the BBC weather advice, I considered my trip 'absolutely necessary' and travelled to Stansted airport the night before my early morning flight, staying at a very reasonable Bed and Breakfast a mile from the airport. The one and a half hour flight was uneventful until we reached Oslo Torp airport, which was closed due to a blizzard. The pilot announced we would be diverting 15 minutes to Oslo International, which I knew at 400mph+ would be more than a short coach ride at ground level. Ryanair were very efficient and the bus they provided had us back at Torp airport, minus the blizzard, three hours later.

One quick call to Rent a Wreck and my Yaris appeared, complete with road going studded tyres, looking like a gravel rally tyre with pin heads spaced across the tread. Chris had sent a map and directions via email, which proved easy to follow using road numbers. I was pleased to see clear roads for most of the scenic two-hour drive and surprised by the grip from the snow tyres when the white stuff finally appeared a few kilometres from Gautefall, my destination.

The airport delay meant it was already 4pm, so I headed straight to the frozen lakes to meet Chris and get a feel for the surroundings ahead of the next day's action. The scenery is stunning, though I took most of it in over the following days thanks to the mesmerising experience of driving across such a vast expanse of ice for the first time. Having met Chris before on the Motor Sport Association's Fit to be Champion scheme in 2000, I knew I'd be in for a good few days. His enthusiasm for rallying, and the whole experience of driving on ice, was at least equal to mine as we drove slowly round each of the four stages carved into the two vast lakes Innovation commandeers for the winter.

With temperatures plummeting after sunset we headed back to the hotel for a sauna to warm up, then caught up over a fantastic three-course dinner of Elk and roast vegetables. Gautefall hotel sits opposite a modest ski run high in the mountains and sports 200 rooms, a gym and pool, the obligatory sauna and a large restaurant and bar. After a couple of beers, at a whopping £4.50 each, I headed for bed like a kid trying to make Christmas come quicker.

Breakfast was another decent spread of European and Scandinavian styles, the latter not dissimilar to an English breakfast. Everyone in the restaurant is togged up in colourful skiwear, so a blue fireproof race suit was not at all out of place. The temperature was minus 7 as we left for the short drive to the lakes, where the first job is fire lighting. A fireman in the UK, Chris is an expert of course! The temperature can rise to above freezing during the day, but I was glad of my thermals and the advantage of a draught excluding all in one race suit. Rubber overshoes are useful as the snow soon dampens race boots, plus sunglasses, which help with contrast on the snow covered lakes.

Innovation offers two services; testing for rally teams and individuals, or practice and tuition using Innovation's own cars, suitable for beginners and professionals alike. On offer during my stay were a Group A Peugeot 205 and a Group N Subaru Impreza. More diverse machinery, right up to latest WRC specification kit, is available on request.

My first runs were in the 205 to acclimatise to driving on the 'proper' rally studded tyres. The grip from the centimetre long tungsten carbide tipped studs is mind blowing; Chris had explained the feeling of driving on them the previous evening, but it's something you have to experience for yourself to understand fully.

The initial impression is the same as driving on gravel, with a slight feeling of detachment from the road and looseness of the steering. As with gravel, when you start to lean on the car there is more grip than you first feel, but markedly so with the studs. You can brake deep into tightening corners relying on amazing lateral grip, with real feeling for the limit of traction at both front and rear. Confidence soon comes in spades, fourth gear corners are taken with a huge stab of left foot braking and an angle to the road that would end in a hefty repair bill on gravel.

In the end you inevitably get bitten by the snow banks, in my case just using too much road into a tightening third gear left,

**ABOVE:** It's a hard life, being a motor sport journalist: 2004 spec rally cars, frozen Nordic lakes and sunshine.

**RIGHT:** From left to right: Andy McKenna (instructor), Jason Pritchard (training in Norway) and MSN's man, Andrew Coley

hooked one wheel and was fired straight through the bank, to a standstill in the snow at the edge of the track. You can tap the banks with a rear wheel to limit the slide, but an errant front wheel pulls you in rapidly, no matter what you do with the steering.

That of course, is the beauty of testing on the lakes. Endless minor offs are punished only with a shower of snow through the window sliders. You swiftly move on to trying different techniques in corners of all types, including ludicrously fast left to right sweeps flat in fifth.

In terms of getting your head around the feeling of a new car on the limit, mileage on the lake is priceless. In the UK testing is always at 97%, with the thought in the back of your mind that an off is just too costly for a test session. The lakes allow you to push to your own and your car's full potential as soon as you feel confident with the phenomenal grip from the studded tyres. Because the roads maintain themselves with snow and below freezing temperatures, a day on the lake in your own rally car costs just £150, with no costly repaint afterwards.

On to the Subaru! The longer corners, which the front wheel drive 205 just switches to understeer towards the exit of, are taken with enjoyable controlled oversteer throughout. Again left foot braking helps you change direction quickly; if you don't left foot brake already, this is an ideal place to learn.

With the extra weight of a Group N car, the front tyres heat up fairly quickly and stud movement starts to increase understeer. Chris advises all the drivers who come and test to

stick to 15 minute runs, to stop cars from overloading transmissions and to limit tyre wear. It's very easy (due to enjoyment primarily) to do lap after lap of the longer stages, and find you have clocked up 100 miles by lunchtime.

Chris took me for a run in the 205 late in the day and immediately I could see my own 'areas for improvement'. With a real knowledge of the tyres and demonstration of his talent behind the wheel, his inputs to the car were small and infrequent. In the longer braking zones he exploited the grip and was less flamboyant on the brakes, increasing exit speed.

Innovation can provide instructors for one to one tuition or shared between several cars for general feedback, as well as arranging all travel details, sourcing FIA fuels and studded tyres ranging from budget to WRC quality. Next season he hopes to offer ice karting on a third lake, as well as 4x4, skidoos and quad bike experiences. Sitting round the crackling log fire cooking sausages at lunch I couldn't help wondering how much I'd have to pay him to work here next year!

My runs the following morning were much improved, leaning hard on the rear tyres and using less correction in the corners. Even driving tidily, you are overwhelmed with a feeling of having fun and wanting to stay for just one more lap.

As I stood admiring the scenery and regretting the fact I was soon to go home, I heard the unmistakable sound of a rally car in the forest, not on the lake. Three minutes of 'maximum attack' later, and local Norwegian driver Jorgen Solberg arrived in his 2004 spec Group N Impreza. Chris was looking at me with a smug grin on his face; he'd mentioned his own experience of Jorgen in full flight in the forest, but had neglected to mention he had arranged a ride for me.

Suffice to say that Jorgen has a good idea of what a brand new Impreza on snow tyres is capable of, proving this to me over a 3km stretch of forest road over huge yomps mostly in 6th gear. Shouting, in his Scandinavian English, "Fun, Yes?" as we crest in 6th, then explaining that he preferred roads he didn't know so well as they were more exciting. I beg to differ; this one seemed pretty exciting from my side of the car! The forest roads surrounding the lake are available for testing, though I would recommend a day or two on the lakes first.

I left the lake at lunchtime to head back to Torp Airport and home, with a head full of a whole new dimension to a sport I thought I knew well. 8 hours after leaving the frozen lakes of Gautefall I was back in my local pub, recounting tales of super sideways action and showing mobile phone footage to prove it. Judging from the reaction of even my non-rally driving friends, Chris and the team at Innovation Motorsports will be very busy next season. n

**ABOVE:** Proof, if it were ever needed, that ice is slippy. Sideways Peugeot 205, sideways Subaru Impreza Group N and a sideways Toyota Corolla

## More Info

**Rally Schools**
www.innovationmotorsports.net
**Rally Instructors**
www.apcsport.com