

Snakes in The Grass

By Ed Valpey, VRG Chief Instructor

This time-worn idiom is generally used in the pejorative, but in the context of driver conduct it's pretty clear that possible threats should be neither seen nor heard. Several years ago the local chapter of the BMW Car Club of America was faced with a dilemma. A number of drivers wanted to make the transition from HPDE driving schools to Club Racing, but their HPDE experience, where passing occurred only on straights and only with point-bys, left them ill prepared. The solution was a "Passing Clinic" wherein participants, after attending a lecture on wheel-to-wheel driving, were given passing stripes. Cars with passing stripes could pass each other anywhere on the track, but when approaching cars without passing stripes the normal passing zone rules applied. The basic principal was simple... the presence of cars able to pass in corners could not in any way change the experience of those who did not wish to pass in corners. The program was successful and has since been adopted nationally. This scenario exists, perhaps to greater extremes, in vintage racing. Fast and competitive drivers inevitably share the track with drivers who simply enjoy circulating at a brisk pace, or who are new to the sport and have yet to learn how to drive to their car's potential. When drivers of both extremes conduct themselves appropriately, the experience of neither is diminished.

For the slower driver this conduct means, above all else, being predictable. This is why new drivers are instructed to stay on line when being passed... the faster driver will find his/her way around. Often, however, when incidents occur between faster and slower drivers, it's due to the slower driver's efforts to get out of the way, and far too often this is because a snake has poked his head out of the grass. When a faster driver hounds and intimidates a slower driver, or makes a tight pass, the latter is very likely to react in an unpredictable manner. In most of the remaining incidents between faster and slower drivers responsibility falls firmly on the shoulders of the former. When members of the Drivers Committee hear the words "He should have seen me" we can be pretty certain we're dealing with the wrong kind of snake. When a faster driver acts with appropriate restraint, the pass occurs safely regardless of whether the slower driver sees it coming. If a pass can't be made without causing the slower driver angst – regardless of whether or not it's technically "legal" - then the pass shouldn't be made, even if it means losing a position to a less thoughtful and careful participant... and that participant will likely soon be branded OCB (Other Clubs Beckon). Faster drivers can't pass unseen, but they can certainly pass without causing fear and discomfort.

For many "competitive" drivers, the appeal of vintage racing lies with the promise that true competition can be found among people who share the universal understanding that it exists with certain limitations. We like the idea that we can go out and drive as hard as we like, often finding ourselves in true hammer and tongs battles, yet at the end of the day our unwrinkled cars can be put in their trailers with only a little dirt and grime to mark our efforts. If we're an ideal club, with ideal participants, a national champion can share the track with Mr. Magoo... neither will have any "moments" and both will leave smiling and looking forward to the next event. Along with VRG's emphasis on safety and driver skill, the restraint, consideration and good judgment of our faster drivers will help assure our club's success in the future.