Tip-Toeing at the Track – The Alternative Line

by Joe Holzer Central New York Region

When I bought my '95 993 Cabrio Tip in 1999, I had just finished working a stint in Chicago which required me to drive about 35 miles each way through Chicago each day. At 5 AM and 8 PM the drive took about 45 minutes and wasn't too bad. But anywhere between those times was stop and go and took twice as long. Thankfully, I had my minivan. But I decided that the Tiptronic was worth trying, so I would have that option for another time. I was working with Duracell and had to travel between Indiana and Tennesee a lot. I found it almost an ideal setup, as it allowed me to shift if I wanted to, or let it take care of everything if I wanted that, and prevented me from making a mistake. More on that later.

When many of my fellow track-junkies found out about the Tip, they thought I was completely nuts. And they were actually right from a purely acceleration and optimum gear standpoint. The Tip is slower off the line, and generally has at least one fewer gear than its equivalent model manual gearbox. But that is not the whole story, and I am convinced that I will not get any future Porsche equipped any other way. The reasons have more to do with the fact that I use my Porsches as all-around vehicles, including that I use them for the track. The Tip provides a versatility which was unavailable in any other car, and has since then been duplicated by many brands' auto-manuals.

The around-town benefits are pretty obvious, even if you don't live in a major metro area. But the surprising benefits are to be found on the track. As a Zone 1 Checkout Instructor, I have a pretty good idea how to drive rapidly, and the Tip actually enhances that ability. But not if I continued to drive as if it were a manual. So the secret is to learn how to take advantage of the capabilities, just as ABS requires you to learn how it will react and adjust your driving, and THINKING, to reap the benefits. With ABS you have to learn to leave your foot hard on the brakes, but nonetheless steer around the situation you might otherwise have hit, and leave the brake pulsing to the system. Similarly, you must learn the characteristics of the Tip and adjust to best match them to gain maximum benefit therefrom. For a 911, the rule is to do all braking in a straight line, then turn in and modulate throttle to the apex, and accelerate from there. The 993 tends to plow a little, so a small amount of braking at the start of the turn is actually optimal, and allows a slight delay in braking in the straight. But shifting while turning is frought with risks except for the most capable drivers, especially as the clutch re-engages which disrupts the car. With a manual, balancing all those actions of shifter, brake, clutch and steering while on the lateral grip threshold is tough. So most people get the shifting done under braking in the straight. That costs time.

With the Tip, I turn in hard under braking to about 20% into the turn. Then, I STOMP on the gas, while opening the steering slightly to accommodate the downshift. Since the Tip can have this by either leaving it in drive, or even with a manual button on the wheel in the newest iteration, the control is easy since your hands never leave the wheel. This plants the car so you can re-establish proper arc, gradually opening through the apex and out as speed increases. On the following straight you need not lift to shift up, as the shift is almost instantaneous, and at the ideal engine revs to maximize thrust due to the Tip's ability to select any of five shift patterns based on throttle, load, and transition inputs. It actually learns a driver's style, and supports it. So, despite the fewer gears, it actually can run faster in the hands of a capable driver than a manual. Just ask Hurley Haywood. And it will never mis-shift and blow your engine, but if you forget to upshift in manual mode, it will do it for you if you reach 300 RPM below redline, and you haven't lifted.

And with the introduction of the viscous clutch in the front differential assembly for the 996 series, the all-wheel drive models are that much more potent, as the Tip is now capable of being used with them as well. And so the one area where a manual is still better than any automatic, the ability to control torque applied to all driving wheels (as for use on snow and ice), is greatly offset by the ability to have it applied through four wheels instead of only two. And for those who worry that efficiency is lost in a "slushbox", that is only true while the torque converter spools up. Once it gets rolling, a mechanical clutch locks up to create the same direct drive efficiencies as found with a manual gearbox.

In short, unless you never see city traffic, or are contented to have guys with "slushboxes" blow by you on the track, you should check out the latest transmission technology. You will be REAL surprised. It's a true marvel of engineering.

Now, the cabrio roof on a 993 on the other hand …