

Training Days

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Carmelita Jeter had a fundamental problem: She didn't know how to drive a stick shift.

That knowledge could come in handy when you're practicing for the [Toyota Grand Prix of Long Beach Pro/Celebrity Race](#). But, during the first days of training, the Olympic sprinter was hoping to find a Scion FR-S to fit her skillset.

"I actually raised my hand and said 'I'm sorry, do you guys have any automatics?'" Jeter said at practice last week. "A lot of people laughed at that."

However, Jeter wasn't alone in her deficiency. Actor Corbin Bleu, from "High School Musical" and "Dancing With the Stars," had no manual transmission experience either. In fact, that's fairly common for celebrities taking their first turn at Long Beach.

"A couple people didn't know how to drive stick, but that pretty much happens every year," says Danny McKeever, owner of Danny McKeever's Fast Lane Racing School.

Since 1985, McKeever has trained celebrities-turned-drivers for the race. He's used to teaching the basics. And this cast of characters is no different from the 28 McKeever trained before them.

"Every year, some of the celebrities are a little overwhelmed," McKeever says. "They go through all those emotions and then they become much more aware. I tell them 'this is not a career change. It's a bucket list thing list for most of you.'"

The [field](#) of 16 celebrities and three pros includes Oscar winner Adrien Brody, "Amazing Race" host Phil Keoghan, two-time Indianapolis 500 winner Al Unser Jr., and NASCAR legend Kyle Petty.

The race takes place April 12, with participants driving the Scion FR-S for 10 laps. In preparation, McKeever puts the celebs through four days of exhaustive training at Willow Springs Raceway in Palmdale.

Bleu has seen clear results from the training.

"Day 1 was nothing but frustration," he says. "I was just trying to figure out how to work the car. By Day 3, I was passing people. I was like 'I can do this. This is gonna be fun.'"

Last week, the group drove their first laps on the actual race track during practice in Long Beach. Their training paid off, as everyone managed to avoid even brushing against the concrete walls. That may have come as a surprise to Keoghan.

"When I look at all the concrete around the place, I'm super confident that somebody is going to scrape the wall," he joked before the first session.

Meanwhile Tricia Helfer, star of "Battlestar Galactica" and "Killer Women," found out that being a racing fan isn't enough to make you a capable driver.

"Because everybody drives, you assume it's not that hard," Helfer said. "And watching racing, you're like 'yeah, you know, I could do it.' But it's a lot more intense in the car than you expect. There's a lot more technique to it."

After only a relatively small amount of training and practice, the competitive spirit runs deep within the participants. Jeter quickly adapted to a stick shift, and plans to use the same fire that drove her to three medals in the 2012 London Olympics.

"This race is definitely going to be like a track meet," said 4×100-relay gold medalist. "When that flag drops, I'm going for it."