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## Cats and slot-car tracks are a recipe for dementia

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The other day, I received a package at work. Since I was not expecting to receive any packages, I was, as I often tend to be, mildly perplexed. I assumed it was some sales material, or perhaps a stack of Victoria's Secret catalogs. (Don't ask; it's the unfortunate side effect of having mail-order Christmas gifts delivered to the office.)

Imagine my delight when I picked up my package and noticed that it was a slot-car track. One of my clients had recently staged a publicity event involving giveaway slot-car sets. Apparently they had a few left over and sent one my way.

I was far more excited than a not-quite-middle-aged man really should have been. I gawked at the box in disbelief. I even tore it open to make sure that it actually included a slot-car set. When I confirmed that it did, I had to stifle a not-entirely-manly squeal of delight. "Duuuude," I said to no one in particular.

When I got home that night, the kids were most curious about my booty. I tried to explain to them what it was, but I could tell they didn't quite get it. None of them had ever seen a slot-car set in action. So I set about popping the track together and plugging everything in.

I set the pieces up in a standard figure-eight format. I figured it would be good to start with the basics before graduating to some of my favorite track formations from my youth, such as the Loop of Death, the Big Long Straightaway of Death, or the borderline-illegal Really Tight Left Turn of Death.

And I never even tried the Right Turn of Death

I set the cars on the track and grabbed one of the triggers. I squeezed a bit on my trigger. Nothing happened. I nudged one of the cars with my finger. Nothing. I nudged the other car. And zoom, off it sped around the track.

"Cooooool!" shrieked the girls as I made my little black car zip through the turns. The kids started shrieking that they wanted to try driving the other car and they simultaneously scrambled for the other trigger. As I momentarily ignored the shriek-laden battle for control of the other trigger, I savored the moment. It had probably been 25 years since I last drove a car around a slot-track, and I'd forgotten how stupid-fun it was. I was having a blast.

And at that precise moment, caught in my reverie of lost youth and cheap electronics, I discovered something about slot-car tracks that I'd never previously known: they apparently drive cats insane.

I have mentioned Frisco to you before. He's my fiancee's cat. He's 10 years old, mostly gray, and weighs just slightly less than 14 metric tons. He spends most of his days sleeping, eating, or hoping to eat. He rarely moves, and when he does, it's often with the inherent speed of a bucket of Mrs. Butterworth's. Only occasionally does he exhibit, for lack of a less ironic term, cat-like reflexes.

As a person who had only ever spent meaningful time around dogs for most of his life, I've found that I'm still adjusting to life with a cat. I suppose that there are many longtime cat owners who could have predicted Frisco's reaction to the sight of tiny cars zipping around a standard figure-eight slot-car

track.

But for me, what happened at that moment was a total surprise.

For it was at that moment that I saw Frisco, for the first time in our relatively brief cohabitation, launch a full-on cat attack.

He's a kitty on the edge

From seemingly out of nowhere, as I gleefully watched my little car fly through the turns, Frisco leaped directly onto the first turn. He didn't flinch as the two cars whunked into his considerable girth and flew off the track. He zeroed in on the purple car, pawed at it once, then leaned down and began gnawing on it.

"Hey!" I shrieked. I waved the cat away and snatched my cars from his suddenly demonic kitty-jaws. "Go on, git!" I said.

The kids howled with laughter. "Do it again, Daddy! Make Frisco do it again!"

I didn't want to do it again. Did they not witness the gnawing?

I hoped maybe the second time, Frisco would be more accustomed to the cars and wouldn't go all Godzilla on us again. We started the cars up again as I kept a wary eye on the cat.

As the cars sped around the track, Frisco's head whipped around like it was being yanked by an invisible and somewhat cruel muzzle. He was desperately trying to track the cars. He hopped inside one of the turns and whipped his entire body around as the cars sped past his position. It was the fastest I'd ever seen Old Fatboy move. And, I had to admit, it was absolutely hilarious.

After whipping around a full 720 degrees, Frisco pawed at the track – and nailed the purple car. It flew onto the carpet. He jumped after it, then once again began gnawing on it.

Once again, the girls howled with laughter. This time, I joined them.

After that the slot cars were only fun if we put Frisco in the middle of the track first. Each run of the cars seemed to jangle his nerves even further. I'm convinced that at one point he spun around with such velocity that he induced some form of kitty dementia.

At the end of every run, after he'd knocked his "prey" off the tracks and had a moment to enjoy a bit of gnawing, we'd yank the cars from him and do it again. This went on for, oh, about three days.

It occurred to me that maybe it wasn't good for the cat for his nerves to be tweaked nonstop for long periods of time. So after one particularly lengthy session I locked him in the bedroom for a little while. The racing wasn't as fun without the cat, though. Much like Tokyo isn't as fun without Godzilla.

By the end of the weekend, Frisco had gotten the last laugh. He had gnawed on the purple car enough times that he somehow rendered it inoperable, and therefore only of interest to him. Naturally, I took it away from him anyway, and packed it up in the box with the rest of the track pieces. One car does not a slot-car track make, even when you really aren't racing two cars as much as you're hoping the cat will find the task of tracking twin targets so infuriating that he begins howling like a kitty-monkey.

At some point I'll go buy a new car so the kids and I can have a little more fun. Maybe it will be next week. Maybe next year. I don't know.

Until then, Frisco, I would suggest that you get some sleep.

*Bob Rybarczyk ( [href="mailto:brybarczyk@stltoday.com">brybarczyk@stltoday.com](mailto:brybarczyk@stltoday.com)) writes stuff. He sure did enjoy showing up in a different section of this web site on Saturday.*

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