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Formula Vee suits driver to a T

By Tom Beer
staff writer

ARE RACE CAR drivers really athletes?
"You've got to be," answered Andres Serrano, who comes from Farmington Hills by way of Ecuador and a few other interesting places and who last October drove his own Formula Vee racer in the national championships down in Georgia.

"People just don't realize the physical requirements involved in driving a race car at speed," said Serrano, the only Michigan driver to qualify for the nationals, sponsored by the Sports Car Club of America and held on the three-mile Road Atlanta track in Gainesville, Ga.

"You're fighting with the car, and you've got to use all the muscles in your body to control it," Serrano continued. "And you have to concentrate totally on driving for long periods of time. It's not like football, where you can at least relax a little between plays."

"A lot of people think you just sit back and relax and drive your car."

Formula Vee, a popular amateur class, is a relatively inexpensive way to go racing. The cars use Volkswagen components — engine, transmission

and suspension — and no more than a specified amount of money may be spent on tuning.

"It's a formula car in that its wheels are out in the open, and it's a single seater," said Serrano, who has driven his 11-year-old car in 50 races during the past four years. "It looks like a champ car except that it's a lot smaller."

FROMULA VEE racing is strictly an amateur proposition. It's "purses" are limited to \$2,500, and Volkswagen pays little attention to the sport since the VW parts used are long out of production.

"We're basically doing it for the sport," said Serrano, who owns his own business consulting firm. "Some of us think we can move on to bigger and better things. Some of us fall in love with the class the way it is."

The son of a diplomat, Serrano was born in Quito, Ecuador, 31 years ago, and did his growing up in Mexico, El Salvador, Panama and Rockford, Ill., where he graduated from Rockford College.

Serrano went to work for the White Motor Corp. in Chicago and advanced to sales manager of the company's Latin American division. He met and married his wife, Wanda, while they were both with White Motor in Chicago. Serrano was transferred from Chicago to Farmington Hills in 1980. He formed his own consulting business after White declared bankruptcy last year.

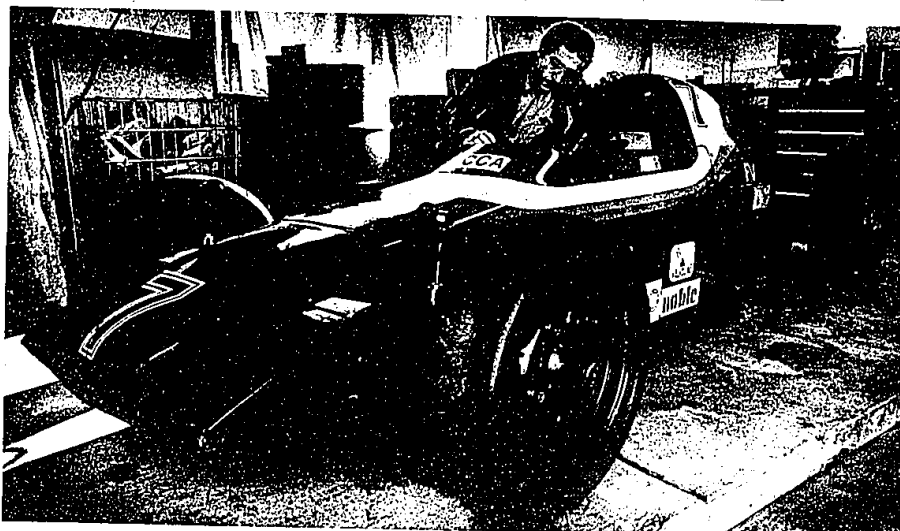
"Basically, I consult with various companies in regards to their export activities," Serrano said.

Always handy with cars, Serrano developed a liking for auto racing while in college.

"I dabbled in road racing back then," Serrano said. "I had a car or two. But, you know, you're broke half the time in college."

"I was looking to get involved in road racing in a class that would allow me to compete with good drivers and wouldn't send me to the poorhouse."

AND THAT CLASS turned out to be Formula Vee. Serrano, who has a little financial help from a sponsor, estimates his racing expenses at something over \$10,000 last year.



Andres Serrano of Farmington Hills looks over his Formula Vee race car in which he qualified for the national championships in Georgia last year.

RANDY BORST/staff photographer



Andres Serrano: "Some people think you just sit back and relax and drive your car."

"Any kind of racing is expensive," he said. "I guess what you have to look at is this: OK, you want to go racing, so what is the cheapest way to race? The answer has to be Formula Vee."

"Look, I have a car and two transmissions. Maybe I have \$13,000 invested in my car. But that car will always be competitive. If I go up a class, say to Formula Ford, it's going to cost me \$20,000 for just the car and motor. And a year later, that car won't

be competitive because of the freedom of design these people have. It's a car-of-the-year thing."

Serrano, who does most of his own mechanical work, used his van to tow the racer to the meets he had to do well in to qualify for the nationals. Last year, he raced well enough in several qualifiers to finish fourth in the seven-state region.

Next season, he'll have to run in 11 races — the best six performances will

count — to qualify for the nationals in Georgia.

Serrano had to be disappointed in his performance in last year's nationals. He was rear-ended five laps into the race, and the resulting unscheduled pit stop put him way behind. He finished 18th in the 36-car field.

"I certainly thought I'd do better," he said. "I started 18th, and I was moving right up through the field, picking people off. I was running 10th when I got hit."

"These are relatively short races, sprints really, and you're done for if anything happens to you. Unfortunately, something happened to me."

So Serrano has all winter to get his car back in shape for the coming season, but he's had some bad luck there, too. Burglars broke into his garage recently and stole \$2,500 worth of tools. "The police caught the thieves, but I can't get my tools back just yet," he said. "It's a real bummer when I can't work on my car."

A tall tale!

Stevenson's 'giants' rip Hawks

Livonia Stevenson's height advantage was evident its 64-38 Western Lakes Activities Association basketball victory over Farmington Harrison Thursday night.

Tom Domako, a 6-foot-7 junior, scored 21 points and pulled down seven rebounds for Stevenson, and 6-6 teammate Bob Slika scored 12 points and snatched eight rebounds.

"We played really well until it came time for the genealogy lesson," said Harrison coach Mike Teachman, whose team fell to 4-11 overall and 3-8 in the conference. "The Livonia schools always seem to have the giants."

"We have two kids in our school over 6-foot-4. One's a swimmer and the other has a broken foot."

Wes Jones and Gordie Dawson scored 10 and nine points, respectively, for Harrison, which was outrebounded, 45-23.

FARMINGTON WHIPPED Walled Lake Western, 56-47, in a Western Lakes Activities Association game Friday. Farmington is 4-10 overall and 4-8 in the league. Western is winless in 15 starts this season.

Dan Zang scored 18 points for Farmington, and teammate Scott Hayosh had 10. Chris Keller scored six of his seven points in the third quarter. Rob Wendland (18 points) and Mike Cullen (14) led Western.

NORTH FARMINGTON was beaten by Livonia Franklin, 51-43, Friday in a Northwest Suburban League basketball game. The Raiders are 2-6 in the league and 7-9 overall.

Franklin was led by Bob Stebbins (19 points) and Mike Johnson (18). North got 14 from Ray Boyle and 10 more from Will Reineke. Franklin, now 4-5 in the conference and 8-7 overall, held a 27-24 lead at halftime.

LUTHERAN NORTHWEST lost its 14th-straight basketball game this season when it dropped a 73-48 decision to Pontiac Oakland Christian Friday. Mike Aumann scored 25 points for Northwest and Mark Roehrs had 13. Northwest plays next on Tuesday at Harper Woods.



Farmington's Chris Keller (20) passes off during a recent basketball game.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Harrison's Wes Jones (33) leads Livonia Stevenson's Tom Domako in a race to the basket during Thursday's game, won by Stevenson.