

Speed dreamin' Race teams aims for a grand win

By Pat Schutte
special writer

Success is projected in different ways and perceived in many more.
For instance, it could be seen as the success of the great football running back making the headlines and drawing the incredible salary. Or it could be the Best Picture Oscar for the director that launches his career skyward.

To make individual success work, one needs to back oneself with a team of professionals willing to go the distance to achieve greatness.

For a crew of local guys, it's no different. They're the ones who set the table for driver Jim Robinson to feast on. They're the Robinson Racing Team, the behind-the-scenes crew on a successful Sports Car Club of America racer.

BASED IN Livonia, Robinson Racing is in its second year of competition on the SCCA Trans-Am circuit.

The team owner and driver, George Robinson (who lives in Texas and owns and operates the 74-ranch, a game hunting ranch), is the first to admit the importance of the team that he and team president Robert Nowakowski put together.

"This really is a team sport, but unfortunately, the driver gets more of the glory when in reality he is only one component in the racing machine," said Robinson, a former sid racer who claims that getting behind wheel of a race car has taken the thrill out of all the other exciting things he does.

Robinson met Nowakowski through race driver Wally Dallenbach Jr.

"HE (ROBINSON) was cruising around the race courses and asking team owners how much it would cost for him to drive their cars," Nowakowski said.

So Robinson and his childhood friend and Nowakowski and his performance automotive company — Tech-Sports — formed a partnership and put together a racing team in the heart of automotive country, a prime location for a team like theirs.

"Detroit is an idea place," he said. "It has all of the materials it takes to run a race car. . . . And the access to the highways here makes it very easy for us to travel."

Many of today's race drivers, Nowakowski said, come from "well-to-do families." And Robinson is no exception. Yet, at 31, Robinson understands that it just doesn't take a wad of money to win at this game.

"Everybody on our team is treated with equal respect," Robinson said. "They have all worked together for several years now and when we show up at a race, the competition knows we're ready to go."

CASE IN point . . . Sears Point, Calif., in the opening race of the 1991 SCCA Trans-Am season.

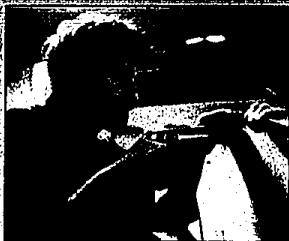
"In the opening race, we out-crewed everyone," Robinson said on their fourth place finish against other teams sporting several cars and up to a dozen crew members. Robinson Racing has one car and four crew members.

"Without this crew behind me we'd just be spinning our wheels."

Team manager Jim Fraser of Novi, who has worked for Indy champions Rick Mears and Bobby Rahal, said he and his friends who make up the Robinson Racing have finally come full circle.

"We've all worked together at various places and for various teams over the years and this is a culmination of talent with a new racing team," he said.

THIS YEAR Robinson Racing (which in its first year was called Comp Kart) bought the framework of a car — a rolling chassis without a motor or transmission — from SCCA racing and design guru Bob Riley of Indianapolis.



photos by and JIM RIDER/staff photographer

With a steady hand, mechanic Dave Warfel makes modifications to the hood of the Robinson Team car.

From there, the team built what amounts to a seriously customized 1991 Camaro, complete with a 4.5-liter, 310-horsepower, V-6 engine and a host of other cool things that make it illegal to drive on the street.

Back to SCCA Trans-Am specifications, the blue, white and hunter's orange car weighs in at 2,400 pounds. The only two original parts it wears from the Camaro they started with is the windshield and roof angle, making the car identifiable to fans.

And it has a somewhat less than scary top speed of 190 mph, which, Fraser said, is fast enough for the kind of racing done here in Detroit and at other SCCA Trans-Am circuit courses across the country.

"This car doesn't have neck-snapping acceleration," Fraser said. "The handling characteristics of this type of car makes it what it is. It will corner as fast as it goes straight."

THE SCCA Trans-Am class evolved from racing the muscle cars of the 1960s and early '70s — the Ford Boss Mustang, Camaro Z-28 and Ford Cobra. "It was a playground for the factories," Fraser said. "That's where this series came from."

A car that's more than a car

By Pat Schutte
special writer

Here's a look at the basic hard goods (for example, the car, its parts and the equipment involved in transporting and maintaining the car) that are associated with operating a SCCA Trans-Am racing team.

THE RACE CAR:

- The frame and suspension, \$95,000.
- The engine (you'll need four), \$25,000 each.
- The transmission (you'll need two), \$8,000 each.
- The rear end (you'll need two), \$10,000 each.
- The tires (110-mile average per set, three or four sets per weekend), \$1,000 per set.
- The wheels (you'll need five sets), \$2,400 per set.

The brake pads (they would last five years on a family car, spent on a weekend in a race car), \$520 for four.

- The fuel (90 gallons on a weekend), \$4 per gallon.

THE TRANSPORTATION VEHICLE:

- The tractor (custom with a sleep cab), \$95,000.

Trans-Am is the most competitive of the different race series like the International Motor Sports Association, GTO, GTP and Camel Light, because car modifications are strictly governed and costs are kept down to make it a true classic American car race, he said.

"The less money you can spend, the greater the competition you have," Fraser said.

THIS WEEKEND will likely be the most importance race of the season for Robinson Racing. Not only is it a chance for Fraser, Nowakowski and the rest of the crew to pull off a victory in their hometown, but it also puts Robinson and his performance car in full view of the Big Three automakers, especially Chevrolet.

"To win here, with all of the guys being from the Detroit area, would be the greatest thing that could happen," Fraser said. "We all want this one . . . bad."

"We've produced a good product and now we're getting ready to market it," Robinson said. "The elements are here. All the big guns are out in Detroit."

As if the hometown pressure wasn't enough, Detroit is one of the more challenging courses for driver and crew alike on the SCCA Trans-Am circuit.

There is no room for error. "The track is completely challenging and required an immense amount of driver concentration," Fraser said. "If you screw up on the street circuit (as opposed to the open road circuit) you hit a speed trap."

AVOID RACING. Amateur 1-456 racers think they could easily handle the fast life. Not so, Nowakowski said.

"We spend all night working on last minute engine changes, living out of hotels and airports," he said. "This is definitely not the life of champagne and cheese. It takes a lot of time away from our families."

So Robinson will have one advantage over much of the field. He knows that when he gets behind the wheel and is called to the start, his crew has had the advantage of spending the night before the race with their support crew . . . the wives, children and families backing those behind the scenes in the work of auto racing.

- The trailer (complete with generator, welder, air compressor, storage for race fuel tank and all the tools), \$100,000.
- The tools (enough to fix anything with a motor), \$90,000 plus.

NOT INCLUDED:

- The salary of the team members (including a cook), the motor home that follows the team, transportation (permits and fuel) costs and a lot more.

And consider this: There is an \$11,000 purse at each of the 16 series races. If Robinson Racing won every one of them (which is highly unlikely for any SCCA Trans-Am team) they would be able to pay for their tires and their engines.

"They say that horse racing is the sport of kings," said team manager Jim Fraser on the great deal of money associated with horse racing. "For what it costs to board a race horse for a year (roughly \$15,000). We spend that alone on traveling permits for our truck."

"We'll spend close to \$1 million this year doing something that we all like very much. This (auto racing) is the real sport of kings."

THE ROBINSON RACING TEAM



NAME: Jim Fraser
AGE: 38
HOMETOWN: Novi
POSITION: Team Manager
RESPONSIBILITIES: I've been in the business so long that I can work on any aspect of the car," said Fraser. "I also involve bill paying, hotel reservations, answering the phone and things like that."



NAME: Robert Nowakowski
AGE: 33
HOMETOWN: Livonia
POSITION: President of Robinson Racing
RESPONSIBILITIES: Research, design, produce, and test racing products. Hands-on maintenance on the car. Works with Fraser on SCCA sanctioning meetings.



NAME: Dave Warfel
AGE: 31
HOMETOWN: Novi
POSITION: Mechanic
RESPONSIBILITIES: "Transmissions," said Warfel. "And from there just about everything from the engine to the body and cosmetic work."



NAME: Mike Nowakowski
AGE: 25
HOMETOWN: Orionville
POSITION: Crew Chief
RESPONSIBILITIES: "I'm responsible for the maintenance of the car, with my responsibilities being the rear and mechanics. I also did the body work and painting on the car."



NAME: Norm Johnson
AGE: 25
HOMETOWN: Ann Arbor
POSITION: Mechanic
RESPONSIBILITIES: Johnson is a shock and suspension expert and an experienced welder who also specializes in fabrication work. "I'll do just about anything."



NAME: Don Male
AGE: 32
HOMETOWN: Garden City
POSITION: Team truck driver
RESPONSIBILITIES: Besides coordinating all of the team transportation, Male (an experienced welder) also built the accessories, like a modified golf cart and trailer that carries tools and tires, which are a must for a SCCA team.

Behind a great race is a great poster . . .

By Ralph R. Eohltinaw
staff writer

Maybe Kathy Nagler should grumble about her job assignments more often.

Nagler designed the 1991 Detroit Grand Prix poster for Simons, Michelson, Zieve Inc., a Troy-based advertising agency. But she wasn't enthusiastic about the assignment, having just come off a hectic week finishing the Michigan Opera Theatre program book.

"At first, to be honest, I wasn't real enthused about doing it. I was just sort of beat and kind of grumbled about being forced," she said. "But it worked out pretty good. I'm glad in retrospect."

SMZ was one of five advertising agencies contacted last year by Detroit Renaissance Grand Prix to submit designs for the new poster.

"You're working like 20 hours a day to get this book out and the last day, after five days of doing that, I'd just got home and crashed when we found out we had the Grand Prix project," Nagler said. "We basically had the weekend to come up with some ideas. 'We had less than a week to do it, which is just a real short amount of time to do something like that.'"

So it's no wonder SMZ personnel were happy when two of their eight designs were selected to be among the four finalists.

The designs were printed in the Detroit Free Press Magazine and posted at the North American International Auto Show in January. A popular vote was taken through the magazine and the winning design was determined by the winner, and wouldn't you know it, the grumbler's design was chosen.

"I WENT down to the auto show just so I could see what was going on," Nagler said. "I couldn't help when I walked past the counter (where the designs were) to just look a little bit to see if I could see who people were voting for."

Although Nagler, a Troy resident, can take much of the credit for the poster, the signature on it is that of Ken Taylor, the artist who turned Nagler's concept into reality. Coincidentally, Taylor resident Taylor also drew the Grand Prix III poster seven years ago.

The new posters are now on sale for \$15 at shops all



JIM RIDER/staff photographer

Kathy Nagler may have thought a week wasn't enough to come up with an idea for this Detroit Grand Prix, but it was, since her DaVinci-style artwork graces this year's poster.

over the Metro Detroit area. The race will be run June 16.

Nagler's idea was to capture a theoretical Indy car designer's pen-to-performance vision of the 100 mph-plus racers. Specifically, the poster incorporates a "Da Vinci-style" look, showing an Indy car challenging the streets of Detroit gradually changing into a blueprint-like drawing with a symbolic 10 in the background to represent the race's 10th anniversary.

"You're kind of peeking over the shoulder of the guy designing the car," Nagler said.

BORN IN Ann Arbor, Nagler and her family moved to Oak Park when she was 1. When she was in the seventh grade, the family moved to West Bloomfield.

Asked what she considers her hometown, Nagler said "Metro Detroit."

A longtime hands-on art aficionado ("I took all the art classes in school"), Nagler never aimed at a career in that field, thinking of it in terms of struggling painters trying to sell watercolors in shopping malls for \$10 each.

"I never thought you could make a living at it, so I figured it would always be a hobby for me," she said. But while attending the University of Michigan, she got a summer job at SMZ as a delivery driver.

"It really opened my eyes to all the different ways you could make a living in the arts field," she said. "I just had no idea."

Nine years later she's on the brink of her 10th high

school reunion, newly married, and still working for SMZ. Funny thing though, Nagler never got a college degree.

"A degree is nice, and sometimes I wish I had one, but to have gotten a degree, I would have needed to take classes that eventually I could have taught because I was also working at the same time. I think when you're in art, a degree just gets you foot in the door. The only thing that's going to get you a job is your portfolio."

NAGLER CERTAINLY has more than her foot in the door at this point, but the job doesn't get any easier.

"Advertising is a high-pressure, fast-paced, deadline-oriented job," she said. "Sometimes you have to be creative on demand and it's kind of stressful. 'You can't please everybody all the time when you're doing something subjective. I like red. I like blue. Shut up. Don't care. Do this. Do that.' But I thrive under pressure."

"If I have a week to do it, I'm not going to have the idea on the first day. I have to wait until it's much more of a panic. And you get the ideas at the weirdest times."

Indeed, the Grand Prix poster vision came to Nagler while she was undergoing physical therapy for a soccer injury.

Speaking of soccer, Nagler is an athlete from way back. She appeared on West Bloomfield High School's inaugural soccer team when she was a junior.

"I made the team because I bled a lot," she said, "showed effort."

For three years she was part of Oakland University's women's soccer club, where she received one of the greatest thrills of her 27-year existence in the form of a headline in ODU's student newspaper, "The Oakland Post," and displayed her acumen for thriving under pressure.

"I was in a big scoring slump and the coach had threatened to throw me off the team if I didn't score a goal in this game, and I scored four of them. The headline was, 'Nagler explodes on Western.' The parts of my body were lying all over campus."

Her suggested headline for this story was, "Nagler explodes on the Grand Prix." Let's hope not.