

Speed demon

Model-car racer competes nationally

By Anne Sullivan
staff writer

WHEN IT COMES to cars, Tony Christen, a 17-year-old Farmington Hills resident, is a real speed demon — even though 35 miles per hour is about top end for him.

"Doing 35 on scale is like doing 350 (on a full size track)," said Christen, who has earned a trophy or two racing radio-controlled model cars.

"They're flying. And I like the competition. I don't know of another sport with 10 guys battling around the track, door-to-door, bumper-to-bumper, fender-to-fender."

Tony races cars that are one-tenth the size of professional race cars. His cars are built by hand, battery powered, and must weigh at least 42 ounces to meet the requirements of Radio Operated Auto Racing (ROAR).

His interest in radio control cars began seven years ago, when he asked for, and received one for his 10th birthday.

"His parents thought it would be a fad and Tony would soon move on to something else. Today, he's competing in radio controlled races across the country — and winning. He earned 20 trophies last year."

"Tony didn't excel in sports or (with a) musical instrument," said Linda Christen, his mother. "But when he picked up his (radio controlled) car, he was like a natural."

HIE LEARNED to drive and maneuver his car on the driveway at home, and spent several years on the driveway before he started racing.

"He spent hours and hours racing his car around the driveway," said Jack Christen, Tony's father. "He got some cones and built a track in the driveway. That's when we knew it was more than a passing fancy."

It's a sport with no limitations. At age 17,

Tony competes against adults up to 70 years of age. Age is neither an advantage nor disadvantage, according to Jack Christen.

"It's a fun sport for kids of all ages, and there are no physical limitations," he said. "The tracks are all fitted for handicap access. It's fantastic. It ensures everyone can participate."

The Christen family learned a little more than a year ago that Tony suffered from Scotopic Sensitivity Syndrome, a perceptual dysfunction dealing with light sources and black and white contrast. The condition is corrected with a pair of special glasses.

"His grades — and his driving on the car track — improved immensely after he got the glasses," said Linda Christen, who admits she was amazed Tony could compete after learning of his disability.

Part of Tony's problem was that he saw everything two dimensional rather than three dimensional.

"When he got his glasses, one of the first things he said was, 'Wow, clouds are fluffy,'" said Jack Christen.

TONY DEVELOPED an interest in the different style cars, and received an RC 10 for Christmas in 1989. This was his first off-road car. Tony has tried every kind of car, and today he prefers racing his pan car.

It was by accident that Tony first learned about racing in the radio control arena two years ago. He walked into a hobby shop, looking for accessories for his cars, and noticed a sign announcing a race.

In his first race, Tony qualified for the B event, the second fastest race of the day, he finished in second place and came home with a trophy.

"All his practice on the driveway came together," said Jack Christen.

Today, radio control racing is a family affair with the Christens. Tony's dad is the pit

man, and his mom paints many of his cars. But when it's race time, it's Tony at the controls.

The oval raceways are 1/10 the scale of professional race tracks and include two 40-foot curves and between 80-105 feet of straightaway on each side.

Attending a meet is like attending a full scale race. It's an all day affair. The competitors race against the clock in qualifying heats, to earn their spot in the main event.

RADIO CONTROL racing is big business and can cost big bucks. The Christens estimate the cost of building one of Tony's race cars between \$750-1,000, but say a racing quality car could be bought for \$300-\$500.

Parts need repair and replacement regularly, sometimes after only one race. In addition to the costs of building the cars, racers must also buy batteries and chargers.

Like professional drivers, the radio control drivers have sponsors. Tony has picked up six sponsors who cover portions of his expenses.

Andy Jacobson, of Andy's Radio Control Products, provides him with bodies. Tekin Electronics sponsors him for electronic parts. Robinson Racing Products sponsors Tony for gears. Boca Bearings provides bearings. Quarter Flash provides Tony with battery motors, and Prostar offers Tony a 50 percent discount for tires.

"We are grateful for the sponsors," said Linda Christen.

Tony's interest in racing cars may be inherited, somewhat. Originally from Indiana, Tony gets a lot of assistance from his dad, who built stock cars when he was young.

"I didn't race Tony," said Jack Christen.

"Tony is racing for himself."

Tony has made a name for himself in the radio control racing arena. Manufacturers have sought him out to test prototype chassis. All of his cars are either limited production or prototypes.

Not only has he earned a reputation because of his racing, but word has gotten around the circuit that Tony builds one of the smoothest differentials. He has been nicknamed "Diffman" by a fellow racer for whom Tony built a differential.

Locally, Tony races at Hobby House in Livonia, Riders in Canton, and JJ's in Warren.

IT HASN'T ALL been smooth sailing for Tony, a junior at Farmington High.

When he first made the decision to compete, Tony entered the club circuit. Last year he made the leap to the travel circuit, and each time he needed a couple days off from school to attend a race, he ran into problems with his teachers.

His teachers were not eager for Tony miss a couple days to race what they thought were toys, according to Linda Christen, who was angered because she doesn't believe students participating in team sports are has-



Tony Christen competes nationally racing his radio-controlled car. He operates his race cars with better

precision now that glasses have corrected a vision problem.

sled when they need time off to compete.

"It's better this year," said Linda Christen. "They've known Tony for three years and realize it's for real, he truly has an interest and isn't just trying to get out of school."

Jack and Linda Christen are pleased with what the competition has done for Tony.

"Unlike a team sport, this is totally up to his individual ability," said Jack Christen. "It's a little like golf, you may play on a team, but what you accomplish is what you accomplish. (Radio control racing) has

helped build his self confidence, and the improvement in his eye-hand coordination is astounding."

"The cars are inches apart and they are maneuvered in and out to compete for position. I've tried it, and I'm all over the track."

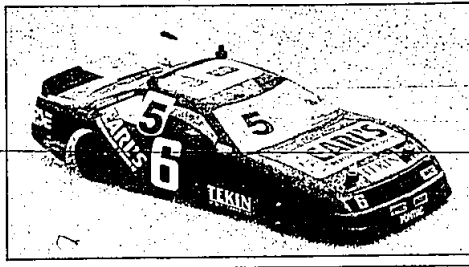
Tony meets people from all over the world at the races. He feels competing has done a lot for him personally.

"I've grown up. I don't do what most kids my age do," said Tony. "I don't go to parties or to the mall anymore."



Photos by
Sharon LeMieux

Jack and Tony Christen work together in the basement of their Farmington Hills home on the mechanical end of the sport. Radio control racing has become a major family event.



One of the cars Tony Christen races is a 1/10 scale model of a professional racing automobile. Tony has raced at speeds of 35 mph.

Cable TV company to hike basic, some premium rates

By Susan Buck
staff writer

MetroVision's 23,000 subscribers in Farmington and Farmington Hills will pay more for the full basic package and some premium channels beginning Feb. 1.

But rates for other premium channels will drop and a new discount for high-end users could mean lower monthly bills for some subscribers, said Tom Bjorklund, MetroVision vice president and regional manager.

"We understand that nobody likes a rate increase," Bjorklund said. "However, MetroVision's basic cable rates continue to be among the lowest in the metropolitan Detroit area."

The price of full basic service will increase by \$1.50 to \$18.45 per month.

"We're working with programmers to keep costs down," Bjorklund said.

The cable industry continues to experience cost increases of 25-30 percent annually, making this increase necessary, Bjorklund said.

"There's been years that we haven't increased our rates," Bjorklund said. "We've never increased our rates more than once a year." He could not immediately identify those years where rates weren't increased.

FOR COMPARISON purposes, MetroVision's full basic rate in 1987 was \$12.45 a month.

The new rate compares favorably to other communities in southeastern Michigan where basic service can cost as much as \$24. The average monthly rate is \$20, Bjorklund said.

Bjorklund said he didn't anticipate any further basic rate changes for at least one year.

The cable carrier will implement a series of changes in fees, Bjorklund said.

The changes will help "provide better service and

equality in rates" in Livonia, Redford and Farmington/Farmington Hills, MetroVision's three Detroit-area communities, according to Bjorklund.

"MetroVision has always had slightly different rate structures in the three systems, which has been difficult to explain to customers," Bjorklund said. "Customer service and marketing communications will also be more efficient with an essentially common structure."

NEW PREMIUM channel rates are:

- Disney Channel — \$8.25 per month, down by 25 cents.

- Home Box Office, Showtime and The Movie Channel — \$7.95, up by 45 cents.

- Cinemas — \$6.95, down by 55 cents.

- PASS — \$8.95, no change.

The new rate for remote control units will be \$3, a decrease of 25 cents. Additional outlets which had cost \$4.50 without remote and \$3.50 with, will now cost \$3.95, with or without remote.

- Cable Guide magazine price will remain at \$1.50

A \$2.70 monthly discount will be offered to subscribers with three premium channels, a remote and the guide, Bjorklund said.

The discount comes in part as a response to the downturn in the economy, Bjorklund said in another interview.

"We've added subscribers during the last year but in terms of the number of channels, there's been some dropoff in premium channels and also on pay-per-view events," Bjorklund said.

He said the decreases haven't been out of the ordinary considering current economic conditions.

MetroVision services 20,000 in Farmington Hills and 3,000 in Farmington.

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