

Car-lovers find computer useful



MIKE WENDLAND

The hot Florida sun baked down on the backs of the three engineers as they hunkered down over a bank of laptop computers, studying screens with changing displays of numbers, graphs and flickering images.

Fifty feet away, 29 race cars screamed past at speeds well over 200 mph.

Welcome to the converging world of the geeks and the gearheads.

Such was the scene last week in Homestead, Fla. during the annual "Spring Training" session for the CART racing circuit. All the big names in racing were there. Unser, Andretti, Vasser, Even Paul Newman. All the hottest open-wheel cars, too.

But while the car is indeed the ultimate star, perhaps the most unsung hero is the microchip.

For chips, and the computers they power, play a huge role in the pits and on the race track. They control and monitor crucial engine functions that not only help the sleek speedsters run more efficiently but make racing safer. And all that technological assistance eventually translates into more efficient and safer family vehicles.

"That's why we race," said John Quigley, director of racing for Visteon Automotive Systems, the Ford Motor Co. enterprise that I watched last week during the Florida time trials. "Think of the racetrack as the ultimate proving ground. It's a perfect performance model for our people, our technology process and our products."

For example, computers provide critical telemetry informa-

tion. Radio signals transmit data on ignition, fuel consumption, water temperature and oil pressure as the black and grey No. 20 Visteon car circles the track. The bank of Compaq laptops in the pits instantly crunch the numbers and spit out detailed reports and visual displays.

Watching the numbers, engineers can "coach" driver P.J. Jones on adjustments he can make from the cockpit and what the pit crew can change as Jones wheels in from the track.

Bob Schultz is an engineering technologist for Visteon racing. He lives in Waterford, but pretty much from now through the end of the racing season will spend most of his time on the road or at race tracks.

Visteon's race telemetry engineer is Kirk McNeil of Ann Arbor. Working out of the pits and a state of the art technology trailer that provides race-track support, he pointed to a tablet-sized personal computer that spits out data from the official Omega timing clock. The wireless PC provides the driver instantaneous and detailed information on his lap times, standings in the pack and average speed.

Tom Neuhart is a marketing specialist for Visteon racing. He says the technology perfected on the track has given the auto supplier a competitive edge in the industry. "We're working on hardware, software and control strategies to make our racing and automotive customers successful," he said the other day, shouting to be heard above the exhilarating roar of the engines. "This is like a top gun school for our engineers. This is the elite. This is where technology and training bring real results."

Visteon also supports other racing forms, like those of the American LeMans Series, the National Hot Rod Association,

Enduro, Formula One and even the America's Cup sailing spectacular.

And it pays off. Five years ago, a Phase 6 Engine Control Unit was introduced for Formula One racing. That system, perfected in the racing environment, was later adapted for mainstream use and is today a regular part of Ford Motor Co. production cars and trucks. It processes some 10 million computer commands per second.

Right now, auto engineers are looking with excitement at other innovative solutions that are being refined in racing. Jim Katzen, a Visteon engineer from Ypsilanti, was in Homestead showing off a Digital Driver Display Wheel that features, among a host of computerized and technological advancements, a multipage configurable message center that shows vital driving information on the steering wheel.

Diane Creasy manages sales and marketing for Visteon's Global Technology Development division.

"Look around you," she said, sweeping her hand in an arc across the track, shimmering in the 82-degree heat. "This is technology being pushed to the limit. And while racing is a lot of fun and a great sport, what we're really doing is advancing the future. And that's exciting."

You can follow the story of Visteon racing on its Web site (www.visteon.com), and on the Web site of its racing partner, Patrick racing (www.patrick-racing.com). To leap up to date on CART racing, check out its Web site (www.cart.com).

Mike Wendland covers technology and the Internet for NBC stations and is heard talking about computers 4-6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday on AM1270, WXYT in Detroit.

CARRIER OF THE MONTH

Mark Kozlowski has been named the Farmington Observer's Carrier of the Month for December.

Mark lives in Farmington Hills with his parents, David and Barbara, and has three older sisters, Kristy, Bridget and Ellen. He is in ninth grade at Brother Rice High School and enjoys algebra and Spanish. Mark plans to get through high school and college before making any long-term choices for his future.

Earning his own money is what Mark likes most about his route. It has also helped him to learn how to deal with people and handle money.



Mark Kozlowski

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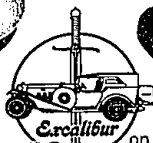
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