

"We used to have machines that went 25 or 30; now they go over 100..."

The snowmobiles they race are pretty much like the standard riding models, except for the horsepower. While a standard snowmobile may go 60 miles an hour, the big racing engines will propel it to 100 mph plus.

"They are pretty finely tuned," Toutant says.

"IT'S A LOT like a motorcycle. You lean into the turns and power slide on the corners," his son, Tom, said.

That is a description from the driver's point of view.

From the spectator's angle, it is a lot like a stock car race, with the snowmobiles going around a flat oval track, kicking up a cloud of snow in their wake.

They spin and flip like cars, but because of the generally uneven surface, unlike cars, they tend to leap in short hops like a school of porpoises as they tear around.

Races are sponsored by either the Michigan International Snowmobile Association or the United States Snowmobile Association.

"Modified" classes are open only to professional drivers like the Toutant team, but amateurs may enter the stock classes.

THE MISA hasn't prepared a full schedule yet, but some of the biggest

races are the "Sault 500" in Sault St. Marie; the Traverse City 250 and the Thunder Bay 250 at Alpena.

Nearer to home, both Northville Downs and the Detroit Race Course turn the track over to the snowmobiles, and Toutant says DRC is aiming to become a big "money" race this year.

The pros race for prizes sometimes going up to several thousand dollars, both "win" money and "lap" money, he says.

Entrance fees run from \$5 to \$50, depending on the race.

How do you get into racing?

"You have to start out in the stock classes," he said.

You get a number by registering with MISA (which is moving to Westland soon; it is located in East Jordan now).

Even a family machine can be raced in the stock classes, Toutant says, but warns it is awfully tough on the machine compared to general riding.

"The flips, and things break . . ."

After a year in "stock," you can go to "super stocks," which are hot, but unmodified snowmobiles.

Then it is possible to enter professional racing.

But in competing with the pros, you

are competing with dealers and manufacturers for the big time titles.

You might think that racing is a winter sport.

Then how do you explain those snowmobiles in the middle July heading out the expressway on trailers?

What they are doing is drag racing on grass.

A straight-line test of acceleration, they race on a 1,000 foot course. A popular nearby spot for this sort of thing is at Whitmore Lake.

Now if they could think of a way to get a snowmobile to float . . .



Why One Livonia Family Likes The Sport

Who rides snowmobiles?

"I've always hated winter," says Mrs. Mary Gilbertson, secretary of the Livonia Sno-Flakes and now in her third year of riding.

"I'm the kind who doesn't even like to shop when it's snowing. I've never been involved in sports before."

"Last winter, though, we were out riding one night and it was 14 degrees below zero. It was so cold that when you breathed, your breath condensed on your hood, and little icicles hung down, you know?"

"But you dress for it. One of my daughters went up to Houghton Lake one weekend and she didn't want to wear one of those suits -- you know -- she said it made her look fat."

"That was the last time she did that."

"I DON'T know just what it is, it's so pretty, so quiet in the woods."

"There are all the shapes the snow makes, and you are away from it all."

"Next year, we are going to get another machine, I think, for Brenda -- she's 14 and really interested. I think you get more machines because you get to like it, and it's not much fun riding with somebody else."

"The older one (Debby, 16) is getting a little old for it, I guess."

It's mainly a family affair, and this two-child, two-snowmobile family is nearly a statistical average, she says.

Whatever the fascination, it draws suburban housewives out into the

snowfields when, previously, they would hardly get out of their station wagons.

Probably only camping draws out as many families in Michigan, and sure enough, the Gilbertsons camp, too.

STANLEY GILBERTSON was the family member who got the rest interested.

"When I was a kid in Minnesota, I would have given my right arm for something like this," he says, with the

memories of staying only on the cleared roads, or not going very far.

"Sometimes when you stop a machine and get off, you sink in up to here." A hand cuts off at mid-thigh. "It's really tough to walk."

"I was brought up with snow, I know what it's about."

"I used to ski a lot, I suppose, I would still be all right."

But with two kids, a wife, and a sport which is so easy to learn, (Mrs. Gilbertson claims she taught most of a Girl Scout troupe the basics in an afternoon. Snowmobiles are the thing.

