

Chassis, suspension key to competition

Van Arnem team challenges European cars

By ROBERT A. SKLAR
Standing sentry over this country's still maturing sport of professional auto racing isn't exactly Harold Van Arnem's idea of a good time.

Rather, it's a fiery obsession with him.

The 32-year-old Cincinnati native owns Van Arnem Racing (VAR). Approaching its fourth birthday, VAR has offices in Birmingham and shop facilities in Troy.

It's committed to manufacturing an American car capable of competing successfully with European-manufactured cars on the international auto-racing circuit.

REACHING THAT lofty plateau looks more likely with each passing month, says Van Arnem, confidently.

"We've blended talented engineering with the latest breakthroughs in equipment to become one of America's most influential auto-racing teams," he said.

VAR operates a pair of specially-constructed 1974 Chevrolet Corvettes. Each Corvette has a spoiler, or adjustable body wing.

A spoiler's purpose is to exert downward air pressure on a car's rear axle to keep the car from losing traction when cornering sharply at high speeds.

IN ADDITION, each Corvette is structured a few inches wider than past VAR cars, enabling it to securely hold wider tires.

VAR competes both on the International Motor Sports Association (IMSA) and the Sports Car Club of America (SCCA) circuits.

Its chief driver is Troy's Jerry Thompson. The 36-year-old veteran behind the wheel has been an application engineer for General Motors Corp. since the early 1960s.

Van Arnem says he pegs Thompson as "Mr. Corvette," because he's a three-time national champion in unlimited production, SCCA's premier amateur series.

VAN ARNEM talks openly about VAR's intention to try every conceivable means to permanently loosen Europe's lock on winning in international auto-racing circles.

What's more, he confides freely that much of his planning is predicated on advice from International Export.

That's a computerized automation-implementation service situated in Rye, N.Y., which Van Arnem owns.

'Every guy on our crew is just dedicated to an effort' — Harold Van Arnem

Van Arnem cites France's Porsche to illustrate how Europe boasts a monopoly on lightweight race cars.

PRESENTLY, VAR's Corvettes experience only minimal problems setting the pace on the straightaways during international auto-racing competition, Van Arnem notes.

But they lose up to 10 car lengths in the turns to the tinier, more maneuverable European models, Van Arnem adds.

Consequently, Van Arnem says he's got to be extremely creative in developing a chassis and suspension system which will compensate for his cars' heavier weight.

Since last year, Van Arnem says he's improved the maneuverability of his cars by 30 percent.

By 1975, he says he projects their maneuverability will improve another 20 percent.

"BUT THAT still won't be enough to be truly competitive in Europe," Van Arnem observed. "So, two things will have to happen."

"First, we'll have to enhance our cars' fuel consumption by a more-refined carburation system."

"This also could be accomplished by rule changes restricting the amount of fuel a car can carry based on its weight. Such changes seem possible by next year."

"Second, there's a definite need for new rules making the width of a car's tires relative to the car's weight."

WHAT'S KEPT Van Arnem so enmeshed with the world of checkered flags and pit stops? Meeting a challenge, according to Van Arnem. As he perceptibly put it:

"I'm both personally challenged with making Detroit-designed cars competitive against European-designed cars and seeing the sport (of auto racing) gain broader national acceptance."

Van Arnem's auto-racing roots run deep. They stem back to his collegiate days at the University of Cincinnati.

That's where he was graduated from on a football scholarship. Between gridiron practices, Van Arnem used to race stock cars on a nearby banked, dirt track.

HE RACED under the alias, Fleet Montay, because, as Van Arnem remembers, "the football coaches frowned upon on participation in such dangerous outside activities."

"You needed very little talent to compete in the stock car races," recounted Van Arnem, "just pure guts. And I just loved it."

"Whoever had the fastest, strongest car which could absorb the most bumps usually won."

After graduation, Van Arnem left auto racing for close to a decade.

DRAFTED by the National Football League's Dallas Cowboys, he proved too small physically (6-1, 190 pounds) to crack the Cowboys' beefy roster.

Responding to an instinctive urge, he then journeyed to Phoenix, where he struck an interest in the computer industry.

But, gradually, he recognized the severe limitations that industry placed on his deepening desire to interact with different types of people.

So, he returned to auto racing and, with Bloomfield Township's J. Marshall Robbins, founded VAR.

ROBBINS, 32 as well, broke his ties with VAR last year to devote himself full-time to actively racing.

Van Arnem says it's exhilarating "knowing you're within reach of the optimal achievement level in auto racing."

"Every guy on our crew is just dedicated to an effort," he said. "That's why our team's something special."

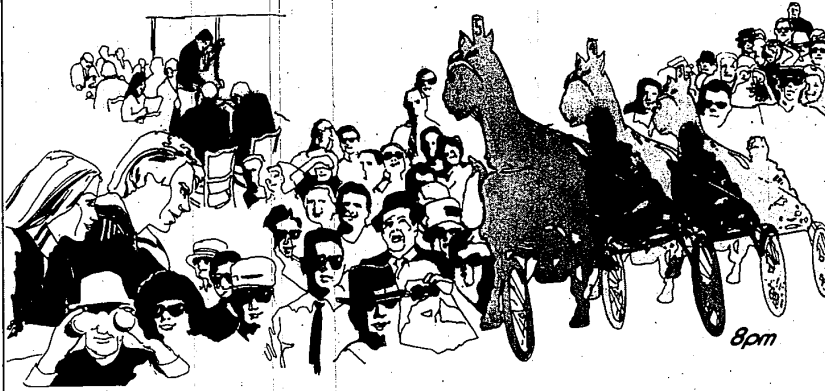
"It's attuned to people working together, not to intangible pursuits."



Van Arnem Racing hopes to permanently loosen Europe's lock on winning in international auto-racing circles with this 1974 Chevrolet Corvette.

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Van Arnem Racing 1974 Schedule

- Upcoming events
- July 27—Elkhart Lake, Wis. SCCA-sanctioned, 3-hour tour.
 - August 18—Charlotte, N.C. IMSA-sanctioned, 3-hour tour.
 - September 29—Phoenix, IMSA-sanctioned, 3-hour tour.
 - October 18-20—Mexico City, IMSA-sanctioned, 6-hour endurance.
 - November 30—Daytona Beach, Fla., IMSA-sanctioned, 3-hour tour.
- Previous events
- April—Atlanta, IMSA-sanctioned, 6-hour endurance, 1st in U.S. prototype production and 10th overall in field of about 50.
 - June—Lexington, Ohio, IMSA-sanctioned, 6-hour endurance, 1st in U.S. prototype production and 5th overall in field of about 50.
- (IMSA, International Motor Sports Association; SCCA, Sports Car Club of America).



Harold Van Arnem Jerry Thompson

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