

A Need for Speed



^ Division 10 Mechanic Leona Swedenhjelm sits in her brand new Chevy Corvette, which she says she may race after it's paid off.

Racing is all the rage for some Metro mechanics

By CHRISTINA ESPARZA

(April 3, 2002) Gateway Division 10 Mechanic Leona Swedenhjelm is used to being the only girl in the group.

She's the only female mechanic at her division, and out of 53 mechanics volunteering at the 2002 Winter Olympics, she was the only woman. But it's her hobby that might seem a little threatening to some men — racing.

"I remember this one guy had a gold '69 Pontiac Firebird," on the racetrack, Swedenhjelm said. "He was mouthing to me, 'I'm gonna whip your ***,' and he's sitting there shaking his finger at me, and while he's doing that, the light turned green and I took off," she recalled with a laugh. "I left and he was still shaking his finger at me."

Swedenhjelm started racing when she was a junior at John Glenn High School in Norwalk. She owned a 1969 Pontiac GTO and learned to beef it up in high school auto shop.

"Our high school auto shop teacher was very good," Swedenhjelm said. "We used to bring our race cars in — everybody had muscle cars — and he would show us how to make them go faster. He even used to stay after hours to help us."

Gateway Division 10 Mechanic Leona Swedenhjelm traded in her muscle car for a sleek 2002 Chevy Corvette.



Swedenhjelm's first race was against a Ford Mustang.

"I was excited, and nervous," she remembered. "All I could think was I wanted to beat the guy next to me."

And she did.

A swollen head

"I was jumping up and down," Swedenhjelm said. "The first time you win, your head gets swollen."

From then on, Swedenhjelm was addicted to speed. She would race her GTO at Terminal Island in Long Beach and at the Firebird Raceway in Phoenix.

Along with her GTO, which went through three engines and 11 clutches, Swedenhjelm also owned a Suzuki GS1150-ES motorcycle and a 1987 Chevy Corvette.

But in August, she said good-bye to her GTO and traded it in for a red 2002 Chevy Corvette with 360 horsepower and convertible top. She hasn't taken it out to the track yet, but said she might after it's paid off.

Until then, Swedenhjelm watches the races from the sidelines. She frequents NASCAR races, truck races and motorcycle races. She even sponsors a motorcycle rider — Central City Division 1 Mechanic Aaron Pine.

Pine has been racing since he was in elementary school, according to his dad Bob Pine, Body and Trim Leadman at Non-revenue Vehicles Division 4.

Racing interest snowballed

"He just came by it naturally," the elder Pine said of his son. "He used to race Big Wheels at his elementary school, where they used to have tournaments. He did the skateboard thing. Then he got into radio-control cars. It snowballed from there."

Central City Division 1 Mechanic Aaron Pine races his Suzuki motorcycle in the National Motorcycle Racing Association's Top Gas 8.20 Index competition. Courtesy of Bob Pine



Bob Pine, helps his son, Aaron, get ready for his next race. Courtesy of Bob Pine



Aaron Pine started racing his 1960 Volkswagen Bug when he was about 18. His father worked as his crew chief when they raced on a track in Carlsbad. A couple of years later, though, the younger Pine discovered something new.

"I borrowed a friend's bike, and I kinda got the bug," Aaron Pine said. "The bike was a bit cheaper, and a lot more fun."

Aaron Pine now races his Suzuki motorcycle in the Top Gas class of the National Motorcycle Racing Association, a class one step below professional riding. And his dad is still his crew chief.

"He's awesome," the proud "Pops" Pine said with an enormous grin. "He's very good at it. He's a very, very good rider."

The Pines, along with Bob's wife, Meri, and Aaron's son, Dakota, travel the country to compete in the 8.20 Index race. This means that the rider cannot reach the quarter-mile finish faster or slower than 8.20 seconds.

A matter of focus

"I just try to focus on what's at hand," Aaron Pine said. "I focus on what's going on on the track. It seems like you're out there by yourself, but you get very competitive."

Although Aaron Pine has held the No. 1 spot in his class two years in a row, and won about \$1,000 in contingency money last season, he finds being with his family is the most rewarding aspect of his hobby.

"I enjoy being able to be out there and spending time with my dad," Aaron Pine said. "He makes it a lot more fun. I appreciate all the help from my parents."

Bob Pine also stressed that the most important element in motorcycle racing is to revel in the excitement.

"We started all of this to go out and have fun," Bob Pine said. "Winning is the frosting on the cake. It's nice to win, but you can't win all the time. When the fun is gone, then it's time to move on to something else."

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