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The San Diego Union-Tribune.

SAVE THIS EMAIL THIS PRINT THIS MOST POPULAR

Accountant goes from rat race to drag race

Mom hits track for break from crunching numbers

By Lisa Petrillo

STAFF WRITER

August 26, 2007

RANCHO BERNARDO – Cathy Means, successful accountant and SUV-driving Rancho Bernardo mother, likes to relax by driving so fast she needs a parachute to stop herself.

Come weekends, Means trades the tailored business suits she wears as a certified public accountant for a Nomex suit, like the NASCAR guys wear. It is unflattering but necessarily fireproof, now that Means, at 52, has taken up drag racing.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune
Cathy Means, 52, of Rancho Bernardo checked out her dragster while crew member "Scotty Dog" Karamopoulos watched.

"I do this to relax," she said over the bone-shaking thunder of every conceivable engine gathered at Barona Speedway in Lakeside on a recent summer night. "After that first burnout, I forget all about taxes."

Means smiles at the eel-shaped race car with the Chevy big block engine and her name emblazoned across the skinny snout that stretches out thin like so much spaghetti. The Means-mobile is a Norm Porter-built dragster, definitely not street legal.

Her day job is spent as a partner in a downtown San Diego accountancy and financial-planning firm – Lipsey, Youngren, Means & Sandberg.

What makes Means' heart beat hard enough to command every ounce of her attention is maxing 135 mph, and getting off the "go" light under a double split-second time. That's 0.002 seconds from green light to flooring it down the track where the chutes pop out and stop her before the pavement ends.

Always it's over so fast, 20, 30, 50 seconds of incredible thrill, then getting towed back to the pit to prepare for the next run and the next.

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Online: For more information about Cathy Means, go to <http://uniontrib.com/more/racer>.

HOT ROD HISTORY

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When they leave the track, Means and her family, as well as her racing team members, already are talking about what they can do better for the next race.

Here are not big-money, big-glory races that air on ESPN, with championship purses worth \$100,000 to more than \$1 million.

In little more than a year, the Means Team has been learning the ropes and the ways of high-velocity engines as they've raced on tracks throughout the West, including Pomona and Fontana.

Means declined to say how much she spends on racing, but she does have sponsors, as do many racers. In general, cars run from \$5,000 to upward of \$50,000, and even higher for the top-fuel dragsters. Entry fees run between \$400 and \$1,000 a race, and gas is a whopping \$15 a gallon.

At a recent weekend race, Means pulled up to the track in her ink-blue 1964 Corvette with her 11-year-old daughter, Natalie, who never misses a race.

This summer night, about a dozen other female drivers are peppered throughout the nearly 100 racers in their classic dragsters, souped-up El Caminos, Mustangs, Camaros, Novas and all manner of chrome-gleaming machines screaming down the track.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune

Today, 30 years after legendary racer Shirley Muldowney helped shatter the machismo barrier, women still make up less than 15 percent of the 35,000 licensed competitors in the National Hot Road Association.

But times may be changing.

For the first time in the association's 55-year history, a spokesman said, all pro-racing categories have women in competition.

Team Means is not about gender wars. Mark Means, Cathy's husband and racing partner, cheerfully handles the business end of their fledgling franchise.

Mark Means also is certified to race the car.

"But she's more focused and has more concentration than me," Mark Means said. "I'm bright enough to know that."

As on most race days, Mark Means, who

event – "the Nationals" – in Great Bend, Kan.

1961: For six years, the Nationals hopscoches around the country to showcase the growing sport before settling in Indianapolis. The Winternationals become the association's second event.

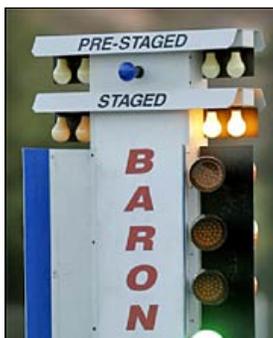
1976: Shirley Muldowney becomes the first woman to win an event in the NHRA's fastest division.

1984: 260 mph speed barrier toppled.

1999: In February, Tony Schumacher becomes the first to top 330 mph in Phoenix.

2007: Now in its fifth decade, the National Hot Rod Association is the world's largest motor sports sanctioning body, with 80,000 members and more than 140 member tracks, 35,000 licensed competitors and 5,000 member-track events.

SOURCE: National Hot Rod Association



runs his own insurance and financial services business, has arrived early and hauled out the Means dragster, with the help of friend and neighbor “Scotty Dog” Karamopoulos. Means has set out their brightly colored camp chairs and their cooler stocked with icy water and sugarless Red Bull energy drink.

At bigger racing events, they’ll bring the RVs, the barbecue, some friends for Natalie, and in between the races they’ll hang out like it’s a day at the beach.

Except instead of the call of the gulls, there’s swirling dust and the lingering smell of burnt rubber and gas fumes from a hundred hot rods billowing smoke.

Some people heading toward qualifying for AARP membership might see the attraction of low-impact activities – yoga, golf.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune

Cathy and Mark Means talk happily of the many adventures they’ve shared, sailing their 32-foot boat around the Gulf of California, caving, scuba diving, skiing.

“Nothing I’ve ever done is as absorbing as this,” Cathy Means said of her time riding a 900-horsepower engine. “It takes everything I’ve got.”

Her pre-race ritual involves bringing a little piece of Mark with her. She always wears her lucky earrings – small gold hoops that were the first pair he ever bought her.



DON KOHLBAUER / Union-Tribune

“Then I cinch my belt, I take a deep breath, the squint of my eyes, the set of my jaw.” She breathes deep and visualizes the pulse-quickenning starting lineup. “That first burnout is going to feel so great.”

It’s such a family affair that Team Means’ professional mechanic Rick Pusztai brings along Fred, his friendly pit bull, who pants in the shade on his own carpet as Pusztai puts his ear to the screaming rods during the many engine checks for this car designed by racing legend Norm Porter.

“This is a dream come true for me,” said Pusztai, who relates the life-altering summer when he was 10 and first heard the distant thunder of drag racers near his grandfather’s home outside Pomona.

While everyone pitches in to get the Team Means car back out onto the line, and across the finish first, Pusztai said the Meanses always let him make the call when it comes to the mechanical fine points.

“Rick, it’s time for you to do your magic,” Cathy Means said after a frustrating early pass where she hit only 70 mph.

By the end of the long day, Means turned in some of her better times, more like the six-second quarter-mile her racer is built to handle.

“I’ve been thinking about taking it to the next level,” she said.

That means getting into one of the bigger, faster dragsters and the big leagues where racers are half her age and the 300 mph barrier has been shattered.

Never let it be said that Cathy Means, certified public accountant, does not play in the fast lane.

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