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Actuaries are good sports, too—III

The need for speed

by Linda Heacox
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He'd never so much as changed oil, but when actuary Dan Fritz bought his first sports car, an Alfa Romeo in 1976, it turned out to be a ticket to a seriously competitive racing avocation.

Starting in low-speed events like auto cross (where drivers set up pylons on a parking lot and race for the best time), Fritz progressed to time trials (racing on a track against the clock) and won several competitions before deciding he needed bigger challenges in 1987. He found them in formula car racing, driving vintage formula Fords (which look like small versions of Indianapolis race cars) and later graduating to the bigger, more sophisticated formula Continental class cars, which run in a substantially more competitive class that includes professional drivers.

He won three championships with his Fords and was dominating his class by his fifth year of formula racing. Of the nine races he competed in that year, he won seven. Moreover, he had the fastest qualifying time in all nine races.

Fritz, who in his nonracing life is vice president and actuary of the Federal Home Companies, Orlando, Fla., has competed since 1993 in the grueling long distance off-road race, the Baja 1000. His team of six drivers, two for each of three legs of the race, finished the Baja in 30 hours and 53 minutes, good enough for fifth in class and 45th

place overall. On their leg, Fritz and his South African co-driver piloted their dune buggy across 500 miles of largely desert terrain in around 12 hours.

This Baja was the longest ever, covering 1,150 miles between Tijuana and LaPaz, Mexico. Fritz's vehicle averaged about 40 mph, sometimes crawling over boulders, sometimes racing flat out, across wildly varying terrain in every possible degree of daylight. Adventures included losing headlights at night and nearly spinning out over a cliff, narrowly avoiding a collision with a cow, and breaking off a piece of the transmission, an accident that required the car to be welded at every pit stop.



Dan Fritz and his co-driver get their dune buggy airborne in the Mexican desert during last year's Baja 1000.

Risk? What risk?

Although the widely held perception is that actuaries are risk averse, Fritz doesn't see a contradiction. "I don't consider the car racing I've done really dangerous." He did admit that



Bruce Bengtson competes in Sports Car Club of America races two or three times a year, sometimes in this production Datsun 2000 Roadster.

off-road racing can be treacherous, because drivers never know quite what to expect. But it's precisely that element of surprise that he relishes. He plans to do the Baja again, as well as his formula racing.

"Dan has a higher tolerance for risk than I do," said fellow sports car racer Bruce Bengtson, vice president and chief actuary of LifeUSA, Minneapolis. "One hundred thirty, one hundred fifty miles an hour and the only thing between him and the pavement is a flimsy fiberglass body and a tube frame. Man, it's a whole different perspective than where I'm at."

Shane Chalke, president, CHALKE/SS&C, Chantilly, Va., who also enjoys a spin around the track in his modified Ferrari, preferably at speeds in excess of 100 mph, agrees. "I don't really think that in the kind of racing I do there's much danger," said Chalke. "Fritz's class is much more dangerous than mine. In my class, you've got a frame and a structure completely around you. Very rarely do you hear about a fatality. I've had minor crashes maybe three times over the past 10 years. I've never been injured."

Bengtson, who races his own 4-door Alfa Romeo and also rents production sports cars to race, started as a "corner worker" (a safety official who oversees track firefighting and driver safety equipment). Then, tempted by the competition, he started competing in auto cross and other low-speed events, getting an education in driving skills and the dynamics of cars.

Competing in Sports Car Club of America races, he has driven both a sports sedan, a Dodge Omni GLH that looks like “a grocery-getter shoebox,” and a Datsun roadster, a car built in the late '60s along the lines of a Triumph or MGB.

Chalke said he takes his Ferrari to Summit Point, W. Va., a grand prix track with 10 turns and “some good elevation changes,” to compete. “People bring everything from old formula one cars, to vintage race cars, to street cars,” Chalke said. The cars are usually divided into three groups, according to speed and power. Then, Chalke said, “You line up in the grid and race.”

He has completed the two-mile course in 1:29 and reached top speeds of 135 mph. In 1991, he was awarded the GT Award as one of the most outstanding drivers at the Ferrari Club of America national meet.

Strategy or speed?

All three said the nature of the sport is what attracts them. “Road racing is very precise,” explained Chalke. “You do the same thing over and over, trying to do it consistently every time.”

Bengtson’s formula for winning races is “50% running as fast as you can and 50% outsmarting the other drivers.”

He said it’s strategy, not power, that makes his Dodge “very competitive,” enabling him to win against faster cars like the Mazda RX-7 or the Porsche

944. A win in 1994 at the Brainerd (Minn.) International Raceway, for example, was a triumph of competitive psychology.

“There were half a dozen cars in my class, including the record holder. I knew who he was at the beginning of the weekend so I tracked him very carefully. Whenever he was behind me, I made sure he didn’t get a true read on what the car could do. It was a mind game from the beginning. I knew that on the next to the last lap, if I could get by him coming into the sharpest corner before the longest straight, I would be able to build up enough of a lead in the twisty, turny back side of the track that he would never be able to catch me.”

That ability to think logically and progress by steps to achieve an objective is the similarity between driving and actuarial work, according to

Bengtson. “Let’s say you’ve got 20 other cars on the track, and you’re only racing against six of them in your class. You may know you have to stay within two seconds of the lead car in the race, otherwise you’ll lose the draft. You also know there are times when, even though a certain car is not in your class, you don’t want him to pass you. You can maneuver a little bit to make it difficult for him to pass you, even though he has a faster car. Then when he does pass you, he’s not going to interfere with your race. The objective is to be first at the finish line when the checkered flag flies, and you’ve got to mentally work back from that.”

So is the mental gymnastics or the speed the best thing about racing? “Now that’s a difficult question,” Bengtson laughed. “It is quite a rush.”
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Shane Chalke races his modified Ferrari at a grand prix track in West Virginia.

Actuaries are good sports, too—IV 100th Boston Marathon: Who’s running?

by Mike Cowell
Editor, The Actuary

Several years ago, when I had the spare time to publish the newsletter, *The Actuarial Marathoner*, we had a good idea of who was running which race and how they finished. The Boston Marathon even included “actuary” as one of the occupations to check on the entry form.

Unfortunately, for the 100th running of Boston this April 15, we were left with such designations as “insurance” or “finance” to choose from, in spite of the numbers of

actuaries running marathons out of all proportion to our representation in the working population.

If you are running in this historic event, please let me know by mail, phone, fax (in the 1996 *Directory*) or by e-mail: USUNM8YL@IBMMAIL.COM and I will put together a story.

Thanks and have a great race. Hope to see many of you in Hopkinton.