

Crowning achievement ; Hub dentist pulls out all the stops in NASCAR quest

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Four years ago, Tom Connelly wasn't exactly living life in the slow lane.

Raising three children and establishing his cosmetic dentistry practice in the Back Bay took up the majority of the Detroit native's time. But when one of his patients revealed he was a race- car driver, Connelly felt the need for speed.

Sort of.

"He asked me to sponsor him," Connelly said. "And I was intrigued by the whole idea."

Ever the businessman, Connelly, who lives in Carlisle, decided to cut out the middle man, buy the car and drum up the sponsors himself.

"I started out that way," he said. "As a business."

But it wasn't enough. The fast lane beckoned.

"I wanted to drive the cars, so I started signing up for every racing school across the country," he said. "I kind of did it all on fast-forward."

Now, after a year of road racing, Connelly, 33, is a professional driver in NASCAR's minor league, with one official race under his belt.

"My first race was a little nerve-racking," he said. "But I placed 14th out of 26. Not bad."

Surprisingly, Connelly isn't a lead foot on the open road, and doesn't consider himself a daredevil. He's attracted to racing because of its marriage of speed and science.

"People assume that if you can drive fast, you can get into a race car and do the same," he said. "But a race car is a raw vehicle that weighs only a couple of thousand pounds - just a chassis of bars and tubes and engine and a steering wheel. When you corner at 140 miles an hour dealing with a G-force, it's nothing like driving."

Connelly races all over New England, most recently at Thompson Speedway, in Thompson, Conn. He houses his cars in Leominster and has a team of mechanics and a full-time driver to race weekly to accumulate points for NASCAR's rating system. His main sponsor is a local Web site, www.findadentist.com.

He'll drive in at least a half-dozen more races this year - but don't call him Ricky Bobby anytime soon.

"I'm just having fun right now," he said. "Of course, I'm a competitor, and in the racing world you have aspirations of being the best, but at this point I'm just enjoying where I am."

Still, racing is a dangerous sport, and while Connelly is having fun, he never loses sight of the hazards.

"A guy got killed last year," he said. "I protect myself, though. We have the highest levels of equipment with the most restraints. I mean, I definitely go into each race with 100 percent concentration. I don't have a ritual, but I do think about my children. A lot of the time I say, God help me."

Despite the risks, Connelly is addicted to the rush.

"I've always been a competitor, but as you get older, you can no longer play football or wrestle," he said. "It's a way for me to compete without killing my knees."

As for the whole NASCAR craze, Connelly is happy it's moving into the mainstream.

"NASCAR has grown like mad," he said. "It's a great sport. Every day I learn more and more. There's so much engineering behind racing; there's athleticism, too. It's a very complete sport."

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CAPTION: FUEL-INJECTION: Andy Hilliger and Tom Connelly fine-tune a race car in their garage in Loeminster. STAFF PHOTO BY STUART CAHILL

CAPTION: A BRUSH WITH FAME: Tom Connelly, a dentist, gets revved up before a race. Driving a race car at 140 mph is nothing like driving a normal car fast says the professional driver. STAFF PHOTO BY STUART CAHILL

Credit: By LAUREN BECKHAM FALCONE