

Revved Up and Ready To Get Underway

Story and photos by PA1 Tasha Tully, PADET St. Petersburg, Fla.

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- It is the end of another picture-perfect day on Florida's west coast. Cars are parked in a sandy lot as their drivers walk toward the gated entrance. The glow of floodlights replaces the sun's rays as the noises from a dozen roaring engines harass the ears of eager fans making their way to the wooden bleachers. The announcer bellows a rowdy welcome through speakers surrounding the track. It's race day at Desoto Super Speedway in Bradenton, Fla.

Several young fans, all wearing Coast Guard t-shirts, sit in the bottom row of the stands while their mother wedges hearing protection in their ears.

"We come here about once a month," said Beth Wilson of Sarasota, Fla. "My boys get a kick out of watching the stock car races, and since their uncle is in the Coast Guard they like cheering on the Coast Guard car."



BMC Jonathan Brown, officer in charge of Station Cortez, in Cortez, Fla., proudly displays the #6 Coast Guard stock car he painted to resemble a 41-foot rescue boat. "There are so many black tire marks along the car's body, I'm thinking about turning her into a buoy tender," said Brown. Coast Guard photograph by PA1 Tasha Tully, PADET St. Petersburg, Fla.

A stock car is any standard passenger automobile that can be modified within specific guidelines for racing. The "#6 Coast Guard car" is a two-door, 1978 Chevy Caprice, painted to look like a Coast Guard 41-foot utility boat. It is bright white with that familiar racing stripe across its nose, a Coast Guard Auxiliary emblem in the center of its hood, Coast Guard emblems on the sides and a big, black number six on its doors in honor of the driver's favorite professional racer.

"I watched an interview with Mark Martin in the early 1990's and I was impressed with his comments

regarding the complex factors that go into racing," explained Chief Boatswain's Mate Jonathan Brown, officer in charge of Coast Guard Station Cortez in Cortez, Fla., and the #6 Coast Guard car driver. "After listening to him I started paying attention to what was actually taking place and I became a big fan of racing."

Brown didn't grow up with a fondness for racing. Living near a military base in the small town of Lampasas, Texas, his family was much more interested in hunting, fishing and other outdoor sports.

“I was one of those people who thought racing was just going around in circles...boring. Almost like watching a football game and not knowing anything about the sport and having no team to root for, you’re just not into it,” explained Brown. “I learned more and more about racing when I started following Mark, and now it has grown into a thrilling pastime for me.”

In 2003, Brown transferred from the Coast Guard Cutter *Mohawk*, home ported in Key West, Fla., to Station Cortez, and, coincidentally, bought a house within 15-minutes of the speedway. With his curiosity peaked, Brown went to the track and asked a car owner “how someone who doesn’t know much about racing goes about getting on a team.” That person introduced him to Gus Coorsen and Brown has been working with him ever since.

“Gus is a three-time champ at the track, and, I’ll admit, it didn’t take much for him to talk me into getting the car,” said Brown. “Since then he’s taught me the ropes, helped me fix the blown engines and straighten the mutilated frames.”

In 2004, Brown bought the car nearly race ready from Gus. He only had to straighten the fenders, replace some safety equipment, tune up the engine and give it a spiffy new paint job. Since then, he and Gus have replaced the frame and body once, replaced four axles, two rear ends and rebuilt two engines.

“I’m not sure of the exact dollar amount that it has cost. If I kept close track of it, it wouldn’t be as much fun and my wife would kill me,” Brown said with a grin. “I can tell you that you can find a car without an engine for about \$2,500, but the engine is the major expense from anywhere upwards of \$3,000.” Brown is already on his third engine.

“This one puts out a little under 300 horsepower. I stick with track rules and use eight-inch wide racing tires, 3,300 pound minimum weight with no more than 53 percent of the cars weight on left side,” Brown explained. “I got kicked out of a race once for having 53.1 percent on the left side, that’s about 13 pounds over. I blamed it on the galley cooks at the station for fattening me up.”



Members from Coast Guard Station Cortez, in Cortez, Fla., proudly flank BMC Jonathan Brown, officer in charge of Station Cortez, as he shows off his #6 Coast Guard stock car. Brown races the 1978 Chevy Caprice nearly every weekend from mid-February to November at Desoto Superspeedway in Bradenton, Fla. Coast Guard photograph by PA1 Tasha Tully, PADET St. Petersburg, Fla.

Brown races nearly every Saturday night from mid-February to the end of November. He won his first race at Desoto in 2005 and another in 2006.

“I don’t know exactly how fast I’m going, but I’ve only been fast enough twice,” jokes Brown. “There are no speedometers and everything is judged by lap times. The track is three-eighths of a mile on the inside groove and our class runs an average of 18.25 seconds per lap. That’s about a 75 mph average speed.”

With speeds like that, it’s no wonder Brown tore through more than 10 sets of tires during the 37 races he competed in last season.

“I think I only missed two of Jon’s races last year,” said Senior Chief Christopher Brown, racing fan and officer in charge of the Aids to Navigation Team in St. Petersburg, Fla. “At one race we had a promotion ceremony for a Coast Guard member, Seaman Timothy Troyer of Station Grand Isle, La., right in the center of the track and Jon went on to win the race that night, which was an extra thrill.”

Brown’s wife (and car owner), Olga, along with their children George, Daniel, Stephanie and Samantha, their grandson Brenden, and many friends from the Bradenton area, will continue to encourage his efforts to improve his speed and standings during this season’s races.

“My family members are probably my biggest fans, especially my grandson Brenden. He really enjoys when the school buses race and, of course, Trick or Treat nights for Halloween,” Brown said. “My father has been a tremendous help with the car and in the pits whenever he visits Florida.”

Although Brown doesn’t get to spend as much time as he’d like at the track, he has noticed many similarities between this hobby and his day-to-day job of being in charge of the small-boat station.

“Both require teamwork and dedication to achieve goals, both must be performed with limited funding and resources, and both have very high maintenance standards that must be upheld in order to reduce safety risks,” Brown emphasizes.

Whether he’s maintaining a 41-foot Coast Guard boat or a 17-foot Chevy Caprice, Brown states that, “Good enough is not enough, and we must continually try to improve on what we have. In fact, there are so many black tire marks along the car’s body I’m thinking about turning her into a buoy tender.”

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