

proud parent

By Amanda Kehrberg

Photography by Mike Wooten

DRIVEN TO SUCCEED

Cassie Gannis Soars On and Off the Race Track

It can be hard for Cassie Gannis to remember not to speed. As the lead driver with Squirt Racing team, this 16-year-old Desert Vista High School student races at speeds upwards of 130mph. But as a young driver on the road, she is cautious and responsible. “I’m tempted to speed,” Cassie admits with a laugh, “but once I start doing five over I’m like, okay, I just gotta slow it down.” With eight years of racing experience and an ever lengthening history of top-five and top-ten finishes — including Arizona State Champion in the 2003 Bandolero Series — Cassie is

racing. John raced as a hobby, and talked to Cassie about trying it herself when her parents saw how often she was watching racing on television. Cassie and her dad started with a used quarter midget, then a kit car, and onward up. “She was building such a great relationship with her dad,” Kathy says fondly. “They built a car together, and I tell you what, you’ve really got to get along to do that!”

As Cassie will attest, anyone who thinks that racing cars is not a real sport is sorely mistaken. She has to do regular core-training to keep in peak physical condition — because when that

light goes green, her heart rate jumps to match that of any other athlete. During a single race, Cassie loses seven pounds of water weight, requiring a water bottle with an extra, extra long straw that reaches up to her helmet. “People at school are like, ‘Well, what’s hard about sitting on your butt and driving a car?’” says Cassie. “I’m like, okay, you can take my car out any day if you want to drive it. It’s harder than it looks.”

On the track, Cassie is aware of the pressure of being a female driver in a male-dominated sport, but she doesn’t let it faze her. “She had to prove herself,” says John. “Since it is a male-dominated sport she



No, that’s not Danica Patrick, it’s Ahwatukee’s own Cassie Gannis.

solidifying her place as an up-and-coming star.

Cassie is quick to point to the role others play in her continued success, particularly her parents, John and Kathy Gannis. When I ask her how she got to where she is today, she doesn’t hesitate. “Them,” she declares, gesturing to her parents. Her dad smiles but shakes his head. “No,” he says, “your determination and your skill.” It is her father, in fact, who led Cassie to

had to prove herself to the guys, because she’s racing with guys, not kids.” Kathy adds that Cassie’s fellow racers are more likely to give her grief for being so young than being female — but at the same time, they’re excited for Cassie and eager to help her. “Not that they’re going to let her get away with anything,” says John, “If they can take her out, they’ll take her out.”

In addition to racing, Cassie is a



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spokesperson for SADD and regularly talks to groups ranging from elementary school kids to adults about the importance of safe driving — no drinking, wear your seatbelt, and no texting. Cassie admits that this experience and the necessity of keeping her grades up to race (she maintains well above a 3.0 GPA) have made her a more responsible young adult.

Racing is surely in the future for this talented young rookie, but Cassie's parents aren't about to let her forget college. Cassie plans to major in Engineering while working her way up to the coveted, Nascar. For now, when she gets a rare break from schoolwork and training, you can find Cassie rooting for the M&M car (her favorite candy). "Come to our house on the weekend and it's Speed Channel, Speed Channel, Speed Channel!" exclaims Kathy. John and Cassie exchange a knowing look; they're catching heat for recently pay-per-viewing the indoor racing Chili Bowl. "It's a really good race, though, so," Cassie begins, then adds jokingly, "You don't understand, Mom!"

For more information on Cassie Gannis: www.squirtracing.com

Just how proud are these Proud Parents?

"I'll be honest with you, when I see her in that Nascar Super Late Model Monte Carlo, that's 3,000 pounds of car. I mean she's going around 150 miles per hour. It is a little nerve-wracking, but I'm confident in the fact that her father and our pit crew would not put her in any car that was unsafe...And I'm confident in her driving skills...Everybody has things they have to overcome, and I'm really proud of her."

- Kathy Gannis