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Lifestyle

Riva man discovers love of slot car racing, takes friends along for the ride

By THERESA WINSLOW, Staff Writer

Randy McGuire's journey from memory lane to victory lane began with a trip home to Iowa a year ago.

There, among boxes stuffed with childhood toys, he found his old electric racing car set. He decided to take it back to Riva with him, and one day, on a whim, he set it up in the basement.

A friend came over, and the next thing he knew, they had spent the better part of four hours watching the tiny cars whiz around the track - and hurtle off of it. "It was just hilarious," Mr. McGuire said. "But it got me thinking about the old days."

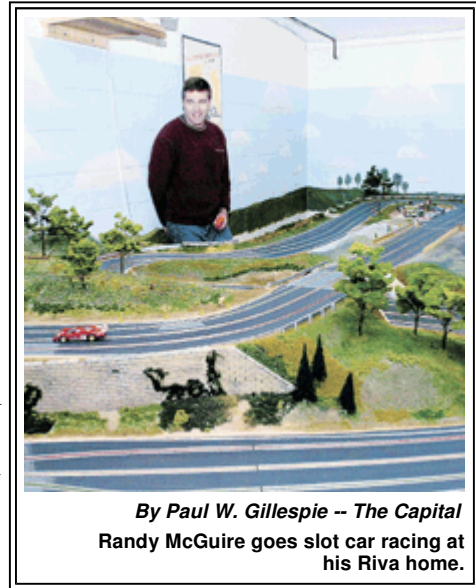
As he reminisced, he remembered reading about much more elaborate racing layouts with larger cars. Needing a new project after remodeling his kitchen and bathroom, the 45-year-old Mr. McGuire searched the Internet for "slot cars" and soon found himself immersed in a 1:32 scale world.

"(The) 1:32 scale is a realistic size," he said. "The cars look realistic."

A skilled craftsman, Mr. McGuire spent only a couple weeks to build his own 7-by-24 track, which is based on an actual 3½-mile course in Japan.

"The most important part of building anything is a comfortable chair," he said, flashing a boyish grin. "If you have a comfortable chair, you just have to visualize what you want to do."

Mr. McGuire's still making refinements to his layout and adding scenery, but has been racing steadily for the past few months. His track is handmade - there are even cracks painted on it to simulate the real thing - and hooked up to a computer, which provides lap times and sound effects. A hand-held device controls how fast the cars travel over a slot in the track.



By Paul W. Gillespie -- The Capital
Randy McGuire goes slot car racing at his Riva home.

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Slot car racing is very big in Europe and in England, Mr. McGuire said, but not as many people in this country are involved the hobby. There are a few clubs in the area, but so far Mr. McGuire has been content to race against friends and family.

The first time his friend, Gary Meyer of Eastport, saw the setup, he was awe-struck. "I was amazed at the detail, not only in the track and the scenery, but how each car looks like and handles like the actual car," Mr. Meyer said. "He has encyclopedic knowledge. This is obviously a passion."

Mr. McGuire's slot cars resemble vintage Jaguars, Ferraris, Ford GT40s and Porsches. All his cars, some of which he buys already made and others that he makes from kits, are based on models from the 1950s, 1960s and up to 1970, which he considers the heyday of road racing.

The slot cars handle like the real cars because Mr. McGuire spends a lot of time tweaking their performance. This way, a 1950s Jaguar goes a lot slower and is much looser around the turns, than, say, a 1970 Ferrari. But even two cars from the same year have subtle differences if they are different makes, so slot races are always competitive. The miniature vehicles travel at scale speeds analogous to the real cars, which ran from just over 100 mph to about 230 mph, depending on the era. Mr. McGuire's top lap time is just over six seconds.

"Right now, I'm faster than anyone," he said, again smiling. "When I'm racing, I'm totally concentrating on the cars going around the track. It's like I'm a little kid again."

Driving ambition

It's race day and Mr. McGuire can barely contain his enthusiasm.

As he takes a vintage Ferrari for a few test laps, he talks almost as fast as the car whirring around the track. He spouts off a long list of facts about the actual race car, then moves immediately to a discussion of the finer points of driving the slot version. Navigating twists and turns on the layout isn't as easy as it looks, even though the cars have brakes. The hand-held controller which supplies the power is extremely sensitive.

"I was amazed at how realistic slot car racing was," Mr. Meyer said. "I thought it would be like running a model train around the track. You can really get a feel for the cars."

Mr. McGuire said the whole key to racing is smoothness. New racers, he said, go too fast and crash. "Everybody wants to go fast," he said. "Everybody wants to be the first person to the first corner. (But) you can't go fast until you're smooth - just like in the real world, just like in real racing."

Mr. McGuire has done a little bit of actual racing, and even attended a racing school, but most of his experience is on the slot track. His father was the real racer in the family, competing in Sports Car Club of America events when Mr. McGuire was growing up. Two of his father's old uniforms hang on the wall in back of the track.

Chuck McGuire, who lives in Des Moines, Iowa, said Mr. McGuire was the only one of his children to catch the racing bug. When the

elder Mr. McGuire recently visited his son, he was impressed by the layout. "It's a really marvelous setup, isn't it?" he asked. "I think he has a thirst for doing stuff that's unique and doing it very well. He's so meticulous in whatever he does."

Mr. McGuire's wife, Nancy, knew her husband tended to go at things 100 percent, but said she was a bit surprised at how quickly the track "took over the basement, and our social lives, and all his spare time."

Another surprise, she said, was how much other people love it. "Not only Randy, but anybody else who gets their hands on it - you see the sparkle in their eye. You leave everything else behind and enter the magic kingdom."

If he ever tires of slot cars, which doesn't appear likely to happen soon, Mr. McGuire said he'll just move on to another project. But he's going to have to cut down on his racing time in a couple weeks anyway, because that's when he starts training to be a firefighter. Mr. McGuire's already had one stint as a firefighter before, in Iowa, after spending 15 years in the Army. He's also worked as boatbuilder.

"If I get sick of this, I'll just do something else," he said.

For now, though, he's content to stay in the slot.

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