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Need for Speed

To take a break from his legal work, Richmond lawyer Stephen Harper likes to take his car for a spin through the countryside.

In Harper's case, however, the car is a race-prepared Nissan Sentra and the "countryside" is the scenic three-and-a-quarter-mile road course at Virginia International Raceway (VIR) near Danville. Or perhaps the twists and turns of Summit Point Raceway in West Virginia.

In either location, Harper is not sightseeing. He's wrestling the wheel through corners designed to confound the wildest racers or blasting down straightaways at 125 miles per hour.

It's an exhilarating change of pace every few months for Harper, who spends his work days on personal injury and workers' compensation cases. "It's a good break," he said. "It gets you away from the law for 48 hours."

Don't look for Harper on television race coverage – this is not Formula 1 or IndyCar racing, and it's certainly not NASCAR. Harper is a club racer, a hobbyist who works on his own race car and pays to join a crowd of similar-minded speedsters at the track several times a year. It's about as low-budget as you can get and still get to race on a real track with rules and officials.

VIR general manager Jay Lief – himself a lawyer-racer – explains only about one half of 1 percent of auto racers are professional drivers. "The vast majority of racing is by people who pay to race," he said. "We love it – it's a passion."

"You'd be surprised how many professionals are involved in racing," he said. "There are doctors, lawyers and



real estate developers."

At a club racing weekend at VIR last month, no business suits were evident. The conversation was about cars and racing, not work. The cars themselves looked stock, but all carried safety equipment including steel roll cages, five-point harnesses and fire extinguishers.

Harper points to the stripped out interior of his black Sentra SE-R, with its confining racing seat and head restraint device. "I feel safer in this car than in my street car," Harper maintained. "I'm so strapped in, I can't reach the passenger door."

Automotive carnage on the track is rare. Rough driving is discouraged, and racers can have their licenses suspended or revoked for aggressive maneuvers. "It's club racing," Harper said. "The idea is you're not trying to hit anybody."

Hitting may be discouraged, but passing and timing are the name of the

game. "I've always been a very competitive person," Harper explained.

Harper said he's also had a long-standing interest in cars. "It led me to want to drive at the track where you can drive it at the limit without getting in trouble."

Harper's 1991 Sentra SE-R is a legendary light-weight compact that came from the factory with both agility and muscle. The factory look of Harper's black Sentra is long gone, but its fun factor has been dialed up a few notches.

A performance camshaft boosts the stock 140 horsepower to near 200. The beefed-up suspension is so stiff, the body barely tilts as Harper slams the car around a tight u-turn. Aside from speed, the only evidence of the forces at work is the daylight that shows under the inner rear tire as Harper works to keep the car on the pavement.

"It's a great cheap, fast car," Harper said.

Low budget racing involves a lot

more than just a car and a few free weekends, Harper explained. After torturing the equipment for two days at the track, he spends many nights back in the garage after the kids are in bed, fixing damage or installing improvements. "There's always something that needs to be done," he said.

Driving a well-worn, decade-old race car, Harper had to become a quick learner to keep maintenance costs down. "I didn't know how to do anything when I first started racing," he said. Now, with some help from friends and family, he's changing transmissions and camshafts with ease. Harper's father, Larry, was serving as "pit crew" at Harper's recent weekend at VIR.

Harper regularly posts finishes in the top five in his class, but club racers don't get prize money. Contingency sponsorships provide some equipment that helps with expenses. "I won a tire yesterday," Harper noted, pointing to the Hoosier sticker on his front fender.

With no real sponsorship money available for even the fastest competitors, Harper's car is one of the few to have a large advertisement on its flanks. It reads "Racecarlaw.com," a Web address that leads to Harper's firm. He even has the office phone number and his e-mail plastered on the side of the car.

Has it led to extra business? Not so much, Harper acknowledged. Few lawsuits arise over stuff that happens on a racetrack. "You basically sign away all your legal rights," Harper chuckled. Nevertheless, Harper said he's working on one personal injury case that came to him through racing contacts.

Harper said he is always "fired up" when he heads home from the track, enthusiastic about making some change to improve his performance and anticipating his next visit to the race circuit. "It's definitely something I look forward to," he said.

— Peter Vieth

