

Accessorizing for fast track: Racey Girl fills void in women's apparel

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ANTIOCH -- The purple-and-pink Chevy Camaro zipped past the grand stands. At the turn, the driver squeezed the gas, the 300-horsepower engine whined, and the rear swung out right. A moment later, the car drifted along in a perfect curve.

Cathy McCause (number 65) was on her way to her first victory at the Antioch Speedway. It came in a qualifying round, but that didn't faze her.

"I did it!" she screamed in the pit as she climbed through the window. She hugged everyone she could find. "I did it! I won! I won!"

The 43 year-old mother of three has come a long way from her early days as "360 McCause" -- a nickname she got for spinning out so often. Last year, as a rookie, her erratic driving got her black flagged -- sent off -- all the time.

At the main event this late June night, she wound up ninth in a field of 16.

She also has come a long way as a businesswoman. Last year, tired of the grind, she quit her plush job in corporate marketing. A lifelong fan of auto racing, she founded Racey Girl, a clothing and accessories company for women fans, based in her Martinez home.

In typical McCause fashion, she calls it "my transformation from psycho corporate mom to psycho race car driver and motorsports apparel maven."

Eccentric as she might seem, what McCause does is quite mainstream.

She has joined the rapidly growing ranks of more than 10 million women who control small businesses in the United States. Her market is populous, too: auto racing attracts 75 million American fans, more than 40 percent of them women, according to research by NASCAR.

Curiously, NASCAR apparel sales for women lag far behind men's gear, at barely 10 percent of total sales. The market gap was irresistible.

"I kept coming back to the racing thing," McCause said. "I had to give it a try."

Restart

For decades, career meant a job to McCause. Throwing in long hours week after week, year after year, she rose to manage global marketing for Synergen, a Walnut Creek-based software company.

"She never needed much direction, only a few guidelines," said Dick MacDonald, Synergen's founder and only CEO, who hired McCause in 1999. "She always found creative ways to get the job done, without breaking the bank."

The hard work seemed to pay off: McCause had a staff of 30 and a six-figure paycheck, plus a hefty benefit package. Though single, she could afford mortgage on a large house.

She could also allow for an expensive hobby for her son. Ricky, at age 15, got a "Dukes of Hazard" orange Camaro before it was legal for him to drive in traffic. For a season, he drove at the Antioch Speedway, while McCause cheered from the stands.

It wasn't going to last. As her career in the corporate world reached two decades, McCause was growing jaded.

"You realize that you've sold your soul to the corporate devil," she said. "You work extremely hard. You sleep in the office, wear the same clothes the next day -- only to see the company cannibalized after an (initial public offering) or a takeover."

In the software sector, those changes happened frequently, and McCause didn't always get the best of deals. When MacDonald sold a majority stake in Synergen, she stuck around. Then they joined SPL World Group; McCause still hung on. But she knew her days were numbered. Her boss knew it, too.

"She wasn't very happy in that environment," MacDonald said. "I think she missed clear responsibility."

Her patience finally ran out last year. Her timing was just a few weeks off: soon after she quit, Oracle bought SPL World Group, valuing the stock options she left behind at more than \$1 million.

"It could have been a nice fund to start over with," said McCause. "But I don't mind. The promise of that is exactly what has you trapped. Well, I walked away."

Months of dilemma followed. Annie Faulkner, a friend and neighbor who had looked after her children while McCause was away on trips, now had the freshly unemployed mother sit in her kitchen, debating her options.

"She wanted to try something on her own, and she wanted flexibility to see her kids more," Faulkner recalled. "But she hesitated about her own business. I said, 'Hey, try it, if doesn't work out, you can still switch back to marketing and make money as a consultant.'"

And so it happened. Teaming up with two friends, McCause set out to turn her beloved world of racing into a market for her Racey Girl women's accessories.

The market

The afternoon sun beat down mercilessly on the Infineon Raceway in Sonoma. The qualifying rounds of the Toyota/Save Mart 350 -- the Bay Area's only NASCAR event -- were just winding down. Engine noise filled the hollow hillside.

McCause set up her tent at Turn 9, clear across from the grandstands. She itched to watch the race, but she was here to sell. Although remote, the concession and shopping area was busy, with hundreds of people mulling about. This was it: the first big-time event for Racey Girl.

NASCAR fans are much more affluent than their reputation, McCause said. They may not hold Ph.D.'s, but they do spend. With travel, lodging, tickets, food, and drinks, a weekend at the track can add up to as much as \$1,000 per person.

A T-shirt or a hat here is part of the budget, too. NASCAR gear alone has sold in the range of \$2 billion per year. Together with other motorsports such as Indy, Formula One, or motorcycle racing, that rivals the \$5 billion market for NFL gear, McCause said.

Trying to tap those wallets, her pink tent stood out among large trailers and other tents. A row of freshly

printed T-shirts hung on display, together with jewelry, hats, and even underwear.

"When women go out anywhere, they accessorize accordingly," McCause said. "Car races are no different."

She was decked out from head to toe, chatting up customers nonstop, with only a minute's break for a light beer. She raised the longneck in cheers. "There are perks about being your own boss."

Across the square, the Umbrella Girls -- a modeling agency -- touted their services, parading perfectly crafted models in blue leotards. McCause looked over with more than a hint of disdain.

"Somebody's got to do that job, too, I guess," she said. "There's a reason why we're keeping it real, though. Women just don't look like that."

"That's another problem with women's racing wear. They seem to make them only for these size 2 chicks. I've never been size 2, and have no desire to. My stuff goes all the way up to 2XL."

The macho test seemed to prove her right.

A very NASCAR bunch of guys walked past, some half naked, some clutching beer bottles, sporting white tank tops over elaborate tattoos. They showered the McCause tent with catcalls. Then they moved on, ignoring the models completely.

"Men are funny," McCause smiled, vindicated. "They act out like that, but when they come to buy stuff, because they do, they go to the side of the booth, not the front. They do their business quickly and out of sight. They don't want to get too close to the pink."

The weekend was all business and little entertainment for McCause and her team. She didn't even get to watch her all-time favorite driver, Vallejo-born Jeff Gordon. She could only take a few minutes to run over to the pit and give some of her Racey Angel baby clothes to Gordon, for his newborn daughter.

Biz model

That evening, gathered around the barbecue in a nearby trailer lot, McCause celebrated: she had exhausted her first receipt book.

The business was coming to life. Sales would pay for the costs of the weekend, including the \$3,500 McCause had paid for the right to pitch a tent, and a bit more. Four or five major events might be enough to recover the \$20,000 initial investment, McCause estimated.

She is marching on, setting up the framework of what she hopes will be a rapidly expanding operation. Being present at races, surrounded by other vendors, helps a lot: partnerships, co-branding and distribution agreements are already in the works.

As the business grows, it will have to become a lot more formalized. McCause has taken the plunge, but the operation resembles a Girl Scout outing more than a full-fledged company. There are no employees, only volunteers, friends, family, and interested interns. Even her agreement with her business partners is in flux.

Casting the framework might prove difficult.

"A game plan needs to be developed by year-end," she wrote in an e-mail. "Retail hire is going to be especially difficult since it's primarily weekend work, requires travel, and is not your typical full-time job."

The production side will probably have to adjust as well. For the time being, McCause tries to produce everything locally. To print T-shirts, for instance, she uses the services of Brentwood-based

Monogramming by Frichy.

On a national scale, that model will be hard to maintain. McCause says she will try to preserve the "boutiquey" feel of the products, but she'll have to find manufacturers overseas by the end of next year.

For this much uncertainty, McCause appears remarkably free of stress. She has fun in the fast lane, and visibly belongs there, too. Even after an 80-hour work week, she heads to the dirt track on Saturdays.

Passion

Inside a racing car, the Antioch Speedway feels a lot smaller than it is. Every push of the gas pedal unleashes hundreds of horsepower, and propels the lightened chassis at breakneck speeds. Every curve arrives within seconds after the last. A turn of the wheel sends you sliding and spinning. Only the ultra-deep seats and a web of seat belts keep you from flying out sideways. By the third turn, your shoulders start to ache and you struggle to retain your grip on the wheel. Other cars dash and crash inches from yours.

It's no place for the faint-hearted.

It's also no place for the materialistic. Most of the classes -- including the Pure Stock category McCause races in -- don't have money prizes, only a plaque. It's a hobby that devours your time, your money, and your attention.

As cars pass by, fingernail-sized bits of mud shower the bleachers. The smell of 110-octane race fuel mixes with dust, sweat and burnt oil. In the pits, despite the occasional brawl, the camaraderie is palpable.

Just before the race, a quick debate flared up: is dirt or asphalt racing superior?

"That's a no-brainer," said Steve Sutherland, the lead track official at the speedway who raced for decades and acts as McCause's mentor now. "Real men race in dirt."

"Really?" McCause shot back. "How about real women?"

"Honey," Sutherland grinned, "we're working on you."

The Saturday evening turned into late night. McCause parked the beat-up car after her final run. Before getting down to the long cleanup job, she ran back to the pit-side stands to check out one last event.

It was race day, after all, and to her, there is no more important business than that.

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