

Amateurs live out race car dreams

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PAHRUMP, Nev. (AP) -- Pushing 140 mph in his Radical SR8 LM race car, John Morris is a body at rest in motion.

His hands sit neatly at 10 and 2. He shifts gears with swift, easy efficiency. While his passenger bounces like a pinball in her seat, Morris coolly anticipates every bend and dip in the winding racetrack.

He should -- he owns it.

It's the centerpiece of this 61-year-old Web entrepreneur's desert playground. He calls it a country club for speed-hungry amateurs, a retirement alternative to tennis and a place to live out your speed racer fantasies. Members have access to Morris' favorite man-toys, including fleets of high-speed karts, Corvettes, Lotuses and Radicals, a shooting range and five planes.

Morris explains the impetus simply.

"I retired and I don't like golf."

The Spring Mountain Motorsports Ranch is part of a growing market of racing clubs catering to men like Morris, who want to drive fast and are willing to pay for the privilege.

Two hours west of New York City, the Monticello Motor Club hopes to lure Wall Street-types to its four-mile track when it opens this summer. It promises fine dining, hotel suites and dotting mechanics to maintain members' vehicles. Initiation fee: \$100,000.

Clubs in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and North Carolina are following the same model -- guaranteed "seat time" for amateur drivers topped off with luxury amenities.

Aside from being men of means, Morris says his members share a common interest in "driving right on the edge to where the car may go out of control."

Not all, however, fit the thrill seeker stereotype: An accountant whose two sons can recite the make of their dad's favorite cars; a hydrogeologist-turned-nature photographer from Denver who admits to being nervous before his first race; a Los Angeles businessman whose ailing mother reminded him of his childhood race car dream.

"She reminded me of that when she was dying," club member Mike Schmidt said. "She said, 'You want to do things you want to do in your life. So you better go do that, before it's too late.'"

Morris bought the Spring Mountain track four years ago when it was little more than a tangle of pavement off a highway an hour west of Las Vegas.

The Southern Californian recently had sold a successful Web venture. He bought a yacht and was dreaming of Mexico. But a trip to the dusty track changed that. He saw potential, or, at worst, a solid real estate investment. He and his brother-in-law, Brad Rambo, an importer, paid cash.

"I just love passing cars, I love passing them as close as I can. I love racing. I like anything that's fast and quick," Morris said.

Morris says the plan was to build a place where he and his racing friends, and their wives, (nearly all the drivers are men) would be comfortable.

That meant a pool, gym, spa and a shady perch for watching the races. (They're also broadcast on a closed circuit system and shown in the clubhouse.)

He added high-speed karts to coax tourists off the Strip. No lessons required. Would-be racers can sign up courses to learn to handle Corvettes or Lotuses. The motorsports ranch is a licensed dealer of Radicals, British-made open cockpit race cars known for being easy to drive and relatively affordable. The basic model retails for just under \$100,000.

For people in that tax bracket, the club itself seems reasonably priced.

Basic members play a \$7,500 initiation fee, roughly \$5,500 in annual garage rental fees and dues, as well as track usage fees.

Morris is working to boost his current 160-member base by developing relationships with the casinos. The place has "high-roller perk" written all over it.

"A lot of our packages are shorter, so we don't get 'em too tired out, so they'll go back to the tables," Morris said.

All of this is a bit much for Jack Farr. The Texas businessman is credited with starting the race country club trend when he opened his Texas Motorsports Ranch near Dallas in 1999. Since then, more than 700 people have joined.

Farr describes high-speed driving as a "a disease, a passion, an affliction." He shuns the word "racing."

"It's driving fast with style."

While he's added amenities to his club -- track-side homes, a restaurant, a gas station that sells 116-octane racing fuel at \$9 a gallon -- he says he doesn't plan to cater to the "elite."

"My members have said, 'I know what I want. I don't want to pay for some lavish clubhouse. I just want good food, a good track and clean bathrooms,'" Farr said.

To each his own.

On a recent Saturday, Morris sports a shiny silver racing suit and a dark tan, giving him the look of an 1960s-era astronaut.

His sleek, black Radical is lined up with more than a dozen others. Wives and friends shade the drivers from the desert sun with black umbrellas. True to the fantasy, a photo with a model in go-go boots and black hot pants goes to the winner.

Morris nimbly slips his slight frame into his car.

It's time for the afternoon race.

As the cars hit the track, the crowd files up to a viewing tower. The soaring buzz of engines drowns out most conversation and the announcers' attempts to bark out calls.

After 20 minutes, only one announcement comes through clear.

"And John Morris takes the checkered flag ..."

Spectators say he always does.