

The New York Times



Chris Ramirez for The New York Times

James Barron channels his inner Mario Andretti in a Bugatti Veyron at the Monticello Motor Club.

By JAMES BARRON

MONTICELLO, N.Y. – July 27, 2008 – So the guy in the passenger seat — a guy who could be at the wheel in one of those television commercials where a car going backward does figure 8s while the words “professional driver” flash at the bottom of the screen — says, “Go ahead.”

I floor the accelerator, and two things come to mind. No, three.

The first is, this is probably not a good time to think about my carbon footprint. I am at the wheel of what the manufacturer says is the world’s fastest production car, with 16 cylinders, 1,001 horsepower and 10 radiators. Its thirst for gasoline is also breathtaking. The Environmental Protection Agency says it gets only 14 miles a gallon in highway driving and even less in the city, a mere 8 miles a gallon.

Here I am, all but flying down what used to be a runway for small planes. Now it is a straightaway at a new automobile racing club that costs \$125,000 to join. The car, a Bugatti Veyron, can go more than twice as fast as some of the Cessnas that once took off and landed here.

The second is — well, at 110 miles an hour in a \$1.8 million car, I forget the second thing.

The third is, please, God, let the brakes work.

The idea was to channel my inner Mario Andretti and see what it would be like to be a dues-paying member of the new racing club, the Monticello Motor Club. It was dreamed up a couple of years ago, when the economy was better.

Now, with the club scheduled to open on Sunday, officials say they are close to the limit they set of 125 “founding” members — the \$125,000 crowd. They will not say how close, but they maintain that the sputtering economy has not deterred the big-bucks, big-horsepower types they are looking for.

The club was planned as a place where people with exotic cars could push their Ferraris, Lotuses and Ford GTs to the limit without worrying about speeding tickets, a place where weekend Bobby Unsers could rev their engines and squeal the tires all they want. But these engines do not make that ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa noise that Walter Mitty thought he heard. They roar.

Some say that roar is one of the most promising sounds the area has heard in a long time. “The type of clientele that are members will bring a lot to our community,” said Anthony P. Cellini, the supervisor of the Town of Thompson, N.Y., which includes Monticello. “The Town of Thompson, the Catskills — we were once known as the hospitality capital of the Northeast. This is another part of the puzzle to bring us back.”

But some neighbors complain that an automobile racetrack is a throwback to an age before high gasoline prices made fuel economy big news. “The Town of Thompson is going blacktop when the whole world is going green,” said Ann M. Culligan, whose house is 1,200 feet from the club’s property. “We’ve heard all the construction. We hear everything. We should have our blue sky, our green trees, our fresh air.”

At the club, real members will get to hang out with car aficionados like Jerry Seinfeld who have paid the \$125,000 (up from \$100,000 just a year ago). Someday, members like him will hang out in a clubhouse. It has not been built yet. For now, they get the second floor of an air-conditioned “tent” with glass walls. Like the crowd they cater to, the club’s owners are also big spenders. The president, William McMichael, estimated that the club had spent \$5 million on impact-absorbing guardrails, in case novices misjudge a turn and spin out.

Mr. McMichael, 41, a former health care entrepreneur who is an exotic car enthusiast himself, said he wished the club had been his idea, but it was not.

A real estate developer bought the airport several years ago and had considered building big-box retail stores there. But the developer settled on a racetrack because, Mr. McMichael said, “it was already approved for noise.” The ta-pocketa-pocketa-pocketa factor.

Mr. McMichael signed up as a member in mid-2007, when the track was still only a blueprint, and was soon hired as a club official. Then, with a group of investors, he bought out the developer.

So what about the economy?

“Ari and I have been contemplating that since last fall, when we saw the economy teetering,” Mr. McMichael said, referring to the club’s chief operating officer, Ari Strauss. “Most members have an average net worth of \$20 million and seem to be unaffected by the cycles the economy is going through.”

Or, as Mr. Strauss — who started a company called Figleaves.com in 1999 to sell underwear and was the general manager of Walmart.com before he and his brother started a medical software company — said: “One hundred and twenty-five thousand is just not a lot of money to them.”

This is why private racing clubs have been taking shape around the country, and speed seekers know every turn. They also know how much track time they get for their money — at Monticello, they are guaranteed 200 days a year.

The track is not all that Mr. McMichael and Mr. Strauss have in mind. Circling the track in his Ford GT, Mr. Strauss said they had set aside 100 acres where they could build townhouses and condominiums with a view of the main straightaway. “Imagine a 4- to 12-car garage with living space over it,” Mr. Strauss said.

That sounds like what Myrtle hated about life with George before Tom Buchanan in “The Great Gatsby.”

But this is about driving. What happens if, like Daisy, I have an accident?

“You’re responsible,” Mr. McMichael said. “If you damage things and push beyond the limits of the car or your own limits...”

His voice trailed off.

“Well, that’s why we have instructors,” he said. “Our membership base knows they’re not the next Mario Andretti. They’re not looking for the next two-hundredths. But we will tightly control the track and make sure our members are operating safely.”

So the Bugatti came with Butch Leitzinger, who has won the 24 Hours of Daytona three times and the World Sportscar Championship twice. He drove around the track once with me in the passenger seat. Then we switched places.

The Bugatti has paddle shifters on the steering wheel for changing gears rapidly. They look familiar. My Volkswagen GTI has them. Mr. Leitzinger said the Bugatti’s shifting mechanism worked more or less the same way.

You could buy more than 60 GTIs for the price of one Bugatti, and my car can go fast.

But the Bugatti can go faster. It can go from zero to 60 miles an hour in 2.3 seconds. Another test driver, James May, hit 253 miles an hour. But speed is one thing. Going the distance without a pit stop is another. Mr. May was quoted as saying “the tires will only last for about 15 minutes, but it’s O.K. because the fuel runs out in 12.”

It has a spoiler that pops up at 137 miles an hour, creating what the engineers call “downforce” to keep the car from going completely airborne. I said “completely” because of something that John Hill, a Bugatti executive who was at the clubhouse, had told me earlier: “At top speed, I think the front end of the car is two and a half inches off the ground.”

That did not happen with me at the wheel. Maybe I could have gone fast enough for the spoiler to do its thing, but when we pulled onto the straightaway, there was a pickup truck on the left side, halfway down. The grounds crew was at work.

Mr. Leitzinger told me to drive past the truck slowly — slowly in the Bugatti meant about 40 miles an hour — and stop, then hit the accelerator. He was taking no chances. He did not want to risk having the truck pull out in front of us.

We circled the track a couple of times — top speed, 60 miles an hour. The third time around, as I pulled alongside the pickup, it drove away.

Finally I had the track to myself, for my short ride in a fast machine.

I did not smoke the tires. I did not notice my head being forced against the headrest or, as Mr. Leitzinger put it, “your heart being thrown against your back.”

A colleague who drove a Bugatti Veyron last year said that it was all but impossible to describe the sensation unless your job description involved flying fighter jets or being shot out of circus cannons. It is jaw-dropping. It is grin-inducing. I said something like “yee haw,” or maybe “whooooa.”

And the brakes worked fine.



With 1,001 horsepower, the Veyron is called the world's fastest production car. It can go from zero to 60 in 2.3 seconds.