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FALL 2011



Todd Strong, director of engineering and quality at Gullstream's Long Beach site, poses on the ramp with his beloved 1970 Titan Mark VI Formula Ford. Behind him is another incredibly beautiful and magnificent machine—a G550—that Strong works with in his professional life.

Living *in the* Fast Lane

BY PATTY JENSEN

Zoom!

Zoom! Zoom!

Zoom! Zoom! Zoom!

That is the sound of fast—and Todd Strong adores that sound.

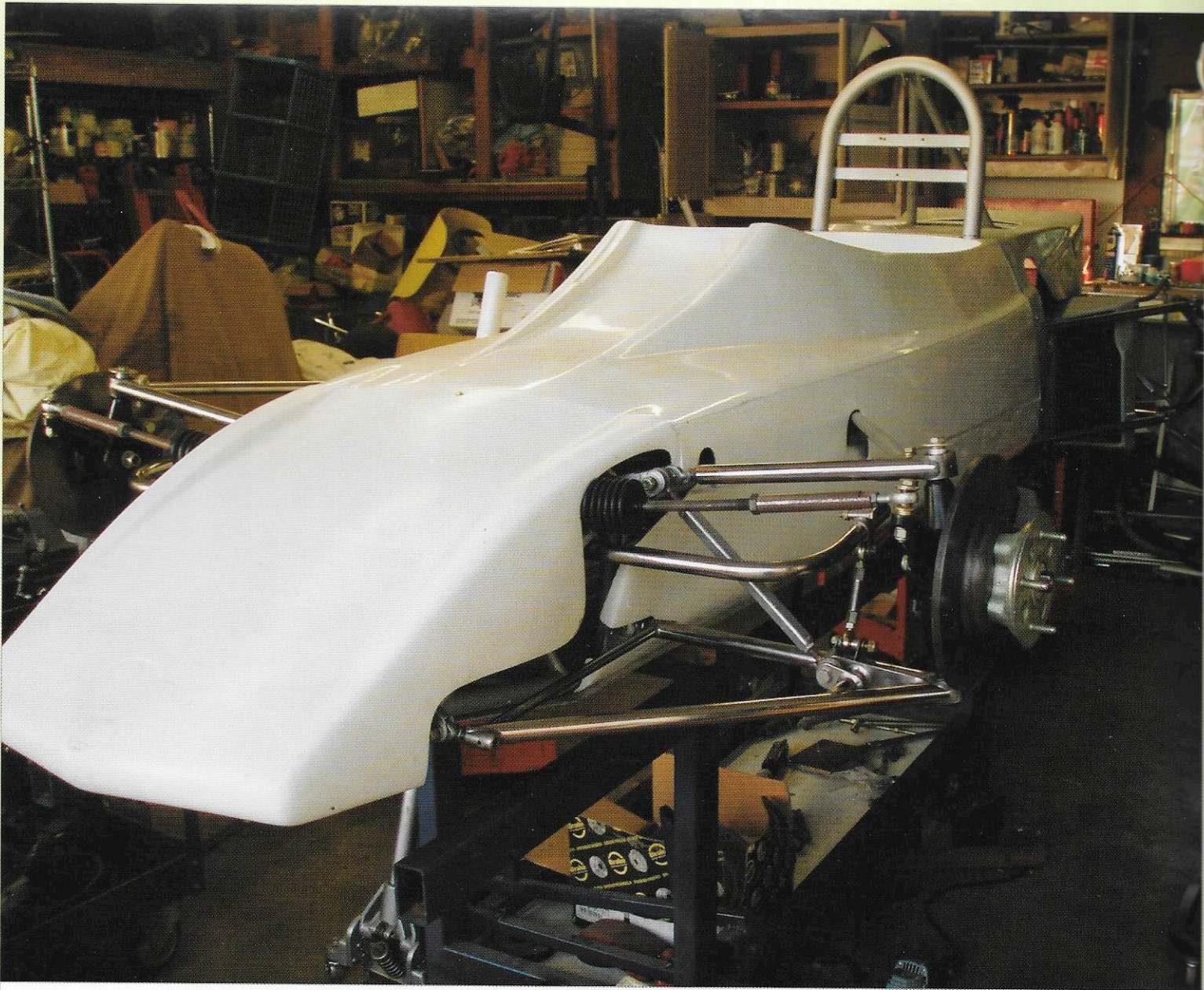
For Strong, director of engineering and quality at Gulfstream's Long Beach site, competition and speed have been a lifelong passion. Growing up in Lake Tahoe, Calif., he raced dirt bikes in high school, loving it as he skidded up and over hills, leaving other riders literally in his dust. As a competitive downhill skier in college, Strong careened across snowy slopes, doing his best to beat the best. Now he restores and races vintage Formula Ford cars, pushing himself and his vehicles to the limit along the twisting tracks.

"I've always been into speed, always been into dangerous stuff," says Strong. "I have a need for the thrill."

Wait. This guy is an engineer? He sounds more like an adrenaline-seeking rebel than a respectable business professional. Yet that is his charm. Strong has managed to merge both sides of his personality into one really interesting person.

"My dad was a motorcycle racer and into sports cars, so I come by it naturally," Strong says with a smile. "As I went through





Strong's "new" 1975 Titan Mark IX in the mock-up stage of build. At this point, the car is about three months away from completion.

high school, I knew I wanted to be a mechanical engineer. After receiving my college degree, I tried working for a race car driver. It was grueling work and didn't pay well. Most importantly, it didn't provide a stable lifestyle, which wasn't going to work for marriage and children."

That would be his responsible side. But Strong quickly discovered the coolest career alternative to auto racing—the aerospace industry.

"In many ways they are very similar," he says. "High performance machines that are intricate, mechanically fascinating, beautiful, and go extremely fast."

Although it may seem an engineer's "busman's holiday," Strong really enjoys the restoration process of bringing a vintage car from random rusty scraps in dilapidated crates into a clean, mean, racing machine. One of the fun parts of the hobby, says Strong, is talking to friends about the hidden treasures out there—the discarded dreams of another racer, left decaying in a weed-filled backyard, yearning for a new owner. Finding and restoring the car, learning the story behind the vehicle, and exploring the history of the company that made it, all adds to the experience.

"I love restoring and racing Formula cars," says Strong. "I recently finished

a 1975 Titan Mark IX Formula Ford. Titan was an English company that built race cars from the 1960s through the late '70s. I spent about 20 hours a week for a year bringing the car back to life. But it was worth it. It's a magnificent vehicle."

For those who are not aficionados of the type of car Strong races, there are many different classes of Formula cars, including the more well known Formula One and Formula Atlantic. What is important to understand is that they neither look nor act like NASCAR vehicles. In fact, to the uninitiated, they resemble a sophisticated soap box derby car—very small and short. And that is the scary part. Low to the ground, open wheel, seating only one person, this class of car with its powerful Ford engine goes more than 130 mph!

What's interesting, according to Strong, is that it doesn't seem like you are going that fast driving down the straight-away portion of the course. The real rush is racing around the corners, when everything "puckers up" at the hair-raising high speeds.

"Because the Formula Fords don't have 'wings,' they slide around more and are more fun to drive," Strong says. "This type of racing is a tightly controlled class, so the cars are very similar. It's the driver's skill that makes the difference."

Lately, Strong has been racing his "new" 1975 Titan Mark IX, along with his trusty blue 1970 Titan Mark VI Formula Ford. The drivers at these races are classified as "amateur"—meaning no prize money—but they are certainly professional in their skill, dedication and abilities. On a typical race weekend, the competitors go through two or three 30-minute sprint races on the track, a 30-minute practice, followed by a 30-minute qualifying round that determines the line-up positions.

Then the flag drops and the race begins. It is a full race. Twenty laps at about a minute and a half per lap. No pit stops. No refueling. Make it all the way around or you are done.

"The whole time at the track can be tense and stressful," says Strong. "I need to stay in the moment and be 100 percent immersed in what I am doing. I'm alone, in control, not thinking about work or family."

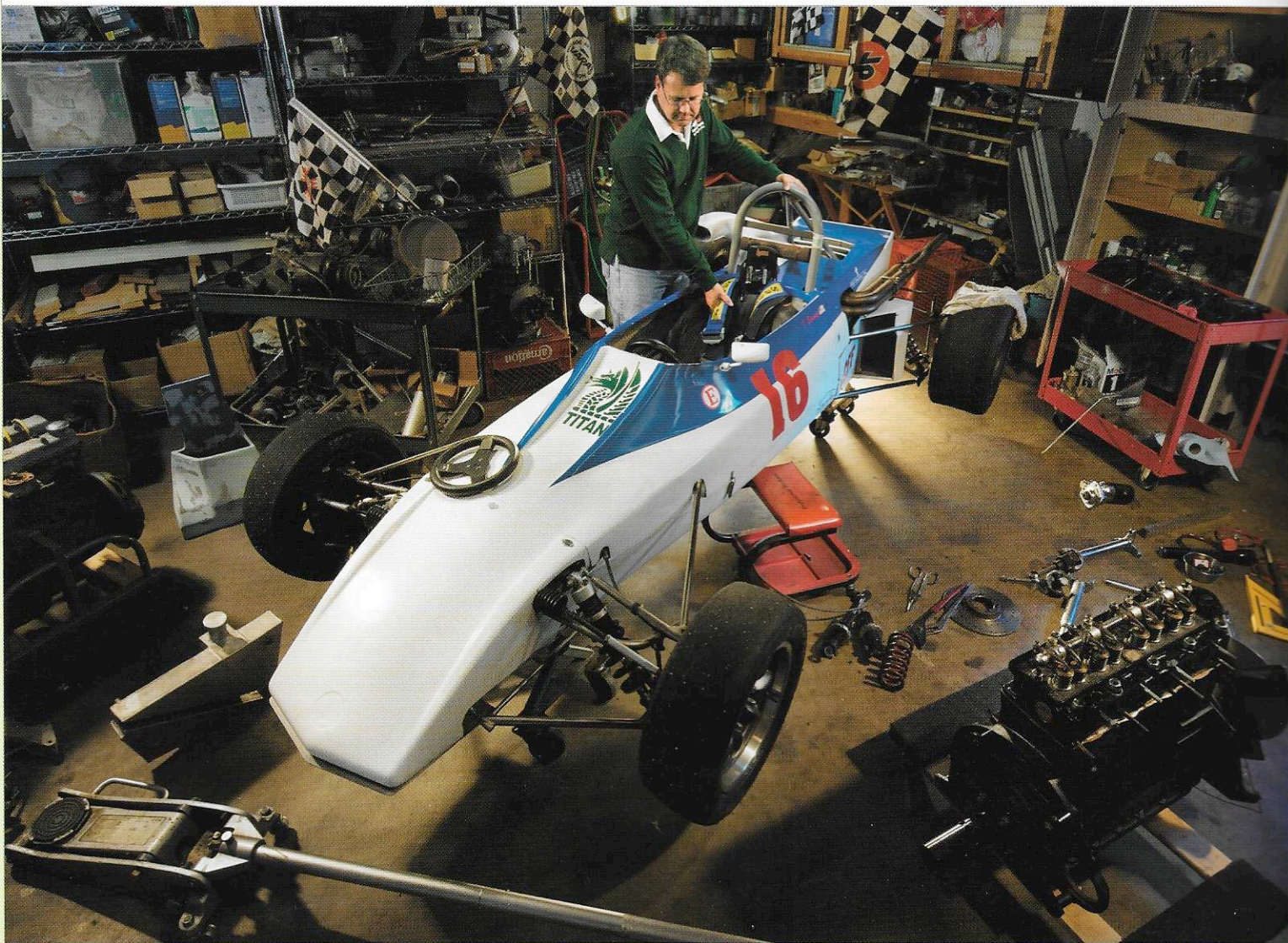
Despite the stress, Strong says it has a cathartic effect, too. "It is incredibly refreshing. It clears your mind and forces you to totally focus on the moment."

Strong races 12 to 16 weekends a year, traveling to racetracks throughout California, Nevada, Arizona and Utah. After all these years of participating in the sport, Strong has raced on and knows most of the

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tracks, but it still is necessary to become familiar with each course, and for that he sometimes turns to PlayStation video games.

Strong spends another late night in his garage, getting his car ready for a race.





PlayStation?

"I have used PlayStation to help learn a racetrack," Strong says with a laugh. "For instance, I had never raced at Miller Motorsports Park in Salt Lake City. It was a new track for me, and I learned the course on my PlayStation. Obviously, you need to practice on the real track, but it does help you prepare."

So will the racing dynasty carry on to the next generation?

"I have a wonderful family who support me and my sport," says Strong. "My wife, Ann, also raced before we had our children, and she may again. Our oldest daughter, Erika, has raced go-carts. I could see her moving into Formula Fords in the future. Sydney, 17, is an artist, but she loves to draw images of race cars. So each in their own way carries on the tradition."

As for now, Strong is loving racing, feeling the adrenaline rush, being a winner. Among his championships are Vintage Auto Racing Association Driver of the Year 1998; Formula Ford Pacific Challenge Champion 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2009; and Formula Ford "The Series" Champion 2008 and 2009.

"I don't plan on giving up racing anytime soon," says Strong. "I love this sport. At some point, I know it becomes more dangerous with age. Hopefully, I will know when I reach that point. Until then, I am going to keep on racing.

Zoom, zoom, zoom! ←



Top: Strong receives the top trophy from two-time Indianapolis 500 winner Arie Luyendyk after his first win in the "new" Titan Mark IX at Phoenix International Raceway.

Middle: A battle for the lead in turn one at Willow Springs International Raceway.

Bottom: Leading the pack in the trusty blue Titan Mark VI.