

Racer focuses on fun

Woman finds success in a traditionally male-dominated sport

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By Ed Youngblood

The small animals at Humanitarians of Florida are grateful for Dora Thorne's compassionate and gentle touch. The guys racing Central Florida's circle tracks, not so much.

This breadth of interest and experience — from animal welfare to the rough-and-tumble world of stock car racing — clearly illustrates the extent to which Floral City's Thorne will go to explore her inner landscape and test her limitations. She sums up her quest for meaningful experience nicely on her Facebook page: "I'd rather look back at my life and say 'I can't believe I did that' instead of saying 'I wish I had.'"

Thorne moved to Florida in her early 20s, by which time she had already established an adventurous lifestyle.

"I left home in New Jersey in my late teens and hitchhiked all over the United States," she said, "making a living in 'men's work' like construction, roofing, tree trimming, lineman and bartending. I went wherever excitement and a means to make a living took me. Exploring for new experiences was my life."

In Florida, Thorne met her husband, Frank, and settled down — somewhat. But in no way did she give up her active lifestyle. With a lifelong interest in animals, she took work as a veterinary assistant, a surgical assistant at Humanitarians of Florida, an animal control officer and an animal abuse investigator. She also has a private large animal wound care service.

"I love them all, but I think I prefer working with large animals," Thorne said. "I love horses, especially, and have done all the rodeo cowgirl stuff — barrel racing and so on."

In 2010, Thorne saw an ad for a demolition derby at Citrus County Speedway. She had never been in a race car but thought it sounded like fun. She made a deal to set up an old Cadillac for the derby and signed up to drive. There must have been something about her that seemed competitive (or foolish), because that same evening she was recruited to drive a school bus in a figure-8 race.

She was hooked by the fun and excitement of racing and bought a used Street Stock Camaro. She painted it with No. 48, which was her age when she started her racing career.

"I made every mistake possible my rookie season (2011)," Thorne recalled. "But I got a lot of help and advice and good will from the other drivers, probably because I wasn't a threat to anybody."

"When I asked Street Stock champion Curtis Flanagan for advice, he said, 'Just start in the back and try to keep up.'"

But her second season — 2012 — was something different. She had bashed up the car so badly that during the off season they cut off the chassis from the firewall forward and installed a new front suspension.



STEPHEN E. LASKO/For the Chronicle
Dora Thorne puts her car through its paces and tests the track prior to her race on a recent Saturday evening.



STEPHEN E. LASKO/For the Chronicle
Dora Thorne checks instruments on the dash of her stock car in preparation for a practice run on a recent Saturday afternoon at the Citrus County Speedway.

"Now it handled really well, and I had a good engine built by Flanagan," Thorne said.

With good equipment, Thorne focused on the points race for the season. She entered every event, won two finals, finished well in most of the others, and won the 2012 Citrus County Speedway Street Stock Championship.

"Things were different for the 2013 season," Thorne said. "It got a lot rougher on the track because I was no longer the harmless nice lady at the back of the pack. Curtis said he no longer had the time to do my engine work, and our friendship became distant, at best."

But Thorne's success brought in a lot of new sponsors. These included Robert Todd Racing, the Woodshed Pub, Raymond Frankart Roofing, Ryan-Markland Signs and others.

"I have a lot of good people pulling for me, and I am grateful to them all," Thorne said.

Thorne's strategy has changed for the 2014 season.

"I am not going for the Citrus County Speedway Championship," Thorne said. "It is still my home track, but I am exploring other tracks in Central Florida. That season championship was a real confidence booster, and I am finding that to continue to learn, it is helpful to try other tracks and learn from other drivers." She adds, "I am focusing on this being fun. I like serious competition, but I am not going to let title-seeking ruin it for me. At my age, the fun is more important."

It appears that fun is not the only benefit of Thorne's active lifestyle. At 52, Thorne is a handsome woman. She has blue/gray eyes that sparkle with mischief, and the lines in her face seem to have been fashioned by smiles, not by worry. Her blond and graying hair is kept in a long pony tail (the better to quickly stuff into a helmet), and her near-6-foot frame is lean with muscular definition, especially on her tattooed upper arms. While she refuses to regard herself a feminist role model, a younger woman could do worse than take cues from her style and attitude.

Thorne admits that it is not unusual for fans to ask her what she thinks of the top-tier celebrity driver Danica Patrick. She says, "I just grin and say, 'There's no comparison. I'm better.'"

"That," she adds, "always gets a good laugh and lets people know I don't take myself too seriously."