

Racing Toward Business Success

“Backing into” Panic Motorsports

By Sam Morton / Photography by Robert Clark

Every successful small business begins with passion – an unquenchable belief that you can take something you do well and make a living doing it. So it is with Steve and Becca Bertok of Panic Motorsports. Along with business partner Jerry Horn, Steve and Becca have built an auto racing enterprise in the heart of Lexington County.

The way Steve tells it, he sort of “backed into racing.” At the time a parts salesman for a local salvage yard, Steve attended an American Le Mans Series race at Road Atlanta with some friends. “I thought that was really cool, so I came back home, researched it a little and found out we had a local racing organization here, the Sports Car Club of America – South Carolina Region,” he says. The organization is composed solely of volunteers. Part of its appeal for Steve was that if he attended training classes to work the flags or various other safety positions, he could get better-than-front-row, trackside views of the races for free. So he went to a training session in 2000 conducted by Becca Watson, a polite – though no-nonsense – lady who also happened to be a racer.

Steve began racing with the SCCA’s Solo II program in 2000, and in 2001 he won South Carolina Region’s Solo II Driver of the Year Award and the Street

Modified Solo II Championship in the state and in the Southeast Division. Steve and Becca eventually found they had more than a love of cars in common and were married in 2002.

When Steve still worked for the salvage yard, he would buy a Mazda Miata and sell it for parts. “That would fund my racing. But then one day, I thought if I could do that consistently, I could start my own business.” Jerry, a long time friend, was looking to make a career change as well, so he came along with Becca and Steve, and they opened Panic Motorsports in the fall of 2006.

The original idea for Panic Motorsports was (as the story goes) conjured up by a few gear-head friends on a bar napkin. The business, in addition to acting as the umbrella organization for the Panic Motorsports racing teams, sells high-quality, tested salvage auto parts for Mazda Miatas and RX-7s (street cars and race cars alike) as well as custom vinyl decals, Autopower roll bars, Carbotech brake pads and more.

Panic also rents race cars, a widely-practiced approach within racing circles, yet hardly known outside them. “Oh yeah,” Steve says, “a driver could race his entire career and never own a car.” He says the advantage of renting, especially early in one’s career, is that the driver can judge whether he or she has the knack and the commitment for the sport without a tremendous initial investment. “That’s an area of our business I’d like to grow for the future.”

With respect to racing, Panic has grown into a team of 15 drivers and officials. It has members in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Maryland, England and Holland. Its members compete and officiate at permanent road courses including Daytona International Speedway, Roebing Road Raceway, Carolina Motorsports Park (outside Kershaw), Road Atlanta,

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Virginia International Raceway, Trailway Speedway and Lowe’s Motor Speedway. The team boasts over 10 championships, including Steve’s 2008 Carolina Cup Pro Series championship win, which he took at Virginia International Raceway in October.

Steve admits that part of racing’s allure is the adrenaline rush it provides. “But when I’m out there, I don’t really

Steve and Becca Bertok, along with business partner Jerry Horn (standing), have built an auto racing enterprise in the heart of Lexington County.