

## Gentlemen... Start Your Engines

Local attorney Michael Waters has grown to realize he has a need for speed.

by Cindy Riley Photo by Beau Gustafson

**M**ichael Waters clearly has the need for speed. After three decades of practicing law, Waters is finally pursuing his longtime passion for auto racing.

"It's exciting to get behind the wheel. I'm always a little nervous until the car gets on the track. Then I settle down," explains the 60-year-old Cullman native, who grew up watching his uncle, Vic Geisen, race stock cars in the 1950s. Geisen won numerous track championships and competitions throughout the Southeast.

"He raced all over North Alabama, including at the Fairgrounds Speedway and the Iron Bowl Speedway, and also in West Georgia, Chattanooga, and once, in 1954, in the Daytona Beach Race won by Lee Petty. He was very good, so it was exciting to see him in action."

About three years ago, Waters, a Rhodes Scholar and partner in the banking and financial services division of Birmingham's Jones Walker law firm, decided to enroll in the Skip Barber Formula Car Racing School. The national program, founded by former Formula 1 driver Skip Barber, trains young professional drivers and amateur racing enthusiasts. Drivers come from all over the world to participate. NASCAR favorite Jeff Gordon, Indy car drivers Tony Kanaan and Marco Andretti, and the late Paul Newman are among its famous grads.

"I learned so much during the course," Waters explains. "I think most people would be surprised by the technical side of driving.

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It's not just about trying to mash the gas pedal. You have to understand how the car reacts both to acceleration and braking. A street car masks the feel of the road. In the race car, if you are in a turn and think you are going too fast and you release the accelerator, that will often make the car spin. The only way not to spin is not to release the accelerator. That takes discipline.

"There are also the physical demands. Our races at Skip Barber are only 30 minutes, but it's 30 minutes of constant work in the car. You feel the G-forces in the turn, your hands and arms are constantly working the steering wheel, and it is usually pretty hot. We are required to wear complete race gear, and that includes a helmet, full race suit, fire protection shoes and gloves. I also wear a HANS device with my helmet which helps protect against neck injuries."

Waters says as a spectator, the most thrilling part for him was never the sounds or even the speed.

"I always enjoyed the color of the cars. They are all different, with different paint designs, and at times one car stands out and at other times the colors blend based upon both the speed of the cars as well as their close proximity to each other. It's almost like a painting. You don't get that sense watching it on TV."

For Waters, formula car racing is an all-consuming process.

"The challenge is not to think too much and to drive based on instinct and, ultimately, to trust what I am doing and

trust the car. You feel everything in the car and often, in order to make the car feel more stable, you have to drive it faster. In some corners you can only drive the car 40 mph, in some corners the ideal speed is over 100. The car is built for speed and does not feel right unless it is driven at its ideal maximum."

Waters is proud to have competed at Road Atlanta, Road America in Wisconsin and Sebring in Florida. He hopes to improve his lap times and looks forward to what lies ahead.

"I wish I had started sooner. A number of drivers my age have been doing this for several years and it shows in their speed. And I enjoy the camaraderie. Many drivers in the Skip Barber series come from all over the country and from varied careers such as law, medicine, engineering and even the CIA. There are also drivers, both male and female, in their teens who hope to become pros. I could be racing against a future Indy 500 winner."

A licensed pilot, Waters also enjoys reading about foreign policy and the American West. A graduate of Duke University and University of Alabama Law School, he cheers for the Blue Devils and the Crimson Tide when he isn't preparing for the half-dozen races he participates in each year. His three grown children are supportive of their dad's driving, but wife Melinda has needed a bit more convincing.

"She gets a little nervous," laughs Waters, "but she's getting better about it. She knows this is important to me."

As for Uncle Vic, who was recently inducted posthumously into the Alabama Auto Racing Pioneers Hall of Fame in Talladega, "He had a good sense of humor," Waters confides. "He would be interested in what I'm doing, but he would joke about why I'm not driving the car faster and why I haven't won a race yet."

