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Bitten by the Bug

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Ron Wake with his race car Photo provided

for supplies. Asked if his patients know about his "other life," Wake shrugs. He'll tell them about racing, but he doesn't flaunt it. No checkered flags adorn his office walls.

Wake has raced locally at Laguna Seca, Infineon, and Thunder Hill, in Willows, as well as in Southern California at Autoclub Speedway (Fontana), Willow Springs (Rosamond), Buttonwillow, and Los Angeles' old Riverside Raceway. He's competed in Wisconsin, Oregon, Nevada and Georgia. Wake maintains dual membership in the San Francisco region SCCA and the LA-based Cal Club, which allows him to race in the Southern Pacific Division. Formula Vee competes against Formula Ford, Formula C and Formula 500 (the snowmobile category...let the snickering begin.) "We're the slowest [group]," says Wake. But it's real racing, head to toe.

Like other racers, Wake suits up in Nomex and dons a crash helmet; he uses head and neck support (HANS) and clips into a 7-point body harness. Races run rain or shine; participants simply swap out rain tread tires for the dry weather slicks when needed. With its low center of gravity, Formula Vee cars rarely flip (unless the wheels are clipped) but Wake recalls spinning repeatedly after being hit in one race.

Wake competes from January through October. The three-time Northern California Region winner also placed in the Southern Pacific Division two years in a row. He finished 18 out of 45 the last two years in Wisconsin's "Road America" race. Wake's trophies are housed in his garage, and there they'll stay, says wife Sharon. But she does approve of his hobby ("When we met I was racing," says Wake) and even acts as his pit crew alongside their daughter.

On a normal weekend, Wake runs three half-hour races. He says SCCA racing is "fairly inexpensive" for a serious hobby, and race spectators are admitted free. "It's a great opportunity to see professional race courses." Wake's next race weekend is July 23 and 24 on Thunderhill in Willows; he then races at Infineon September 3 and 4. It's clear he'd love to see some friendly faces lining the track.

After over 35 years of competition, the dentist who races and the racer with a dental practice says he won't retire "until my competitors tell me [to]." Even then there's another option-vintage racing, with "older cars and older drivers." For now, he's still gunning for that checkered flag.

SCCA Formula Vee racing began in 1963. Explore the San Francisco chapter of SCCA online at www.sfrscca.com, or watch video from Wake's car-mounted camera online at www.lamorindaweekly.com.

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What does Ron Wake, D.D.S. have in common with Rick Mears, Niki Lauda, Dan Gurney and Paul Newman? They all race sports cars. On weekends the Lafayette dentist races Sports Car Club of America sanctioned Formula Vee cars. That's Vee, as in VW, or Volkswagen, Bug. A vintage, 1960's-era Bug. Don't snicker just yet: these ram air-cooled, open wheel racers are 10 feet long, weigh 1,000 pounds and cruise at an average 75 mph (top speed 115, "almost terminal velocity," says Wake) along asphalt road courses. To build the racer, Wake says "we take the wheels, axel and transmission and throw the Bug away."

As a child, Wake raced go-carts on his family's central California valley farm. His interest in organized racing grew out of a conversation he had with a patient who raced cars and did his own mechanical work. Wake had a BMW 2002 that needed work, and asked his patient for help. That was 1974. Soon Wake was acting as his patient's pit crew and watching from the sidelines. He bought his first Formula Vee in Oakland a couple years later, and has been racing ever since.

Now Wake owns two race cars, employs a Redwood City "motor guru" for mechanical work, and shops I/O Port Racing in Lafayette