

Grant drag racer still loves her high heels

By Cindy West

Less than a decade after graduating from high school, Erica Ortiz has left her mark on the world — tire tracks.

From her home base in Grant she travels long miles to pursue her second career in drag racing. Weekdays she is an advertising executive for the Huntsville Times newspaper.

Neighbors who haven't met Ms. Ortiz since she moved to the area last May can keep up with her career through her web site and a new Internet-based video show, "Horsepower and Heels."

Growing up in Florida, the Puerto Rican/Cuban girl didn't know a thing about cars. She was into sports, even graduating with volleyball scholarship, but injuries from a car wreck kept her from taking advantage of it.

IT WAS AFTER graduation that she bought her first car, a liter 1990 Mustang GT.

"I liked cars, but I didn't know anything about them, and I didn't know anyone who knew anything about them," she said.

She began to scour car magazines, web sites and nearby speed shops to figure out how to make her car go faster. In Orlando she found a racetrack with a "test and tune" night for street cars and drivers.

"I was an athlete, so I like competition. I've never been much of a spectator, either. When I got there I stood at the fence for a few minutes and watched a few cars go by, and then I decided to put my car in there," she said.

That was in August 1998.

"I'VE NEVER looked back after that," she said. "One of my first nights at the track, somebody came up to me and asked if I knew which one was the gas pedal. That kind of gave me the drive to keep going."

From street class she moved up to bracket class, which is a hand-

apped class, and then to drag-racial class, where she used street tires instead of slicks.

"Those cars run 0 to 175 in about 8 seconds," she said. "That's the class where I actually runnered-up for the series in 2003." That means she was runner up for the championship.

She's been successful as a pro racer, making it as a runner-up last year in the Fun Ford Weekend Pro 5.0 points championship. That was a good rookie pro season, but she has higher aspirations. She wants to race full-time in the NHRA, the National Hot Rod Association, the top sanctioning body for drag racing. That will require a higher level of sponsorship.

"I'M AT THE point now where this is as far as I can go on my own dollar," she said. "With the smaller sponsors I have now, it's going to take me either becoming a hired driver for another team or a larger sponsor coming on board. The racing is a job in itself, but we also take very seriously the job of working with our advertisers and sponsors to get them some exposure. We do a lot of out-of-the-box thinking as far as motor sports marketing."

She can name about a dozen women drivers in her circuit and

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Erica Ortiz stands beside an electronic device that lights the start of a drag race. It is commonly called a Christmas tree because of the multicolored lights.

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the NHRA, but there aren't that many drag-racing women out there.

"I'm probably in the top 5 women in my class," she said. "The difference between me and other women who race is most of them are just drivers. My team is an all-woman team. I work on the car myself; I drive the car myself. We promote ourselves."

Her team includes Debbie Denny of Jacksonville, Fla. They both work on the marketing.

Part of that promotion is her web site, www.horsepowerandheels.com. The logo is a pair of high heels surrounded by a circle and topped by a pair of pink wings.

FEMININITY AND motor oil aren't mutually exclusive, she said.

"I build my own engines now. I can do my own maintenance. Some of the things I out-source now just because of time, but I know how to work on my car," she said.

She's had to work at not being defensive about her choice of career.

"It's kind of a double-edged sword. People look at you more, and you get more attention because you're one of the few girls out there, but they also can be very critical as well. You always feel like you have something to prove," she said. "I started thinking that I had to be one of the boys to play with the boys. I got to the point where I was like, 'You know what? Who says I can't still be a girl and still be out there racing my heart out?'"

From that experience came her trademark motto "Who says horsepower and heels don't mix?"

That and other sayings are featured in a line of clothing that will be for sale on the web site.

ANOTHER ASPECT of promotion is her Internet-based video show of the same name.

"Debbie and I encounter so

many funny things, being 2 girls on the road with a truck and trailer going to these races by ourselves," she said. "We wanted a way to tell those stories, and it helps us to market ourselves, as well.

"We tow a large trailer. I've pulled into truck stops, and the truck drivers are kind of amazed that 2 girls will jump out of this truck. They will ask, 'What have you got in there, sweetie?' I tell them I've got a race car in there, and it goes zero to 207 miles an hour in 6 seconds. They're just in awe."

Ms. Ortiz carries a small video camera everywhere. When she's working an event, someone else will shoot video for her. PNN.com uses short video clips to put together the video show.

THE RACES are held on weekends, so she's able to work her full-time job in advertising, but all of her vacation days are used traveling to and from those weekend races or getting the car ready to hit the track.

She took off this season to convert her car from an older-model Thunderbird body to a 2007 Mustang body and upgrade the engine.

"I've always loved Mustangs. That's what I drive daily, so I'm glad to be back in a Mustang this year," she said. "We should be faster and a lot better-looking this year."

She moved to Grant to be near her boyfriend, who works for the professional racing outfit Gotham City Racing. He had moved to Grant a couple of years ago. Gotham City races in the NHRA series.

People can catch up with Ms. Ortiz's career by visiting her web site, www.horsepowerandheels.com, or by watching the Internet video of the same name that was scheduled to begin airing in September on PNN.com, the Personal News Network. It can be found at: <http://horsepowerandheels.pnn.com/2321-the-show>.

THE ADVERTISER-GLEAM
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