AAOS Now

The need for vintage speed

By Jennie McKee

Nicholas Colyvas, MD, travels the world racing vintage cars

For as long as he can remember, **Nicholas Colyvas, MD,** has had a passion for cars.

"As a child, I was always building model cars, talking about cars, or working on one of my parent's cars," he says.

Dr. Colyvas poses with his 1963 Lotus 27 Formula Junior car at Hockenheim Race Track in Germany. Courtesy of Nicholas Colyvas, MD

It's no surprise that when he's not seeing patients at his busy orthopaedic practice or performing surgery, he is often surrounded by roaring engines and screeching tires as he hurtles down the racetrack. Drawn to the cars he remembers from his youth, Dr. Colyvas devotes much of his free time to racing vintage automobiles, and also races modern cars. For more than a decade, he has competed at a wide range of events on tracks in small, out-of-the way towns as well as in glamorous, international locales.

Getting behind the wheel

After completing his orthopaedic residency and fellowship at the University of California at San Francisco and building a sports medicine practice in the San Francisco Bay area, Dr. Colyvas bought a vintage racecar with his first paycheck.

"I attended a weekend course at a driving school," he says. "After that, I spent many hours at test days and weekend races learning how to drive competitively."

His first race was at Sears Point Infineon Raceway in Sonoma, Calif., just north of San Francisco.

"I was happy just to finish in one piece," remembers Dr. Colyvas.

Today, Dr. Colyvas owns an assortment of racecars, most of which are formula cars—single-seater cars built specifically for racing—from the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Two mechanic crews—one based in the United States, the other in England—maintain and repair Dr. Colyvas' cars.

"My cars include Formula Ones, Formula Juniors, Formula Fords, and Formula 500s," he says. Each category indicates specifications that are unique to the type of car, such as weight and engine size.

"Formula One cars are the very top of the line," he notes. "They are the fastest, most powerful cars with the biggest engines and highest levels of technology of their respective eras."

While cars with smaller engines have a top speed of around 120 to 130 miles per hour, Formula One cars can reach 170 to 180 miles per hour.

"But formula cars are not only about top-end speed," he says, noting that the important thing is how well they can maintain their speed and momentum on a twisty race track.

Dr. Colyvas has a special affinity for vintage race cars.

"A pure spirit of racing existed in the time before massive sponsorship," he notes. "These cars come from a time when mechanical principles rather than electronic computer systems determined a car's performance, which makes them easier to understand for a mechanically minded orthopaedic surgeon.

"It also doesn't hurt," he adds, "that their value increases significantly over time."

Dr. Colyvas in his 1975 Shadow Formula One racecar. Courtesy of Nicholas Colyvas, MD

The thrill of competition

"The true heart of racing is in England and the rest of Europe," says Dr. Colyvas. "The tracks there are fantastic."

One of Dr. Colyvas' favorite European races is the Historic Grand Prix of Monaco, in which drivers negotiate tight corners, changes in elevation, and a tunnel as they zoom through the narrow streets of the stunningly beautiful principality. The race is held on the same circuit as the Monaco Grand Prix, one of the most prestigious races in the world, which is held two weeks later.

"The race in Monaco is always very special," he says. "The circuit is essentially the same as when the Monaco Grand Prix started in the late 1920s. It runs through the local streets, right next to the Mediterranean Sea."

Because it's a large, international race, it attracts many well-known and highly skilled drivers. Another challenge, says Dr. Colyvas, comes from the track itself.

"There's no run-off room whatsoever," he notes. "On most tracks, you can stop or slow down on 20 or 30 feet of grass, gravel, or sand before you hit a barrier."

Not so in Monaco.

"All the corners are blind and you are surrounded by steel wall barriers," he says. "If you're an inch off where you're supposed to be, you'll hit the wall and it's 'game over.' It's very unforgiving."

When Dr. Colyvas competed in the race in 2008 and 2010, he drove a 1975 Shadow, a Formula One car he describes as an "extremely powerful" automobile that is "daunting but exhilarating" to drive.

"The car has a very strong history in Monaco," says Dr. Colyvas. "It was driven by a famous driver named Tom Pryce in the 1975 Monaco Grand Prix."

Dr. Colyvas also loves driving at the Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps, a racetrack in Belgium that dates from the 1920s.

"This track is considered one of the best in the world by Formula One drivers, and it has an incredible history," says Dr. Colyvas, noting that he also enjoys racing in his Formula One car in the Historic Grand Prix in Montreal, Canada.

"Another historic and famous racetrack where I've raced is Goodwood Circuit, in England," he says. The Goodwood Revival, a 3-day festival held each September, celebrates the types of cars and motorcycles that competed there from 1948 to 1966.

"Even the spectators dress in period clothing," says Dr. Colyvas. "It's very impressive."

In the United States, he races at Sears Point Infineon Raceway, as well as Road America in Wisconsin, Watkins Glen International in upstate New York, and at the Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca in Monterey, Calif., where the Monterey Historic Automobile Races are held every August.

"But I really love my little club events on both continents, where we have few spectators. It's really just a bunch of guys and a few gals with their cars," he says. "We have a lot of fun."

Dr. Colyvas notes that he has won several races, and generally finishes well.

"In some of the classes, the cars are very equal [in terms of power and performance], but in other classes—such as Formula One—the cars come from a wide range of years," he says. "Where it's a little uneven, we compete with equivalent cars within the group."

Although drivers are seldom injured in vintage racing, says Dr. Colyvas, the sport does have significant risks.

"I've had two major crashes that damaged the car, but I've never been hurt," he says.

A precise sport

The most challenging part of racing, says Dr. Colyvas, is the coordination and rapid-fire decision-making required. Driving Formula One cars is particularly physically demanding.

"Precision is key," he says. "You have to brake, turn, accelerate, and change gears in a very precise manner at exactly the right time to get the maximum performance. It's hard enough to do that on the race track by yourself when you're only racing against the clock. An immense layer of complexity is added when 20 or 25 other cars are racing with you."

As the driver negotiates the track, he or she must make almost instantaneous decisions.

"The result of each decision is often immediately evident to you, sometimes dramatically so," he says.

As much as he enjoys racing, Dr. Colyvas is quick to note that he would not want to race full-time.

"I love racing, but I really enjoy being an orthopaedic surgeon," he says. "It's nice to step away on the weekends to race, but it's always great to come back on Monday and return to performing surgery."

View the video from the 2008 Historic Grand Prix of Monaco.

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AAOS *Now*
August 2010 Issue
http://www.aaos.org/news/aaosnow/aug10/youraaos5.asp

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