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HELLO, NEIGHBOR :-)
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Writer's son Henry says West Chandler racing school has filled his longtime desire: A need for speed.

Navigating the future (hold your breath til we arrive)

So. Tempe teen revs up driving skills while connecting to a community

Story & photos by Barbi Walker-Walsh

Watching your child chase a dream is exhilarating, but when that dream involves high speeds and negotiating a 15-turn race track, it's also nerve-racking.

Those moments of gripping the armrest and mashing on a non-existent brake in the passenger side floorboard come flooding back.

Only today, my now 17-year-old is clocking nearly 100 mph around a racetrack with his

classmates in the Advanced Teen Driving course at Radford's Racing School at Firebird Motorsports Park in West Chandler.

It's a thrilling ride for both kid and parent. The sun-drenched stretches of Firebird aren't just home to the roar of engines—they're the pulse of a community nurturing the next generation of drivers.

Among them is Corona del High School student Henry Walker, who recently completed Radford's program. It wasn't just his dream—it reignited his love for racing and connected him to a new community of like-minded people. And it's more

than just speed; it's a community of gearheads.

Radford's teen driving course is a rigorous program designed to equip young drivers with skills beyond the racetrack.

From mastering vehicle control and understanding how to handle their car if it goes into a skid to understanding the physics of driving, it offers a comprehensive education far exceeding standard driver's education.



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Most importantly, it emphasizes safety, ensuring your teen is not just skilled but responsible behind the wheel. From a parent's perspective, it comes down to building confidence and trust. "Mainly eye placement, braking skills and how to get out of a skid," Henry said, are the skills he learned at Radford designed to make him a safer driver.

Watching Henry navigate the track's twists and turns was heart-stopping at times, but seeing his newfound confidence behind the wheel after the course filled me with pride and trust. His respect for the car and the road had noticeably grown. Experts at Radford point out that no driver on the road benefits more from proper training than those in their teens. Their curriculum focuses on the fundamentals of safe, skilled and conscientious driving. It's more than racing; it's about a supportive community fostering invaluable lessons that help build confidence that aims at saving lives.

Casey Buckman, Firebird's track manager, provided valuable insights into the collaboration with Radford.

"It's about more than just driving," Buckman said. "It's about building a community and a safe environment where teens can explore their limits and learn the responsibility that comes with driving." One of the major concerns in Phoenix for the racing community, Buckman said, was the uptick in street racing if Firebird Raceway was to go away. Now that Firebird Motorsports is here to stay, Buckman said, we can make sure they have a safe place to race their cars. They even created the Jr. Street class, where drivers ages 13-17 are allowed to compete in street vehicles with a guardian or parent riding in the passenger seat. Fostering relationships and imparting the importance of having a safe environment for drivers, families and the community is paramount to everyone at Firebird, Buckman said. "We take it very seriously."

Connecting the community through history also matters. The historic raceway also shares a generation of love for the sport and a connection to the community that Firebird brought. Buckman is honored to carry on and share the legacy with others.

Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park, once slated to close, now stands strong. With community support, it carries on Firebird International Raceway's legacy. The world-class facility offers three road-course circuits, acres of pavement for



autocross and skidpad use, a ¼-mile NHRA Drag Strip, drag boat racing, off-road truck racing and more. Led by Buckman and business administrator Connie Bopp, they bring a combined experience of over 50 years in the industry.

"As someone who grew up going to events at the facility when it was called Firebird, I am excited to be honoring the history of the past 40 years and look forward to adding to the legacy for years to come," said Buckman. "I'm such a history nerd," Buckman added when it comes to his deep connection to the sport and raceway. Now, in an ode to its history and former glory days as Firebird International Raceway, it was renamed Firebird Motorsports Park. Family, passion and the future of racing fuel Buckman.

His deep connection to the sport and raceway is evident. "The respect I have for Charlie Allen—he basically grew this with his bare hands. I love every aspect of this," he said. Allen, one of the first people Buckman called when bringing back Firebird, played a pivotal role in preserving the raceway's history. Buckman's family ties run deep, too; his dad and uncle were IndyCar drivers, and his mother worked at Firebird, eventually becoming VP under Allen. He said it's a great way for him and his mom to bond.

As Firebird Motorsports Park diversifies, engaging the community with car shows, DJs, and live entertainment, it's not just about racing—it's

an opportunity to bond with family. For Buckman, it's generational—a love and involvement in racing passed down. Witnessing this intergenerational bond is heartwarming. It's not uncommon at Firebird—many families connect over their love for racing. As I explored the grounds, I overheard staff discussing bringing family members to experience the track, a testament to the sport's unifying power.

Even 25-year-old mechanic Marques Jacobs got his mom and sister hooked. At first, his mom was worried about him driving and racing cars. But not anymore—not after he brought her and his sister out to take the race course training. Now they're crazy about it, too.

Beyond the finish line, it comes down to instilling safety, honing skills and inspiring dreams. Programs like Radford's extend far beyond individual participants. They contribute to the community's safety and well-being by fostering responsible drivers. The course ignites a passion for motorsports in teens, introducing them to the discipline, dedication and exhilaration it demands. It also serves as a stepping stone for teens interested in pursuing a future in motorsports, offering a taste of the thrill that the sport entails. Buckman said that for most people, the passion starts with wanting to drive or be behind the wheel.

But there are so many different avenues available for anyone who wants to be in the racing industry, he said. "No matter what kind of gearhead you are, there's a place for you here." Jacobs, who has worked for Radford for four years, said he was a manager at Fry's store before he got the job at Radford. He's always loved fixing cars, and now he repairs, drives, tests, and even races them. His advice to those interested in working there is to "Keep your head down, work hard, and shine bright."

As the sun sets on Firebird, one thing is clear: programs like Radford's create more than just safe drivers. They fuel dreams and equip teens to navigate their future, both on the road and in life.

When the first day is over, Henry wants to drive my car home. This time, I worry he'll want to drive my 10-year-old Porsche Cayenne like he's still on the track. He doesn't. It's like old times again, with him in the driver's seat and me on the passenger side. But I'm not gripping the armrest or mashing the non-existent brake. There's no white-knuckling. Instead, we connect and talk about his future aspirations and what he's learned. Now, I can take my eyes off the road and see my son beaming with accomplishment—a priceless moment.