



Witness

an online magazine

The Farmer and the Race Car

Photographs & Text
by
Richard Falco

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As the early morning light spread across the field you could feel the heat rising. It was going to be another hot summer day. Yet a strange feeling fell upon you because you were standing in a field of Christmas trees. The trees are part of a farm owned by Michael Sabia in the small bucolic town of Easton, Connecticut.

Easton was first settled in 1757. Today it has a population of just over 7000 people. It is unique in that it is home to some 20 active farms - all of which are small family-owned businesses. A few go back many generations. One goes back over 300 years, making it one of the oldest family-owned and operated farms in the United States. Today, farming is still an integral part of life in Easton. The fabric of the community is closely tied to the land.

Michael Sabia has been living in Easton all his life. He grew up and went to public school here. He started dating his future wife, Samantha, at the local high school. They married, settled into a home, and had a son, Luke. They love and have no thoughts of leaving the community.

Michael and his wife, Samantha, walk through one of their fields of young trees.



Michael clears a patch of weeds from a infant Christmas tree. It takes years before a tree is mature enough to survive and grow.





Samantha, and their son, Luke, watch as Michael examines one of the Christmas trees.



Samantha takes care of the chickens and collects the eggs for sale at their farm stand.



FIREWOOD
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Michael's - Sabia Tree Experts - crew works along one of Easton's main roads.

Unknown to most people, Easton is also considered the Christmas Tree Capital of Connecticut. In 2005, Michael began clearing the land on acreage that he bought. He planned to create a tree farm. Trees were planted but it took several years before they were big enough to sell. In the interim, he worked with his father, Michael Sr., who was an excavator and owned a construction company. He also became a volunteer fireman for Easton.

Over the years, Michael has expanded his operations to include tree work and removal, wood spitting & firewood, and excavation. The farm now has over sixty chickens that produce eggs for sale. His wife, Samantha, oversees the farm stand which sells several different products, including flower decorations and wreaths. She is also an art teacher at the local elementary school.





Michael and his crew take down and remove a dead tree for a Easton resident. This is just one part of his business.





Back at the farm, Michael oversees the cutting, splitting, stacking, and the delivery of wood. It has become a large part of his business.



Large cut trees are brought to the farm daily to be split and sized for firewood.





Splitting wood is hands-on work and dangerous.





Once the work for the farm and businesses are complete, Michael's attention turns toward his race cars.



Michael and race team member, Rick Authalet, begin the process of rebuilding one of the cars that will compete in the forthcoming races.



The race team continually discusses the modifications that need to be made to improve performance.



A great deal of time is spent planning and getting ready for the next race.

As the farm and business expanded and prospered, Michael could turn his attention more and more to a passion he discovered in early childhood. When he was young his father, introduced him to go karts. By age seven, Michael was competing in regional go kart racing. At age seventeen, his interest turned to faster cars. Starting with an old car he purchased from a junk yard, he built and modified it so that he could begin racing in the Stock Car Division competitions in the Northeast. “I love the adrenalin rush of the race,” he says. In his first year, he won the track championship.

As time passed, he decided to move from a paved track for stock cars to a dirt track. Racing on a dirt track is very different than racing on a paved track. The move to a dirt track meant using a different kind of vehicle with different specifications to race. Because he doesn’t have major sponsors, he builds, modifies, and maintains the cars himself. He jokes, “splitting firewood and cutting trees pays for my race cars.” He has been racing in this division for the last fifteen years.



Preparing the car to compete as a Modified Dirt Racer, requires a great deal of preparation before each race. Any damage from a prior race must be repaired. However, the main focus is how to make the car faster and more aerodynamic for the conditions at the track in the next week's race. This must all be done within the specification of the cars in his division. Michael has a group of individuals that make up his crew and race team.

Rick Authelet has been with Michael for over two years. Rick started racing in the 1980s. Though he no longer races, he has become very involved in the mechanics, engineering, and maintenance of these modified dirt racers. Before joining Michael's team, Rick worked with many other drivers. He says, "that after years of trying to beat Michael," he laughs, "I would rather just work with him." He continues, "working with Michael



Rick Authelet begins reassembling the exterior metal to the body once most of the mechanics are complete.

is fun. Michael's competitive – like we all are - and he usually finishes really well. So, we all have a good time being together. We're just like brothers or family."

The two men also spend a good deal of time talking about strategy. "There is always a strategy to racing," says Rick. "Each week is different. The track changes. We are always searching for ways to make the car faster. We talk about it. We make changes. Sometimes, we go the right way. Sometimes we don't."

Another teammate is John Kearney. He has known Michael for thirty years. In addition to the daily maintenance, he always accompanies Michael to the track for the weekly races.





Since he retired, Rick has spent a lot of time working on Michael's cars. They have become close freinds.



Another crew member, John Kearney, does some final alignments and adjustments.







Michael Sr. continually checks in to see the team's progress.



Luke, Michael's son, loves to help his dad.



Luke watches as Dad works.



Once the mechanics are in order, the car is moved from the garage and into the trailer that will carry it to the racetrack.



Family time. Luke has his own go kart racer which he is learning to drive.





Three Sabia Generations - Michael Sr., Michael Jr., & Luke

RACE DAY

Though the race car has been prepared for the upcoming race, upon arrival in the pit, the car gets the once over. “Everything is checked and rechecked. After the two warmup laps, slight modifications are made concerning what Michael discovers about the conditions on the track,” says Kearney. This must all be done quickly before the ‘heat laps’ that determine the car’s position in line for the feature race. Position in the lineup is critical and greatly impacts the driver’s ability to win.

The intensity in the pit is loud and fast. Cars fill the inner circle and race teams move about at a frantic pace. Each crew knows how the sequence of the races is scheduled and needs to be ready before each segment begins. The air is filled with sound and dust.

When each phase of the schedule is announced, the drivers scramble to their cars, harness themselves in the safety cage, start their engines, and begin to move into position to enter the track. The race schedule is broken into three segments. The first segment is the warm-up laps. These laps enable the drivers to see and feel out the track’s condition so they can make modifications back in the pit to enhance the car’s performance. The second segment is the eight-lap ‘heat race.’ In this segment, each driver is competing for who will get the best position for the feature race. The cars circle the track furiously to get the position they think will best serve them. The final segment is ‘the race.’ This is the segment that determines the winners and losers. It’s the reason they all come to compete.

Michael is considered one of the major competitors in ‘modified dirt racing.’ The season begins in April and races are conducted every week until October. The schedule creates a grueling pace for everyone involved.

Win or lose, Michael’s passion for the sport brings him back every year to compete. When asked if he would ever give it up he laughs, “maybe when Luke starts racing.”







A tremendous amount of physical labor is necessary to get these race cars to perform at their maximum.



Kearney shares some last minute thoughts before Michael begins the warm up laps.





The cars lineup and wait their turn for warm up laps. These laps give the drivers a strong sense of the track's condition.

The Heat Race



Competition in the 'heat race' is fierce. These eight laps will determine the lineup positions for the start of the feature race. It will also enable the race teams to make any final modifications.







After the Heat Race, all of the cars return to the pit. This will be the last time the crew teams can make any modifications before the final race.

The Feature Race



The cars in the feature race are moving at 100 plus mph. There is no room for mistakes.





At the speed these cars are moving, they will circle each lap in approximately 20-25 seconds.





Michael has gained a reputation as one of the most experienced and competitive drivers in dirt car racing today.

Richard Falco

Richard Falco is President of Vision Project. For the past thirty years he has worked as a photographer, filmmaker, and journalist. He has had assignments on four continents in over thirty-five countries and has worked for many major magazines, including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Geo*, *Life Magazine*, *New York Times*, *US News & World Report*, to name a few. There are two published books of Mr. Falco's work: *Medics: A Documentation of Paramedics in the Harlem Community* and *To Bear Witness/ September 11*, and two eBooks: *Hunger and Rice in Asia* and *Witchcraft: Ancient Traditions Alive In Salem*. He is the director of the films *Crossroads: Rural Health Care In America*, *Holding Back the Surge*, and *Project Music: Not a Single Dissonant Note*, and is also the executive producer of *Josie: A Story About Williams Syndrome* and *Dorothea's Tears: The State of Mental Health Care in America*. He is presently Coordinator of Multimedia Journalism in the Masters in Communication Program at Sacred Heart University and the director of all of Vision Project's educational programming.

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