

Mr. Johnson ... and his mechanics

In the first of a two-part series, The Post's automotive writer looks at W.J. Mouat secondary school students who are learning about cars and using that at the track.

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special to the post

It's past 2 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. At most high schools across Abbotsford, the majority of students fixate on packing up their books, turning off their computers, and most importantly, making plans for the weekend.

But, around the back side of W.J. Mouat secondary school, the automotive area is still very-much abuzz with activity. Students help each other change a tire on an Acura Integra, another spins a wheel on a Jeep Cherokee, and yet another peers up at an Eagle Talon on the hoist.

One thing is obvious. The end of the school day, and the weekend, do not seem too important to this group.

"I always have students asking 'How late you staying today?' so they can work on their car, or the race car. They don't want to leave," says Richard Johnson, who has been teaching automotive at Mouat since 1990, and, along with seven other Lower Mainland schools, helped start the B.C. Secondary School Drag Racing Association (BCSS-DRA) in 1992.

"Last night it was seven o'clock till we got out of here. I said, 'I gotta go. I have a family too,'" says Johnson.

This is the automotive mechanics department at W.J. Mouat. Sure, there is a gathering of bulky, faded computers over in the back corner, with a few desks set up in front of them, lending some semblance to the fact this is a school. And, this is a classroom. Johnson says the computers came from the drafting department a few years ago, and, although they get used sparingly — manuals are available and testing will soon be done online — in this department, the most-important computer is a hand-held which plugs into newer vehicles to monitor on-board diagnostics.

"I have students that are diehards and never want to leave this room to go anywhere else in the building. Then I have other students at the other end of the spectrum. They take it because they think it's going to be an easy course," explains Johnson. "They usually find out it's not an easy course. They do actually have to work in here, and have to get their hands dirty. We also have written tests on the theory side of it."

According to Chris Vander Meer, who currently leads in the BCSS-DRA points standings, the process is simple.

"People bring in their cars when they have a problem. They go, 'I need you to fix it' and, we just do it," says the 17-year-old Grade 12 student, now in his second year of automotive mechanics. "I've learned a lot about brake systems, a little bit about the electrical, balancing tires, changing spark plugs and we did valve covers a couple of times. Head gaskets take too long and we don't do clutches because it takes too long."

"I've always liked cars, so I figured I'd take auto because it would be fun. And it is." The auto mechanic course is an elective, but some students, and parents, believe it should be mandatory.

"When I see parents at parent-teacher interviews, the mother always says, 'I wish I had taken mechanics in high school.' It's their biggest regret," says Johnson. "The ones who are most proud are probably the parents whose daughters have taken the class. There's two (girls) in here right now and they're lovin' it." Many of the students in the class are also part of Team Mouat, the racing arm of automotive mechanics which competes on the BCSSDRA circuit.



Photos | **Craig Carmichael**

W.J. Mouat automotive students Chris Vander Meer, right, and Anastasia Barkman love learning about cars, then racing them.

Graduating student Anastasia Barkman only began taking automotive this school year. The 17-year old grasped her new-found wealth of automotive knowledge to the extent she took the Gr. 11 course last semester, and is finishing up the Gr. 12 course this semester.

"I didn't know, if I broke down on the side of the road, how to even change a tire. I did that today," says Barkman, who, despite being a rookie on the high school drag racing circuit, sits eighth in the standings. "It's very helpful. Plus, I get to help my friend. She brought in her tire today."

Colin Schmidt admits getting into the course because he had too many spares. However, Schmidt has already learned more than most of us will know in a lifetime. "I've learned a lot about the workings of cars, and how to maintain them," says Schmidt, 18, and a graduating student at Mouat. "The Talon up here (on the hoist) was front-wheel drive before, but we converted it to all-wheel drive. You have to exchange the transmission, and put in a rear transfer case. That's something I've been working on a lot."

Schmidt, tied for 38th in the drag racing standings with 40 points, seems almost mystified at his automotive interest.

"I really don't know. It's just some hidden passion," he responds. "I just enjoy doing this."

As for those old drafting computers along the back wall and nearly hidden by auto parts, Vander Meer appears to have made the best use of them.

"I have a lot of doors open for me right now," insists the graduating student. "I've got automotive and drafting. I'm thinking BCIT, because it's a technical school."

As for the racing? "Maybe later, when I'm older and have more money," concedes Vander Meer. "I could probably make a race car and go out for fun every once in a while." And it all started in Richard Johnson's classroom around the back of W.J. Mouat school, hidden from view to many people but certainly not his students.

For more info, check out: www.mouatracng.com, and www.high-schooldragacing.org.

