

By: Andrew S. Hartwell / Through The Esses

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Driving the No. 197 RSR Motorsports Mini-Cooper in the Grand-Am Continental Tire Sports Car Challenge Series (with co-driver VJ Mirzayan), young Sarah Cattaneo has been chasing not only the rest of the ST Class pack, but her dream to one day be among the leaders of the pack.

Cattaneo is just 24 years old and after having spent most of her childhood riding horses in show competition, (she started at the age of six) she has since set her sights on riding atop many horses fitted under a single 'saddle' in an attempt to show she is truly a competitor no matter what the ride.

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Sarah Cattaneo took her equestrian competitiveness to the automotive realm.

She enjoyed success while on a horse and so far, her record in ST this season would almost suggest she is still riding one. Through eight races this season, she has finished in the top ten just once (7th place at New Jersey Motorsports Park). In her first year in Grand-Am, 2009, her best finish was a 6th place at Barber Motorsports Park. Upon closer examination, however, she is currently sitting in the top third of the 2010 driver point standings in only her second year in the series. That isn't the same as being in the top 10 but being ahead of 61 other ST racers is a great start. You can't get that far up the standings riding a one horsepower race car so she must in fact be making her Mini gallop.

Cattaneo grew up in a family that enjoyed being immersed in the car culture of her native Arizona. Her dad raced in SCCA and she was the little one who always went to the races with her parents. She wasn't quite old enough to change tires or swap an engine, but she did develop a sense of belonging in the sport. It just took about 18 years to fully develop and it came only after she hung up her competitive saddle for the last time.

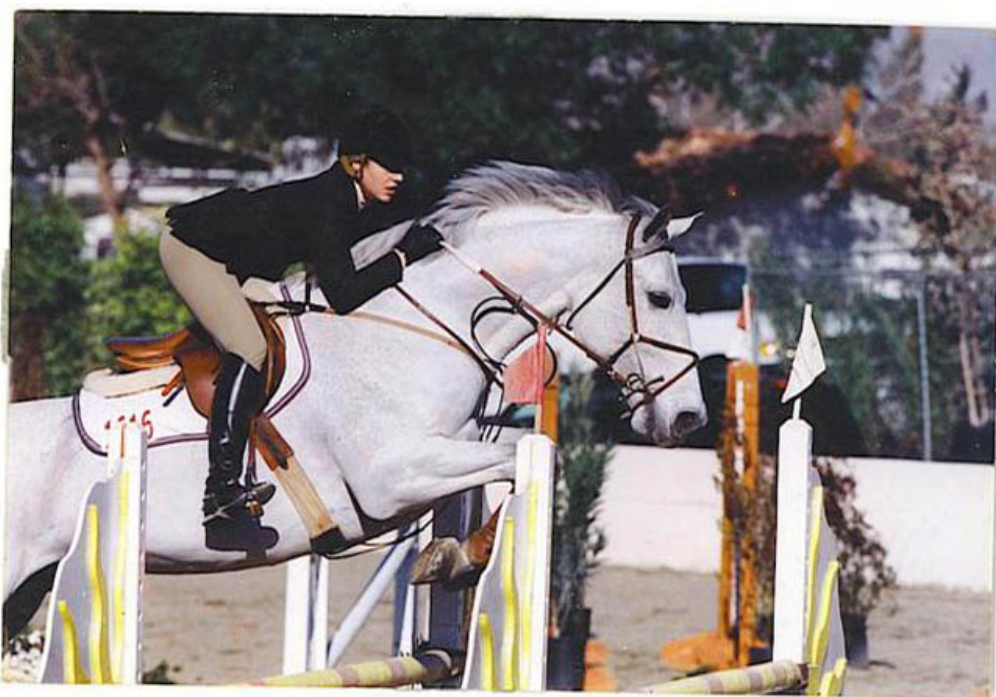
"My dad raced in the SCCA when I was really little, around age two or three," she told us. "My parents would bring me along until I got a little older and then when my sister was born, dad decided to stop racing. As a family we all had an interest in cars and we would all go to the car shows and automobile events when I was growing up. When I was 18 and graduated High School, my dad gave me a graduation gift certificate to the two day Bob Bondurant Driving School. I went and I had a blast!"

Track time translated into a rekindling of the competitive fire within her and she soon found herself looking to her dad for a way to enter the world of competitive auto racing. He was agreeable and even felt some of the same urges within himself.

“At that first Bondurant School we drove the Cadillac CTS and I really enjoyed it. About two years later I was bugging my dad to let me go back to the school. When I did go back, I went for the four day class where I got to drive the Corvette C6 cars and that was a ton of fun.

“Around this same time my dad was getting interested in going back to racing. After the Bondurant experience we decided to buy a BMW Mini and race it in the NASA spec Mini-cooper class. The cars were built to a spec class by a BMW dealer and you could buy one and they would supply the track support. The cars were also street legal so you could drive them to the track and then on the track. That’s how we got back and forth to the races! We later bought a second Mini so my dad and I would each have our own to drive.

“Unfortunately the Mini spec class only lasted for a few years and when we bought the car it was already beginning to phase out. I never actually got to race in the car in that class because I did not yet have a competition license. I had been driving in a lot of driving experience schools where you run your own car, but they supervise the running so you aren’t racing against anyone. At the end of the year they held a school where you could get your competition license so you can go racing. It is a one day deal where they make you practice starts and do different exercises and so on. You either pass or fail and I passed.”



Sarah spent most of her life on in the saddle in jumping competition.

With her new license in hand, Cattaneo finally got some competitive wheel time in the Mini. She immediately let the rest of the field know she had experience in winning competitions. Her success in two years of racing that car helped set her on a path to what she hopes will blossom into a full career.

“When I started racing I won the NASA Arizona PTC Class championship in the Mini. I won in 2007 and 2008. During this time my dad had developed an interest in Grand-Am. We knew Randy Smalley, the owner of RSR Motorsports, through racing against him in NASA. My dad also knew Tom Long from Freedom Autosport. We talked to both of them about a ride for the 2009 Continental season. Randy said he had most of the seats for the season filled already so I ended up running one race with him and RSR Motorsports, and seven races with Freedom Autosport. I drove a Mazda MX5 with Freedom.”



Sarah is in the top one-third of the points in the ST Series this year, which means she's beating a lot of other cars to the finish.

Getting her first taste of professional racing in 2009, Cattaneo quickly recognized the differences in the level of competition she would face on the track and the differences she would see all around her in the paddock.

“Racing in Grand-Am that first season was awesome!” she said. “It was like nothing I had ever been around. Everything was so professional. All of sudden my racing experiences went from hauling your own tires out to being surrounded by motor homes and 18 wheeler rigs. It was a totally great learning experience. I had never been on any of the tracks we raced on. It was so exciting to be racing with all the talent that was out there. These were all the people I had watched race on TV and here I was right out there with them!

“Tom Long and my co-driver Mark White were awesome too. They coached me all year long. I learned so much with them and I feel I really improved as a racer from that experience.”



Leading some traffic in her Mini.

Coming back to her experience in the world of show competition for a moment, one can tell that this driver has the determination to improve her skills when you hear what she went through to perfect her time in the saddle.

“From the time I was 6 years old I rode horses.” She said. “I competed in National show jumping competitions up until about the age of 17. I trained out of California, even though we lived in Arizona. Every Friday after school I would fly out to California and train until Sunday afternoon and then fly back Sunday night and go to school Monday morning. I did that all through high school.

“We rode at shows all across the country. Even if I hadn’t gotten interested in auto racing I probably would have stopped riding in competition at 17 anyway because I had reached a point where I had to decide to do it full time or step away. I don’t have any regrets about my decision. I still ride once in a while and I have many friends in that world.”

Outside of racing, Cattaneo holds a degree in Real Estate and she works alongside her father in the family business.

“I work for my dad in real estate. I have worked in his office all through college and still today. We are primarily a commercial development company. We find a location to build a shopping center and we build it and rent out the stores. Sometimes we buy an existing center and sometimes we build and sell out – everything is available for the right price!”

Part of her experience in the world of professional racing includes interacting with the fans. Grand-Am encourages fan and team interaction through an open paddock and with autograph sessions held during every race weekend. Cattaneo told us she loves that part of the whole racing world.

“I think I am outgoing and personable. I love the fans. I love how they can come up to you and ask all the questions they want and just hang out with us. I love that!”

Cattaneo knows that competing at the top level of Motorsports – as in any form of sports – requires a substantial investment of time and effort and practice. Given her past record of commitment to her previous sport, we expect she will continue to do whatever it takes to become recognized as a competent professional racing driver.



Sarah is an improving driver and consistently finishes up in the field.

“I have a sponsor in Global Jet, a private jet chartering service, and they – along with my dad’s support - have helped me go racing to date. I am extremely focused and dedicated to everything that is involved in racing. I want to keep improving every year and move from the ‘gentlemen driver’ class.”

Sarah Cattaneo is indeed showing continued improvement having qualified on the pole at Homestead Miami and having qualified in the top ten at every race but one this year.

“I would like to be a professional driver in every sense of the word. I hope to move from where I am paying to drive to being paid to drive. And there isn’t anything I wouldn’t like to try to drive. I think a ride in the Rolex Series or to race at Le Mans would be incredible. Right now we are looking at securing a full season ride in Grand-Am. Nothing is settled just yet but I am really looking forward to getting back on track and improving my skills even further!”