

[Home](#) / [Sports](#) / [Motor Sports](#)

Local team chases championship

TNI RACING, BASED IN NAPA, IS CURRENTLY LEADING THE USTCC POINTS



Felipe Cabezas pushes the No. 43 TNI Racing Mazda hard around Sonoma Raceway. The Mazda is sponsored by Performance In-Frame Tuning, T.E.M. Machine Shop and American Canyon Collision Center. Got Blue Milk photo

September 16, 2012 9:42 pm • Register Staff

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From Sept. 21-23, the FIA World Touring Car Championship (WTCC) will descend on Sonoma Raceway to feature some of the top road racing drivers on the planet. Speed Channel will cover the race as drivers from Europe and Asia battle it out fender to fender around the technical and twisty race course in Sonoma. As a support race during the weekend, the United States Touring Car Championship (USTCC) will be running two races. During the USTCC events, a local race team is hoping to stretch its championship lead.

TNI Racing, based in Napa, is currently leading the USTCC points with its blue No. 43 Mazda as the schedule takes them to the high profile televised race weekend. Ron Valtierra, the team owner and manager, has three Mazdas running in the series and his efforts this year have been solid enough that he is hoping to hand Mazda the 2012 Manufacturer's Championship.

Ron and his wife, Deb, are committed to succeeding this year and they have some very personal inspiration. The name TNI Racing is based on the names of their two children, Tanner and Izzy (T-n-I). Their son Tanner was born April 3, 2009 (which is where their car number, No. 43, comes from). Six days later, Ron and Deb went into their son's crib to wake their newborn baby and he would not wake up. Tanner passed away six days after birth as a result of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). From that experience, their lives were changed forever.

The TNI Racing logo has a flame in the graphic over the "T" representing the memory of Tanner. Ron and Deb decided that in Tanner's memory they wanted to win this year's United States Touring Car Championship. To give the team the best odds of winning, Ron is running three separate Mazda's in the series under the TNI Racing banner; the blue No. 43 car driven by Felipe Cabezas, the red No. 3 car driven by Doug Makishima and the burgundy No. 4 car driven by AJ Gracy. AJ's car runs under the combination Performance In-Frame Tuning/TNI Racing banner.

Even though Ron and Deb are committed to winning the championship for Tanner's legacy, anyone who is involved in racing can tell you, wanting to win a championship and actually doing it are two very different things. The season has been a rocky one for the team. After racing hard all year and finally grabbing the points lead, an engine fire in the No. 43 Mazda driven by Felipe left the team's championship driver without a ride. Doug stepped out of the No. 3 car to let Felipe run the next event so he could earn the crucial points needed to keep his lead while the No. 43 car was repaired.

Performance In-Frame Tuning in Napa prepares all of the cars for the races. With an in-house chassis dyno all of TNI Racing's cars are tuned for maximum horsepower. After the engine fire in the No. 43 car, the staff at Performance In-frame Tuning with the staff at T.E.M. Machine Shop have been working overtime to get the engine out, rebuilt and back into the No. 43 car before the WTCC weekend.

"I don't know what we would have done without the help of Rich at T.E.M.," said Ron Valtierra. "He and AJ at Performance In-Frame Tuning have really pulled off a last-minute miracle for our team. We would never be ready for the race at Sonoma if these guys hadn't given it their all."

TNI Racing is also sponsored by American Canyon Collision Center, which is a very helpful sponsor to have in the USTCC because the series is pretty aggressive and sometimes fenders pay the price for some close racing action on the track.

"Unfortunately, that is part of racing sometimes," said Ron. "Luckily, we have a resource like American Canyon Collision Center to keep our cars looking sharp."

Ron is pulling out all of the stops for the big race at Sonoma. Based on the number of fans that will be at the event to see the World Touring Car Championship race, he wants his team to look good and do well to secure a championship for his team. For the WTCC weekend, Ron has pulled in Rob Krider from Napa's Krider Racing to share driving duties with AJ Gracy in the No. 4 car.

"I'm absolutely excited to be a part of it," said Rob Krider. "When Ron told me about Tanner and what TNI Racing was all about, I knew I wanted to be a part of something like that. Racing for a reason. Let's get on the track and let's do it for Tanner!"

Practice and qualifying will begin Friday, with racing Saturday and Sunday. Another support race for the WTCC weekend will be the Maserati race featuring celebrity race car driver Patrick Dempsey from television's Greys Anatomy. Tickets start at \$25 and will be available at the gate.

For more information about the race, go to www.racesonoma.com.