

'It's a Two-Fold Opportunity'

VFW Life member Ryan Roulette partners with VFW as his professional stock car racing career takes off

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To provide some respite from his career as a pilot in the Air Force, Ryan Roulette, 38, likes to trade his cockpit for the inside of a stock car, shredding rubber at 180 mph on weekends.

For Roulette, who in 2021 raised the stakes by becoming the only active-duty Air Force officer to race professionally in the ARCA Menards Series, the competitive stimulation of racing cars provides him with the highest form of Zen.

"I really, really believe the rigors of your day job require a lot of time to be the best you can be," said Roulette, an Afghanistan War veteran and Life member of the VFW Department of North Dakota.

"But in trying to be the best at what you do, you need to invest just as much time finding something else to balance you out. Racing is that for me — it helps with my mental fortitude."

It was through his commitment to both his service to country and professional racing career that Roulette and the VFW came together in 2023.

VFW and Ryan Roulette Racing first teamed up last year for five races at Flat Rock Speedway in Michigan, Elko Speedway in Minnesota, Bristol Motor Speedway in Tennessee and Phoenix Raceway in Arizona.

"It was a two-fold opportunity," Roulette said of the relationship. "It had to do a lot with what I saw happening with the VFW and the work they do and have done for a long time for veterans like myself, as well as where I believe I am headed in my racing career."

Aware of VFW's presence at the national level and the legislative work it continues to carry out for all veterans, Roulette was both ecstatic and honored to represent the oldest combat veterans organization in the country.

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“With the platform I have, I felt it was a good relationship to have with one another, to help us achieve our goals together,” Roulette said. “I believe in what the VFW does and wanted to join them in serving as a voice for the great work it does for veterans.”

VFW believes the partnership, which continues into the 2024 racing schedule, will be beneficial for both the organization and Roulette. As part of the relationship, Roulette visits local VFW Posts around the areas where he races. These meet-and-greet opportunities have since brought members in droves to the races.

“The support from our state and local VFW representatives at last year’s races was outstanding,” VFW Adjutant General Dan West said. “We intend to build off that momentum this year to further camaraderie among veteran race fans and let them know about the many programs and services the VFW has available.”

‘I WAS ALWAYS TRYING TO FIND MY WAY INTO A CAR’

The irony of relaxing behind the wheel of a race car is not lost on Roulette. He explains that a dangerous, high-stakes sport such as professional car racing brings him peace of mind.

“Sure, some people find it crazy,” Roulette said. “They find it difficult to believe going 180 mph around a racetrack while hanging on by the seat of my pants can bring me balance, but for someone like me, yes, it does.”

In fact, Roulette has only ever known one or the other.

A third-generation Air Force veteran, Roulette has spent most of his life around military circles, where his obsession for car racing began to take root while living in Kentucky as a military brat.

“As a young kid, around 8 years old, living in Kentucky, my parents would watch it weekly, and we would go to weekly gatherings and watch races,” Roulette said. “The sport started to grow on me from there. It always made me happy to see Rusty Wallace in Midnight (his car) compete against Dale Earnhardt, Jeff Gordon and all those other guys racing.”

When his family again relocated during his high school years to Knoxville, Iowa, Roulette found himself living near Knoxville Raceway, home of the coveted Knoxville Sprint Car Nationals. Roulette became a fixture of the place, watching the races and observing closely the inner workings of pit crews and race car drivers along with a high school friend of his whose family owned and operated a team at Knoxville Raceway.

It was that very friend who eventually offered Roulette an opportunity to drive a smaller version of a sprint car around the track, his first taste of what would become a lifelong passion.

“I would help them do little jobs around the track, but I was never racing outside of the friendly go-kart stuff,” Roulette said. “Getting that chance to try out my buddy’s car was it. From that point on, I was always trying to find my way into a car.”

But it would be a long time before the B-52 Bomber pilot turned professional race car driver.

‘WE HAVE A LOT OF OTHER SKILLS’

After high school, Roulette followed his grandfather and father in joining the Air Force, where he enlisted in 2004 and soon deployed primarily to the Middle East in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

“It was always in the background as I was going through high school trying to figure out my life,” Roulette said. “Serving my country, especially post-9/11, seemed like it was the right thing for me and what I wanted to do.”

Throughout his military service, however, Roulette continued to race and garner experience.

Prior to his ARCA Menards Series platform debut during the West Series finale at Phoenix Raceway in 2021, Roulette had been racing across the U.S. for more than a decade.

From racing karts, mini stocks, mini sprint and b-mods, to legends, midget cars and sprint cars on dirt oval tracks, Roulette was versed in an array of racing cars and platforms before he jumped into the West Series finale, where he started 30th and finished 22nd.

“When you get to walk into the inside of the track and you are standing on pit road and you got the car in front of you and your name on it and you are looking up — it is a whole different feeling,”

Roulette said of his debut.

The leap from amateur to pro was one of faith and long consideration.

When Roulette was contemplating the transition, he sought out NASCAR Xfinity Series team owner and driver Jesse Iwuji, a Navy reservist who personified the necessary hard work to race professionally around his commitment to the armed forces. (See the September 2019 issue of VFW magazine.)

“He kind of paved the way for me, if you will, as in he experienced being active duty, having to reach out and find teams that did not know anything about him,” Roulette said. “It is definitely tough for me to explain that I have a lot of experience. It is just not what guys who grow up on asphalt have. So how do I convert that experience? Jesse helped me navigate that portion.”

Roulette has since competed in 15 professional races and done so around his commitment to

the Air Force, a dynamic that presents an almost impossible and demanding schedule.

Between racing on the track and participating in duties with the Air Force, there is little time for wasted motion.

“It is definitely unique in that regard,” Roulette said. “As much as I would love to be sitting there with the team in Charlotte, N.C., working on things, a lot of the stuff I have to do is over the phone or video conferences.”

Though Roulette’s mental fortitude is strengthened by finding himself behind the wheel of a race car, his military mindset also offers a virtue when situations in his racing career grow hectic.

“We may not have skills in some cases that directly transfer to the civilian sector, but we have a lot of other skills that make us very driven, motivated and hard workers in general,” Roulette said. “We are the types that if you tell us we have to get from A to B, I assure you we are going to get there one way or another, even if it is painful for us to get there.”

To achieve both his goals and those of the VFW, Roulette, racing in the Fast Track Racing No. 12, said his team created a rigorous racing schedule for 2024, which kicked off at Daytona International Speedway in Florida on Feb. 17.

“We made sure to spread ourselves out as much as possible to get the car on the track in as many areas as we could to help spread the reach of VFW across the country,” Roulette said. “But that is just for this year. Our long-term goal is to continue to move up the ranks with VFW by our side, to eventually get into the NASCAR truck series next.”

Roulette’s next race is at Iowa Speedway in Newton on June 14.

This article is featured in the 2024 June/July issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez, Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.