

Why Lanier Tech's Motorsports Technology Degree Is Important

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John Leverett – Program Director & Instructor Lanier Technical College

Since Henry Ford opened his doors at the beginning of the 20th century, the automotive industry has seen constant change. As a result, many would say the modern automobile is almost unrecognizable from Ford's original offering to the public.

While the automobile has evolved, so too has the industry that supports it. From racing to restoration to today's jaw-dropping show cars, the automotive sector desperately needs those who have the necessary hands-on skills and training.

The Motorsports Vehicle Technology Program at **Lanier Technical College** provides the training necessary to stay ahead of the curve. This Motorsports program focuses on racing but provides extensive training critical to the industry as a whole.

This unique program is, in many ways, ground-zero for the next generation of emerging automotive talent.

To find out more, we headed north to 2535 Lanier Tech Drive in Gainesville, Georgia, to talk with John Leverett. John is the institution's Program Director and Instructor for the Motorsports Program in the School's Applied Technology and Transportation division.

Many in the South know John Leverett from his extensive work with the successful Panoz Sports Car and Racing program.

What follows is an edited transcript of our conversation with John Leverett.





A Love Of Racing

Rod Worley – Editor – John, what drew you to the automotive industry?

John Leverett – Program Director, Lanier Tech – When I was in high school, my Dad worked for the Nikon camera company. So, I got to go with one of my Dad's coworkers to the Atlanta Grand Prix at Road Atlanta in the '80s

At the time, I was 16 years old and thought it was so cool being this close to race cars, but it'd be even cooler to drive them. So I decided I wanted to be a race car driver.

To me, an engineering degree made perfect sense because you'd have a solid working knowledge of the car, which will make you a better race car

driver. So during high school, I worked two jobs to buy my first race car, a Formula V.

While earning my Mechanical Engineering Technology degree at Southern Tech, I started a Formula SAE team (it's still operating today) and raced a Datsun 510 in the SCCA. Southern Tech has since become SPSU at Kennesaw State University.

Rod Worley – Editor – How did you make it over to Panoz?

John Leverett – Program Director, Lanier Tech – Like many things in life, I was in the right place at the right time. When I graduated from Southern Tech, racing was kind of in a severe downturn at that point.

I ended up getting a part-time job with Atlanta Motor Speedway, giving driving exhibitions in the Legends race cars and looking after them. One day I happened to be at a World of Wheels event promoting a Legends car when I met Danny Panoz.

I went up for an interview the following Monday and started working the next day.



International Racing Success

Rod Worley – Editor – So John, you were there at Panoz in the early days. What was the experience like being a part of a small automotive business that eventually grew into a global racing brand?

John Leverett – Program Director, Lanier Tech – You're right, Rod. At the time I started, **Panoz** was a very small family business. But definitely, it was a fun experience to be a part of the growth and success.

My first job was making the windshield wipers work and developing a working defrost system for the Panoz Roadster. Working for them gave me the chance to do a little bit of everything.

My experience progressed through the Esperante development, the Panoz school cars, racing series cars, and spec cars. Ultimately, Panoz successfully competed in racing series around the world.

In 2006 the Panoz Esperante GTLM won the GT2 class at the 24 Hours of Le Mans. Also, in 2006, we won the 12 Hours of Sebring.

In 2018, driving the Panoz Avezzano in the Pirelli GTS class, we won the drivers and the manufacturers championship against Ford, Chevrolet, Aston Martin, Maserati, Porsche, and McLaren.

The company has also provided IndyCar with the G-Force GF05 and GF09; and the Champ Car World Series with their final race car, the **Panoz DP01**.

At one time, Panoz operated a driver training racing school at Road Atlanta and Sebring International Raceway. Students learned racing techniques in our purpose-built GT-RA "school cars."

The Panoz Racing Series was a one-make series using the more powerful Panoz GTWC models, which led to the even more powerful GTS version for the SCCA GT2 competition as well as a run of special cars for the Marlboro Penske Racing Experience. The series was set up for amateurs to learn racing in a low-cost environment.

The Avezzano was the last car we did right before Don Panoz died. It ended up being one of our most successful race cars.

So on the Avezzano, I was responsible for the chassis, suspension, interior, and exterior design. Sadly, with no succession plan in place, the business stopped when he died of Pancreatic cancer.



Strong Career Placement

Rod Worley – Editor – John, you had been with Panoz for over 24 years. How did you transition over to Lanier Technical College?

John Leverett – Program Director, Lanier Tech – This particular program at Lanier Technical College started in 1999 to provide skilled talent for Panoz and the racing school. We always supported the program and hired interns and graduates over the years.

So it worked out quite fortuitously when Panoz closed that I got a call saying they would need a new Program Director for the Motorsports Vehicle Technology Program.

My primary role is as an instructor but expands to include marketing, promoting the program, and enrollment. Currently, we have 90 students in the program.

We just set a record with 45 new students starting this semester. The **Motorsports Vehicle Technology Program** is a two-year program that offers a degree or a diploma.

Upwards of 90% of our students are in the degree program, leading to an Associates of Applied Science degree. In addition, several of our alumni have gone on to pursue 4-year engineering or business degrees.

As part of your Motorsport's degree, you've got the choice of taking things like CAD fundamentals, Principles of Marketing, or Principles of Management.

Right now, we've got 100% placement for the people that graduate from the program. There is so much demand here in the Southeast for the skillset we provide.



Geared For Success

Rod Worley – Editor – How do you keep the Motorsports Vehicle Technology Program current in the changing automotive industry? Have any of your alumni gone on to prominence?

John Leverett – Program Director, Lanier Tech – I've got some great fellow instructors and we've got great people on our advisory board that provides valuable industry-specific guidance. On a national level, Rahal Letterman Lanigan Racing shares its unique insights with our program.

In addition, local shops like Comprent Motor Sports, Atlanta Speedwerks, OPM Autosports, and others are there guiding and hiring our graduates as well.

We have developed a relationship with the new PTC Driving Academy in Tennessee where we are supplying student mechanics to help maintain and operate the school's Formula Cars. It's an awesome, real-world experience for them.

Our graduates have found success at every level of the motorsports industry. For instance, we had two of our graduates on the Corvette team at the 24 Hours of Le Mans three weeks ago.

Another example would be Josh, one of our graduates, who has been on the Daytona 500 winning car for four the last five years. So we've got graduates spread out throughout IMSA, NASCAR, the Southeast, and locally as well.

Definitely, it's an advantage for us when it comes time for recruitment. But, I've been told when you ask other Motorsport Tech programs about their famous graduates, the answers don't come as easily.



Real-World Skills

Rod Worley – Editor – John, it's easy to see you enjoy passing on your years of automotive experience. What is the most rewarding part for you?

Also, how do you see the program progressing in the future?

John Leverett – Program Director, Lanier Tech – Rod, working with our talented students is very rewarding, especially when they graduate and go on to great careers. Just seeing the students gain confidence, acquire real-world automotive skills and advance toward their goal is the cornerstone of our program here.

Also, it's great to see the range of career goals our program draws. For example, they aren't looking for a career path doing general automotive repair in a car dealership.

They want to bolt-on turbochargers and create custom cars. Others want to go into the restoration side of the industry.

While our focus is on racing, the fabrication skills, engine building, and composite experience they gain here directly translate to other automotive industry segments.

Not to mention the hands-on welding and troubleshooting experiences are invaluable in the real world.

As far as the future goes, we'll probably reach a point where we're fabricating some of our own race cars. It would give our students valuable first-hand experience building a race car from the ground up.

We are also exploring how best to incorporate some Electric Vehicle tech as the industry starts moving in that direction.



Knowledge Is Power

For over 20 years, the Motorsports Vehicle Technology Program at Lanier Technical College has provided an unparalleled opportunity to learn by doing.

By design, the smaller class size ensures students get the personalized instruction they need when they need it. This program gets students in the driver's seat of their new automotive career in less time and for less expense.

If you or your car club is interested in visiting the facilities, reach out to John Leverett at jleverett@laniertech.edu or call the college at 770-533-7000.

They say that knowledge is power. At the end of the day, that's why Lanier Tech's Motorsports Technology Degree is so important.