



The Cary News

CARY, NORTH CAROLINA

THURSDAY, APRIL 10, 2003

www.carynews.com ♦ 460-2600 ♦ 50 CENTS

Happy 25th

The Cary Road Race celebrates its 25th running on Saturday, April 12.

The annual 5K and 10K races will begin at 8:30 a.m. in front of Cary High and finish at the school's Cooper Field.

Race-day registration will begin at 6:30 a.m. in the Cary High auxiliary gym.

For complete coverage of the Cary Road Race and a look back at the previous 24 years, see today's special section in Sports.



Voters say yes to bonds

Bond referendums pass easily in Tuesday's voting. Drafts of plans expected for June presentation.

BY ADAM ARNOLD
STAFF WRITER

Recreation and road bond referendums hit the right note with Cary voters.

Both bond issues passed easily in polling Tuesday. The recreation referendum approving \$30 million garnered almost 55 percent of the nearly 6,600 votes cast and the ballot for

\$130 million for roads rolled up 72.7 percent of the votes.

"People have repeatedly said 'we need more facilities' through surveys," said Tom Hemrick, chair of the town's Parks, Recreation and Cultural Resources Advisory Board. "Now they are saying so with their vote."

Funds from bonds could help implement the vision outlined in the proposed parks, recreation and

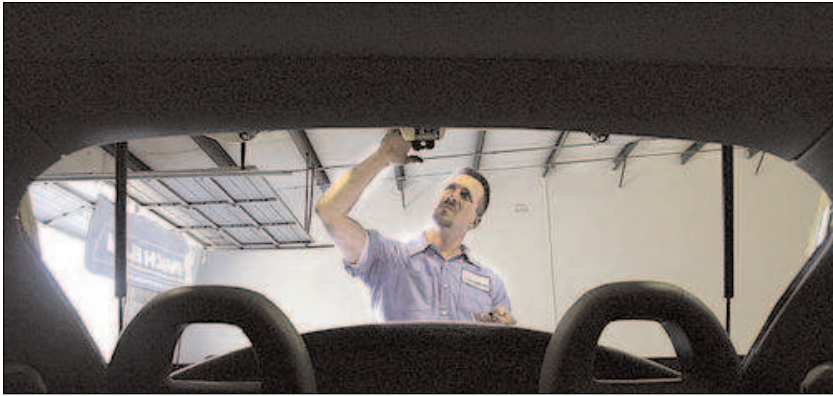
cultural resources master plan. Hemrick said the plan, now in draft, will probably be presented to the council in June.

The road bonds gained voter approval in all 32 precincts and from one-stop and absentee voters. The recreation bonds got a majority of the votes in 24 precincts and from one-stop and absentee voters.

Provisional votes will remain uncounted until today. The Wake County Board of Elections will canvass the votes Friday at 11 a.m.

SEE BONDS, 7A

Partners put it all on the line as they launch a new auto-repair shop



STAFF PHOTOS BY GRANT HALVERSON

Greg Cole battles with a balky trunk latch on a VW Beetle at the new garage he and partner Jerry Gala opened in February.

A-POF MERGER DEMO

Open for business

STARTING OVER

This is the first in a series of occasional articles that will follow Jerry Gala and Greg Cole as they develop their new business, Apex AutoWorks.

STARTING UP

BY MEGAN JONES
STAFF WRITER

Each weekday at about 6:45 a.m., Jerry Gala pulls into the parking lot of Apex AutoWorks. As he flips on the lights, fires up the computer and starts a pot of coffee, his partner, Greg Cole, arrives. The men will sip their drinks for a quiet half hour, talking about the day ahead, before going into the shop.

By the time they begin sweeping the floors and scrubbing the grease stains off of their hands, a good 13 or 14 hours will likely have passed — especially if business has been good, and they were able to line up a number of oil changes, brake jobs and other service and repair work. They will go home, Gala to Apex and Cole to Raleigh, with just enough energy to shower and maybe watch some television before going to bed and getting ready to start all over again in the morning.

This is what it's like to own a small business. It's tiring. It's a little scary sometimes, when they think about all the money they have invested in this dream, especially with two families depending on them to make a success of it.

HELP FOR START-UPS

- Wake Tech's Business & Industry Center
851-1313
- SCORE (Service Corps of Retired Executives)
856-4739
- Small Business Administration
467-1016

But it's also very rewarding for the two long-time friends, who decided last January — after Gala was laid off, victim of the massive Enron scandal — that the timing was finally right for them to follow through on an idea they have talked about for 10 years. Like other North Carolinians who have been suddenly thrust into the unemployment ranks since the late 1990s, Gala was tired of having his career depend on someone else's good fortune. He was ready to take control of his career, and Cole, who had waited years for Gala to see the light, was too.

"I think it's just something in you," Gala said. "You want to take control of your own destiny and not rely on someone else."

It has been two months since they proudly first turned over the sign on the front door of the shop to read "open." They already have books' worth of war stories to share with the many other people in this corner of Wake County who have traded a steady paycheck for the chance to build something of their own.

For Gala and Cole, there is only one way for that story to end, because this risk is about more than just changing red ink to black. This is their homes on the line, their children's educations, their waking hours for the foreseeable future. This is their life.

The Partners

Gala, 33, and Cole, 40, were good friends long before they became business partners. They have much in common: Both grew up in Cary and graduated from Cary High School. They have the same entrepreneurial bent, similar values, a strong work ethic and a drive to succeed. They enjoy woodworking and are passionate cyclists.

Since they first met in the summer of 1988, when they worked as mechanics for the same local garage, they have become family men, too.

Cole is married to Debbie, a publisher for GlaxoSmithKline in Research Triangle Park. They live in
SEE PARTNERS, 6A



Jerry Gala removes the tires from a Mitsubishi Eclipse as he prepares to check the brake pads. Gala hopes to spend more time developing and marketing the business, but as the shop gets off the ground, he works alongside partner Greg Cole most of the time.

A view like no other at Augusta

Weinbrecht holds tight to his spot in the scoreboard at Masters.

BY STUART HALL
STAFF WRITER

Harold Weinbrecht has been on the Augusta National Golf Club board for some 25 years now. But he does not debate the club's all-male membership policy, or the ways the Alister Mackenzie course design can combat both technology and Tiger.

Instead, his board stands on the grounds amid the azaleas, pines and

Weinbrecht holes at the Masters, the first of golf's four major championships.

For four days each April, Weinbrecht inconspicuously works behind the scoring standard attached to the 17th hole scoreboard.

His job as a scorer is quite simple. As each pairing strides down the par-4 fairway, Weinbrecht flips a new set of names and scores through 16 holes into place for the patrons, as they are called at Augusta, to see.

Weinbrecht, 46, a Cary Town Council member who works as a systems developer at SAS Institute, has a coveted position.

"After you do it a few years, you begin to understand the im-

SEE VIEW, 8A

Dylan blowin' into Cary

Folk-rock legend to play Regency Park on May 13.

BY LISA COSTON
STAFF WRITER

This year's concert schedule for the Amphitheatre at Regency Park already included an up-and-coming star, Norah Jones.

Now it includes a musical legend, Bob Dylan.

Dylan is scheduled to play the amphitheater Tuesday, May 13, at 7 p.m. Tickets go on sale this Friday, April 11, at 10 a.m. for \$31.50 and \$41.50.

The show is part of a 22-date spring tour that ranges from the Hilton Hotel in Atlantic City, N.J., to West Palm Beach Fla.'s Sun Fest and the Asheville Civic Center Arena.

The grandchild of Jewish-Russian immigrants, Dylan was born Robert Allen Zimmerman, on May 24, 1941, and started writing po-



Dylan

SEE DYLAN, 9A



PARTNERS

FROM PAGE 1A

the Medfield neighborhood on Cary's eastern edge with their two daughters: Ashley, who is 10, and Hannah, who is 7. Their dad keeps pictures of them taped inside his toolbox, so he can see them during the day while he is at work and they are in class at Reedy Creek Elementary.

Gala is married to Christa, a freelance writer. They don't yet have children, but that will change in May, when Christa is due to deliver a boy.

It is a struggle for them to put into words the reason for their friendship. Like Cole's way with cars and Gala's way with numbers, the easy way each has with the other just seems to come naturally. It is because of that and more each was willing to put his faith and trust and career in the other's hands.

Cole first saw his friend as a possible business partner that first summer, when Gala helped him build a garage.

"That he was so young and able to teach me how to do something like that really impressed me," Cole said. "I guess it first opened my eyes to just how smart the guy was."

Gala, likewise, was impressed with Cole's effortless way with repairing vehicles.

"He's the best guy around here, hands down," Gala said.

Both thought they could make a good business team. The idea was so appealing that after the men had parted ways professionally and Gala was traveling the country in tech sales, he would stay up in his hotel room nights working some numbers on how the two could open a shop of their own.

The Decision

It took a while for the stars to align, though.

Cole thought he was ready to own his own business. He even explored two opportunities for taking over an existing mechanic's business, but neither felt right, and he didn't relish the thought of going it alone.

"One person can't do it," Cole said. "You either have to have a partner or pay somebody. And there's no way you can pay somebody enough to do it like you want it to be done, like it needs to be done to be successful."

Whenever Gala came to town for a visit, Cole would ask if the younger man had given any more thought to going in on a garage with him. But in the meantime, Cole and his wife Debbie were making a life for themselves and their girls.

Gala was on his company's fast track, rewarded for his hard work with increasing responsibility and latitude in running his own show. But the job quickly lost its luster. He and Christa had been transferred to states far from home. He was spending 20 nights a year away from her, and both soon tired of having a part-time marriage.

"We wanted to pay our dues, and Jerry made really good money," Christa said. "But he'd come home and we'd have 48 hours to get stuff done around the house before he left again."

So Gala left that job to take a new one, developing sales territories for an energy-services company. He and Christa were able to move back to Wake County, close to friends and family. He cheered with everyone else in the company when they landed a huge new account in 2001.

"That account ended up being Enron," Gala said ruefully. "After the downfall of Enron, which happened after we already committed in contracts to people, ramping up staff and office space and everything else, the bottom fell out."

The paychecks stopped coming in January 2002, although he wasn't officially let go until May. It gave him time to think.

Gala was very busy the next three months. During the day he looked for work; evenings were spent running numbers on the shop he and Cole had talked about for so long. He scouted the town looking for places that might accommodate a new garage. He wrote feasibility studies on auto repair in western Wake County. He called Cole most nights to get information about the market, asking him what kind of tickets he

did that day and how many cars



Greg Cole of Apex AutoWorks examines the undercarriage of a car for damage.

STAFF PHOTOS BY GRANT HALVERSON

BIO

GREG COLE

■ **AGE:** 40
 ■ **HOMETOWN:** Cary
 ■ **FAMILY:** Wife, Debbie. Two daughters: Ashley, 10, and Hannah, 7, both students at Reedy Creek Elementary School. The family lives in the Medfield neighborhood just outside Cary's eastern edge.
 ■ **EDUCATION:** Graduate of Cary High School, 1981.
 ■ **CAREER:** Has worked as a mechanic since graduation at Cary Village 66, Crossroads Exon and Modern Service.
 ■ **HOBBIES:** Cycling and coaching children's soccer
 ■ **WHY HE AND JERRY MAKE A GOOD TEAM:** "We were friends for many years before we did this business. I reckon it's our deep friendship."

came in.

"It was three months of long days and sleepless nights," Gala said, trying to figure out which direction he should take. Should he work for someone else, which no longer seemed to promise built-in security? Or put his money where his mouth was and finally take the plunge into entrepreneurship?

"It was probably the not knowing that was the hardest," he said.

In April, though, Gala had made up his mind. The only jobs that would pay the kind of money he needed to support a family were travelling jobs, which he and Christa decided weren't worth his time away from home. So he called Cole over to the house one night and the two sat around his kitchen table, gong over the pages of numbers and statistics and forecasts Gala had compiled.

When Cole left, Gala went out on the porch to talk to his wife. "Is there something you want to tell me?" she asked.

Debbie Cole had a good idea of the men's plans. She had frequently heard her husband talk about his wish to go into business with Gala.

For Christa, though, it was something of a surprise. Gala had mentioned the idea in passing a few times, but she hadn't realized how serious he was, even when he began gathering figures. She had some initial concerns.

"My biggest fear was, what if it doesn't work?" she said. "What if we put all this money into it and there's no business there, we can't get customers? What do we do then? I was really fearful of going into debt and taking a risk — especially since the last three or four months we had been on financial hard times."

But Gala calmed those fears as he made his case. He had been given a lot of leeway in his previous jobs, so he had hands-on experience in developing a market base, following the money and taking care of customers. He had seen where management had dropped the ball and where they did well. This was something he could be good at, and the numbers backed him.

And she knew that, and pledged unwavering support.

The Coles had a similar conversation, although their situation was a little different. Greg Cole still had a job, a good one. Debbie was working the decision 100 percent, but wondered if she could shoulder the mortgage and the groceries and utilities for a family of four on her paycheck alone.

"You've got to pay your bills, and one salary these days doesn't cut it," she said. Unlike Christa, who can bolster her income by accepting more freelance work, Debbie has just her base salary to draw upon.

But the potential gains were worth the risk, they all decided. With everyone on the same page, they got to work.

The Process

The remaining eight months of 2002 were a blur, although each step toward opening day seemed to take forever.

Lining up the money was easier than they thought, thanks to the comprehensive business plan the partners had readied.

"It's a service-related business, which the bank smiled on," Gala said, since the service industry is still doing better

than other sectors. "We were very conservative on numbers, and were still optimistic about the business. It was an easy sell to the bank."

About those numbers: Before they approached the banks, Gala and Cole took into account every dollar they would need to get the business off the ground, with enough left over to sustain it for the anticipated slow first months. They priced building requirements, such as the lifts, shop equipment and construction costs for refitting an existing structure.

"We priced inventory and office equipment, down to the pens," Gala said. "We figured out what are the numbers it takes to start up, what revenue we thought we would get out of it, what do you have to have to survive."

They ran their own personal numbers, too. Neither family had much personal debt. Even though the Galas had been living on her paycheck for several months, and the Coles were supporting a family of four, neither had much in the way of credit-card debt. They took advantage of low interest rates to refinance their homes and pay off some larger bills, like the Coles' truck.

"We're taking bids on the children now," Cole joked.

Then they went loan shopping. "We put as collateral everything we own," Gala said, "including our first born." They joke that's why Christa became pregnant.

The day they signed the bank loan is the day it really sunk in that there was no turning back.

"We each put our houses up," Christa said. "Even though you have so much faith, when you sit down at the table with the lawyer and he says, this is your property, it's worth this much and you're signing that if you default they will sell your house. That's scary."

"It makes you soul search and say, 'Do I feel as strongly about this as before I signed the papers?'" I did," Gala said. "That was the fire I needed, the final flame and drive to say, this is it. We're committed now, we're gonna make it, we're locked in."

Money in hand, they started shopping. They got good deals

BIO

JERRY GALA

■ **AGE:** 33
 ■ **HOMETOWN:** Cary
 ■ **FAMILY:** Wife, Christa. They are expecting their first child, a boy, in May. They live in Apex.
 ■ **EDUCATION:** Graduate of Cary High School, 1987. Studied Automator/Robotics Engineering at Wake Technical Community College.
 ■ **CAREER:** Has worked as a mechanic and a salesman, specializing in multi-state sales and territory development.
 ■ **HOBBIES:** Cycling
 ■ **WHY HE AND JERRY MAKE A GOOD TEAM:** "He's the best guy around here, hands down. His work ethic and his family values are exactly the same as mine. You don't find people like that all the time; when you do, you need to surround yourself with them."

on equipment, bidding at auctions. Commercial real estate brokers tried to interest them in properties in Garner and North Raleigh, but both wanted to stay in western Wake. Their numbers were western Wake numbers. They had friends here, family here. They lived here. They wouldn't budge.

They finally found a building, after one of Cole's friends grading the parking lot realized it would be available for lease in October. Soon after, Cole quit his day job.

The building was already zoned light industrial. It still took two months to get all of the necessary permits from the Town of Apex, including one that granted a change of use that allowed them to operate an auto shop.

"We had stuff in my garage, his garage, my parents' garage. Anyplace that had an open garage door, we stuck stuff," Cole said.

The Opening

They got all the permits right before Christmas, and began readying the building, first by scrubbing away 20 years' worth of dirt and cobwebs.

They pinched pennies wherever they could, realizing that the unanticipated permitting delays cost them money every day they couldn't open.

Gala acted as his own general contractor. Cole built the attractive wooden desk that anchors the office. They did about 90 percent of the refitting work, resulting in a 5,000-square-foot garage with four lifts, two bays and enough room to bring in 8 to 10 vehicles at a time.

They estimate that they saved upwards of \$70,000 by doing the work themselves.

"It took 24 hours a day for three months," Gala said, "and we were still at six figures out. We still put some on the credit cards. But we both knew we had to be cost conscious. Just because you see a big number in the checkbook doesn't mean it's really there. There were

'One person can't do it. You either have to have a partner or pay somebody. And there's no way you can pay somebody enough to do it like you want it to be done ...'

GREG COLE
 Apex AutoWorks

some huge numbers in the checkbook when we started, but that was money that was already gone."

They were hesitant to do much marketing until they knew exactly when the shop would open. They wanted to hand out business cards, afraid someone would call the shop and not reach anyone on the other end. What kind of impression would that make? Instead, they had two trucks painted with the shop's name and logo, and parked them near the street so people driving down North Salem Street would fix Apex AutoWorks in their minds.

The long days got to both partners.

"One night he came home and something had been delayed again, and he had been working so hard," Christa said of her husband. "He was so frustrated that it almost seemed like he was going to kind of break down. That was really hard to see. I think the guys tried to keep some of that from us, and when I finally saw him almost break that night, I thought, oh my gosh, this is worse than I thought."

"There were a few nights I remember, the stress was getting to them," Debbie said.

But finally — finally — they opened the shop on Feb. 3.

The Job

They had several jobs lined up their opening week, and friends and family spread the word that Apex had two new, honest mechanics in town.

Gala hopes eventually to do more development and managerial work, but for now he works alongside Cole in the shop.

The men have become accustomed to working 13- and 14-hour days — with just the two of them, there's always a car to be worked on, a call to be made or a floor to be swept — but neither is complaining.

"It felt like we took a reduction in work time," Gala said. "At first, we were working seven days a week, 15 and 16 hours a day" to get the shop ready to open.

"When we opened for business, and weren't open on the weekends, it was a relief," Cole echoed. "They're still long days, but there's only five of them in a row instead of seven or 15."

Business has slowed in the last two weeks; they're not sure why, but they hope it's temporary. Gala blames it on spring fever, people being unwilling to take their car to the garage when they can use it to play hooky from work or take a mini-break. At least, Cole says, it's not just them. Other area mechanics are reporting the same kind of fall-off.

They're not drawing a salary yet, and won't for several months. But they met their February goals, and were "slammed" with business the first three weeks of March before the slow-down.

"We're real close to covering everything," Gala said. "We still have some unexpected things pop up here and there, but we've been very fortunate and have had the reserves to cover a lot of that stuff."

"I actually feel like we're a little ahead of what I envisioned, of what I felt realistically would happen," Cole said.

There have been few major hiccups along the way, which they credit to careful planning and pragmatism.

"If we do things right, we'll be rewarded in the end," Gala said. "You've got to be truthful to yourself. You can't have this whole big rose garden and say this is how it's going to happen. If you're realistic about it, I don't think there are all that many surprises."

Contact Megan Jones at 460-2608 or mjones@nandco.com



Greg Cole's inspiration — his family — is never far from sight or mind. He and partner Jerry Gala whose wife is expecting a baby in May — say family support was important in their decision to launch Apex AutoWorks.