# Race: 'I have a very strong competitive nature'

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"So I was like, 'Sure," Hennings said with a laugh. "I've always wanted to. I've always gone to those things and thought, 'Well, that would be fun to try.'

In 2018, she received a trophy for being the fastest car in the women's division trophy dash.

"I like the adrenaline part of it," she said. "I have a very strong competitive nature. I'm definitely one that likes to win."

At first, only family and close friends knew she raced. Two past WAWG presidents said they didn't even know about it when the Capital Press contacted them.

But occasionally, someone spots her at the derby.

"It's surprising to see Michelle jump into the car and then you think about it for just a moment and, 'You know, that doesn't surprise me at all that Michelle's jumping into that car," said Matt Harris, director of government affairs and assistant executive director at the Washington Potato Commission.

People ultimately realize it fits her nature, Hennings said.

"If they know me, they know I'm competitive,' she said. "I was competitive in sports, I'm competitive in everything I do."

#### Advocating for farmers

Hennings, 45, joined WAWG 18 years ago as director of finance. She became executive director in 2014.

'My job just isn't any job — we fight for the right to farm," she said. "I love advocating on behalf of the farmers. It comes naturally to me. I understand farming because it's part of my life.

She and husband Scott raise wheat and hay and own a cattle ranch. They have been married 16 years and have two children, Harlee, 16, and Hayes, 14.

Farmers have a passion and respect for their land,

"I understand that firsthand because I do it," she said.

constantly reminds lawmakers and the public about the importance of farmers as they feed the world. Priorities include touting the value of the lower Snake River dams to the region's farmers and the economy, the new farm bill Congress has started working on, salmon recovery and labor

Hennings is amazed that some people still don't understand how vital farmers are.

"Farms are a target continually and they need to know we are the ones that provide safe and reliable food," she said. "It's always a goal every year to be able to get through to those that question what we do."

"Michelle is a very energetic and passionate leader," said Marci Green, Fairfield, Wash., farmer and a past president of WAWG. "She's effective and willing to go the extra mile to tell



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Michelle Hennings with her support team. From left are family friends Randy Gray and Rick Ruzicka, Hennings and her husband, Scott Hennings.



Michelle Hennings, a Ritzville, Wash., farmer and **Washington Association** of Wheat Growers executive director, will drive a 1977 Ford pickup in the women's race division as part of the Lind Combine **Demolition Derby in June.** 

the right people what we need done for wheat farmers in Washington state."

Wheat farmers benefit from Hennings in "so many ways," said Ryan Poe, a Hartline, Wash., farmer and another past president.

"We would have a very hard time replacing her, as well versed in all the different areas as she is," he said. "She makes herself available pretty much 24/7, even when she is on vacation. She is a trusted, dedicated, passionate leader of our industry."

"Michelle's work makes farmers farm again for the next season," said Pater-son, Wash., wheat farmer Nicole Berg, herself president of the National Association of Wheat Growers. "She's farm bill policy-oriented and the safety net that she works on helps keep all of us family farms in business."

Berg knew about Hennings' racing.

"I think it's great, a person has to have some way to blow off steam," she said. "It shows how wellrounded she is for the industry. She knows how to talk to the farmers, and she knows how to talk to the Legislature. Those are two different, complete things."

## 'Just go out and do it'

Hennings doesn't practice before she races.

"I just go out and do it,"

How does it feel?

"I get a little nervous, and then I get competitive, and I just go for it," she

How fast does she go? "As fast as I can," she

The speedometers in the car and truck don't work, but Hennings' team esti-

Courtesy of Michelle Hennings Hennings took home a trophy in the women's division trophy dash in 2018. the driver's windshield and mates she usually reaches 35 mph. She was "definitely" nerpickup. Still, "I prefer the pickvous the first time.

"You have to learn when to accelerate and when to let off the gas," she said. "The first year, that was trial and error. But after you get the feel for it, you just go out and do it."

The race itself is "very intense," she said.

"I want to win, so I try to do whatever I can to make sure I'm in the front or close to the front," she

Gray, friend Rick Ruzicka and Hennings' husband Scott help with vehicle maintenance.

"You compete on Friday night, and there could be major repairs that need to be done to be able to actually be in the show on Saturday," Hennings said. "Sometimes those guys are up all night long, working on the pickup or the car, if there was damage done to

The first year she raced in the car, another driver hit her "pretty hard" into a

"I ended up sideways and a gal pushed me probably halfway around the track," she said. "That was an eye-opener for me. ... I was looking at her like, 'OK, you can stop now.' Definitely, you never know what's going to happen."

Because the car is smaller than the pickup, getting hit was "a little bit more shocking," she said.

"You definitely have some bumps when you go into a race like that," she said. "It doesn't bother me too much. I have never been really scared."

Safety requirements are extensive, she said. They include extra protection for door and a roll bar on the

ups over the cars," she said. "You're up higher in the pickup."

'She's competitive, she likes the throttle for sure," Gray said.

Naturally, husband Scott is her biggest fan.

"She's just a great racer, a farm girl," he said. "I just think it's like driving on the old gravel roads back in the day. She gets in there and goes at it. I'm very proud of her."

He was not at all surprised when she first decided to race.

"I figured she'd jump in," he said. "I'd be nervous to do it, because you've got everyone watching you."

Hennings doesn't ever see herself driving a combine in the derby, the main event. They might not go fast enough for her.

'Yeah, they don't," she said with a laugh. "I like the adrenaline. Not so much the crashing into each other, but the racing."

## Return of the derby

The Lind derby is a major staple for the surrounding community, Hennings said.

"It's bringing people together to enjoy a sport that you don't see everywhere," she said. "We're a farming community in this area, so to be able to bring everybody out to have some fun is definitely a good thing."

Most of the people who compete in the derby and races live in Lind and surrounding communities.

The derby attracts a crowd of 5,000, bringing muchneeded money into the area.

THINKING ABOUT RACING?

Randy Gray travels from north of Bellingham to race during the derby.

"Once you do it once, you're hooked," he said.

After he heard about it from friend Rick Ruzicka, Gray rode over on his motorcycle to watch.

"So I went home, looked in the paper and found my first truck for \$400," he remembered. "Brought it home, just started working on it in my garage at night. Next thing you know, we're racing the next year."

"Just get an old pickup, fix it up," said Scott Hennings.

Michelle Hennings also encourages others to consider enter-

"Life's short," she said. "If you have something you really want to try, go for it, because it's very rewarding in the end."



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Friend Randy Gray and husband Scott Hennings are part of Michelle Hennings' support team when she races cars and pickups during the Lind Combine Demolition Derby celebration.

"Everyone's missed it," Hennings said of the pandemic-caused hiatus.

The combine demolition derby is the main draw, but the audience also loves watching the car, pickup and grain truck races — to the point where they have become events on their own, said Josh Knodel, chairman of the Lind Lions Club board, which puts on the derby.

"We didn't think it would take off like it has,"

The powder puff race is equally important, he said.

"A lot of this takes so much time away from family," he said of preparing the event. "So it's great when the spouses can participate, too, and make it a true family event."

### The value of farming While growing up in

Ritzville, Hennings' family raised wheat, hay and

"I grew up with the value of farming, seeing families grow up and raising your kids on the farm and how important that is," she said. "I love it. It's not just something you do for a job. ... You're contributing to people, you're growing their food. I think that is more valuable and more rewarding to be able to also bring your children up in that kind of atmosphere."

She started dating Scott her freshman year of high

"It was pretty much love at first sight, I think," she

They went off to college, Scott went into the military, and then they got back together.

"It was really special," she said.

She attended Washington State University for a year, then transferred to

Eastern Washington Uni-

versity in Cheney to com-

plete her bachelor's degree in business and accounting.

In school, she played basketball, tennis, softball, was a cheerleader and barrel raced in rodeo.

Hennings coaches youth sports and is an officer on the Ritzville Rodeo Association, overseeing the annual Ritzville Rodeo Labor Day weekend.

Their kids compete in junior high and high school

Would they ever race or compete in the combine derby?

"I think they both have the competitive nature enough to do it," she said. "We'll play basketball and everyone's pretty competitive on wanting to win."

#### First to the finish line The skills Hennings

uses in racing also apply to her work at WAWG. "Working for the advo-

cacy arm of Washington wheat growers, we consis tently have strategies for various goals we want to accomplish so that farmers can be proactive and not reactive to issues," she said. "Racing is similar — you look into who your opponents are, watch as they time in, and put together in your mind how you're going to get to the finish line before they do."

Hennings urges Washington farmers to share their story. She advises lawmakers to do their research and reach out to farmers about the impacts their decisions

"I never thought I would be on the political side of things," she said. "But now, when you start to understand how it affects everyone's lives, I feel that it was just my calling to work on behalf of the wheat farmers in Washington state."

## **Shortage:** 'Things are not going to get better in the short term'

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expect delays in equipment and parts deliveries to get worse in the foreseeable

'Things are not going to get better in the short term, so we need legislation to address these issues," Eideberg said. "The longer we wait, the longer we are going to feel the pain. There is a real sense of urgency here."

Port congestion and labor shortages have conspired to hinder shipments of machinery components, preventing manufacturers from fulfilling demand for new tractors and combines, experts say.

The lack of computer chips required for high-tech

features in modern farm equipment is but one example of the problem, which also extends to more mundane parts such as tires, windshields and knobs.

"All it takes is trouble getting one or two items and you can't make the machine," said Michael Langemeier, agricultural economist at Purdue University who tracks the farm equipment industry. "There's no magic pill here. No easy fix."

During a recent tour of Midwestern manufacturing facilities, Eideberg routinely saw unfinished farm machinery sitting outside factories, waiting for components to arrive.

It's taking about five to

six times longer now for mechanics to acquire service parts than before the coronavirus pandemic, he said.

Meanwhile, the inventories of some equipment dealers are so depleted that they're buying machinery simply to strip it for parts, Eideberg said. "That's how desperate people are."

Machinery sales slumped due to weak commodity prices during much of the past decade, so the recent resurgence in crop values has spurred farmers to invest in new technology, Langemeier "We're at the point a lot

of people need to replace the

machines they bought 10 or

15 years ago," he said.

The shortage of equipment has prompted growers to instead buy farmland, which has shot up 20% in value since last year, Langemeier said.

"They would buy a lot more machinery if there were inventories available," About 40% of farm-

ers recently surveyed as part of Purdue University's Ag Economy Barometer reported that insufficient supplies have impeded their equipment purchases. "That's unprecedented,"

Langemeier said. "Historically, that would be zero." Congress is consider-

ing bills aimed at relieving port congestion and improv-

ing domestic manufacturing, with supporters hoping for bipartisan approval before its August recess.

Even then, it will take time to implement the bills enough to make the supply chain operate more smoothly, Eideberg said.

"You can't turn the Titanic, as it were, around in a matter of minutes," he said.

Some provisions of the Bipartisan Innovation Act are aimed at longer-term goals, such as increasing domestic manufacturing of semiconductor computer chips, he

"There's never a better time to start than today,' Eideberg said.

Others

provisions that reduce tariffs on Chinese components and improve options for manufacturers, he said. The legislation may also include labor-related provisions, including Pell grants for technical education programs. "If we don't have enough

quicker effects, such as

skilled workers, we're not going to be able to compete," Eideberg said, adding there's been too much emphasis in the U.S. on four-year colleges rather than shorter-term technical "We've attached too

much value on the one at the expense of the other," he