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AT 14, YOUNG MOORESVILLE DRIVER'S BEING CALLED A NEW JEFF GORDON

JOSH WRIGHT BEGINS TO MAKE A NAME FOR HIMSELF IN STOCK CARS

STAFF WRITERS, JACKIE MAH BERNIE PETIT, STAFF WRITERS

Josh Wright, 14, of Mooresville, can't legally drive on public roads, but that doesn't stop him from climbing into a stripped-down stock car and leaving men three times his age in the dust.

Earlier this summer Josh won his first 20-lap Super Stock V8 race at East Lincoln Motor Speedway in Stanley. He pocketed \$300 and the thrill of beating 18 to 20 other serious competitors, ranging in age from about 20 to 50.

"He's gotta put four cushions on that thing so he can see over the steering wheel," said Speedway announcer Larry Hammett of the 5-foot-6-inch Mooresville teenager. "He's gonna be a good stock car driver."

Josh started driving when he was 7. For fun, his family took him to a go-cart track near their old home in southeast Missouri, but something clicked that day as he sped around the track. And he said his eyes have been focused on the turns ahead ever since.

Josh can race at private tracks like the East Lincoln Motor Speedway because N.C. law doesn't prohibit those younger than 16 from driving on private property. Individual tracks set age limits.

However, he won't be competing on any NASCAR-affiliated track for about two years; those tracks all require drivers to be at least 16.

His dad, Jerry Wright, used to race stock cars himself.

"Even as young as he is, he can tell us what the car is doing and what it isn't doing," Wright said.

Josh spends up to seven hours a week on his car, No. 49, either readying it for an upcoming race or repairing it from a previous one. "He's got the talent, there's no doubt about that," Jerry Wright said. "He's got more patience than most of the guys he's driving with."

But Josh just thinks of himself as an average kid.

He plays sports, goes to school and has fun at the race track, said Josh, who played on his middle school basketball and football teams.

His friends root for him at the track once in awhile, he said. His girlfriend comes every weekend for good luck.

But luck isn't as important when you have talent, like an innate ability to drive the car and the maturity to handle it, other drivers say.

Patience can mean the difference between being an average driver and a great one, said Tom Sandal, owner of Carolina Racing Supply in Mooresville.

"It takes a lot to be patient in order to have your car in position to take advantage of situations, and Josh has that gift," said Sandal, who has known Wright for about four years. "A driver might have to follow another car for a few laps before he has the right opportunity to pass. Drivers without Josh's patience will try to force the issue, and that's when your wrecks happen."

Jason Rice, a six-year racer from Lincolnton, agreed.

"Some people just have a natural ability to do well," said Rice, 30, of Lincolnton. "And he has one in racing which is going to make him go very far."

Not only does Josh have strength and stamina, but he has an understanding of the sport that many adult drivers don't have, Sandal said.

"He's a sponge for information on anything related to racing," Sandal said. "He picks up on things very quickly and he's not at all bashful about asking questions about how he can improve on the track."

Connections in the right places don't hurt either. Josh gets car help and advice from Doug Drago, an engine assembler at Dale Earnhardt Inc. in Mooresville, whom he knows through his father. "Drago will go into work on Mondays and all the guys want to know how Josh did when they're supposed to be worrying about Junior (Dale Earnhardt Jr.)," Sandal said.

Sandal, 44, said he's seen only one other driver comparable to Josh at the same stage of his career - Jeff Gordon.

"You could watch Jeff and tell that this boy is going to be good, that this boy is being

groomed to be a professional driver," he said. "Josh has the same things going for him."

Other drivers may have been a little surprised by Josh's presence and success on the track, Rice said.

Josh remains unflappable.

"I know I'm up there doing the same things they are, I'm accomplishing the same goals as they are," he said. "I'm just not intimidated by them."

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