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TEEN'S RACING FOR NASCAR CAREER

JOSH WRIGHT, 17, FINDS EARLY SUCCESS IN IMCA MODIFIED DIVISION

STAFF WRITERS, DAN TIERNEY

Josh Wright likes to compare his situation to that of NASCAR driver Carl Edwards, as the similarities are almost scary.

Both grew up in Missouri and now live in Mooresville. Both started their racing careers without much money to push their passion. Both won the International Motor Contest Association's modified division national Rookie of the Year Award, with Edwards' win coming in 1998 and Wright's in 2005.

Edwards drives in front of millions of fans through the year on the Nextel Cup circuit. As for Wright, well, that is where the similarities end. If he continues his path, NASCAR may not be far away for the 17-year-old driver.

"He beat on doors until he got a chance," Wright said about Edwards. "When he got that chance, he shined."

Wright is waiting for his chance. Until then, he's going to keep racing because it's his passion.

Wright started racing with go-karts at age 7. Before he could legally drive on the streets, he was racing grown men at dirt tracks around the area. It didn't take long for Wright's driving ability to get noticed.

"The first time I watched him," said Doug Dragoo, who helps build Wright's engines, "I thought this good was good. Really good."

Racing in the modified division last year, Wright won the state championship in addition to his national honor. Tom Sandal, owner of Carolina Racing Supply, could see the success coming from a while back. Sandal finds difficulty in even recognizing a difference between Wright's skills as a youngster to now.

"When I first met him, he was winning races," Sandal said. "Now he's still winning races."

For Wright, that's all he knows. Sure the Lake Norman High senior also plays the guitar, lifts weights and hangs out with his friends on occasion. It's racing that consumes his life.

He has a part-time job working on car parts. He watches every NASCAR race. From Monday through Thursday he spends at least two hours working on his car. He races on Saturday and washes his car on Sunday. And he matches his 4.0 grade point average with an excellent knowledge of his car.

"I don't know anyone at 17 years old as smart at putting a car together," said Dragoo, who works in research and development at Dale Earnhardt Inc.

Wright is already looking ahead at what he needs to do to catch that break. He and his father are trying to sell their race car, so they can move to the late-model division and gain experience on the paved tracks. He's also taking public speaking classes at a local community college to fit the clean-cute image major NASCAR sponsors want.

Dragoo, for one, thinks Wright has the skills to make it to the highest level.

"I've been around professional racing for 30 years," he said. "This kid has the total package."

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