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Need for Speed

April 01, 2009 ¦ Eric Brown

Aspiring race car drivers usually develop a passion for the sport at an early age. Often, they are seen hopping into the seat of their first go-kart when their peers are still peddling bikes with training wheels.

Liberty sophomore and sport management major Stephen Berry possesses the same fervor for driving at high speeds, but unlike his contemporaries, he did not grow up immersed in the sport. In fact, he did not receive his first professional go-kart until he was 14. Six years later, this late bloomer is turning heads in NASCAR's developmental circuit, donning Liberty University on his Monte Carlo's quarter panel.

"Most guys in racing have a much different past than we did," said Stephen's father Bill Berry. "Almost always, a parent, family member or friend has been involved in racing. We didn't have a clue about what we were doing, even in the go-kart stuff. We went to the track and just asked people what to do, because we didn't know."

Stephen's lack of racing experience did not hinder him as he quickly moved from go-karts to a half-scale sized stock car. During his brief Mini-Cup stint, the Huddleston, Va., native started eight races, besting the division's top drivers in his final two contests. Despite being told at season's end to enter into an intermediate racing series, Stephen made the jump to a full-size stock car in the Limited Sportsmen Division.

Following a successful run in Limiteds, he found himself behind the wheel of a late model stock car in NASCAR's Whelen All-American Series. With just a handful of starts under his belt,

Camping World Series truck driver Stacy Compton approached Stephen and asked him to join his late model team. After two full seasons in the developmental circuit, he shifted gears to NASCAR's Camping World East Series — a division where drivers race with engines and chassis almost identical to NASCAR's Nationwide Series. Beginning in April, Stephen will compete in 13 Camping World East races during the 2009 season.

"We are racing for Bobby Hamilton, Jr. this year," he said. "He's a NASCAR driver and he wants to become an owner. He's a professional, and I'd like to be like him someday."

Much like their driver, Stephen's first pit crew did not come with an abundance of mechanical expertise. In the early stages of his career, Stephen and his dad recruited men from their church, placing them in positions where they would serve the best. With assistance from crew chiefs along the way, the group stood by Stephen, helping him achieve quality starts and finishes. In 2007, the crew's efforts shined at Southern National Raceway Park in Kenly, N.C., when the young driver surpassed the entire field in time trials, setting a new track record.

As Stephen and his team venture closer to the goal of competing in the Sprint Cup Series, sponsorship becomes a necessity. Nearly two and a half years ago, the Berrys presented Liberty University with the idea of placing the school's name on the hood of Stephen's Monte Carlo to help with recruiting.

"My goal is to graduate from Liberty University and succeed at the highest levels in NASCAR," Stephen said. "Dr. Falwell was instrumental in my being able to pursue my dream. I would love to honor Dr. Falwell and Liberty University by becoming a Champion for Christ in the competitive sport of NASCAR racing. "

When the green flag drops, Stephen's parents take their designated positions. Bill often serves in the pits as a crew member or mans the spotter's tower when one is not available.

Stephen's mom, Linda, is not a spotter or a tire changer, but her role is just as significant. Equipped with a video camera, she documents each of her son's races. When the Berrys return home, Stephen studies the footage intently, critiquing the positives and negatives of his performance.

With each race bringing a new experience, this assertive driver is also becoming a smarter one. If a mechanical problem occurs during a race, Stephen senses the potential danger and makes adjustments accordingly.

"He's really matured a lot in the last year or two," said tire specialist Bill Parker. "He's at the point now where he's competitive even when it is not an ideal night."

To show his appreciation LU's for support, Stephen invited Chancellor Jerry Falwell, Jr. and his family

to Lowe's Motor Speedway in Concord, N.C., to take part in the Richard Petty Driving Experience in March. The program allows enthusiasts to climb into a race car and discover

firsthand what professional drivers encounter on race day.

“Liberty has sponsored us for the past few years, and we just wanted to get the whole family out here and show them a good time,” Stephen said. “Anyone who comes out to the Richard Petty Driving Experience is blown away at how much fun it is.”

Driving at speeds close to 150 mph, Stephen and Falwell burned rubber for eight laps around the 1.5-mile oval. After completing his run, Stephen watched from behind pit road as the chancellor looped around the track.

“I was impressed,” Stephen said. “He looked like a pro out there.”

Falwell said he enjoyed the experience and hopes the university can help support Stephen’s budding racing career. Moments after stepping out of the race car, he recalled his feelings while sitting in the driver’s seat.

“I was a little concerned when I got behind the wheel,” Falwell said. “You catch on fast and it’s a lot of fun. It’s something everybody should try.”

Though the support of Liberty and other local sponsors have kept Stephen’s racing ambitions alive, moving up to the Camping World East Series requires additional sponsors to defray the cost of the regional circuit. Bill says he spends every free minute putting together packets to send out to potential sponsors. While the path to the Sprint Cup is longer than any road course, Stephen is relying on God — the ultimate crew chief — to guide him on his incredible journey.

“We know everything is in His hands,” he said. “It’s not how good I am; it’s not how good the car is; it’s how He wants it all to work out. We know that coming in, and we’ll let His will be done.”

Limited Sportsmen Division

2005 Three wins, nine top fives

Late Model Racing

2005 Youngest driver to qualify for Bailey's 300 in Martinsville, VA

2006-07 Garnered four poles and 11 Top 10 finishes at Motor Mile Speedway in Radford, VA

2007 Set track record at Kenly, NC / Led first 104 laps of "Thanksgiving Classic"

Started 10th at Bailey's 300

Started 14th out of 65 drivers in Toyota All-Star Showdown

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