



Driven

Lake resident Stephen Berry is on racing's fast track

STORY BY LYNDA IMIRIE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDT HARRELL

FOR Bill Berry, it wasn't a surprise when his then 10-year-old son Stephen fell in love with a NASCAR video game he got for Christmas. Although he wasn't a big racing fan himself, the elder Berry sensed his son's affection for the sport and eventually offered to take him to a "real" race at Martinsville Speedway.

What surprised Berry was when Stephen climbed into a go kart a short time later, lapped the track a few times and succumbed to a passion no one expected. Right from the get-go, it was obvious Stephen loved the thrill of the race.

"I remember going to the track at Water World [now Hot Shots]," Stephen recalled. "I just loved it."

For fun, he entered some races using a rented go kart, occasionally the youngest driver in the competition. By the time he was 13, Stephen was ready to leave rentals behind and pursue professional go-kart racing.

Bill Berry smiled as he recalled how little the family knew about racing at the time.

"We didn't have a clue what we were doing," he said with a laugh. "But other racers were willing to help us along even though we were competitors. We really didn't know much of anything in the beginning."

Driving a newly purchased used go kart, Stephen captured his first racing win at a track in Montvale.

"There's a lot more competition at the professional go-kart level," Bill Berry said. "They're lower to the ground, have a special chassis for racing, it's a dirt track, and the speed is like 80 mph."

And the speed, Stephen admitted, is what fuels his passion.

"You're on the edge of out-of-control, just inches away from it. There's no room for mistakes," he said.

According to his dad, Stephen showed promise from the very beginning. It wasn't long before he was winning at the state level. He soon left go karts behind and moved on to the next level.

Stephen drove his first stock car in 2005 at age 17 in the Limited Sportsman Series at the Motor Mile Speedway in Radford, supported by a pit crew made up of friends from Staunton Baptist Church. After three wins and nine top-three finishes, Stephen moved up to the Late Model Series to prepare for the Bailey's 300 at Martinsville, known as the "Daytona of Late Model races." He was the youngest driver to qualify for the race and finished a respectable 29th out of a field of 42 of the best drivers in the country - not bad for a rookie kid from Huddleston.

Now 20, Stephen is a junior at Liberty University majoring in sports management. In fact, he's an ambassador for the school and is featured on Liberty's Web site. With 90 million race car fans across the country, the Christian school recognized an opportunity to reach potential new students by sponsoring Stephen. A favorite photo of his is with the late Rev. Jerry Falwell alongside Stephen's car with "Liberty Flames" across the hood.

Liberty was an easy choice for Stephen because it was close to home and it embraced a moral standard the Berry family shares.

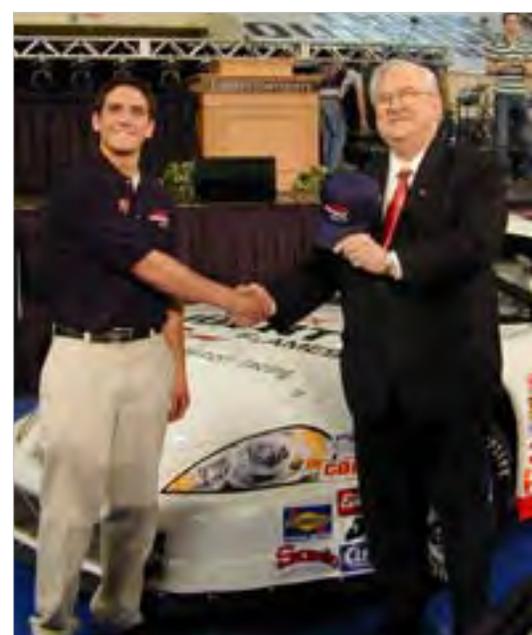
"You can glorify God in everything you do," Stephen said.

These same moral values have endeared the Berrys to racing professionals across the nation.

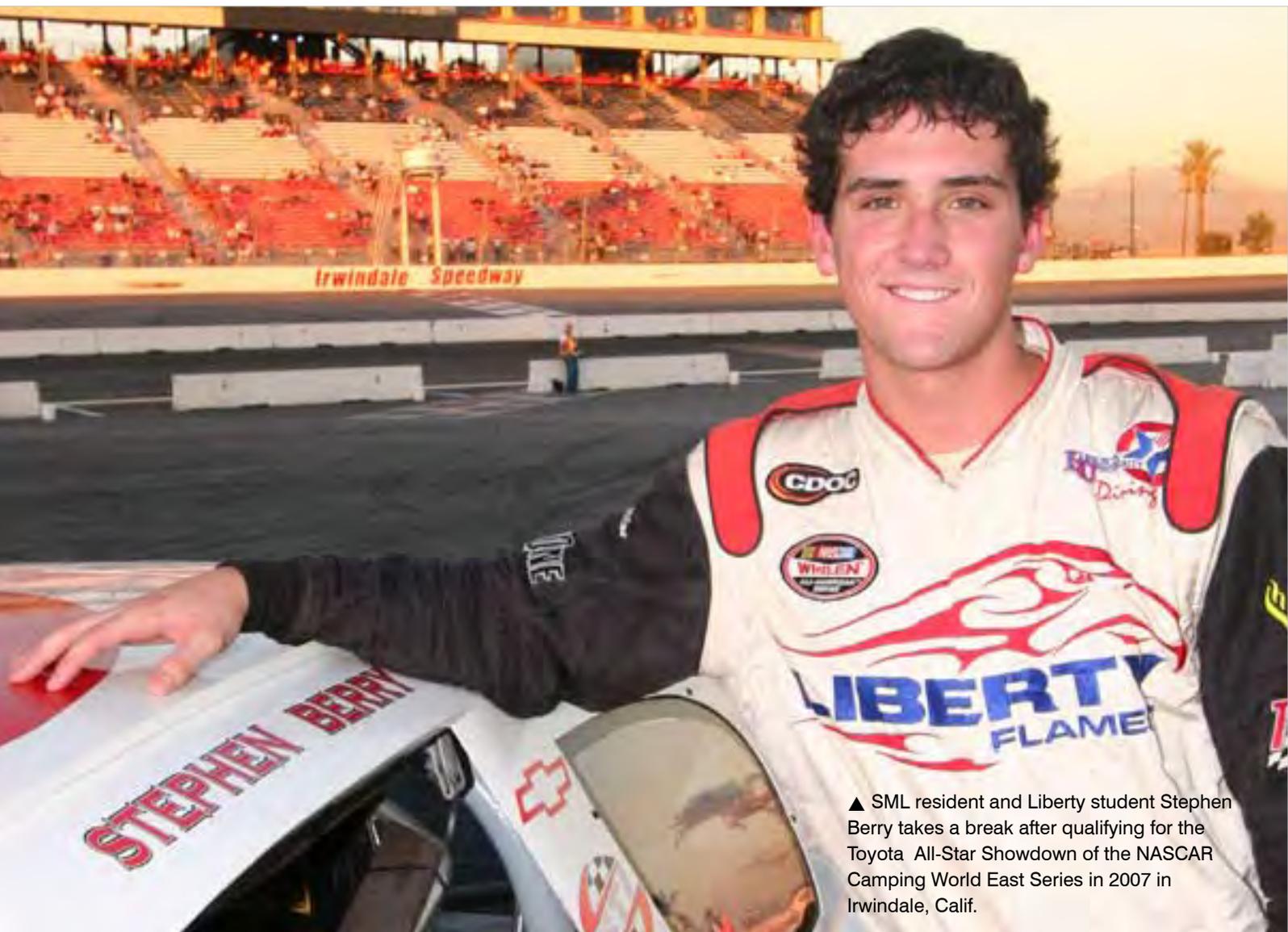
"The spirit of the sport is a good one," Bill Berry said. "It's very family oriented. Races start with a prayer, the national anthem is

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▼ From left, SML resident Stephen Berry is all smiles after participating in the 2002 World Kart Racing Association's Daytona Kart race at age 14; Berry meets NASCAR legend Richard Petty in 1999; Berry, a Liberty University student whose car is sponsored by the school, presents a hat to Dr. Jerry Falwell, Liberty's founder and former chancellor, in 2007.



INSET PHOTOS COURTESY OF BILL BERRY



▲ SML resident and Liberty student Stephen Berry takes a break after qualifying for the Toyota All-Star Showdown of the NASCAR Camping World East Series in 2007 in Irwindale, Calif.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BILL BERRY

DRIVEN CONTINUED

played, the military are honored. Racers aren't ordinarily a party crowd like football or other sports players. You don't read about them in the headlines. Their fans aren't unruly. There are families sitting out there in the stands."

In 2006 and 2007 Stephen drove a Late Model for TurnOne Racing, owned by Stacy Compton, a well-known south central Virginia racer. Compton founded TurnOne, which is dedicated to the development of drivers for the future. A cattle farmer who knows firsthand how hard it is to break into higher levels of racing, Compton saw this as a way to pay back those who helped his career.

At the Motor Mile Speedway in Radford, his home track, Stephen had 11 top-ten finishes. He went on to compete in the Thanksgiving Classic at the Southern National Raceway Park near Kenly, N.C., where he set a new track record for Late Model drivers, leading the first 104 laps before getting tangled in a mishap and dropping out of the race.

The next step for Stephen is the NASCAR Camping World East Series, but as his dad explained, it will require more than just precision driving. That level of racing involves major sponsorship and big dollars, a tough combination to find in these stressed economic times. To cover the costs of the next series, Bill Berry spends every free minute putting together and distributing packets to potential sponsors, emphasizing the publicity benefits and the opportunity for Stephen to promote a sponsor's favorite school or charity.

While the path to NASCAR's top-level Sprint Cup is longer than any road course, Stephen said he is relying on God to guide him on his journey.

"We know everything is in His hands," Stephen said. "It's not how good I am or the car. It's how He wants it all to work out." 🍌

For more information, visit stephenberryracing.net.