

Fast Track

Recent North graduate living out dreams at NASCAR institute

BY COURTNEY GAILLARD
THE CHRONICLE

For as long as Bradley Douthit can remember he has been an auto racing fan. Ever since he was a young boy, he has spent Saturdays with his father, Reggie Douthit, in front of the television roving on his favorite race car driver.

"It was love at first site. (Watching drivers) speeding around the track, trying to out-drive another driver," said Douthit, who has set aside his remote control cars and race car video games, once used to momentarily live out his dream of becoming a race car driver, for studies in engine construction, aerodynamics, chassis fabrication and durability at the NASCAR Technical Institute (NTI), where he is a student. Racing cars professionally, for Douthit, has become more of a reality than a childhood dream.

The 146,000-square-foot NTI training facility, located in Mooresville and also known as "Race City USA," opened in July. The institute offers traditional automotive technology training and NASCAR specific training. NASCAR teamed up with UTI, located in Arizona, to build the school, which requires a high school degree.

After graduating from North

Airport

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wood and other items from demolished buildings. The materials are needed to fill a 100-foot hole at the end of the airport's main runway. When the hole was filled, the airport had planned to construct a runway safety area, which would give aircraft a cushion if they were to overrun the runway.

Airport officials say the Federal Aviation Administration has been adamant about airports having a safety area since an accident in Little Rock, Ark., several years ago resulted in fatalities. The FAA also will not fork over federal money to airports that do not have safety areas. Smith Reynolds officials will desperately need FAA money in the next five years to pay for a \$3 million resurfacing of the airport's main runway.

Chris Veal, deputy airport director, hinted to the zoning board that the airport's future would be in jeopardy without the runway resurfacing, which would require construction of the safety area.

"(The airport) is an incentive for other companies to relocate, especially an airport that is this close to downtown," he said. He also mentioned that about \$100 million worth of aircraft call the airport home, including corporate jets for local corporations such as R.J. Reynolds, K&W Cafeteria and Krispy Kreme. Those aircraft generate nearly \$2 million a year in city and county tax revenues.

Veal said that with the safety area, the airport would save the city and county money because only about \$150,000 of local money would be needed for the resurfacing project if the FAA chips in (although FAA money is not guaranteed).

The zoning board was prepared to decide this matter at its October meeting. But several residents who live around the airport complained that they had been kept out of the loop about the project. The decision was delayed for a month so that airport officials could meet with residents to try to come to some common ground. Three meetings were held, but both sides gave up little ground.

The airport did agree to post signs along Bowen Boulevard (the street the dump trucks would have used to make deposits at the landfill) that would warn drivers about dump-truck traffic. That decision was made after neighbors complained that the trucks would clog the narrow road and potentially cause accidents. But airport officials turned a deaf ear to residents' cries to delay

Forsyth in the spring, Douthit had planned on studying engineering at a four-year college. But a visit to his high school by a Universal Technical Institute (UTI) representative quickly changed his college plans.

"I felt I had to do it," said Douthit, about applying to NTI after meeting the UTI representative during his senior year in high school. Douthit's parents accompanied him to Mooresville to check out the future site where the school would be constructed. The Douthits watched the school be built from the ground up. Each trip to Mooresville, said Douthit, further excited him about his enrollment there.

Douthit was "surprised" to receive three scholarships to attend NTI, one of which was given by UPS (United Parcel Service) called the UPS Racing Technical Edge Scholarship, which is for minority students, like himself, who are interested in automotive-related careers. UPS also sponsors NASCAR driver Dale Jarrett (88).

Douthit is almost halfway through the 52-week course of study at NTI and is as determined as ever to break into the automotive industry, one way or another. So far, Douthit says he's learning "how to build and operate a car from he ground up."

the project altogether.

Veal said the airport is in a race against time. If the runway is not resurfaced in the next few years, he said, then it will have to be uprooted and laid again, a much more expensive and time-consuming process.

Bad blood between residents and the airport did not help the situation. For decades the two groups have been at odds over everything from noise to the annual air show, which allows for airplanes to do death-defying stunts over the homes of people who live around Smith Reynolds.

"The airport is certainly not in harmony with our lifestyle and our neighborhood," said Jerelyn Travick, who has lived on Airport Road for the last two decades. "We don't see the airport as good neighbors at this time."

Northeast Ward Alderwoman Vivian Burke has tried to facilitate harmony between her constituents and the airport many times during her 25 years on the Board of Aldermen. This issue was no different. Burke was on hand for last week's meeting. She came only to listen, but residents asked her to address the zoning board.

"It seems to me that for the welfare of and the safety of the individuals in the area, we have not come to an understanding that we can feel 100 percent that this is going to be a good something for the area," said Burke, who said residents also had concerns that hazardous materials would somehow make their way into the landfill. "We don't know what kind of control the airport will really have."

Burke pointed out that several schools and churches are in the vicinity of the proposed landfill site. And Eastgate, a retirement community, is located off Bowen, which also has a sharp curve that has caused many accidents in the past.

Burke said it would be more ideal if airport officials agreed to have dump trucks use Liberty Street, a four-lane road. She also said that the airport should consider paying for the materials to go into the landfill instead of leaving it open for several years in hopes that large numbers of contractors would use the site to dump their debris. If the airport bought the materials, it would also speed up the time it would take to construct the safety area.

Veal hinted during the meeting that the \$4 a yard it would cost for the materials may be too expensive.

Burke said she would give the airport's proposal another look if they made the two changes. Many residents, however, still have to be sold on the landfill idea.

Ed Cox, director of Smith Reynolds, said a decision has not yet been made about the airport's next step. The airport could appeal the decision. Cox said some direction will come this week when the Piedmont Triad Airport Authority will take up the matter.

"(Douthit has) been a phenomenal student and done a really great job. He has perfect attendance, hasn't missed any classes, and he's keeping a very high grade point (average)," said Brent Watson, director of student services at NTI, who explained that NTI is one of four branch campuses of the Universal Technical Institute, based in Phoenix, Ariz. NTI is the first and only school with a NASCAR specific curriculum in the country.

Just in the last year, father and son attended two NASCAR races at Lowe's Motor Speedway in Concord. Watching the races in person, says Douthit, cemented his dream of breaking into the sport. Despite the stereotypes of auto race car driving being a "redneck sport" not open to or of interest to blacks, Douthit says he has never been dismayed by the predominantly white male industry or experienced racism as a result of his love of the sport.

"People are friendly at (the race car) tracks. There isn't any animosity towards anyone. All (the fans) care about is rooting for their favorite driver," said Douthit, who, like many, was a huge fan of the late Dale Earnhardt Sr., who was killed in the Daytona 500 last year.

Douthit says there are a num-



Bradley Douthit, a Winston-Salem native, is one of 34 black students getting a leg up in the world of car racing at the NASCAR Technical Institute in Mooresville.

ber of black pit crew members on the NASCAR circuit and a lot of black NASCAR fans like him and his father. He says he would like to be the first black driver to win the NASCAR championship one day.

Watson says that the NASCAR industry is shifting toward recruiting a more diverse population into the sport and is beginning that process at NTI. Already the enrollment at NTI is indicating the "positive strides" that Watson says the sport is making in trying to change the stereotype often associated with it of being a "good old boys" sport.

Currently, out of the 750 stu-

dents enrolled at NTI, 34 are African-American and 18 are female.

"Traditionally (auto racing) has been a male-dominated sport, typically a white male-dominated sport, and they are looking for different ways with UPS and Dodge Motor Sports, who both offer (minority) scholarships," Watson said.

NASCAR is interested in increasing not only the number of minorities in the industry but the number of females, Watson said.

Douthit said: "(The race car track) is a place to have fun. (Drivers) may make it look easy but really (it) is not and it takes a lot

of hard work and determination. You have to stay with it because there are a lot of obstacles that may keep you from doing it...I'm going to try to go out and get some experience."

Upon graduating, Douthit intends to begin establishing himself as a race car driver and develop his own racing team by participating in as many local races as possible. NTI expects that its graduates will easily find work, whether it's with a professional race team, car dealership or automotive shop, and Douthit is confident that he will be among the first NTI graduates to make it past the finish line.

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