

Mark Knott: Bowman Gray's next superstar driver

By RANDY PETTITT
Chronicle Sports Editor

A lot of stock car legends have raced around the football field at Bowman Gray Stadium over the years. And as the birthplace of NASCAR celebrates its 600th weekly gathering this Saturday, a new name is emerging in the spotlight at the quarter-mile track -- Mark Knott.

The 24-year old, who many think will someday be a superstar in the sport, has moved through the ranks with uncanny ease. He quickly became a crowd favorite June 6 by pulling off a stunning upset, winning the Sportsman division's prize race -- the Coors 100.

The event was the longest of the season for the Sportsman cars and gained the new kid on the block instant respect from his peers.

"I was leading with 10 laps to go and the caution flag came out," Knott recalled. "I just kept telling myself not to miss a gear on the restart -- and I did anyway."

"I gathered it back together though and hung on. I was pretty nervous."

Despite the thrill of his first big time win, last week was perhaps more memorable for Knott, offering the birth of his son Zachary Steven, his 24th birthday and a third victory of the season.

And to top it all off, Fifteen thousand fans joined in a chorus of "Happy Birthday" for the proud new father.

He responded by outdueling father-in-law, Carl "Dink" Osbourne, for his third win of the year.

It was Osbourne, a two-time champion at Bowman Gray, who first saw the potential of Knott while he was racing go-carts.

"I watched him race those carts and knew right then that he had potential to be a winner over here," Osbourne said.

After two years and three wins in the novice Blunderbust division, Osbourne provided Knott with an opportunity to make a name for himself by letting him drive his second car in the Sportsman division.

"I think I've trained him too well," Osbourne joked after finishing second to Knott last Saturday. "He has all the tools to become a great race car driver. Mark should go a long ways in this sport."

Knott admits racing against his father-in-law is a strange twist, but one he enjoys.

"It was interesting, but I just treated him like I would anyone else," Knott said. "It was fun beating him though. I guess I've got something to kid him about now," he laughed.

But others in the sportsman division think Knott's success is no laughing matter.

"He'll be a superstar in this division -- he really will," said Jimmy Johnson, a five-time champion and 12-year veteran of the Sportsman division.

"Mark has good equipment under him and a level head to be able to use it. He has had some good luck too. Better than mine," he joked.

"No, really, he's a good kid and a damn good race car driver."

Ralph Brinkley, the stadium's winningest active driver, agrees.

"He's at the right age and headed in the right direction," said Brinkley, who won his 50th Modified division race Saturday.

"Go-carts were how I got into racing. I played with go-carts, then raced them, and finally wound up over here. Mark's

done pretty much the same thing. "I've won 50 races. Hell, he might win a 100. You never know. Richard Childress started over here the same time I did. He's now the owner of the (Dale Earnhardt) Winston Cup Championship team," he said.

"I don't know Mark all that well, but he definitely is going the right way."

Terry King, another competitor in the Sportsman division, says Knott could become another famous graduate of the Stadium. "He is very marketable," King

said. "Mark is a clean cut guy with a good attitude. That's what it takes to get into the big time these days."

"I think he's proved he can drive a race car already. The hard part will be leaving Bowman Gray Stadium. This is just a hobby for us, but I think Mark has a chance to turn it into something more than that."

Tough Odds

Despite being in the racing

business since 1949, Bowman Gray Stadium has produced a lot of high hopes, but only one real mainstay on the NASCAR circuit -- Richard Childress.

Others, such as local businessman Ernie Shaw's career on the Grand American circuit, have come close to making it to the bigtime, but Childress' rags to riches success as a car owner easily tops the list.

And perched in the corner of the dimly lit pit area, Mark Knott expressed a desire to add his

name to the list of successful Stadium graduates.

"My goal is to ultimately drive a car on the Grand National circuit," said Knott.

"I know you have to be a Dale Earnhardt or Tim Richmond to make it these days, but that's what I'd like to accomplish some day."

But instead of sitting around talking racing, Knott rushed home to be with his new son and wife.

Mark Knott was headed in the right direction.



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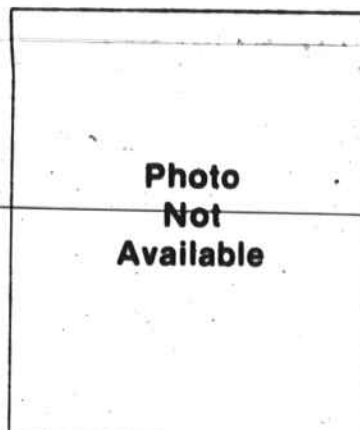
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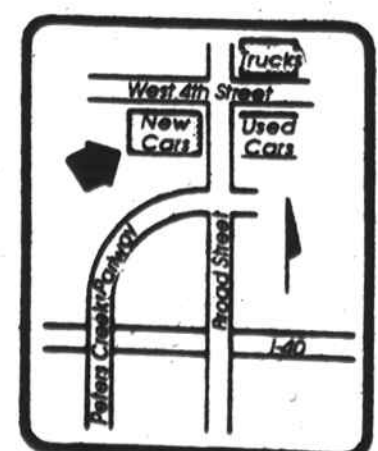
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