

From Karts to Cup

A Closeup with



Michael McDowell

By Vahok Hill

I have known Michael McDowell for many years. I first became aware of Michael just after he started racing karts at the local Phoenix Track, PKRA (Phoenix Kart Racing Association) when he was just a wee little guy. Now he is over 6ft and it just proves if you keep feeding those kids they will grow. At the time, I was racing in the Open 2 Cycle classes and working with my own racing team out of my kart shop.

From the beginning Michael was a good racer. As he progressed through Karting in the Junior classes it was very clear that he was a very talented racer. He won a good percentage of his races, in fact the majority of the Junior races were won by two racers Michael and another racer running out of my shop, Andy Brumbaugh. These two guys were the class of the field. One or the other would qualify on the pole and the other would be in hot pursuit throughout the race. These two karters virtually destroyed the Junior class at the Phoenix track. Nobody else wanted to play. Except another Junior racer, Stephen Leicht, you may have heard of him? Stephen was following right in the tire tracks of Michael and Andy. Then Stephen

moved to North Carolina, the intent was to get experience in cars with fenders. Stephen is doing quite well, he won a Busch race last year driving for Robert Yates Racing. The move back to North Carolina must have worked for Stephen.

Michael raced with the Phoenix club for about 2-3 years and then started to travel to the Regional races

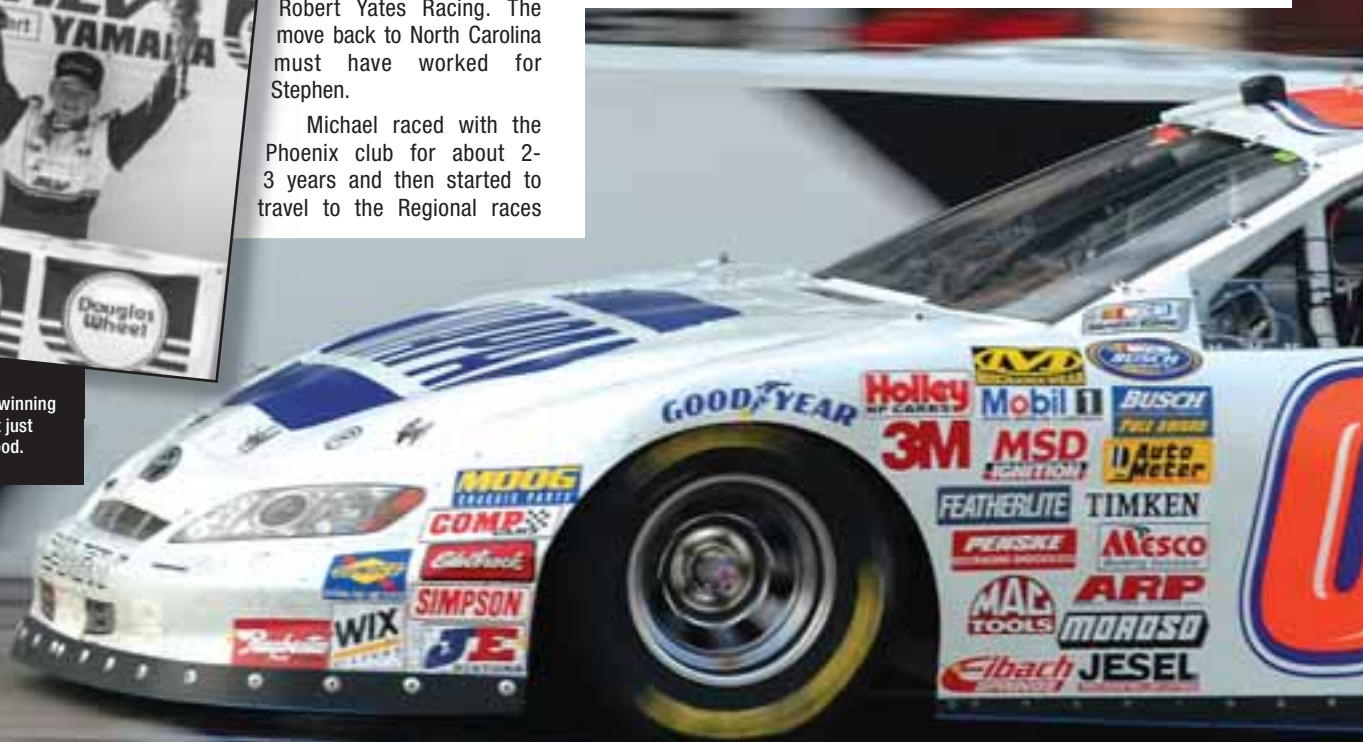
in California. IKF's Region 7, includes Southern California, Arizona, and Southern Nevada and was the hot bed of very competitive karting. It would not be uncommon for a Junior class to qualify the top 15 karts all within 2-3 tenths of a second. The fields were that close.

I lost contact with Michael in the late 90's. I happened to see him in some races televised late at night on Speed Vision in the Star Mazda series and the Grand Am races. He always seemed to be running at the front and doing a good job bringing the cars home in good condition ready to race another day. It became clear that Michael was working his way towards becoming a professional racecar driver. I had watched some GrandAm and Daytona Prototype races that he had done well in and in 2007 he was tearing up the ARCA series with some pretty amazing stats. Most races won, most laps led & most poles. All this by a first year starter in the series. At a local dirt track I ran into Michael's brother Billy who was racing in the Mod Lite class and doing pretty well. We talked about the success that Michael was having in the ARCA series and Billy let me know that it looked like Michael's star was shining bright enough to be noticed by MWR (Michael Waltrip Racing) and the odds were looking like a CUP ride was in store for Michael in the 07-08 season.

I was able to spend some time talking with Michael at the Phoenix



This is the how it all starts, winning is something that just gets into your blood.



race and spend some more time with him on the phone. To be honest I was not expecting the mature and driven young man I met. I was expecting the same kid that I had watched grow up racing karts at the local track here in Phoenix. At the track Michael was focused when he needed to be and approachable when the occasion merited it. Michael was very at ease talking to the fans and to the media types that seemed to be everywhere. He was very fan friendly, many people took pictures with him and he was very at ease with the fans. He was also at ease in the pits and in the line to Qualify for the Busch race. It was clear he was having a great time and was fully enjoying the experience. But when the helmet was on, it was all about making the show. He qualified his Busch car in the top 20 and was assured a place in the race. It was clear that he was a professional in every way.

NKN: *Michael first and foremost congratulations on signing with Michael Waltrip Racing, why don't you tell everybody what this contract means for you in the near future, just what is in store for this year?*

MM: Thank You. I will be driving in at least 30 Nextel cup races for Michael Waltrip Racing (MWR), in addition I will be driving some Busch Races as well. With Dale Jarrett retiring after the fifth race of the 2008 season, David Reuteman will be moving into the UPS car and I will be taking over the double zero car. The sponsors and MWR racing along with their investors wanted a new driver rather than just getting another driver from another team. They wanted to develop a driver to help work towards the future of that driver and our team. They want to be in this for the long haul.

NKN: *So you will be in the cup series full time after the first five races are complete?*

MM: Correct. Nothing could change this process other than my performance or if I make an error with the NASCAR licensing process, which I do not see happening.

NKN: *Who will be your sponsor for the 00 car? Will that change over this past year?*

MM: That is in process for the 00 car. The 55 car will still be the NAPA car and the 44 car will still be sponsored by UPS. We are very close to a new sponsorship for the 00 car for the up coming season. That announcement is forthcoming.

NKN: *Who will be your crew chief?*

MM: TBD for the Cup car, but for the Busch series car it will be Butch Hilton. Butch has a great deal of experience with a variety of different drivers in the Busch series; he is a proven winner and knows how to win in the Busch Series.

In 2005, Michael became the first driver since Mario Andretti in 1975 to run both a major open-wheel race and a sports-car race in the same weekend when he competed in the Rolex Sports Car Series and in a RocketSports Champ Car. He also won the 2007 ARCA Series Rookie of the Year title as well as the Stewart Warner Lap Leader Award. An avid simulation racer, Michael spends, on average, four hours a day driving a computer-racing simulator. — nascar.com

NKN: *So, you have not had any real opportunity to get to know your crew chief yet? Do you think that will be an issue or does the fact that you will not race the first five races give you some time to bond?*

MM: Once we have named the crew chief he and I will have a good bit of time to become accustomed to each other and get to know one another. We will be doing a significant amount of work prior to our first race together. So I do not think "bonding" will be much of an issue.

NKN: *So the Toyota number 00; sponsored by as yet an unnamed primary sponsor, do we know who the associate sponsorships will be?*

MM: We're not real sure yet, it may be multiple smaller associate sponsors for a limited number of races. It may vary from race to race for a period of time; possibly some of Toyota's suppliers.

NKN: *So the goal will be to try and win some races and represent a sponsor. Just what is going to be required of you outside of the track to represent your sponsor? Do you know yet?*

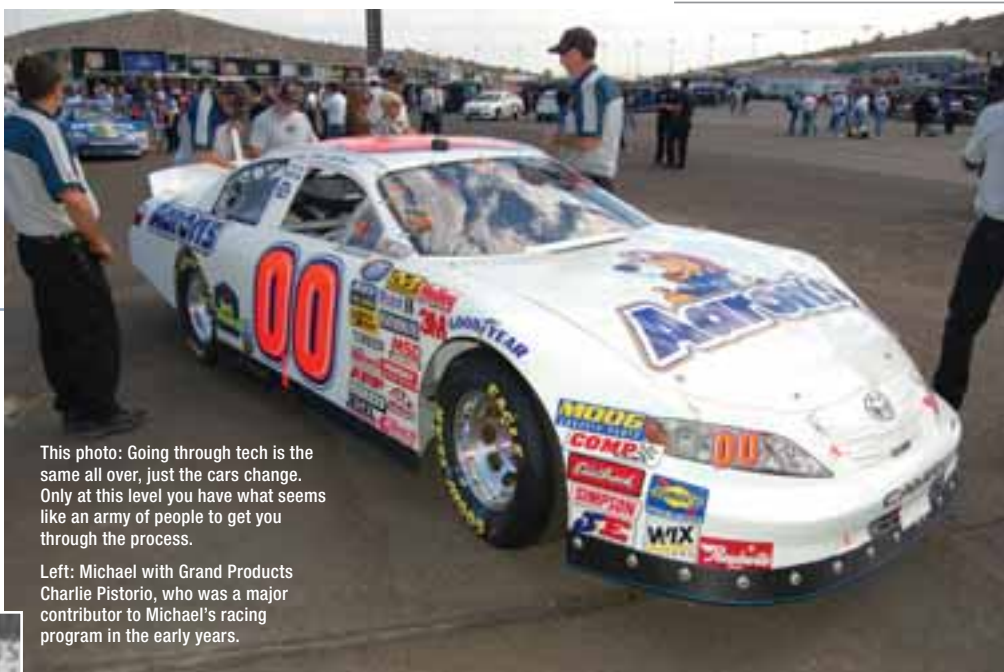


At the line Texas Motor Speedway.

MM: Providing results on the track is my primary objective. And, I will be doing 'Meet and Greets' with the fans and helping the sponsors to gain some recognition through the car and the NASCAR affiliation. I will be building relationships and working to cement the sponsor's relationship into the NASCAR family. The key will be, build a relationship with the fans and a positive link between the fans and our sponsors.

NKN: So how much opportunity have you gotten to test and which cars are you going to be driving?

MM: Not much. But the ARCA cars are very similar to the cup cars. The COT (Car Of Tomorrow) is new to everybody and I will have just as short of an experience deficit driving the car as the majority of the other drivers. I do not see this as much of a disadvantage over the other drivers. MWR has been developing



This photo: Going through tech is the same all over, just the cars change. Only at this level you have what seems like an army of people to get you through the process.

Left: Michael with Grand Products Charlie Pistorio, who was a major contributor to Michael's racing program in the early years.



their COT program and I will get the benefit of that knowledge through sharing information with my other team drivers and Crew Chiefs.

NKN: Lets' talk about the cars. What about the horsepower in the Cup cars, is it really that stout?

MM: Yes, the cars are very stout and the cars accelerate very well. The ARCA cars have a very stout engine package as well. There is a difference

but the difference in power is not that big between the ARCA and the Cup cars. The Cup cars have a little more power, but from the divers seat they feel very similar.

NKN: Are the cars more difficult to drive compared to what you have been driving? Just how different are the Cup and Busch cars from the ARCA car and the Craftsman Truck?

MM: There are differences. The Busch car has

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draft up on the lead car. It has allowed some of the teams with a lower level of sponsorship to be more competitive. It is not about spending buckets of money in the wind tunnel or building track specific cars, I think in the long run the COT will help the racing be better and the teams closer on the track. One positive for me is that I have fewer bad habits from the old Cup car than many other drivers who are still learning the COT. It is a positive for me. In fact it may even be an advantage.

NKN: *My observations at Phoenix were that you were like a kid in a candy store. Everything was new and you were completely enjoying the experience. It is obvious that you are serious, but you seem to be really enjoying the whole process. Michael, are you having fun or is this seem like a very high pressure job?*

a 5 inch shorter wheel base than the CUP car and the truck is longer. It is still a racecar and if you are a racecar driver you adjust very quickly. I have really enjoyed the challenge and getting up to speed in the Busch and Cup cars.

MM: I'm having a great time! The ARCA car and the series was a blast.

NKN: *Let's talk about the chassis and handling differences between the Cup and Busch cars vs the COT that you may have experienced. Just what have you learned to date?*

MM: The COT is much different, the center of gravity is higher. The aero package is less efficient, although the rear wing is more efficient than the spoiler it replaces. The car does not get through the air all that well. It punches a bigger and less efficient hole into the air. The bigger hole makes it easier to

Running well and winning made the experience that much more enjoyable. I mean we were very competitive, we had 10 poles and four wins in the ARCA series. Every driving position I have ever had has been dependent on my ability to perform. The biggest thing is keeping the hunger and competitive spirit alive. I do well in high pressure situations. If you do not have the pressure it is easy to be complacent. I think the pressure helps me perform at a higher level.

On the Grid at Las Vegas. Racing at different track in multiple series does many things for the young racer, exposes them to multiple racers and multiple tracks. Always a good thing to build experience.



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NKN: *Do you see a potential for this of just turning into a job?*

MM: No never! If it does, I think I will find something else to do. This has been my dream for the majority of my life starting around age 8 or 10. This is more of a life long dream come true for me. The things we, that is my family, many of my closest friends and I have talked about for many years are starting to come true. I do not consider this a job.

NKN: *Are you finding the COT to be more difficult to drive or do you just not have enough experience with the Car of Yesterday to really make a distinction?*

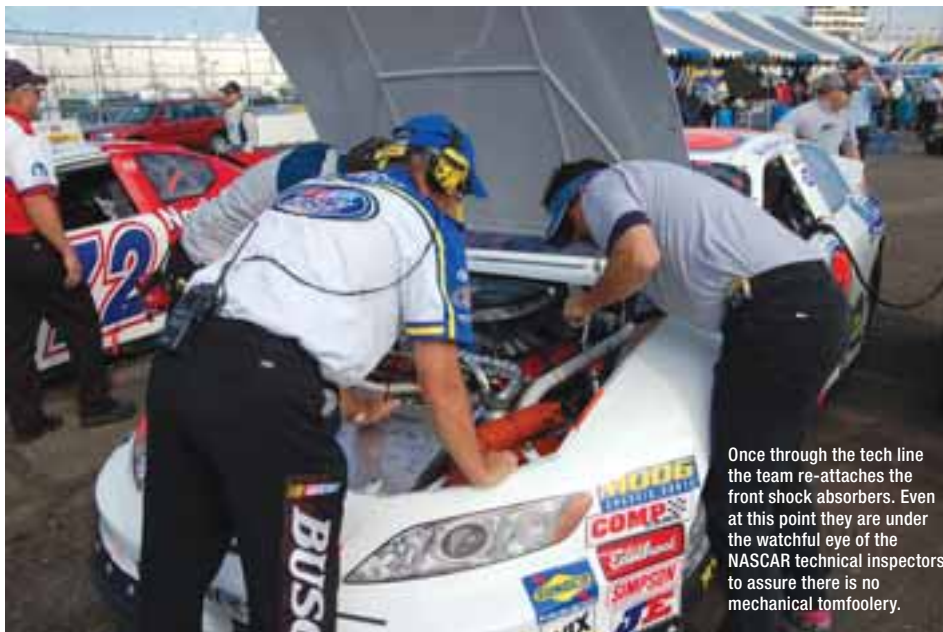
MM: I have nothing to compare to. I do not know any different by having the experience with the old car. The reality is that we have to race this car and so does everybody else.

NKN: *What about the Bush Car? Are you feeling comfortable?*

MM: I feel pretty confident in the car. MWR is coming off a win with David Reutimann at Memphis. I have a good idea of how it should feel and how the car should work. Our Busch program is very good.

NKN: From the outside this sounds like a dream come true. Could you tell how this happened? Who were the people that were responsible for helping you to get where you are now?

MM: My Mom, Dad and my brother Billy were the first and most prolific supporters. We started racing karts together as a family, then we started to sell karts to pay for the racing. I remember my first day at the kart track at seven years old in the back of Tal Crossers pickup truck sitting in the seat of the kart. From that time to now it has been a period of learning to race and developing relationships. The real turning point was driving for Greg Bell in California as a working racer. That led to a relationship with Bill Mayer through his son John. I was a driving coach for John. After a year Bill wanted to start a kart shop and we, my brother Billy and I, worked with him. Bill Mayer put me in my first big race car, a formula Renault. Then, later I was given the opportunity for a one race deal in a formula Star Mazda race at Sears Point. It was my first professional race. Scott Speed had just left the Mazda Team and Mazda was looking for someone to fill the hole. That was another opportunity for me and that led into a two year relationship with Mazda. During this time I was also working at the Bob Bondurant School as a driving instructor. It was through being an instructor at the Bondurant School that I meet Rob Finaly, who had very little race car experience. He had come to the Bondurant School to get a taste of driving a racecar. We clicked as a team. We put together a Grand Am Cup series car. That Grand AM deal developed into a Daytona Prototype series. That developed into an ARCA car opportunity. During that same period I was also given an opportunity to drive two Champ Car races.



Once through the tech line the team re-attaches the front shock absorbers. Even at this point they are under the watchful eye of the NASCAR technical inspectors to assure there is no mechanical tomfoolery.

Based on my performance in the ARCA cars I became involved with Michael Waltrip Racing. This came about because the owner of the ARCA team Eddie Sharp who had a relationship with Michael Waltrip. That was the path or the relationship trail that got me introduced to Michael Waltrip his team. It was a long road and there were many people who helped me along the way. I am very grateful to everyone who helped me.

NKN: Michael what was the path you followed to get here? What did you drive and how long

did you stay in each series?

MM: I started in karts and raced as much as possible for about ten years. That was followed by some open wheel cars the Formula Renault and Formula Mazda.

NKN: Who were the people who helped you the most? Starting at the beginning and now?

MM: My family was the founding force in my racing. My brother Billy believed in me and my ability. He sacrificed a good bit to help me a great

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Michael leads Kevin Harvick around the Texas Motor Speedway in the Busch race. This is a long way from Michael's early days of racing around the Phoenix Sprint Track.



deal. He could have done other things than help but he believed in my ability and he was there for me.

NKN: *It sounds like you moved from series to series gaining experience and learning. Which series was the most fun?*

MM: The most fun and the most beneficial to date has been the ARCA Series. The Rolex Series was fun, but the Stock car racing was so hard you were always racing; no matter where you are on the track, you have to drive very hard. The Champ Car was a great deal of fun as well the cars are very powerful and very light when compared to a stock car about half the weight and more power.

NKN: *Which series gave you the best racing and driver development experience?*

MM: The Rolex Series. The drivers have a very deep skill level. Scott Pruitt & Max Pappas are very good. The drivers are just that good. They have been there and done that and they almost know what you are thinking and react before to you

before you even think about what you are going to do next. The racing is very intense and given the length of the races you think that you would have a good deal of time to rest but it is just the opposite. You are always charging and driving hard. This was my first exposure to racing with truly professional racing drivers.

NKN: *Looking back, on the whole driving in different series what would you have done differently?*

MM: I do not think I would have changed anything. The path I took was the right one for me. I have a greater level of experience. I do not feel like this is the first time I will be driving with other professional drivers.



Although there is still time to get some grins and chuckles with the media guys. Remember it is all about relationships.

NKN: *From a process perspective, in your opinion, based on your experience, what would the best path for an aspiring racer to follow to get to the show?*

MM: First, start young, start early. Karts are a great way to start. Start local, go Regional level and then National level. Then follow your desire for the type of car you want to drive. Push yourself past the local scene. The more opportunities you get to race around the country at different tracks the better, race as much as possible.

NKN: *Let's say you are a young racer, what should you be doing to get noticed and move into a more professional series?*

MM: Racing is a big part of winning. But it is clear that you need a support group that believes in you. Build a team around you that believes in you. The team needs to believe in you and work towards the same goals. Spend time with the crew. Develop relationships with the crew. Make the crew a part of the winning. You do not win alone. Winning is a team accomplishment, especially at the higher levels.

NKN: *Michael, let's spend a bit of time talking about driving the car VS self promotion. Just how much time does a new or aspiring driver need or have to spend promoting themselves? Is winning more important than self promotion or is the promotional aspect just as important as the winning.*

MM: Tough question. Winning is what gets you

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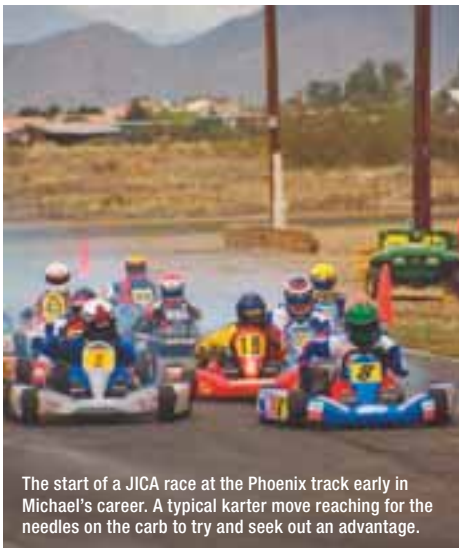
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noticed. It is even more important if you do not have a bankable name or something else that is unique about you. Winning is key. Once you are winning or running at the front all the time you need to do things that will get you noticed by the car owners. Sometimes you just have to go out and meet people and introduce yourself. Sometime you just have to be a bit aggressive off the track as well as on the track.

NKN: Michael, you will be missing the first five races of 2008. Will you still be able to compete for rookie of the year effectively or is that not as important and going for the experience or the first win?

MM: Yes. The process is designed your best 20 races. This will be a great opportunity based on the other rookies in the field. (The other rookies will be Jacques Villeneuve, Dario Franchitti, Sam Hornish Jr. and Regan Smith).



The start of a JICA race at the Phoenix track early in Michael's career. A typical karter move reaching for the needles on the carb to try and seek out an advantage.

NKN: Are you feeling any pressure to win or will the first year be all about gathering laps and learning the tracks?

MM: Yes I want to win! WMR is building a great infrastructure to support the racer. We hope to be in the position to win in our first year.

NKN: Right now who are the drivers you are looking to in order to give you the initial mentoring you will need?

MM: Dale Jarrett is a champion and he is a part of the team. He has taken the time to coach me as has Bobby Labonte during the 24 Hours of Daytona; he has been a great help. David Reuteman has been in the same position I am in currently and Michael Waltrip has given me some valuable lessons and has coached me through some issues. It is very valuable to have someone of his stature in the sport help me. All of these guys have helped me by coaching and sharing experiences and helping me not make some of the rookie mistakes that I am sure that will happen. I have a great level of resources to help me on the way.

NKN: Let's talk about the organization that Michael Waltrip has assembled at MWR. Is there a one big team feeling or are the different



teams very isolated from each other?

MM: The feeling is that we are one team with three Cup cars. Information seems to be shared with each other and Toyota is really helping with the technical resources.

NKN: It is no secret that the MWR teams struggled to qualify for races at the beginning of the season. Have you been around the team long enough to see a difference from when you first arrived or started working with the team? Have you seen a difference in the organization from when you first arrived?

MM: They have come a long way towards making the cars and the teamwork as a unit. Starting a three car team in Cup racing is a very ambitious effort.

NKN: How is MWR different than the teams you have been associated with in the past?

MM: As I have progressed the shops are bigger, the cars are better, the infrastructure to support the cars have gotten more complex. The resources are much greater than anything I have been associated with in the past. The fans see only a very small part of what it takes to get these cars to the track. The racing and the teams at the Cup level are truly amazing.

NKN: Michael it has been a real pleasure speaking with you and seeing what a strong confident young man you have become. We wish you much luck and success in the future.

MM: Thank you for taking the time to talk with me. I enjoyed the experience.

So what have we learned? The simple and concise answer is to race hard on the local level, start winning a good share of races, move on to the regional and then to the national level and learn to win there as well. Then when the time is right make the move to the larger formulas. While an over simplification and it is easy to say go out

and win, it is just what you need to accomplish. This is the method that has been followed by many karters who have the desire, passion and or the dream of being a professional racecar driver. The path that Michael followed is not so different than the karters who have preceded him in this career path, Buddy Rice, Alex Barron, Memo Gidley, and Danica Patrick, just to mention a few. The real issue is that you need a plan and you need people behind you that believe in you and your ability. Unless your family has the necessary resources, and that means the money to get you through the foundational years between karting and a professional career you will need to have a much larger support base.

Something that Michael learned very early is that it is important to be real and to be accessible to the fans. Never miss a photo opportunity.



Another thing you should have gleaned out of this conversation with Michael is that relationships with other people are a critical component of the success of a young racecar driver. It has been said many times winning is not a solitary accomplishment. It takes a team and the team needs to be behind the driver and the driver needs to be behind the driver; it is a team accomplishment.

NKN