

Race/Boy, 15, killed while driving pickup at racetrack event

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school freshman was permitted to race as part of a spectator event — more than 500 spectators paying \$8 each watched the field of 11 cars compete for a purse of about \$200 — nearly a year before he could have earned a driver's license.

Stan Hilgendorf, a driver's education instructor at Badger High School in Lake Geneva, said he has watched races at Lake Geneva Raceway and cannot imagine a child that young capable of handling the pressure.

"I don't think a 15-year-old kid should be driving at a racetrack," Hilgendorf said. "That's starting them awfully young."

Images of Victory

But children captivated by images of victory in the winner's circle face many enticements — and few obstacles — to try their hand at managing the speed and power of Wisconsin's estimated 35 to 40 racetracks.

NASCAR, the national sanctioning body responsible for such marquee events as the Daytona 500, prohibits any driver younger than 16.

NASCAR spokesman John Griffin said that although drivers must be at least 16 for NASCAR events, the Lake Geneva track is not a NASCAR track.

Griffin said racing experience, or "seat time," is more important than age. But some youngsters who start go-carting at age 7 or younger think they're ready for major races at age 14.

"We've just got to set a minimum somewhere," he said.

Some of racing's brightest stars are hyped as former child prodigies of the sport.

Juan Montoya, who won the Indianapolis 500 last week and also captured Monday's running of the Miller Lite 225 in West Allis, is said to have started racing go-carts when he was just 5 years old.

While Wisconsin recently moved to toughen its driver's education requirements, the state does not regulate racetracks or restrict driving privileges for children on private property.

"It's not a public safety issue. It's a personal safety issue," said Janet Huggins, a licensing supervisor for the state Department of Transportation.

Starting Young

For kids enchanted with race cars, the opportunities to start early are many.

Lake Geneva Raceway manager Kevin Dawson said youngsters often begin racing go-carts at age 7 or younger. If they develop enough skills, he said, those kids can enter regular car races as young as 14.

Dawson described James, known as "Jimmy" to family and friends, as an accomplished racer who was as talented as competitors in their 20s or 30s.

"He was certainly better able to handle that car than a 35-year-old rookie," Dawson said.

Jimmy entered his first "sport truck" race earlier this season and had competed in four or five races before the weekend tragedy. His father purchased the second-hand Ford pickup from another racer.

Jimmy, the older brother of two sisters, also enjoyed football, wrestling and other sports at Woodstock High School. But it was racing that he loved most.

Olson, 35, said he started racing cars with his son a few years ago. Although he plans to give it up now that his son is gone, he understands the thrill.

"When you're in the driver's seat, you're in control of the team," Olson said. "You're like the quarterback."

Cause of Crash Unknown

Dawson said officials are still trying to determine why Jimmy's vehicle smashed into a wall about 10:20 p.m. Friday as he was heading into the final turn of the race — near the back of the pack.

Jimmy's father and most of the other drivers already had finished the race.

Raceway manager Dawson said he is confident the driver's age had nothing to do with the mishap. He also believes that Jimmy's truck was going no more than 35 mph when it crashed. "We're all scratching our heads," he said.

It was the first fatality at the Lake Geneva track in at least 15 years.

Lake Geneva police said Monday they had found no evidence of wrongdoing in the circumstances leading to the weekend racetrack death.

The boy's father said he, too, was comfortable that the crash was an accident that could've happened to any driver, regardless of age.

"Whether they're 15 or they're 40, it's just unfortunate," he said. "He was an awesome kid, and he understood the dangers."