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Birth of a Star? Maybe

The All-American Driver Challenge graduates a good one.



BEST OF THE BUNCH:

The top 10 drivers in the All-American Driver Challenge assembled for a group portrait.

By Bones Bourcier

The idea is not unique: Take a flock of hungry young racers, lump 'em together in a run-off, pick a winner. Happens all the time in this create-a-star motorsports era. But in terms of execution, it's hard to imagine a talent search done better than the All-American Driver Challenge, conducted this past February and March.

It wasn't the prize—a funded season in a USAC Ford Focus midget, with a team based in the heart of NASCAR country—but the details that made the AADC such a neat package. Conceived by USAC team owner and Calico Coatings proprietor Tracy Trotter, and organized by energetic Brian Moates, the program left little to chance. Several participants said they'd been through similar competitions, but none this thorough.

Hundreds of drivers entered at select karting facilities, paid a fee, and provided documentation of their lap times; the top 10 challengers from 10 regions advanced to the semi-finals at Andretti Indoor Karting, outside Atlanta. Across two days there, the field of 100 was first narrowed to 24 in a series of road-course races. Next, three oval-track

events and a tough judging process—weighing speed, technical feedback, communication, fitness, character, and mental toughness—whittled that group down to 10. Some had already turned laps in cars ranging from mini-stocks to sprinters; some were simply fast, accomplished karters.

The finalists reconvened at North Carolina's Hickory Motor Speedway, where they strapped on Trotter's Focus midget for a day of timed, observed runs.

To form a composite picture of each contestant, the judging staff was diverse: In addition to car owner Trotter and crew chief Gary Huffman, there were car builder Bob East, whose Beast creations dominate USAC's open-wheel divisions; Rick Benjamin of SPEED TV, a broadcaster steeped in short-track knowledge; Robbie Ray, USAC's 2005 Focus midget national champion; and even this *Speedway Illustrated* editor-at-large. (Full disclosure: this was a non-paying, though rewarding gig.)

East, in particular, provided instant credibility, having closely mentored the likes of Jeff Gordon, Tony Stewart, Jason Leffler, and Kasey Kahne. His coaching was a delight to behold; East prodded, suggested, offered criticism, and without exception made the youngsters faster.

The Hickory finals were basic. In a morning session, each driver followed veteran open-wheeler Brad Noffsinger on an acclimation run; then each was given eight solo laps, perfect for seeing who could find speed quickly without getting over his or her head. In the afternoon came a more intense session in which each driver did 10 laps, had a short debrief with East and Ray, then ran 10 more.

In the end, the star of the show was 22-year-old Bradley Reithmeyer of Hutto, Texas. A late model champ, Reithmeyer had never driven an upright open-wheel car, but that hardly showed. After posting some of the morning's quickest times, he'd decided the car had "a half-second left in it." And he almost found it, improving in the afternoon by a staggering four-tenths. The judges were suitably wowed.

"Bradley showed an extraordinary amount of talent," said East. "I was impressed how he dug down deep and performed when it counted."

The clincher came when the quiet, serious Texas A&M senior removed his helmet and, unaware that he'd just set a fast time, said confidently, "I think I could still find another tenth, probably two."

The job was his.

The Challenge certainly lived up to its goal of providing a boost to a deserving kid. Consider this: Back in Texas, Reithmeyer's late model sat race-ready, but money woes were jeopardizing his season. As he left Hickory, he was already figuring out how to transfer schools, and looking into living arrangements in North Carolina. One gets the feeling he might be there awhile. ☞



POSTSCRIPT: When the 2006 USAC Ford Focus Midget Carolina/Virginia series opened in Kenly, North Carolina, Bradley Reithmeyer led every lap of the feature. Watch this kid.