

Can't a kid get a break these days? If you're 18 year old Derek Ramstrom, the answer to that question is "not yet."

Derek has been a racer for more than two-thirds of his life. He has won seventeen championships in eleven years. Not bad for a kid who hasn't even graduated from high school yet.

Like anything to do with Derek's racing, it all starts with his family. His grandfather, the late Bob Ramstrom, raced stock cars and dragsters. Derek's father, Rick, also followed racing but unlike his father, Rick never got behind the wheel of a race car. "I was always too busy working," Rick says. "I had my own business at 21 so now I'm Derek's biggest promoter and sponsor."

"My family has played a major role in my success" says Derek. My dad has supported me since day one and has always believed I could race. He also pays all the bills and keeps things going in the right direction. My Aunt Cherrie handles public relations and has always supported me on and off the race track. My Uncle Jay is the tire man and helps us around the shop during the week."

Derek's mother, Maureen, cheers from the sidelines. "I have to say, it's pretty scary, my heart races" she says about watching her son race. "And it really doesn't get any easier."

The youngest Ramstrom's chance behind the wheel of a race car came at an early age. "I was five years old" Ramstrom says. "We were looking at a quarter midget and my father said, 'Do you want to try these?' and I was like 'Sure, why not' and we went from there."

Derek began driving Quarter Midgets at the "Little T" at Thompson Speedway. "I loved it" Derek says of his first time behind the wheel. "It seemed natural. It was just something that I was born to do. It kind of came to me."

In 1998, his second year in racing, Derek won the Thompson Speedway Quarter Midgets Series, the Quarter Midgets Northeast Regional Series, and the Silver City Championship. He continued as champion in all three of those divisions until 2003 when he raced nationwide and became the Quarter Midget National Series Champion. In 2004, he captured the national title once again.

A handful of 2004 starts in the Allison Legacy Series turned into a full-time run in 2005. He finished that rookie year with three wins and a third place in season points.

2006 marked Derek's first year in full-sized competition, racing with the Pro All-Stars Series Outlaw Late Model Division. Split into two divisions that year, Ramstrom competed in both the Central (New Hampshire) and North (Maine) Divisions, winning the first Central Division race at Canaan Fair Speedway in July. Derek finished the year with second place points in the Central Division and third in the North Division. The combined points finishes made him the PASS Outlaw Combo Series Champion at just 14 years old. There were also starts in both PASS North and South competition.

The success in Pro Stocks was a big deal. "For a 14 year old to be running and winning in Pro Stocks, that is unheard of" says Ramstrom. "I was actually driving the car and not smashing into the wall. When we won the championship our first year, that's when our racing started to kick it up a notch. When I was 10-ish and we were just running small cars still, it was just a hobby. Now it's not a hobby, it's part of my life."

In 2007 the #35 team moved full-time to PASS North competition. A seventh place finish in final points showed that Ramstrom could compete with the bigger cars as well as he did with quarter midgets and Allison Legacy cars.

For the 2008 season, Ramstrom Racing returned to the track where Derek's racing started. "Racing at Thompson was something my father and I had in our minds from the start of my racing career" says Ramstrom. At the start of the 2008 season I was finally old enough to run at Thompson and we made the decision to build a new car and see how it went. Only being twenty minutes away from our home, Thompson was very convenient for us. We also wanted to build a strong fan base around our home track and running a Pro Stock was the right idea."

Derek's mom, Maureen Ramstrom, said at the beginning of the season that "having Derek win will build up his fan base and, hopefully, that will help us with some sponsorship." She was at least partially right in her prediction.

Running a full schedule of Thompson Pro Stocks yielded four wins, a fifth place points finish and a Most Popular Driver award. It also got Derek lots of press and new fans. "Thompson Speedway opened in 1940 and Derek, I believe, is the youngest winner the track has ever had," says track owner Don Hoenig. "Derek's

running in a good, competitive division. He's competing against good drivers. They're impressed with him so far. And he's a nice kid, too!"

The highlight of Derek's 2008 season and career, however, came at the end of July at All Star Speedway in New Hampshire. At 16 years old, Derek became the youngest winner in PASS North competition, beating series veterans and former champions Mike and Ben Rowe and Johnny Clark.

"We just paced ourselves" said Ramstrom after the race. "I started 16th and just worked my way up through the pack. We tried a late pit strategy and it turned out good. I was using my head and pacing myself. I didn't want to get in any wrecks and smash the car up. I was getting really nervous, but I knew that I had to keep calm and get a good start. To hold off Mike and Ben Rowe was great" said Ramstrom.

Just a few days after the win, Derek took the road test for his driver's license. What would normally be a milestone for other teenagers seemed a mere formality for a kid who had raced at over 100 miles per hour during the previous two years.

The road test was one of several times when Derek's age presented unique challenges for the racer. Another was having to wait for his sister to drive him home after his first win at Thompson Speedway.

Still in high school, Derek balances his schooling with his racing. "I haven't missed much school" he says. "I might miss a Friday here and there, but it doesn't affect school. The kids all seem to like it. A lot of my classmates don't understand the concept of racing. Most of them are not aware of the work it takes to be a successful race car driver. They think you get in the car and push the gas. A couple of my friends are interested in racing and help me on occasion. The kids seem to be pretty impressed now, though, especially since I've been winning and my name has been out there."

After seventh place PASS North points finishes in 2007 and 2008, 2009 brings more of the same for the young racer. "Our schedule for the 2009 season has been the same as 2008" says Ramstrom. "We run Thompson weekly and run the PASS North Tour with some PASS South Tour races." The schedule is what his family and some smaller sponsors can afford.

Already there are both wins and top finishes for the #35 team.

The biggest change in 2009, though, has come from the driver himself. "On the racetrack I've definitely been more aggressive," Ramstrom says. "I've never been that. I've always been the laid-back, patient guy. I'm ready to be more aggressive. I have to learn how to block more and do the tricks that people do on me. Being the patient, laid-back guy works to an extent, but as you could tell in past races I could have been way more aggressive. I've never been an aggressive type in racing."

Mike Grecci, developmental director for DEI, agrees with Derek's change toward being more aggressive. "The kid is pretty impressive," Grecci said. "He handles himself well, speaks well and drives well. In this deal, though, it's not just driving talent, it's the whole deal. I am impressed with him off and on the racetrack. He's actually probably been a little bit too nice on the track though."

The future for Derek Ramstrom, while promising, is not etched in stone. "It would be excellent to run in Nationwide or Cup" says Ramstrom. "That's my destination, but it's hard. You have to have your name out there, you have to be connected to the right people and you need a lot of money. We'll just keep getting more experience, more exposure and just winning. I'll keep trying to make it big until I get too old."

Thankfully, the kid seems to have a lot of years left to get there.