

Sunday, June 25, 2006

## RACE TEAM NEEDS MONEY TO FUEL ITS DREAM

### FATHER / SON RACING OPERATION ISN'T WILLING TO GO BROKE GOING FOR BROKE

By: Brian Louis (JOURNAL REPORTER)

The 800 race fans at Friendship Motor Speedway in Elkin on a recent Friday night were at the track for fun and entertainment.

But for Ryan Robertson, a 20-year-old driver in the pits below the stands and the cars and trucks that lined the fence around the track, the races were serious business. The driver of the No. 29 car wants to reach the top echelon of stock-car racing.

His quest will not be easy: What he needs is a sponsor that will inject tens of thousands of dollars into his family's racing operation so he can compete at tracks throughout the Southeast. The goal is for Ryan to catch the eye of a major NASCAR race team and get signed on as a developmental driver, said Mike Robertson, Ryan's father.

"We need to find some major sponsors, and we will," Mike said in an interview at his garage in Winston-Salem.

Stock-car racing is expensive, even for racing at small, local tracks. For the Robertsons a set of tires costs \$535, a driver's uniform \$1,000 to \$2,000, and a new motor \$15,000 to \$25,000. Fuel costs \$5.50 a gallon. And those are just a few of their expenses. Fees range from \$100 to \$800 a race.

At the highest levels, companies pay millions a year to sponsor a car and driver.

That translates into big business in North Carolina. A study sponsored by the nonprofit North Carolina Motorsports Association found that the industry contributed \$5.1 billion to the state's economy in 2003.

Landing a primary sponsor is not easy. Mike, who said he has spent a lot of his own money on his son's racing career, has hired MediaFit, a marketing and advertising company based in Winston-Salem, to handle the sponsor search, so he can focus on Ryan's racing.

"This has been a major investment for me," Mike said. "I hope the return is going to be greater."

[Robertson Racing](#) bills itself as "3 Generations of Speed." Ryan is a third-generation racer. Mike is a racing veteran himself and his father, Gerald, has raced at Bowman Gray Stadium in Winston-Salem for more than 30 years. Racing is in the family's blood.

"There's just nothing else that interests us," Ryan said.

The family's interest in racing has also become a business instead of an expensive hobby. Mike said he has seen plenty of families go broke and lose everything to pay for racing. He's not going to let that happen.

"I'm not going to lose everything for his dream and mine," he said.

Both Mike and Ryan are busy off the track. Mike is a territory representative for Tucson cigarettes, which are made by Renegade Tobacco of Mocksville. Ryan attends Forsyth Technical Community College and also works part time.

Tucson sponsored the car last year, but it plans to enter the Master Settlement Agreement with the states and it had to cut its sponsorship, Mike said.

Under the settlement agreement, the major tobacco companies agreed to pay 46 states more than \$200 billion over 25 years to settle current and future health-care-cost recovery claims against the industry. The agreement, which was reached in 1998, also set advertising and marketing restrictions against the tobacco companies. Four other states settled with the big tobacco companies separately.

Mike and MediaFit think that Ryan is marketable to a company. He's young and has a clean-cut face. He's personable - and most important - he's a good driver.

Ryan has posted a good season at Friendship Motor Speedway, and he was second in points in the late-model stock division at the track as of June 16.

On a recent Friday, Ryan had a solid night with two third-place finishes and one sixth-place finish in three 25-lap races.

"Ryan's done an exceptionally good job," said Randy Myers, Friendship Motor Speedway's promoter.

According to marketing material from MediaFit, [Robertson Racing](#) is offering a primary sponsorship ranging from \$20,000 to \$40,000 for a full season. The primary sponsorship would splash the sponsor's name in a number of places on the car, including the hood and upper rear quarter panels. The sponsor would also get visibility on 65 percent of the available space on both sides of the trailer that transports Ryan's car.

A sponsor's advertising will be placed identically across all three of [Robertson Racing's](#) race cars.

A company could obtain a secondary sponsorship for \$5,000 to \$20,000. As the 2006 season progresses, sponsorship costs would be prorated based on how much of the season is left.

Mike said that it costs \$30,000 year for Ryan to race and that landing a major sponsor would allow the team to race its car throughout the Southeast in a bid to raise Ryan's profile.

Ryan does have sponsors, including Jerry Hunt Auto Sales, Leonard Cleaners, KDog Graphix, Pit-Stop Discount Tobacco and Hank Thomas Performance Parts. Mike declined to disclose details of the sponsorship arrangements.

A sponsor can gain visibility at the track with consumers and business people. Companies can also strengthen relationships with customers by inviting them to the track for races and having a driver appear at corporate functions.

But at small tracks such as the ones Ryan races on, there are no television audiences and there are not 150,000 people in the stands like at some NASCAR Nextel Cup races. The small tracks limit a sponsor's exposure, said Larry DeGaris, the director of the Center for Sports Sponsorship at James Madison University.

MediaFit has approached about 20 companies about sponsoring Ryan, including such heavyweight companies and brands as Budweiser and John Deere. It has also approached a major convenience-store chain, several regional banks and fast-food chains, a law firm, local tire and auto franchises, and several local radio and television stations. MediaFit said that the response has been good, and it hopes to land a lead sponsor within the next few weeks.

But competition for sponsors is fierce at all levels of racing, DeGaris said.

"There is no shortage of organizations looking for money," DeGaris said.

Big companies and brands such as Budweiser probably get 500 to 1,000 proposals a week, he said.

"There is a shortage of potential sponsors," DeGaris said.

Experts said that there are also plenty of Ryan Robertsons out there, too. His youth and dream of reaching the top in stock-car racing are not unique.

"There's certainly no shortage of young people, male and female, who would like to get there," DeGaris said.

Mike knows that. He also knows that his son is talented. Mike said that if he didn't think Ryan had the talent to get to the top, he wouldn't invest the money in his career.

Racing for big prize money at Ryan's level of racing is rare.

However, [Robertson Racing](#) is looking forward to an October race in Martinsville, Va. The race will pay \$25,000 to the winner. Mike said that 140 cars will show up and only 40 will qualify to race. They're hoping perhaps a scout in the stands will take notice of Ryan - and winning the \$25,000 wouldn't be bad either.

CAPTION: Ryan Roberston wants a racing career, and he'll need sponsorship help.