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# Dirt Track DREAMS

Can two young, first-generation racers  
break into high-stakes sprint car racing?

by AVERY GREGURICH | photography by KATHRYN GAMBLE

McKenna Haase and Chris Martin couldn't be more different. She is petite, pink, and effusive; he is big, boyish, and taciturn. But the two teenagers are each in full-throttle pursuit of oval-track glory. Standing in the infield at Knoxville Raceway, they're both still lit up after a long night of competition.



**F**or a while last year, the best place to see sprint car racing on Saturdays in Knoxville was from a barstool at the Turn 1 Tavern. Preferably from a barstool facing Lincoln Street, the town's main drag to and from the Knoxville Raceway. For the first time in the Raceway's 62 years, the season opened with three consecutive weeks of rainouts.

Through the window at the Turn 1, bar patrons watched a howling parade of multicolor trailers tear out of the "Sprint Car Capital of the World." The winged machines inside were still polished, unsoiled by the retentive Iowa dirt. The truck drivers, the racers, the fans, and surely even the cars were disappointed.

The rigs hauling racers McKenna Haase and Chris Martin seemed to crawl away. For the two young drivers, the rainouts were excruciating. Postponing the beginning of their second season felt like stalling as soon as they'd crossed the starting line. On their trek to becoming professionals, only the rain in 2015 slowed the two Iowans down.

But it didn't slow them down much.

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*"He said,  
'What are you without racing?'"*  
*"I said, 'Dead.'"*  
*- McKenna Haase*

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A day before delivering her Carlisle High School valedictorian speech, Haase became the first woman ever to win a feature race at the Knoxville Raceway. Her win received coverage from ESPN and local media outlets alike. She picked up another win a few races later and finished the year at fourth place in the points standings.

Martin won his first feature in the Midwest last July at the Bloomfield Speedway in Bloomfield. He went on to race in the Knoxville Nationals and finish the season at 20th in the points standings.

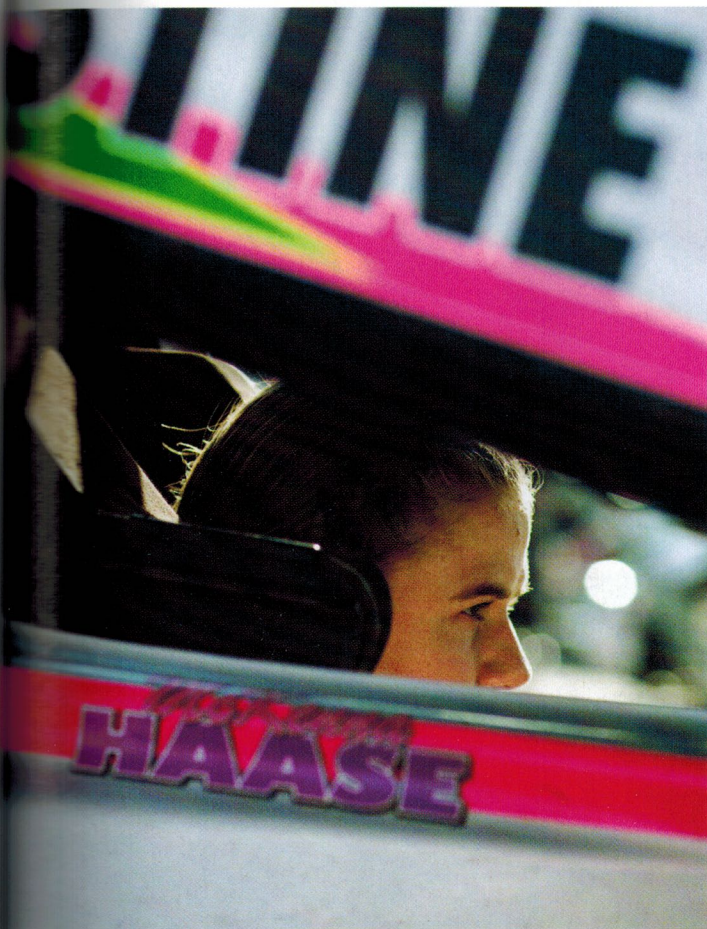
## THE ROAD TO KNOXVILLE

Many of Iowa's racers begin by racing go-karts. They can start as early as 4 years old on dirt tracks like the Newton Karting Klub (28 miles from Knoxville) and English Creek Speedway (11 miles from Knoxville). Or they race on asphalt at tracks like the Slideways Karting Center (less than a mile and a half from the raceway). At Slideways, the karts are even shaped to look like sprint cars, wings and all.

Martin started at Newton; Haase at Slideways.



Toddlers, start your engines. Martin and Haase didn't begin racing quite that early in life; it just seems that way. Haase's outlaw kart — a miniature version of a sprint car, complete with aerodynamic wings — seemed almost as small as its diminutive driver.



Haase, in her car but not yet her helmet, visualizes a race before it begins. She says her special precompetition rituals and reciting the Racer's Prayer help her focus.



"They used to call him 'Iceman,'" says Stacy Martin about her single-minded son's cool concentration on and off the track.

From karts, racers progress to mini sprints, junior sprints, micro sprints, or outlaw karts. Mini sprints are just what they sound like: miniature versions of full-size sprint cars with smaller motors. Outlaw karts are sprint-car-styled go-karts with smaller engines than the mini sprints.

Martin went from go-karts to junior sprints, junior sprints to micro sprints, micro sprints to the real thing; Haase from outlaw karts to micro sprints to sprints. They raced against each other constantly. She actually drove Martin's old micro sprint car when he got a new one.

They ran their micro sprints wherever they could. Martin ran tracks across the Midwest and in Texas and Oklahoma. Haase raced seven tracks in 10 states.

"It wasn't the distance that was hard; it was the frequency," she says. "We did 30 to 40-plus shows a year."

On a wall in a classroom at Carlisle High is an autographed trading card of her in a box stock car. She gave it to her teacher her freshman year. Now there is another card: Haase's gray and pink number 55 sprint car tearing around the track.

## AN EARLY START

Martin just graduated from Ankeny High School. When he was a grade-schooler, he went to the Newton Karting Klub to watch one weekend. The next spring he was out on the track in a kart of his own. It's been full throttle ever since.

"Racing has consumed my life," he says in a slow drawl. "I never stop thinking about it. Every day I think about how I want to do better."

His mother, Stacey, says it's always been so.

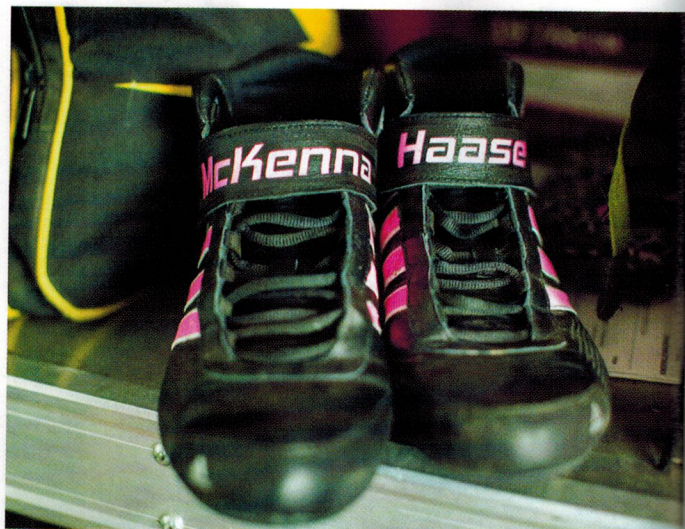
"When he was little, once he'd get strapped in the car, it was straight ahead, tunnel vision," she says. "Most little boys were pretty wound up. They used to call him 'Iceman.'"

Haase says, "The greatest thing about being a race car driver is that you can fly before you get to heaven.

"Life is bigger on the race track," she adds.

In third grade she chanced to meet big-time sprint car racer Kasey Kahne in a Tennessee shopping mall. Right then and there, she wanted to be a racer.

Her parents, Kevin and Kelly Haase, "hated everything about it," she says. "It was absolutely not an option." That



changed one night after a race at English Creek. The crowd was leaving, but the lights were still on. The young driver took a few laps in a borrowed car while her father watched.

After that it seemed Kevin Haase had no choice. He's now crew chief for Team Haase, learning both the sport and business of sprint car racing right along with his daughter. From marketing to merchandising to her own driver-development company, McKenna Haase lives her life entirely inside racing.

So when a car crashes, everything is at stake.

## CRASH COURSE

In their first full seasons in sprint cars, Haase and Martin both crashed.

In Martin's first sprint car race in California, his car flipped completely off the track. The raceway didn't have a fence, and the crash "killed the car," totaling it.

His mother and his brother, Cameron, were in the stands that night. But before the car had even stopped flipping, Stacey received a text message from her daughter, who was watching the streaming video of the race back in Indiana. She had a clear view of the crash that Stacey couldn't see from the grandstands.

"I just kept on flipping and flipping. It rang my bell pretty good," the young driver says. "You just have to check yourself over, make sure you are in the same place, that your arms are still working, and then look at the car."

On June 21, 2014, Haase clipped another car on the third turn and flipped several times through the air. When



"I'm not much of a hair-and-makeup person," claims Haase. Nevertheless, she takes all opportunities to accentuate the feminine. Almost everything she owns wears pink, including her car. Spangles and bows abound. A miniature mechanic's wrench adorns her finger. Her fans love the girl-power image and gritty-is-glamorous message.



her hanging with his buddies in his semitruck-  
race trailer or tinkering with his two cars (he  
in both the 360 and 410 classes), Martin is  
tly the kind of laconic gearhead you'd expect to  
racing. But he's also an outsider: Like Haase, he  
e first in his family to race and found his passion  
s own. Haase's and Martin's sometimes-reluctant  
nts were later converts. Martin says he'll go into  
anical engineering if a driving career eludes him.

she landed, her car was buried so deeply beneath two other cars that her father left the scene because he couldn't see his daughter's car.

The result: a serious concussion and a ruined car.

She was out for four weeks and had to visit her neuropsychologist frequently. He's not much of a racing fan.

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*"I just kept on flipping and flipping. It rang my bell pretty good."*

*- Chris Martin*

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"We didn't get along very well," Haase says. "This guy is ripping on me: 'I don't know what the big deal is. It would just be taking one little piece out of your life.' I said, 'It's not one little piece: It's everything. Everything I say, do, speak, wear, touch — it's everything.'"

"He said, 'What are you without racing?'"

"I said, 'Dead.'"

It's still not easy for Martin's and Haase's parents. Kelly Haase prays for rain every week. She goes to races but can't bear to watch. "She just reads books in the truck," her daughter says.

Martin's parents, Richard and Stacey, have accepted his choice somewhat. "But still, as soon as I see a crash, I want to pack up and go home," says Stacey.

## COUNTING THE COST

Stacey Martin once asked NASCAR driver Kevin Harvick for advice about what she should do to help her son start his career.

"Get him some golf clubs," he said.

"The good old days aren't there anymore," she says. "It's just too expensive, which is unfortunate because you are limiting who can get started." The golden days of "run what you bring" are gone.

"If you want fast, you have to buy it," her son says.

There are three classes of sprint cars based on the size of the engines: 305, 360, and 410.

"To put a 410 motor out on the race track, you are looking at \$60,000, minimum," says Joanne Cram, owner and pit crew chief of Beaver Motorsports.

"That motor needs a rebuild every 10 to 14 races," she adds, at a cost of \$7,000 to \$10,000.

Even a 305 motor costs \$10,000 to \$20,000. Not to mention the cost of the rest of the car, tires, the expense to run the truck to haul it all, and pit crew pay — although many of the crew are unpaid family members.



“Half the teams at Knoxville have one car, one engine, and they have to scramble after that,” says Eric Arnold, a track historian for the Knoxville Raceway. “Some teams have multiples — usually the ones with sponsorships.”

“At Knoxville, there are \$30,000 teams and million-dollar teams,” Haase says. All the racers are competing for the same modest payout on a typical Saturday night. A 410-class feature victory earns \$3,000; a 305 earns \$400. But at a few shows a year, like the Knoxville Nationals in August (see “The Knoxville Nationals”, page 31), a feature victory can make a successful season.

Making a living under such conditions is daunting, but Martin and Haase dream of racing forever.

## WHAT'S AROUND THE CORNER?

Some drivers get their start in sprint cars and move on: NASCAR legend Jeff Gordon raced sprint cars at Knoxville at age 15. Kasey Kahne, Tony Stewart, and up-and-comer Kyle Larson all raced at Knoxville at the start of their careers.

Others — Terry McCarl, Donny Schatz, and Mark Dobmeier among them — have been racing as World of Outlaws sprint car drivers their entire careers and make a living doing it. That's the path Martin and Haase want to take.

In spite of its name, World of Outlaws is the official sprint car professional sport organization. It sponsors an annual racing tour — nearly 100 races in up to 25 states



Sprint car numbers are assigned by drivers, so Martin runs two number 44 cars. Racing is a considerable investment: A single sprint car engine can cost up to \$60,000. Underwriting from sponsors such as those emblazoned on the car's wings helps. (So do the wings themselves, which aid traction and cornering.) Then there are the winnings: Professionals in the sport compete for a total of \$6 million per season.





Haase's car 55, with standout pink accents, roars down the straights, *left*.

Haase, *below left*, was a Carlisle High School valedictorian while competing full seasons. Now she's studying finance at Drake University — the better to build her brand and business as a driver.



and Canada. Racers make the tour, competing for a total of \$6 million in purse money during the season. The lure of traveling and racing against the best can be intoxicating.

“My dad and I want to try a year or two on the road and see if we are cut out for it,” Martin says. “I’ll race anywhere I have the opportunity to.”

Haase doesn’t wait for the question to finish. “I want to be a World of Outlaws sprint car driver,” she says. “It’s my main focus and goal.”

Barring that, both want to continue their schooling. “If I can’t race, I want to be a mechanical engineer,” Martin says. “It’d be awesome to be able to see the mechanics behind everything.” Haase has just finished her first year as a finance major at Drake University.

## RACE DAY RITUALS

For both drivers, race day is sacred. There are rituals.

Martin starts by climbing into his chosen pair of racing underwear.

“He’s been doing it since he started racing,” his mother admits.

Haase can’t wear green. She has to have her racing hair bow. Her gloves have to be put on a certain way.

She recites the “Racer’s Prayer” (it reads, in part: “Grant me joy within this race/help me Lord to set the pace”) before the events start and throughout race night. She found it printed on the inside of her first car. It’s been lettered on every car she’s driven since.



Admiring look  
Haase is a fav  
with spectato  
both genders.  
Her most arde  
fans are youn  
girls, who see  
as an inspirat  
and barrier b



Roll bars, a high-backed seat, and a debris screen in front of the driver help make latest-generation sprint cars safer than ever. But with engines of up to 1,000 horsepower capable of reaching 160 mph, they're also faster than ever, and wrecks and pileups are regular occurrences. Both young drivers have been involved in their share.



Sprint cars: the next generation. Newcomers Haase and Martin are keenly aware that they're joining a sport with generations-deep popularity in Iowa.

Being a woman behind the wheel brings its own challenges.

"I'm not much of a hair and makeup person, so getting my hair into a helmet was interesting. I first did a braid down the back. You can't do that; it causes bruising. You can't use bobby pins because they cause bruising," she says. "Don't do that."

"Now I do a braid down the side, pulled tight. It's flat, no bumps, and covered in lots of hair spray," she laughs.

## AFTER THE CHECKERED FLAG

As race night ends, fans and drivers file onto the gravel parking lot, ears numb and nostrils stung by the pungent smell of burnt fuel. "The races are over and the lights go out," Haase says. "You're walking away, but you can still feel it. It's electrifying."

Driving home from Knoxville, Martin and his father pull into a gas station and roll their car out of the trailer. It's around midnight or a little past. With water and a hose, they wash the accumulated dirt from the car's many creases.

They're preparing for the next race, just down the road, around the next turn, always out there but still within reach. **I**



## THE KNOXVILLE NATIONALS

### KNOXVILLE RACEWAY

624 N. Lincoln Street  
Knoxville  
knoxvillraceway.com  
641-842-5431

Sprint car season in Knoxville runs April to mid-September with races every Saturday night, weather permitting. The highlight of the season is the four-day Knoxville Nationals. The world's largest sprint car event, now in its 56th season, features 100+ teams and draws a sell-out crowd of 25,000 from across the globe.

"There is more talent at the Knoxville Nationals than at any single NASCAR or IndyCar event," says sprint car racer Chris Martin.

Drivers compete for a purse that tops \$1,000,000. This year's nationals are scheduled for Wednesday, August 10, to Saturday, August 13. Fans can purchase either single-day tickets or weekend ticket packages. The weekend also features concerts, parades, a food fair, and exhibits from local, regional, and national vendors.

*Avery Gregurich recently graduated from Drake University, where he studied magazine journalism.*

*Kathryn Gamble is a Des Moines-based photographer.*