

First Gear

BY JAMES HEINE PHOTO COURTESY MARK CARPENTER

Mark Carpenter is pursuing his dream – but still knows school comes first

It's not exactly correct to say that New England Region F Production driver Mark Carpenter was born to race, but when your namesake is the incomparable Mark Donohue, it's difficult not to become aware of the sport early in life.

"My father introduced me to motorsports at a very young age," Carpenter explains. "He named me after Mark Donohue, who is his favorite driver of all time."

James Carpenter, his dad, owned a Datsun 240Z that he used for track days and time trials, Carpenter recalls. As a boy, he often accompanied his father to sports car events and NASCAR races.

"He always wanted to race in the SCCA; so I knew about the Club a long time before I actually became a member," Carpenter says.

An Eagle Scout and a student at the University of North Carolina's William States Lee College of Engineering in Charlotte, Carpenter, 22, is currently an intern at GGS Information Services in York, Pa., where he works in the company's technical publications division.

Carpenter began his motorsports career as a 16-year-old autocrosser. Shortly after high school graduation in 2003, he enrolled in a Skip Barber course. In 2005, he obtained his competition license and began racing an ITA Acura in East Coast events. At midyear last season, he moved to F Production, where he finished second in the 2006 NEDiv standings.

"Of course, I love speed," he says, "but for me, I really love the challenge the sport presents. In so many ways you are challenged every weekend, and the reward – winning – makes it feel unbelievable."

ITA was a good place to begin, Carpenter adds. In 13 races during 2005 and 2006, he recorded two wins, a pole and seven top-five finishes. He also recorded a top-10 finish at the 2005 ARRC and set a lap record at VIRginia International Raceway.

"We DNF'd at the Runoffs last year because of a broken axle," Carpenter says about his first trip to National



Championship Runoffs at Hartland Park Topeka in Topeka, Kan.

"Through the SCCA, I have really learned to respect my fellow competitors, on and off the track," he says. "As a young guy, it's not easy to come right in and expect them to respect you. You have to earn it. But the reward of running clean and predictable on the track is that you gain the respect of your competitors, and that is pretty big to me."

Carpenter also relishes the camaraderie. "A lot of the drivers in IT helped me out a ton when I first got into wheel-to-wheel racing," he explains. "I've been amazed at how helpful people were to me my first season."

Among his IT and FP colleagues, Anthony Serra and Greg Amy have been especially helpful, Carpenter adds. "Anthony Serra has been a mentor to me. He helped me put together my IT car, and I have been picking his brain ever since about a lot of things in racing. Greg Amy has helped me out a lot as well. His experience in the sport has helped me learn things before I make mistakes as a young driver."

Serra points to Carpenter as a top-of-the-line young racer. "He is a great young man," says the 2004 ITA champ. "He is well-spoken. He listens, and he takes instruction well."

Carpenter also displays another important trait, Serra adds: "I've never seen him upset at the racetrack."

Mark Carpenter has been going to the track since he was little, and now he finds himself behind the wheel of a race car. His ultimate goal is to race professionally, but he recognizes the importance of getting his degree first.

Despite his enthusiasm and the encouragement of his colleagues, Carpenter eventually confronted the dilemma faced by many young racers. "I competed in Improved Touring until mid-2006, when I ran out of money and sold my car," he says.

About the same time, his uncle, Paul Kilker, the president of GGS, threw him a lifeline, Carpenter acknowledges. "He and I have been very close my whole life, and we always talked about racing cars sponsored by his company. About a year and a half ago that came true. We entered into a partnership to go National racing."

He is thankful not only for the lifeline provided by his uncle, but also for his GGS coworkers, Carpenter adds. Several make up the core of his crew. "I couldn't do it without them," he says.

Trying to balance the demands of school against those of a racing career isn't easy, Carpenter notes. Both demand discipline and a level of commitment.

"My goals in the next few years are first of all to graduate with a degree," he says. "Meanwhile, I am pursuing a professional career in racing. It has always been a dream of mine...but I am also realistic about my future. No matter what, I want to have a career in motorsports."

His dad approves, Carpenter adds. "My father enjoys it a lot, sometimes I think even more than I do. I know this was always a dream of his, and he gets tickled to death seeing me out there."