

Success at Thomas County Speedway springboards racer

From Indycar.com

From proving himself on tracks such as the Thomas County Speedway to graduating to the hallowed grounds of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Geoff Dodge hopes to follow the path of racing legends such as Johnny Rutherford, Tom Sneva, Rick Mears and A.J. Foyt as he advances his career.

The 22-year-old grew up in Colorado Springs, Colo., watching his father Dick drive sprint cars and compete in the Pikes Peak Hill Climb. He also watched the Indianapolis 500 on television, dreaming of the day he would be among the 33 starters.

"Indy became a goal because it was Dad's goal," Dodge said. "We'd sit around every May and watch what was going on at the Speedway, so it was an interest of his that got passed along. Through my own paying attention to what was going on at the Speedway from back home in Colorado, that's where I picked up on guys like Rick Mears and Tom Sneva."

At 14, Dodge convinced his parents to allow him to embark on his own racing career.

"My dad said if I got all As and a B, and could pay for half of it, then we could go karting," Dodge said. "So I went down and became an employee of Taco Bell because they would hire me that young, and started working, and saved some money, and got my grades where they needed to be. And so at that point, my dad came through and said we'll buy a go-kart."

Dodge began racing go-karts, eventually finishing 16th in the SuperKarts USA world finals in 2001 before taking the next step on this journey and climbing into a 360 sprint car. He spent the next four years racing sprint cars throughout the Midwest and Rocky Mountains, seeking out tougher competition on his drive to advance his career.

"The local sprint car scene was pretty much done," Dodge said. "We're a low-budget operation, and it would be cool if we could travel

60 to 100 miles to all of our races, but here we are driving from Colorado Springs to places like Billings, Montana for a two-night show. Every weekend you're on the road somewhere."

"I've always had the mentality to keep pushing yourself, keep moving up and keep getting against tougher guys and keep going to new places. That evolved into our sprint car program where we traveled to Kansas and Nebraska more than anywhere because there was tougher competition there."

The road took him to the Thomas County Speedway in 2003 and 2004 where he recorded two top-10 finishes in three starts before eventually leading in 2005 to one of the biggest sprint car events in the country, the Knoxville Nationals.

For 45 years, the top sprint car drivers in the country have descended on the sleepy Iowatown for four days in August. Dodge faced off against 124 other drivers. It was his first time in a 410 sprint car.

While preparing for the biggest event in his brief racing career, Dodge heard about a new program between Knoxville Raceway and the Indy Racing League. "The Fast Track to Indy Rookie of the Year" would reward the highest-finishing rookie at Knoxville with a chance to compete in the Indy Racing League's ladder series, the Indy Pro Series, in 2006 - just one step from the Indianapolis 500.

"Your first inclination, because at that point we had already decided to run Knoxville, at that point my heart jumped like, 'Whoa, yeah,'" Dodge said. "But then reality sets in, 'Come on, Geoff. Every rookie from Pennsylvania to California is going to say this is my big chance to try to take a swing at Indy.' I had to settle down, get back to the plan and race for today, run as good as I could."

In preliminary action, Dodge finished third in his heat and then 15th in the A feature. That qualified him for the C Feature.

"We went and did our thing and raced as hard as we could, and (Sunday) afternoon we looked at where we lined up and we thought, 'Man, we've got a shot at this thing,'" he said.

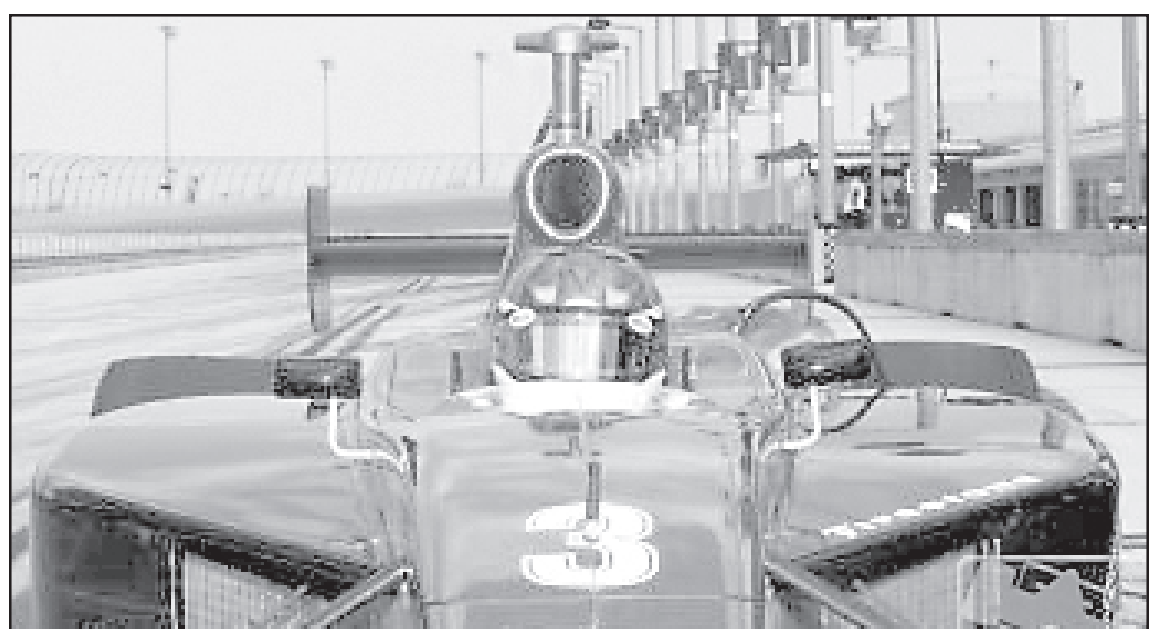
Dodge's 14th-place effort in the C Feature gave him the points necessary to clinch the "Fast Track to Indy" title.

Since then, Dodge's focus has been preparing for his debut in the Indy Pro Series. The series runs single-seat, open-cockpit cars that race about 30 mph slower than the cars used in the Indianapolis 500.

He passed his rookie test last September under the watchful eyes of Mears, a four-time Indianapolis 500 winner, and he's tested twice since. Dodge's deal will put him on the track at the series' six oval race, including the Freedom 100 at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway two days before the 90th Indianapolis 500 on May 28.

"Indy was something that I dreamed about as a kid but honestly never thought I'd ever have a chance to make an attempt at it," Dodge said. "That's the ultimate end goal, but I'm not really thinking that far ahead yet. Right now, I'm thinking about getting in the Indy Pro Series car and putting in the first pieces there. That's about as far forward as I'm focused on right now. I'm big on not getting too drawn out on what's happening five races or five weeks or five years from now, but trying to stay more focused on the here and now and if you do a good job in the here and now, the rest will take care of itself."

The next step will be his race debut March 26 at Homestead-Miami Speedway. From there, Dodge hopes the road eventually leads to the Indianapolis 500.



Geoff Dodge sits behind the wheel of his Indy-style race car. Early in his career, Dodge recorded two top 10 finishes at the Thomas County Speedway.

Photo courtesy of Indycar.com



Dodge

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