

Trading Paint An Adventure



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Ashley Gantt, center, a rookie in modifieds at Sandia Motor Speedway, is fifth in points. Ahead of her in the standings are fiance Garry Richards II, left, and brother Willis Johnson.

By Toby Smith - Saturday, 20 June 2009 00:08

A couple of weekends ago, Ashley Gantt, driving a modified at Sandia Motor Speedway, hit an oil slick on the track, spun out and collided with the race car driven by her brother, Willis Johnson, who had also spun out. Upset, Johnson expressed his feelings to his kid sister. Their cars suffered only cosmetic damage and the siblings managed to get back in the race and finish, Johnson in fourth place, Gantt in fifth. The winner of that race was Garry Richards II. He, happily, avoided the oil spill. He happens to be Gantt's fiancé.

The world of motor racing in Albuquerque, as the Unsers showed us, can be a family affair. Indeed, Ashley's mother, Brenda Gantt, has been a driver herself for more than 20 years. Her father, Eddy Gantt, crew chief for both Ashley and Willis, drove competitively for 30 years. Ashley is clearly the new kid on the motor block. She started racing seven years ago at age 16, driving a mini-stock in the powder puff, or all-women's division, at Sandia. She finished second in points, then promptly took a few years off. She returned last year, racing mini-stocks again, winning the points championship. This year she moved up to modifieds. "I always wanted to drive modifieds," says Ashley, 23, an office administrator for the Mucci Law Firm. "They're just faster and cooler. They give you more of an adrenaline rush." A modified is an open-wheel stock car. It has V-8 power and is lightweight but fast. On the Sandia Speedway, a banked, half-mile asphalt track, Ashley says modified drivers typically average between 90 and 110 mph. A modified has 625 horsepower, while a mini-stock has about 100 horsepower. "The difference between driving a mini-stock and driving a modified," says Ashley, "is like the difference between riding a sheep and strapping yourself to a bull."

As a rookie, and the only woman in modifieds at Sandia, she is fifth in points. Willis is third in points, while Richards is the points leader. Though Ashley's brother, 29, is a rival, the two are close. Indeed, their cars are nearly identical, save for his blue chassis. Her car has a red chassis. "Being this is my first year in modifieds," Ashley says, "I'm just trying to learn the car and learn the track." There are between nine and 15 modified drivers at Sandia Motor Speedway. Their season runs from April to October, every other weekend. *Not surprisingly, Ashley met Richards at Sandia, a year ago. She says no problems exist when the three are behind the wheel. "When we're away from the track or when we're on the track, we get along fine." Taking in all this, Brenda Gantt says, can be nerve-racking. When she is not watching her two children and Richards battle it out, Brenda Gantt is racing mini-stocks - "Because when you get the bug, it's kind of hard to stay out." Ashley keeps improving, says her mom: "She is getting faster. She is good at maintaining her lane and not driving over her head. Guys are not afraid to run side by side with her. They know she's not going to do something stupid, which happens with rookies."