

HARD WORK PAYS OFF

Teenager Brandt Graham clinches second consecutive Lucas Oil Sportsman Cup title

Story by J. Wally Nesbitt

With a runner-up result in the September 16 season finale, Brandt Graham secured his second consecutive Lucas Oil Sportsman Cup championship.

It has been a quick rise to the top for Graham because, as recently as 2014, the now 19-year-old was toddling around Peterborough and Kawartha Speedways aboard the family-prepared Mini Stock. Making a huge leap of faith in 2015, the Orono, ON-based team jumped into the ranks of the Lucas Oil Sportsman Cup series.

"Other than the fact both cars had a steering wheel, nothing was the same as the mini stock," said Graham. "We had just figured out the mini stock and then we had to start learning all over again. Basically, I had to wash my brain of everything I'd learned."

Under the tutelage of his father Craig, a late model veteran at both of the Peterborough-area facilities, Graham quickly adapted to his new, more powerful ride, claiming his first LOSC victory on the Full Throttle Motor Speedway bullring and earning 2015 Rookie of the Year honours.

"I think that spotting for my dad over the years gave me an edge. I was able to see the different lines you could use."

From fourth place in the 2015 point standings, Graham marched all the way to the top in 2016, riding a record of three race victories, including a flag-to-flag win on his home Peterborough Speedway track, to the championship title. Racing against veterans like Shawn McGlynn and Dave Connelly, Graham concluded his title run by edging long time series participant Josh Wood in the final scoring.

"After such a strong year in 2016, we wanted to see if we could do it again this year. We built momentum and were just hoping that it would carry over."

The 2017 Lucas Oil Sportsman Cup presented a new roster of challengers for Graham, with Chad McGlynn picking up the torch from his brother, while rookie Connor James was waiting in the wings, although he would miss the opening round.

On May 13, McGlynn set the early pace by taking the win at Flamboro Speedway with Graham's No. 14 Full Circle Automation/Arcade Pools/J&M Restoration/Mayhew Graphics Chevrolet crossing the stripe in second place.

Following a seven-week break, the LOSC



returned to the Flamboro oval and the teams were faced with a format change. Conforming to the track's double-feature tradition, the Sportsman Cup drivers were forced to contend with twin 50-lap races rather than the standard 100-lap contest.

"That required some changes, both in the car, but mainly with me. We were used to longer runs, races where you had to preserve your tires and brakes."

The format change obviously worked to his advantage as Graham swept both ends of the doubleheader to edge into the point lead over McGlynn.

One week later (July 8), McGlynn was back on top, taking the checkered flag for his second win of the season at Sauble Speedway. Connor James was making his presence felt and recorded a runner-up result while Graham was relegated to third place following a contact-induced spin.

The next race on the calendar was in Graham's backyard with an August 12 appearance slated for the Peterborough oval.

"That race is always the focal point of the season for us. We've got a lot of family, friends and sponsors at that race and we didn't want to disappoint them."

The local driver didn't have to worry, however, as he set a new track record in qualifying and after drawing the number one spot in the starting order re-draw, went flag-to-flag to notch a dominating victory.

Carrying his winning momentum back to the track, Graham again scored two wins in the August 19 return to Flamboro Speedway and prepared for the season-ending doubleheader holding on to a slim eight point advantage over McGlynn.

"That was pretty stressful. It had been Chad and I going back and forth all season."

The stress level ramped up even more when Graham was collected in a crash in the

opening race, his No. 14 Chevy forced to the pits for some urgent repairs while James went on to collect his debut LOSC win.

"We knew we needed to get the car back on track for the second race. The season was all on the line, so we taped the body panels together as best we could and my dad was lying under the car trying to adjust the trailing arms while I sat, with the car running, getting ready to get back on track for the second round."

In the season's final 50-lap dash, James was able to notch his second consecutive win while championship contender McGlynn retired to the pits just prior to the race's mid-point. Despite the damaged car, Graham managed to hold on just long enough to finish second, which was enough to clinch the LOSC title.

"This was a good season for sure, but it was no easy ride. When I was told we won the championship I do remember giving a pretty big sigh of relief, but it feels good because we know that we truly earned it. All the hard work had paid off." **IT**



Two-time Lucas Oil Sportsman Cup champion Brandt Graham (top) credits his time spotting for his dad Craig (above) for his recent success behind the wheel of a race car. Photos by Steve Traczyk