

Schools valuable to racing teams

By JOHN SEEWER
Associated Press Writer

LIMA, Ohio — Michael Klenke learned in class how to assemble a race-car engine and tear apart its transmission. He also learned the best way to handle a problem that crops up when a stock car is flying around a dirt race track at 60 mph.

"It's more than just step on the gas and turn left," Klenke said of driving for the University of Northwestern Ohio's stock-car team. "It makes you realize you really are going to use what you learn here."

Klenke's school is one of a handful of places where students can study how to build a race car from the bottom up. The high-performance motorsports program readies them for a career in auto racing — whether it be working in a pit crew or in the shop.

"A lot of people just see NASCAR on Sundays," said Steve Klausung, an instructor who works with the school's race club. "There's a lot that goes into the six days before the race."

Auto racing's growing presence on television and its widening appeal to mainstream fans has led to more leagues, teams and job opportunities in a sport that increasingly needs highly skilled crew members.

"It used to be that growing up with your dad in the garage was good enough to get you through," said Don Radebaugh, spokesman for the ARCA series. "But it requires more than turning wrenches in a garage. We're seeing more and more drivers and crew members who are college graduates."

ARCA has become a stepping stone race league for not only the drivers, but also crew members.

About 20 students from the Ohio

school spent their weekends last year working with ARCA teams. A group from the school traveled to Florida this week to work at the ARCA 200 on Saturday at Daytona International Speedway.

They'll work on the engines, clean the cars for the race and watch how the pros adjust the aerodynamics of the cars to make them run faster.

"It gives any racing program a place to look for help," said Bill Kimmel, crew chief for eight-time ARCA champion Frank Kimmel. "If you take a kid off the street, we have to show them every step of the way."

He usually pairs a student with an experienced crew member. Kimmel's team, based in New Albany, Ind., hired one of the students who worked for him a year ago to be a mechanic.

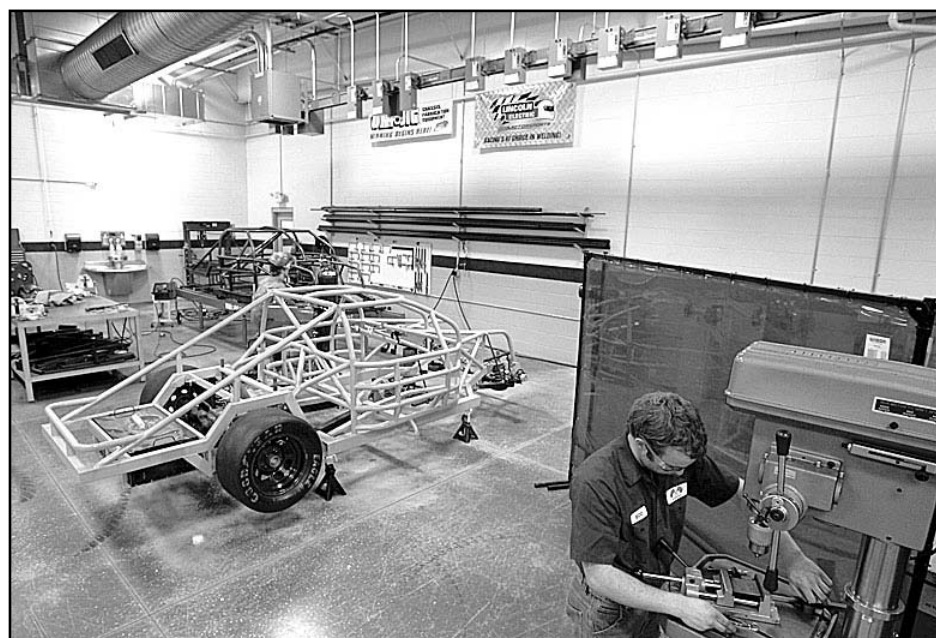
Motorsports students at Indiana University-Purdue University in Indianapolis compete for internships in the Champ Car World Series and with the Panther Racing team in the Indy Racing League.

"We work with teams to configure the classes around what the teams need," said Peter Hylton, director of the IUPUI motorsports program.

ARCA car owner Wayne Hixson, of Soddy Daisy, Tenn., said there's still a learning curve when students start working with a pro team.

"We're looking for somebody who can carry tires over the wall and put them on," he said. "I teach them how to carry tires, put them on and put air in them."

About 1,000 students are enrolled in the motorsports program at the University of Northwestern Ohio, which offers two- and four-year degrees in business and technologies.



J.D. POOLEY / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Michael Klenke, 20, prepares to drill a small hole in a piece of metal for a suspension component Jan. 29 inside the Dr. Jeff Jarvis High Performance Motor Sports Complex on the campus of the University of Northwestern Ohio in Lima, Ohio.

The new \$7 million motorsports complex is where they learn about building transmissions, welding frames and shaping fenders.

Classrooms are attached to the garages where stock cars and dragsters are taken apart and put back together. "There's a lot of big-boy toys here," said Tom Grothous, a dean in the college of technologies.

In one of the garages, the metal frame of a stock car sits on a lift, but soon it will be fitted with an engine and ready for the racing season in April. Outside, there's a 500-foot track for drag racing and a small oval for stock cars. Mounds of rocks and dirt are for the off-road racers.

The school also boasts what it calls the world's largest motorsports classroom — a ¼-mile banked dirt track that the university bought nine years ago. As many as 100 students line up on Friday nights in the spring and summer to work on the pit crews with weekend drivers who come to the Limaland Motorsports Park.

Anywhere from 2,000 to 5,000 fans

show up on race night to watch the sprint cars, stock cars and trucks.

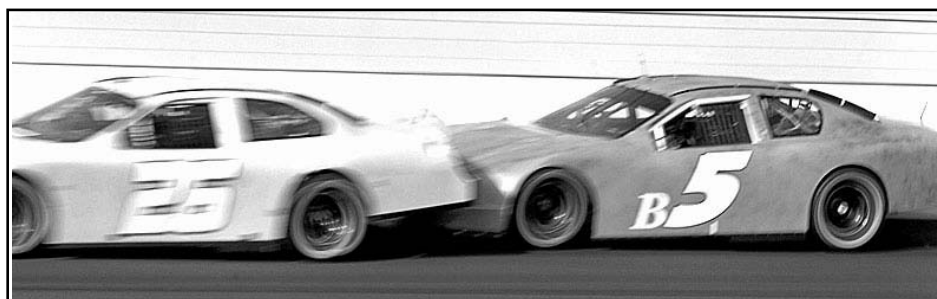
The university's first stock-car team started competing there last year. This season, it will have two teams racing in cars with "student driver" on the rear bumper.

"It lets everyone know that they're out there to learn and not to push the other guys into the wall," said university president Jeffrey Jarvis, who can be found on race nights talking with fans and drivers.

The motorsports program at the Ohio school started in 1993. Other colleges have since added the training, including Lincoln Tech in Indianapolis and WyoTech at its campus in Fremont, Calif.

The University of Northwestern Ohio doesn't track how many graduates end up in racing. But former students now work for teams in NASCAR, the Indy Racing League and minor league circuits.

The education in the classroom can't compare with practicing at the track, Klausung said.



BRIAN JONES / THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

A little close

In this photo released by the Las Vegas News Bureau, Kyle Busch (5) runs into the back of Todd Kluever causing Kluever to crash during NASCAR Busch Series testing at Las Vegas Motor Speedway on Feb. 6.

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