

## Austin Theriault

By Leif Tillotson

In the small town of Fort Kent, Maine, nearly 7 hours north of Kittery, Maine lives 16 year old Austin Theriault (pronounced “terry-oh”). Theriault lives so far north in Maine that his town is on the border with New Brunswick, Canada and is one of the most northern towns in Maine. If you listen to him speak you can even detect a Canadian accent, a byproduct of living so close to Canada.

Fort Kent is not known for its racing talent but rather for its logging operations. The popular television reality show “American Loggers” is filmed 3 hours south of Fort Kent in Millinocket. The area seems more a hotbed for young loggers than young racers. Until now, that is.

The Theriault family operates a trucking company that hauls woodchips and does wood recycling. However, motorsports of many varieties are a part of the family history.

“My family and grandparents have been involved in motorsports ever since I can remember” Austin says. “It started with my grandfather in truck pulling and then my Dad and I got into it, too. My dad also raced dirt bikes as a teenager and had a lot of success in that sport and he also enjoyed racing snowmobiles in the winter. I did dirt biking and snowmobiles but I always had a passion for stock car racing. My grandparents had taken me to several NASCAR races when I was young and car racing was something we'd always wanted to try.”

Midway through the summer of 2007, at age 13, Austin got behind the wheel of a four cylinder car at Spud Speedway. Recently reopened, the track was only an hour away in Caribou and gave Austin a nearby place to race.

Austin began racing in the Four-Cylinder Young Guns division with an old Pontiac Grand Am before moving on to a Dodge Neon and then a Ford Mustang, which he and his family built from the ground up.

In 2008 Theriault earned a 2nd place points finish in the Four-Cylinder Young Guns class. In 2009 he captured the championship in the Fast Fours. Austin also raced with and against his Dad weekly in the Fast Fours.

It was also during 2009 that Austin's Dad bought him a late model car. He went on to win the Spud 150 in his very first start in the car and his first race in an 8 cylinder race car. He also finished in the top 5 of the Spud 100. In only his third ever start in a late model he qualified for the season-ending ACT race at Oxford and finished one lap down in 18th. Needless to say, heads were turned and people were talking.

During the offseason, plans were hatched for 2010. Besides having an ACT-legal late model with his family-owned team, Theriault was also given the opportunity to drive a handful of races in PASS North competition for the Steve Perry Mainely Motorsports team.

Theriault made three starts in a Pro Stock. "Racing in PASS gave me the experience of seat time in a different car set up and expanded my racing experience" Theriault says. "Steve Perry gave me an opportunity with his PASS car which I ran on a few off weekends from the ACT tour. Although I was the 'new kid on the block' everyone was really helpful and respectful, especially Kirk Thibeau and Ben and Mike Rowe."

In just those three races Theriault made an impression on drivers and owners in the series. While continuing to run both series was an option, Theriault and his family chose instead to focus all of their attention on the ACT Tour with the late model car they had just built.

By the end of July, Theriault was sitting just outside the top 10 in points despite missing the first race of the season and not qualifying for another race. He was also in a heated battle with fellow Mainer Brad Babb for the tour's Rookie of the Year Award. A second-place finish at Beech Ridge confirmed that a win (or wins) could happen before the end of the season. Adding to the impressiveness of his finishes is the fact that he had never raced on nor even seen the far majority of any of the racetracks.

Tom Curley, a pretty good judge of racing talent, became an Austin Theriault admirer after only a few races. “Austin Theriault seems to have all the ‘right stuff’” Curley comments. “He has a great attitude, lots of skill, good people around him, and tremendous family support. His several appearances with ACT have been nothing short of exceptional, and quite frankly in our league, which has some excellent veteran teams and overall very tough parity, he has excelled.”

In fact, Curley was so complimentary that when Theriault made the 10 hour haul to race at Thunder Road for the Governor’s Cup, then started 21st and raced to 7th at the finish, Curley gave credit to Theriault over his two-way radio, telling his staff at length how impressed he was with the youngster. He even called Theriault “the next Nick Sweet” which was a high compliment considering that Sweet had just won the race.

It is not to be taken lightly that Curley used the phrase “great attitude” in his comments. It is a phrase used often by people who are observing Theriault. The trait applies to his racing efforts both on and off the track.

Having a great attitude literally starts at home. While most racers would see it as a disadvantage being located so far away from the places where they race, Theriault doesn’t know it any other way. “It may seem like you’re in the middle of nowhere when driving to and from Fort Kent” he says. “But when you get here, you will experience a great little town on the border of Canada. Travelling can be a challenge but we are used to having to drive hours to get anywhere. Being from Northern Maine has many qualities and I think all the travelling just goes to show how dedicated we are to our love of racing.”

“Smooth” is another word that keeps popping up with Theriault observers, no matter which series or track the kid is at. “I guess I learned that from truck pulling” says Theriault. “Be patient and be smooth and steady on the throttle.”

A look at his website reveals that the first entry on his “Goals and Desires” list is as admirable as they come; “To build success through respect and patience on and off the track.” These are certainly some goals more racers should think about

trying to achieve.

Unlike a lot of racers his age, Austin remains well-grounded. While still a kid in age, he seems to have the attitude and behavior of a veteran racer. Respect for equipment and his fellow racers shows each and every race.

Theriault's goals for 2010 were largely met, and some even succeeded. A top 10 points finish for the year, a 2<sup>nd</sup> place run at Beech Ridge, an invite to the ACT Invitational at New Hampshire Motor Speedway and battling down to the last race for the ACT Rookie of the Year Award (which he lost to Brad Babb) were all highlights to a solid year for the youngster.

While a win did not come in 2010, it is fair to say that one or more awaits him in 2011. In November Theriault announced that he would be driving in 2011 and beyond for multi-time Championship-winning car owner and crew chief Rick Paya. As a teammate to Brian Hoar under the RPM Motorsports banner, Theriault will have the guidance of Paya, Hoar and the whole RPM team. He will also have crewchief Mickey Green returning to help him as well as his family and former team members joining the RPM two-car effort. A new Race Basics Ford Fusion will have a Ford engine under the hood. Both cars will be maintained out of RPM's Georgia, VT shop.

So where does Theriault see himself 5, 10 or 15 years from now? "I think all of us young drivers hope to be noticed" says Theriault. "I have visions of racing professionally in the future but I've got to stay grounded and not get ahead of myself. Right now I am taking it one race at a time and hoping that doors will open for me in the future. Where I am right now, racing with the best late model drivers and earning the respect of my fellow racers, is success for me already."

"I have seen hundreds of young drivers come into our various systems over the past 30 years" says Tom Curley. "Austin Theriault is certainly ranked high up on the list for having an immediate impact. He is recognized by veteran drivers as being a solid racer with great instincts, good equipment, and a great attitude. He is positioned to go a long way in this sport."