Josh James of Saukville races small cars around tracks at 110 to 115 mph, but he's too young to negotiate the roundabouts in his hometown.

At age 14, Josh is the youngest and one of the most successful drivers on the American Super Cup championship series. He was named Rookie of the Year and expects to finish fifth or sixth among 22 drivers, some of them more than three times his age.

Josh's father Michael is his crew chief and his brother Tyler, who is studying to be a mechanical engineer in Denver, competed against him. Next year, his uncle will join the James Racing Team.

To say racing is his passion is an understatement. The young man is most comfortable behind the wheel of a car that is half the size of a NASCAR race vehicle and barely large enough for him to squeeze inside.

His car has a 20 horsepower, four-cycle V390X engine.

Josh's racing skills, cool head and politeness have impressed his competitors, his father said.

This is Josh's third year racing Super Cup cars, but the first year he qualified for the elite championship series.

He also races go-karts and next year plans to race trucks. He learned to drive a five-speed stick shift this year so he can race ASA series trucks.

Josh's goal is to compete in the ARCA series, a prelude to being a NASCAR driver.

When he's on the track, Josh said, the only thing he thinks about is how to get ahead of the car in front of him. He methodically works his way forward.

"Nothing else is in your mind. The only thing I'm thinking of is how to get around the guy in front of me," Josh said.

"Just by doing one thing right with the car, you can affect the race. You have to think about your next move — you don't just do it. But you also have to think real fast. We're racing three

wide and an inch apart from each other."

Josh, who is a freshman at Port Washington High School and was an A student at Thomas Jefferson Middle School, said math is his weakest subject.

But his grasp of mathematics and physics on the race track would impress any teacher.

Because this is his rookie year on the circuit, Josh had to start at the back of the pack for the early races, gradually earning better starting spots.

"Coming from last, it's a great accomplishment to get third this year," he said.

James said his son's skills on the track amaze him. He depends on Josh to let him know how the car is running and if anything — tire pressure or a gear — needs to be adjusted.

The two are inseparable during the racing season, which runs from April through October. Josh races every weekend throughout Wisconsin and neighboring states. The closest track is Slinger Speedway.

A typical race day consists of two practice runs, a qualifying race, heat race and feature race.

Garbed in his flame retardant racing suit and large helmet, Josh said, the temperature inside the car reaches above 150 degrees. It was brutal some of the hot days this year, he said.

The team travels with a trailer that has beds, air conditioning and TV. They usually arrive a day or two before the race and hang out with the other drivers.

Josh started racing kid-karts when he was 5, reaching speeds of 30 mph.

His father, a retired Air Force master sergeant who recruited physicians, raced go-karts on dirt tracks in Ohio before moving to Fredonia in 1997. In Wisconsin, go-kart racing is on paved rather than dirt tracks.

"When Josh was 4, I would pull him in his go-kart and he would steer," James said.

He did the same for Tyler. Tyler likes to get to the front right away, his father said, but Josh has always paced his races, waiting for the right time to move up.

When his sons started racing, James retired from racing, maintaining the boys' karts instead. He prefers Josh racing in the Super Cup series vehicles because they have strong roll bars, neck support and other safety features.

With a go-kart there is no protection, and Josh reaches speeds of 70 to 80 mph.

"When he started racing kid-karts, it was pretty scary," James said. "The quicker I could get him into a car with a roll bar, the better.

“When he’s in the go-kart, I get pretty nervous. The only time I get nervous when he’s in the car is if there is a spin-out or crash in front of him and he has to make evasive maneuvers. I can warn him on the radio, but by then he’s usually on it. He has to rely on his instincts.”

Josh said he was involved in two accidents on the track.

In one instance, two cars flipped end-over-end in front of him.

“I went airborne, skidded on the side and ended up on my wheels,” Josh said.

Earlier this year, he was clipped by a car, went off the track, across a grass field and struck a concrete wall, damaging the front of the vehicle.

He wasn’t hurt in either accident.

“When I see a car spinning out, I know exactly where it’s going to go and where I have to go to avoid it,” Josh said. “Everybody knows the risks. Everybody likes it. It’s very fun to go out there.”

Before any race, Josh says a prayer with his father, a ritual started by his mother Tonniam, who died in 2009. She used to hold Sunday School classes called Kart C — Kids Are Racing Toward Christ — for young racers and other children at the tracks.

Josh said he feels his mother’s presence when he gets in the cars. She went to all his races.

Josh has licenses to operate boats and snowmobiles and is looking forward to getting his driver’s license — something his father is not as eager about.

“I’ll be nervous,” James said. “When he’s on the race track, you know that everybody knows what they’re doing. You don’t have that on the streets.”

Image Information: Josh James stepped into his American Super Cup race car, which is half the size of a NASCAR vehicle.
Photo by Sam Arendt