

THE **ROOKIE**

An interview with one of dirt racing's young starlets.





By **Lew Boyd**

Born on December 19, 2006 in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin and known as “the Braids of WISSOTA,” perky, 16-year-old rookie stand-out Kennedy Swan currently ranks fourth in national points against 236 other registered modified drivers. She and her dad/coach/car owner, Jason, reflect on the road to date.

SI: It’s July 5th. I bet you were busy over the last few days.

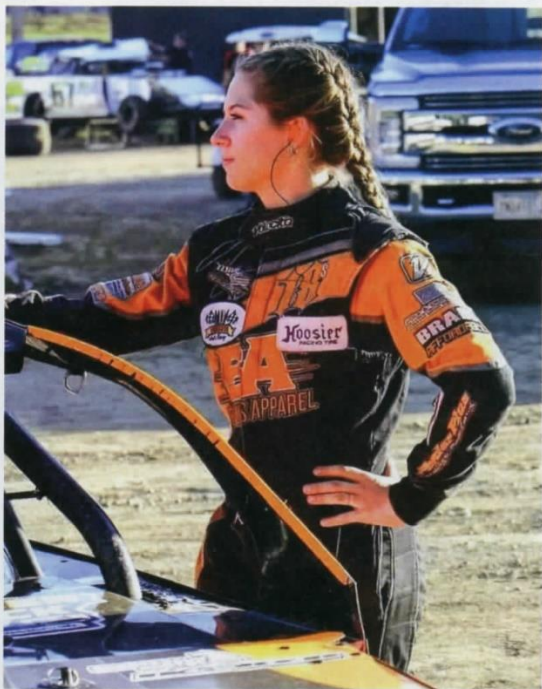
Kennedy: Last Thursday we were at Ashland, Wisconsin; Friday at Superior; Sunday at Proctor, Minnesota; and Monday back in Wisconsin at Rice Lake. That was my best night. It felt good to run right behind Shane Sabraski, Rodney Sanders and Shane Halopka. They’ve all been national champions. Tomorrow night we’ll be right back at it.

SI: How did all this start?

Kennedy: I don’t remember much because I was so young, but I think I did some four-wheeler racing on ice when I was six and got more and more into it. The next year I know we got a kart.

Jason: I remember! The first time she ran that four-wheeler, which was a 50cc versus a 90, she came in crying, saying she wasn’t fast enough. When she tried out the kart for the first time, she was instantly wide open. The Thunder Hill promoter was watching. He shook his head and said, “She sure ain’t scared.” I could already see she was full of raw talent.

Kennedy: From that moment, I knew this was something I really wanted to do. The speed never bothered me and still doesn’t. Somehow it seems to come easily to me.



Known for her trademark braids, Kennedy Swan proves big things come in small packages. She weighed less than 100 pounds when she won her first B-mod race. (Courtesy Photo)

Kennedy Swan moved up to a WISSOTA mod last season and immediately became a winner. (Photo by David Hooker)



She isn't old enough to drink the victory lane sponsor's product, and her trophy looms tall over her head, but Kennedy won the track championship last season at Red Cedar (WI) Raceway. (Courtesy Photo)

one of the first races, I got into someone who rolled over on his side. Something like that has never happened again. I've never really had trouble with another driver on the track, but I heard it being said that I wasn't any good, I didn't belong here, and I shouldn't be doing this without even having a driver's license yet. I knew I shouldn't care what people think and that it was my job to concentrate on getting to the front. What's in other people's heads isn't in mine. I don't have iRacing, but I've spent lots of time watching racing, how other people drive, how they pass cars—and I still do.

Jason: I'd give her pointers, but, honestly, it was kind of a dad/daughter thing. One time I told her she had to drive her 250 kart deeper into the turns. She didn't listen at first, but when she eventually did, she won her first race in it. When it got to the bigger cars, Mike Anderson, a good friend and Mod Nationals winner, really helped her a lot—how to block a slide job, how she should handle a restart, etc. I concentrated more on trying to keep the equipment up and making sure she didn't get down on herself. She is really smart and determined, but she does need to be reminded just how difficult this is.

Kennedy: 2020 was really hard. So much was different, not only on the track but in the garage. There was much more work than in karts, even though that season was so short. I really got into working on the car with Dad and Will Moelter, but I weighed only 98 pounds at the time, so I wasn't helping them carry tires around yet. We made progress—and then came a late-season race at Chateau Speedway in

SI: That sounds a bit unusual. What were your friends thinking about it?

Jason: I'll answer that. Most of them never really knew she was racing in the six years we ran the karts. One night when she was in the sixth grade, I went into the garage. She was taking pictures of her kart. I asked why. She told me a boy in her class didn't believe she raced. She's never been a big talker, but already inside the racing community there were eyes on her. At 11 she won the 2017 Wisconsin Kart Nationals and got second at the English Creek Nationals at Knoxville, Iowa, the same week.

SI: So how about the switch to full-sized cars?

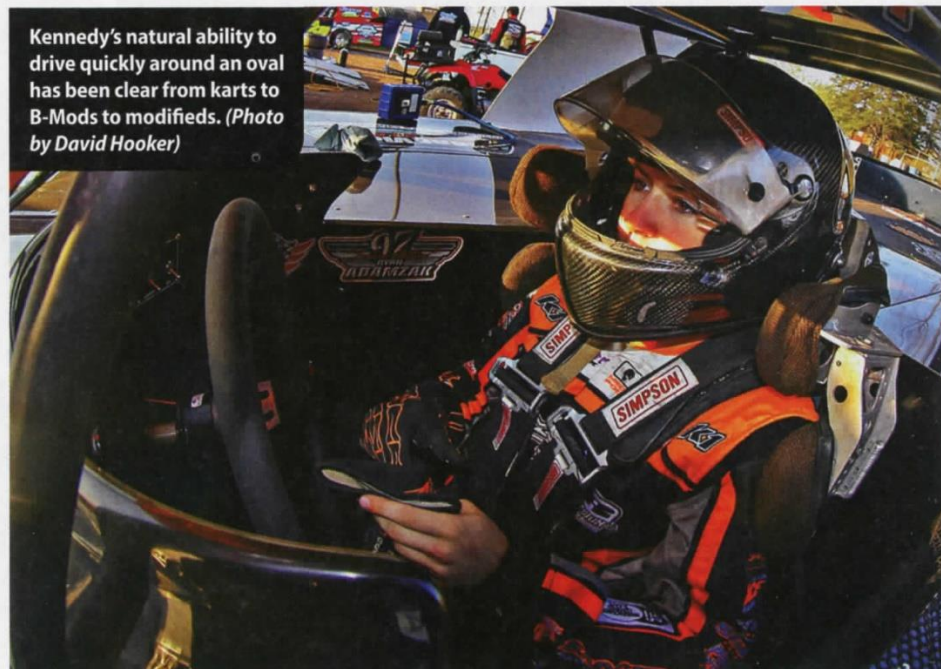
Kennedy: That was huge for me, but it sure came at a bad time. On top of my learning curve, 2020 was the start of COVID.

Jason: We had a decision to make. She was 13, and we knew it was time to make a move—a 500cc Wing Outlaw kart or a WISSOTA B Mod. They cost about the same. But there were other factors. I had been a racer myself, though with none of the talent like Kennedy's. But I loved the sociable aspect of community with the stock car people, so unlike the kart world. We raced as a family. That was important to us. And there was so much more racing we could do with the cars. I called WISSOTA and the local track promoters I knew to see if they'd allow a 13-year-old to run. Everyone said that they'd heard of Kennedy and would welcome her.

SI: How did it go?

Kennedy: I was fortunate that we already had a truck and hauler, Dad's knowledge, and friends with businesses who could support us. But there wasn't a lot of racing because of COVID. And being a girl of 13 was something I had to deal with. I was now racing with guys up to their 50s and 60s—a lot have raced for 20 years. Even this current season I have yet to be in a race with another woman.

Karting had helped me so much back then, but I had a lot to learn. I knew I just wanted to be known as a clean driver. In



Kennedy's natural ability to drive quickly around an oval has been clear from karts to B-Mods to modifieds. (Photo by David Hooker)

“We had five wins. Two were really special, both at our local Friday-night track, Red Cedar Speedway in Menomonie. The first one was in the spring and was a real surprise.”

—Kennedy Swan

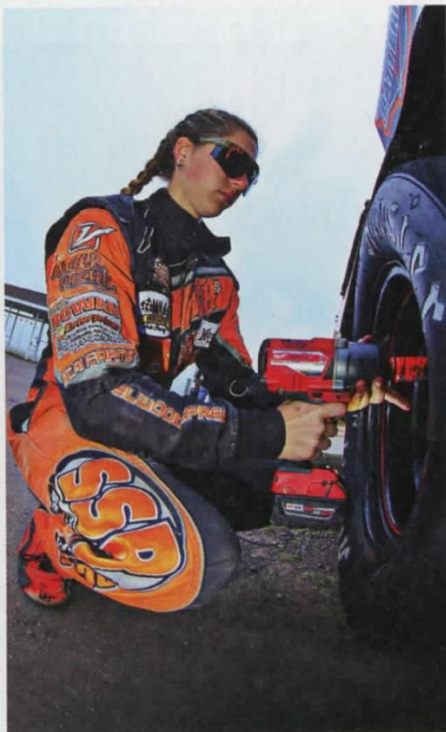
Minnesota. We won. I’m not sure I slept a wink that night. It was extra special because I’d done bad the night before.

Jason: It was just unbelievable. She was flawless, and the crowd was already cheering, but when a 13-year-old girl with those trademark braids crawled out of the car, the whole place—announcer included—went nuts. Everyone had assumed “Kennedy” was a guy. The applause was deafening. The promoter came down to victory lane and presented the checkered flag to her. It hangs in her room today. I get tears just thinking about it.

Kennedy: Dad always cries when I win.

SI: That must have set you up for the 2021 season.

Kennedy: It did. We decided to gear up and go for it fuller time, racing wherever we could. I wasn’t sure we could do any better than we had the year before, but it turned



Kennedy is as focused on working on her own race car as her future plans to enter the financial sector. (Photo by David Hooker)



Even though dirt racing means close quarters, Kennedy Swan (18) makes it a goal to always race clean and earn the respect of her peers. (Courtesy Photo)

into a great season. Usually, it was two times a weekend locally in the spring and three times traveling during the summer for a total of 55 events. We had five wins. Two were really special, both at our local Friday-night track, Red Cedar Speedway in Menomonie. The first one was in the spring and was a real surprise.

Jason: That race changed things because it was picked up in the local papers that this 14-year-old girl was winning. Then a TV crew came and did a piece on her, and everyone saw it. Even her teachers at school made a big deal of it—and some even went to the races.

Kennedy: That was good because my friends started coming with me when they could. They knew it's my happy place, and I'd race every day if I could. They liked it too.

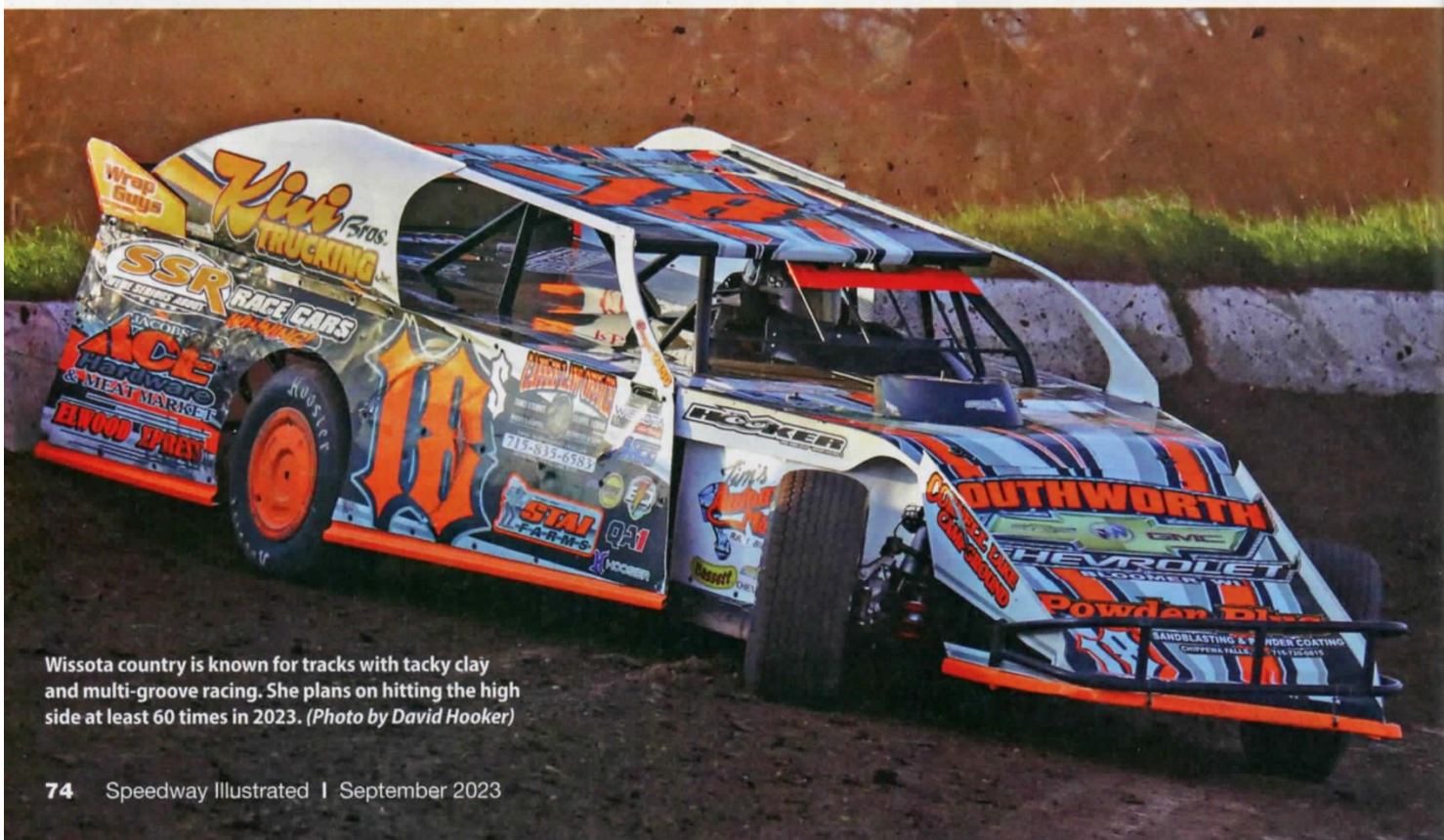
Jason: The second big night at Menomonie came at a special event in September, the annual Punky Manor Memorial. She started up front and led the whole way through several restarts. I couldn't believe how well she was driving. It just looked so natural for her. She was both the first female and the youngest person to win that race in its 41-year history.

Afterwards there was some complain-

ing that she had to be illegal, but no way was that true. In this win in particular she earned a lot of respect in the pit area as one clean and competent racer. She also ended up WISSOTA B Mod Rookie of the Year (one was not named in the previous COVID-shortened season)—and Menomonie track champion.

SI: You didn't spend much more time in the B Mods, did you?

Kennedy: One more season, 2022, but it got off to a rough start. For some reason early on we had a string of DNFs. Then I got into a bad wreck at Superior and



Wisconsin country is known for tracks with tacky clay and multi-groove racing. She plans on hitting the high side at least 60 times in 2023. (Photo by David Hooker)

flipped. My worst. It hurt the car, and I hurt myself mentally. We took a week off to fix it, and I did some thinking. I was always so careful to try to miss wrecks, especially on that first lap. But I came to realize some are unavoidable. I had come to kind of like being that girl in the pits competing against all these older guys, and I was determined to prove I could come back just as fast as before. We did get back on track and got eight wins.

Jason: At 16 this year, Kennedy was certainly ready to move up to the modifieds. She'd already turned down a ride in a Late Model. We made that decision because of loyalty to Jake Hartung at SSR Race Cars who supports us so much. We weren't about to switch alliances. We have no special equipment deals from anywhere, but, honestly, Kennedy has become so visible and popular that every time she passes a car, the applause gets louder. Her tee shirts are everywhere. We have people walk up and offer to help financially however they can. We're very careful about selecting them, because we want to keep them. So far, this year is going well, and Kennedy's performance has surpassed anything I could have imagined. I keep thinking of all the time she has put into it.

SI: What are your challenges for the rest of '23?

Kennedy: First, not to wreck and to get in 60 shows by season's end. Second, whatever happens, not to get down. And third, to find a way to keep racing in September and October without ruining my performance in school.

SI: What about school?

Kennedy: I'm going into junior year and would like to go on to college—and maybe get into financial services and investments. I've heard you can make money doing that, which would help with my future racing. But I can't let up a bit because college admission is so competitive.

Jason: She's being modest again. She is an honor roll student and a spectacular softball player. Her school is one of the tops in the state, and she leads in home runs. On top of everything else, she works out four times a week.

SI: So, Kennedy, what about that future racing?

Kennedy: We'll see. But I do know for sure that someday I would love to take on the UMSTS guys like Dan Ebert with those open motors on a track like Eldora. **FSW**