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## **Pekin race driver starts young**

By Jack Barfield  
Times Sports Editor

It's been said, many times over, that a person is never too old to learn.

In the case of Matt Dobey, it can be said that a person is never too young to learn how to drive.

The seven-year old Pekinite has been wheeling his one-quarter midget race car around the track for the past two and a half months, and driving it well.

Matt is one of several area youngsters who belong to the Abe Lincoln Quarter Midget Association (QMA). They race every Saturday night at Broadwell, which is located near Lincoln.

There are several different divisions which are based on age, weight, success and driving skill. Matt is currently a Junior Novice (ages 5-8), but if his recent performances mean anything, he could be moving up to Junior Stock before the season ends in October. He has won two feature events already this year, and needs three more victories to push him up to the next bracket.

While Matt doesn't exactly drive an Indy type vehicle, he isn't pedaling a tricycle either. The L.E. Starke second grader's car has a two-horse powered engine, a Indy style body with roll bars and the works.

Like most things in life, success didn't come overnight for Matt. It took hours of practice behind L.E. Starke school, a few bumps into the wall and many laps around the one-eighth mile track before he started to reap the rewards of his efforts.

"It takes time," Matt's dad Jim said. "Once we decided to get a car and race, Matt couldn't wait. He wanted to be the first one out on the track. He lost some of his enthusiasm after hitting the wall a few times.

"The thing that helped the most was the other kids talking to him," Dobey added. "He started to regain his confidence."

Learning how to drive the car was only the first hurdle Matt had to overcome. Once he felt comfortable with the car, he then had to learn how to drive in race conditions with other youngsters in his division.

"I think that the biggest problem Matt had was learning how to line up and stay close to the cars," the elder Dobey said, "and running the track pattern without letting the foot up off the accelerator.

"That (learning how to drive in race conditions) is made easier by the track officials," Jim went on to say. "They're so helpful and they're good with the kids. If a driver is having problems, they will stop the race and instruct that driver. They are very thorough with the kids. They want them to all learn the right methods."

The track officials are also very thorough with safety. Each participant must wear a helmet and leather jacket when driving and each must be checked out in practice laps before entering their first race.

Like most activities involving youngsters, Matt's racing is a family affair with the Dobeys although his mother Donna was a little apprehensive at first.

"We talked about it at first because both Jim and I were involved with racing before," Donna said. "It was hard to envision little kids doing this.

"I'm starting to get comfortable with it," she added, "although I still get butterflies before each race. As long as Matt's happy, I'm happy and he can drive for as long as he wants."

"Our goal is to have fun," Jim said, "and as long as we can do that, we'll continue to go to the track. I can't say enough about the club at Broadwell. We've met a lot of nice people there. Everybody is friendly and helpful."

There are 15 QMA Clubs in the country with three of them located in Illinois.

As far as Matt's future, neither Jim or Donna cared to predict what might happen.

"That's a long way off as far as a racing career," Jim said. "I was in stock car racing and I know how expensive it can be."

"Matt can race as long as he wants," Donna added, "but we're not going to force him to do it."

As far as Matt Dobby is concerned, he's having too much fun carrying the checkered flag around the track to worry about the future.

- Other area youngsters belong to the Abe Lincoln Club are: Steve Donker, Mason City; Danny Dowell, Manito; Bret Bahn, Delavan; Todd Huntley, East Peoria and Loren Hoffman, Washington.
- The Dobeys said they would be glad to provide additional information to anyone interested in joining the Abe Lincoln Club. They can be reached at 353-6812.