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Awesome father: Elliott steers perfect line as boy's car owner, dad

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When Bill Elliott goes to Atlanta Motor Speedway's Thursday Thunder Legends racing program, he's not trying to use his skills behind the wheel to be the "Awesome Bill" he's become to NASCAR fans. He's simply trying to be a good father to his 11-year-old son, Chase.

Chase Elliott is in his first year of driving a Bandolero, which is basically a go-kart covered with a small race car body.

It's a role reversal for the two. While in most races Chase is in the pits cheering on his father, this time Dad is the one on the sideline.

But like the other fathers in the Legends garage, Elliott also is the car owner, chief mechanic and driver coach. And his main goal at this point is for all involved to enjoy the experience, regardless of the outcome on the track.

"I don't want to be a soccer dad," he said. "I just want this to be something we can do together and have fun. Life will get serious for him soon enough."

That philosophy was never more evident than early Thursday evening at AMS. Chase Elliott and his cousin/teammate Trey Poole took off with gas cans to get fuel for their cars. Their intentions were good, but their timing was bad. While they were away, the rest of the drivers were getting in line for a crucial practice session.

The boys returned to their pit area and frantically started getting ready for practice.

Bill Elliott, showing only a hint of frustration, pointed out that the car already had plenty of gas. But he kept his cool.

Chase drove off to the staging area, but soon returned without turning a lap. He'd missed his turn on the track.

He walked inside the trailer, obviously disappointed and probably wondering what his dad would say. He sat down beside his father and the two were shoulder to shoulder.

Dad handed son a handful of M&Ms and the two munched candy for a bit until he said, "I guess the car was good in practice."

"Great," Chase replied. Nothing else was ever said.

Cindy Elliott, Chase's mom and Bill's wife, said that's typical.

"If Bill gets frustrated with Chase, he gets over it in about two minutes," she said.

In the first heat race, Chase collided with another car just after the start, ripping up the body on his car and bending several key suspension pieces.

Again, Dad remained cool, offered a few driving tips and began quickly removing bent parts and replacing them with new ones while an old friend from the NASCAR trail -- Bobby Allison's nephew, Steve Allison -- helped Chase repair the body using duct tape to seal the cracks.

When the job was done, Chase looked at the finished product and said he might just leave it that way for future weeks.

"Might as well save the money because it's just going to get torn up again," he said, indicating that he's also inherited his father's frugal ways.

Cindy Elliott said the two are more alike than most people realize. "They're like two peas in a pod," she said.

Curtis Colwell, a longtime friend of the Elliots, said the bond between father and son is unusually strong.

"Chase's dad is his idol, and Bill feels just as strong about him," Colwell said. "To Chase, Bill can do no wrong."

Colwell told a story of a time he was riding four-wheelers with Chase when Bill was away. They came upon a pine tree blocking the trail. Colwell, a broad-shouldered muscular man, climbed off his four-wheeler, easily lifted the tree, about six inches in diameter, and tossed it aside.

"How about that?" he said to Chase, who apparently was not impressed.

"My dad can lift one this big," he said as he held his arms about two feet apart.

Colwell said Chase Elliott will one day become a great race driver, largely because of his admiration for his father. He showed glimpses of that potential on Thursday as he drove his patched-up car from 15th to ninth place in his feature race.

"He lives on every word Bill tells him, and he follows the instructions," Colwell said. "That's why he's going to be better than his dad."

But Elliott said that while he's been impressed with the ability his son has shown so far in go-karts and Bandoleros, he's not ready to plot him a path to NASCAR.

"The door's open for him to do that," Elliott said. "But it's up to him whether he wants to walk through it or not."

This isn't the first time the Elliott family has been down this road. In the early 1970s Bill Elliott's late father, George, took him and his brothers Ernie and Dan racing on the short tracks of North Georgia, giving them all opportunities to make racing a career.

Cindy Elliott said a lot of what her husband is doing today is a way of paying that forward.

"Racing is what they did together," she said. "His dad did it for him, and that's why Bill does it for Chase."