Team Toyota Driver Kaylee Bryson Breaks Out of the Pack

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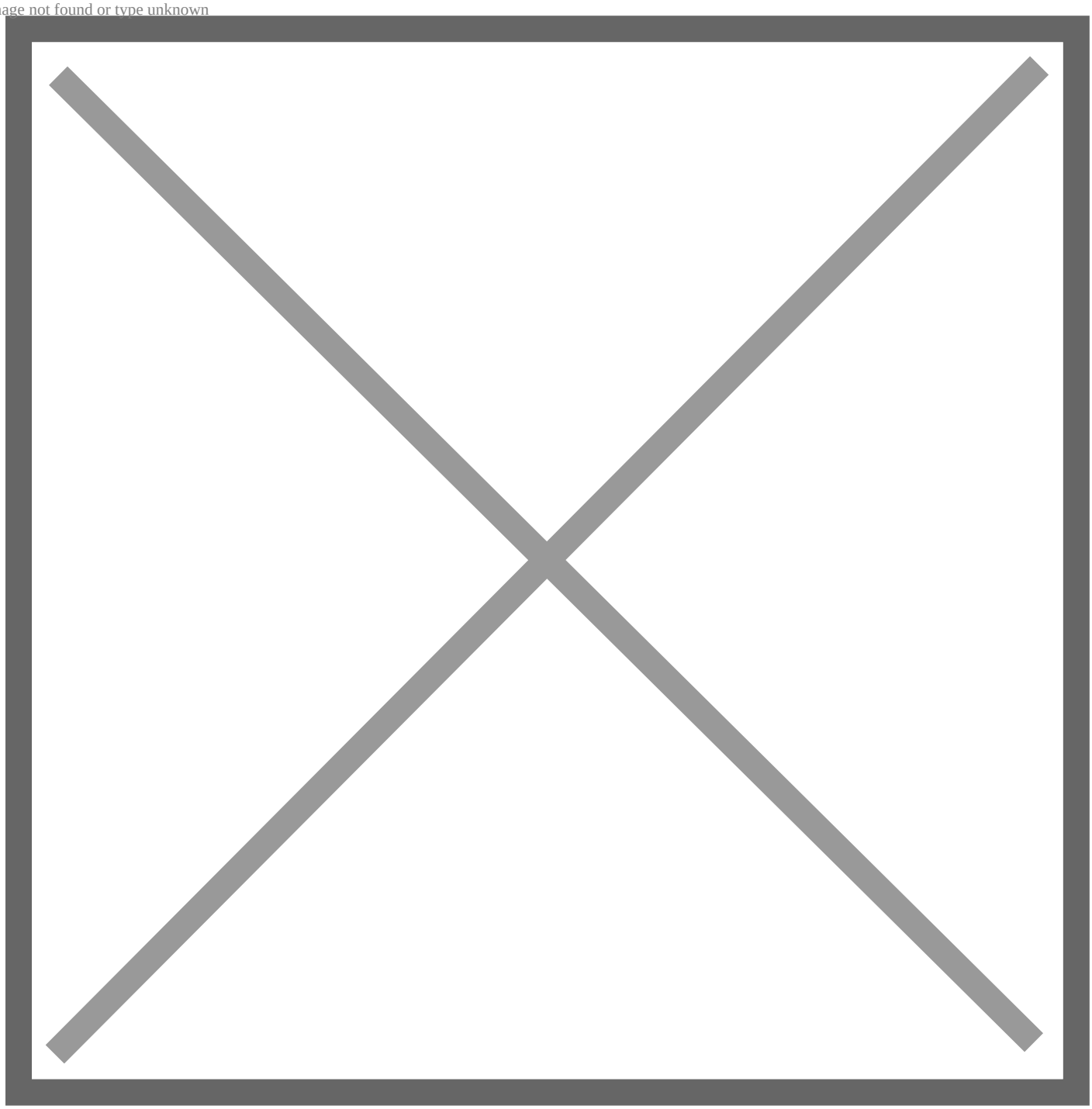


When midget car racing star Kaylee Bryson was growing up, she loved to watch legendary midget-car-turned-NASCAR® racer Christopher Bell dominate on the track. Knowing that they shared a similar background inspired Bryson to chase her dreams. Now, the Team Toyota driver is on the road to follow in her role model's footsteps.

"It was so cool to see how good he was because we had so much in common," she says. "He's from Oklahoma and started out racing my home track. We drove some of the same cars. Seeing that he came from the same place I come from, that helped me think it was possible for me to do it, too."

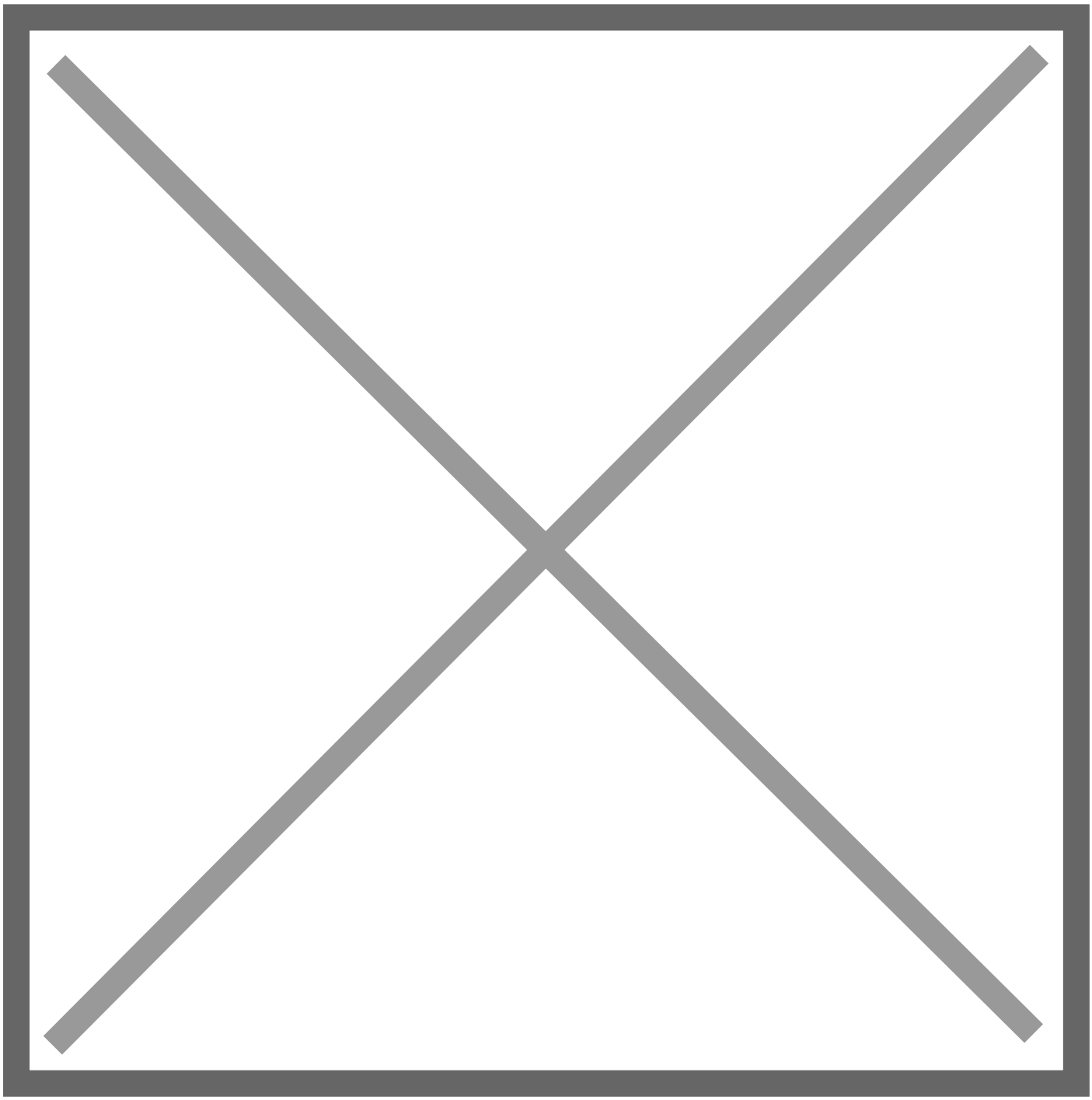
Bryson started racing go-karts when she was nine years old at the 3D Raceway in Oklahoma. After winning multiple races, what started as a weekend activity quickly became more than just a hobby. Her new routine: traveling state to state on Saturdays with her family to race against tougher competition.

"You have to be competitive, you have to have that drive to win, because the schedule, the mental stuff, can get tough," she says. "But I did not want a normal life at all. I love being on the road and traveling. The commitment's been totally worth it for me."

The 19-year-old racing force is one of the strongest up and coming open-wheel drivers in the sport today, with her sights set on climbing the Toyota Racing Development ranks to the top NASCAR® tour. After joining the Keith Kunz Motorsport (KKM) team in January 2020, Bryson has already earned three top-three podium finishes in national midget car feature events. Her first honor came after just three races with the team.

In 2021, Bryson is preparing for her first Chili Bowl with KKM, a six-night event that serves as the Nationals for midget car racing, not too far from her hometown of Muskogee, Okla. According to Bryson, it will be the toughest competition she will face all season, packed with talented drivers and a feature race every night.

"I'm super excited," she says. "This will be my first full year with Keith Kunz Motorsports racing, so I'm pumped to be competing with them. Not only are they the best in the business, but they're like family to me. I'm so excited to be with them."



An early start

Bryson has dreamed about racing professionally since elementary school.

“When I was in fourth or fifth grade, I would write these whole papers about how I wanted to go to NASCAR one day and be a professional race car driver,” she says. “A lot of the kids I went to school with thought that was weird, but all I could talk about was racing.”

And so far, her goals are coming to fruition. At age 13, she became just the second female driver in history to win a Micro sprint Golden Driller at the Tulsa Shootout by topping the restricted class in 2015. Eventually, she moved up the ranks and added a POWRi Outlaw Micro Sprint Series victory at I-44 Speedway in Oklahoma City in 2019.

Bryson made her national midget car debut in 2019 with the Toyota-powered Dave Mac Motorsports team, earning a top-five finish in the POWRi Lucas Oil National Midget League at Lucas Oil Speedway in Wheatland, Missouri in May. Midgets are small, high powered racing cars driven on a short course, and generally serve as a transition class for drivers making their way to higher divisions of motor racing, like NASCAR.

As she entered each new level of competition, her training schedule got more and more rigorous. Bryson transitioned to online high school after her sophomore year so that she could keep up with her classes. The flexibility of schooling virtually made it easier for her to succeed, both on and off the track.

“It started to get hard because I was missing a lot of school,” she says. “When I got a little bit older we started traveling more and it was hard to balance school and racing because I was on the road so much.”

Building a support system

Driving for Keith Kunz Motorsports has significantly improved her performance. Kaylee grew up racing alongside fellow Oklahomans and current KKM teammates Cannon McIntosh, Daison Presley, as well as former KKM driver and now Toyota ARCA driver Holley Hollan. All the racers on the team drive for Team Toyota, and have been a big support system for Bryson.

“It’s even more than team. It’s like you’re part of a family, and that’s a pretty good feeling,” she says. “I can talk to those guys and they would do anything for me. I do things for them. It’s such a good group and I’m so happy to have them as my friends.”

And while she considers her teammates her friends, they’re also some of her toughest competitors.

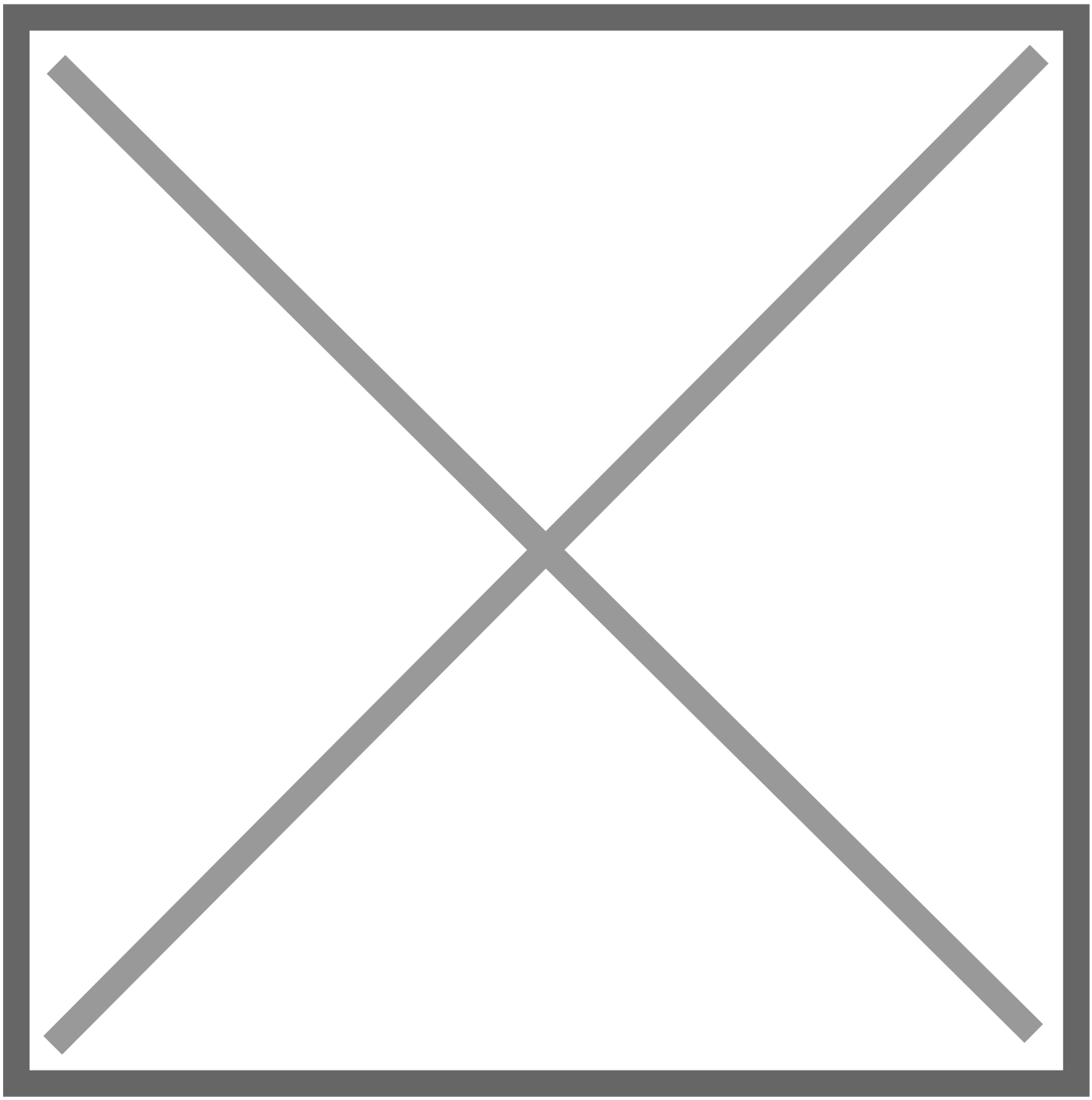
“It’s kind of funny because we’re all family, but also at the end of the day, we’re all competing,” she says. “We’re usually in the same race, competing against each other, but it’s professional. We push each other.”

Bryson’s KKM team and her family have supported her through the season’s ups and downs, and helped her through the unique challenges of being a young woman in a predominately male-dominated sport.

“There are some fans who look at you as just a girl who should not be racing,” she says. “Some drivers think they can push you around and that you’re not that serious. For the most part people are great, but there are some guys who don’t know how to handle a girl who can beat them.”

While sometimes Bryson feels she needs to be extra aggressive behind the wheel, she’s learned to ignore the comments. Her racing record speaks for itself.

“My family’s been my number one supporter through everything,” she says. “They have helped me understand that some people are just the way they are. I’ve received a whole lot of support and I think I focus now on the positives, not the negatives.”



The road ahead

With only one more year of dirt racing, Bryson’s started the testing process to make the transition to asphalt, driving time trials with Team Toyota to see if the new style of racing would be a good fit. But she still has a few goals she wants to achieve before leaving midget racing in the dust.

“Winning more races, that’s I think my biggest goal,” she says. ““I definitely see asphalt racing in my future, but I’ve got another year in dirt. As of right now, I would say my goal is definitely to be in the top of the competition

list and win some races."

The 2020 season was an unusual year for midget car racers, like for many athletes. Some races didn't allow fans and others were canceled, limiting the competition season. Still, Bryson got more hours on the track this year than any other season.

"In 2020, I did the most races I've ever done in a year," she says. "It's like doing math. If you do math every day, you're going to get better and better. But if you slow down and only do it once a month, your progress is going to fall off."

Bryson's hoping those track hours, plus a two-feature start during Midget Week in Indiana, will help prepare her for the Chili Bowl, where she could be the first woman to win a national midget car feature.

"I grew up watching Christopher Bell in Chili Bowl," she says. "And now I'm racing it. I'm hoping to do well in one of those first features and make the last feature, that's my goal. But also, I just want to be a good role model for younger kids watching."