***The Ralston Racing Story***

***Growing up we all have memories of our birthdays and the presents we received. I will never forget my 12th birthday on June 22, 1967. My Dad gave me my first racing go-kart. It was a McCullough kart with a Mac-9 motor. But we didn’t have a place to race it. We lived on a 160 acre farm and milked 60 cows with no place to ride a go-kart. This was a quite a dilemma. A tornado had coincidentally blown all the apple trees except one down in our apple orchard. My Dad decided that we would make a race track there to race the go-kart. Mother could not believe what we were doing and neither did the neighbors.***

***So we began to build the track and by the time we got done with it we had the best go-kart track around. People from all over came to race at our track with their kart or our karts, which had grown from one to three. My brother Jeff and my sister Ruth each had a kart and we would race each other. My Dad was a wise old man. We found out later in life that he was not giving us the full throttle of the motor when we first started. Every morning when we finished with chores we would fire up the kart and each one of us would take turns racing the kart before breakfast. Sometimes we thought the kart was really fast that morning but what we didn’t know was that Dad was giving us a little more throttle whenever he thought we could handle it. He was a wise old owl. We started racing at night and when we did the neighbors across the road would leave because of the noise. When people drove by they would be distracted by looking at us race and run into the ditch. Dad would go get the tractor and pull them out.***

***One of our frequent racers was a man by the name of Bill Rieken. Remember this name because later on in our racing story he will come back into it.***

***After a few years of racing go-karts, my brother Jeff and I decide that it was time to race stock cars. We talked Dad into letting us build a 57 Chevy and race it at the local dirt tracks. Again our Mother was not in favor of this but Dad always seems to get his way. The car was built and ready for the first race but neither Jeff nor I had a driver’s license to get it to the track. Our Dad had a hired man, which is what we called them back then. He lived with us and helped us on the farm and offered to drive the truck and trailer to the race. This adventure began the love of stock car racing and as everyone knows once it gets into your blood, it is there forever. Aren’t we glad? It was funny, our Mother would come to all of our school sporting events but she only came to one race. She couldn’t stand to see us race, it bothered her too much. I didn’t understand that then but I do now. You see my Mother lost a child, Ralph Jr. He died at 6 months because of a heart condition and I didn’t realize what she was going through until later in my life.***

***Racing was put on hold after high school but we continued to go to the races on a local level as well as NASCAR. We would always try and make the Father’s Day race at Michigan. In fact, I took Dad every Father’s Day to the race until he passed away in April of 1985.***

***Over the next few years Jeff, Ruth and I went our separate ways and had our families. We continued watching races but didn’t participate in them until the Christmas of 1996. My sister, Ruth, who by this time had a daughter Katie and a son Marshal, decided to purchase Marshal a racing go-kart. She called me up and had me come over and look at it. Ruth had hidden it in one of the sheds on their farm. When she took the cover off the kart to show me, I didn’t know at that time she would change our family for life. I asked Ruth where she bought such a kart and she said from “Bill Rieken”. The same Bill Rieken that came to our farm and raced go-karts in the 60’s. Bill had stayed in the go-kart racing business and owned his own shop where his son works and sell karts and parts all over the world. Then she informed me that Marshal would be racing at Delaware Speedway which is also owned by Bill Rieken. I wondered at that time if my Dad knew what he had started. I laughed so very hard.***

***Of course my two boys, Travis and Zach wanted me to buy them one right away but I really didn’t know if I want to be in the racing game again. My daughter Stacey was not interested in the racing thing and I was glad. When spring came and it was time for Marshal to race we all went up to help him and to give him our support.***

***Every Saturday night we would go up to the race track and help Marshal with his kart and half way through the season I purchased a kart from who else but Bill Rieken. I still laugh to this day about it.***

 ***I only had one kart and two sons so we had to change the restrictor behind the carburetor so both boys could run the same kart. There was an argument on what number we were going to run. Travis wanted 13 and Zach wanted 07. I asked Zach why he wanted 07 and he said he want that because it was my stock car number. I didn’t know he got in my stuff and discovered that. Travis was 17 at the time and Zach was 10 so they flipped a coin and Travis won, the kart number was 13.***

***During this time Ruth’s daughter, Katie, was bugging her Mother to race so Ruth did everything she could, like always, to come up with the money to buy Katie her own kart. When you are racing at Delaware Speedway there is a goal to finish 4th or better and you get a trophy. So all of our goals were to get 4th or better which none of the boy’s had done yet. Here comes Katie and she gets 4th place right away and all the boys were not happy. In fact Katie went on to win many track championships and races at Delaware Speedway to a point where men would not race against her and they would quit.***

***During our first summer of racing I realized that we could all be together as a family on Saturday night at the race track when during the week we had to run here and there for school activities. So it became a family gathering and again racing was back into our family’s lives.***

***It was early December on a Saturday and my sister Ruth showed up at my house and informed me that we have to teach our kids how to coon hunt. We grew up hunting with dogs called Red Bones and I asked her where we were going to find Red Bone dogs. Within a half hour Ruth was on the phone and found a man who had two for sale so we loaded up the kids in her van and that night we were hunting. This was Ruth’s approach to life – JUST DO IT! And probably the reason her son is playing in the NFL - because she kept telling him he would. That mantra seems to work for the Ralston’s.***

***Two week before the start of the 1998 racing season at the go-kart track on April 18, 1998, tragedy struck my family and I lost my 17 year old son Travis, in a car accident. His best friend was driving drunk and lost control. Now I knew how my Mother felt when she lost my brother but until then I could not understand what she went through. The pain that went through me was something that I don’t want any parent to go through. We laid Travis to rest in his baseball uniform number #13. Travis would have turned 18 on April 23 and he was a senior in high school. This was the hardest thing that had hit our family and I knew in order to keep our family together (and that’s what Travis would have wanted) we made the opening race two weeks later and had a ceremony for him. Zach drove the checker flag around the track in honor of his brother. Bill Rieken led all of us in prayer and the nights racing was in honor of Travis. We set up a cross on the side of the road that Travis was killed on and Katie, bless her heart, set her 4th place trophy there for Travis.***

***During the 1998 season Zach, Marshal and Katie where getting trophies on a regular bases and even winning a few races. Again we used racing to bring our families together one night a week.***

***The season of 1999 Zach won two track championships that year in the 2-cycle class and the 4-cycle class. Katie won her first championship in the 2-cycle adult sportsman’s class and Marshal won lot of races but it was a struggle because of his growing size. Marshal was a great driver but always to heavy. Ruth and I both knew he was going to be a big man and Ruth kept telling him he was going to be a great football player someday and it came true.***

***In the middle of the 2001 season I took Zach and Stacey to see the movie “Gone in 60 Seconds.” After that Stacey decided that she wanted to race. I was in the middle of a point’s battle and really didn’t have time but she always seemed to get her way with me. So we put Zach and Travis’s first kart together for her so she could race. We had a ball with that and she did really well. They both raced in the same class so she really wanted to beat her brother. I was really proud of her.***

***Again, and God only knows why, on May 20th of 2002 I lost my daughter Stacey, in a car accident. A car had crossed the yellow line. She was 17 and a junior in high school. My heart was broken again, I had lost my “Miss America” and I cannot describe the pain that I had and still have inside of me. Here I had lost two children both at the age of 17 and had only Zach left. She was killed early Monday morning and we laid her to rest on Thursday. Looking back on the last time I saw each of them the night before they were killed and they both in their own way said good-bye to me. Travis gave me a hug that seem to last forever and just before Stacey walked out the door she look back at me right into my eyes and she said “Good bye Dad.” I can remember those two moments like it was yesterday. I have always been told that God will not put you through anything that he does not think you are strong enough to take, but I was questioning that.***

***That Saturday I decided that we were going to race. That became the best decision I could have made for Zach’s sake. I decided that if we didn’t continue doing what we do no matter what, that he might go down a path that I didn’t want him to go. Here was a boy at the age of 15, who lost his brother at the age of 17 and then to lose his sister at the age of 17, you couldn’t blame him for thinking that he would be killed when he turned 17. Racing became even more important part of our life. I had to make sure that he and I stayed on the right path and to continue to do the right thing. I made sure to show Zach that things are going to happen to you in life and you can’t let that get you down or stop you from reaching your dreams.***

***Every go-kart driver has a dream of winning the IKF (International Karting Federation) Duffy award. You only get one shot a year at this title and we had tried a few time and only to get as high as 4th. This year the pavement nationals were at Jamaica, Iowa. Zach wanted to go so badly but with the loss of Stacey I didn’t feel I had the strength to do this because we only raced on dirt tracks and only asphalt once. We only had one set of pavement tires and 10 sets of dirt tires. I was not going to buy another set of tires just to race on pavement. He begged and begged, so I agreed to race one class one day. Marshal and I put the kart together and the three of us took Ruth’s red conversion van with our snowmobile trailer with one kart, one motor and one set of asphalt tires to Jamaica, Iowa, a place I had never heard of. We got there a little late and when Zach drew for starting number he drew number 13, he looked at me and tears came to my eyes and I shook my head.***

***We won our first National Championship that day. Zach gave his mechanic buckle to his cousin Marshal for helping us and when they interviewed him he dedicated this Championship to his brother and sister.***

***During the next couple of years Ruth and I continue to help our kid’s race go-karts. Zach, Marshal and Katie continue to win races throughout the race season and we went coon hunting in the winter. We had coon dogs and go-karts. Many people thought that Ruth and I were crazy and they still think that to this day. We always had one goal in mind and that was to help our kids succeed in whatever they wanted to do and to be the best at it.***

***When Zach turned 17 he asked me if we were going to celebrate his birthday and I said no. When he turned 18 I told him to tell all his friends that we are going to have a big party and that there are going to be a keg. I bought a 16 gallon keg of 1919 Root Beer and 10 gallons of ice cream. I learned something that day about kids and kegs. They don’t really care what is in the keg so much, all they want to do is pump in and flick the little lever to fill up there cup. They drank all the root beer and ate all the ice cream. I now have a child past the age of 17.***

***On June 22, 2005, my fiftieth birthday and for Zach’s graduation present I put him in a World of Outlaw Sprint car at Smiley Sutton’s Driving school in Dallas, TX and on the night of my birthday I got to see my son run 100 laps in a sprint car. This was the second best birthday of my life and it all started 48 years ago with the first best birthday at age 12.***

***During this time Marshal was becoming well known as a football player. He was playing at NIACA Junior college and Zach was going to every game. Marshal then signed with the Iowa Hawkeye’s. Ruth came to my house and informed me that we must all move to Iowa City to support Marshal and that she would find a house for all of us to live in. She came back the next day and found a place. I told Zach we are moving to Iowa City to support Marshal while he played football for Iowa. I won’t tell you that it was easy living together with my sister but we were not there for our pleasure we were there to support Marshal. Zach and I ran a few races but mostly we supported Marshal while he played football.***

***During this time Zach was always bugging me about racing here on the local level and I told him that if he wants to race he would need to move to North Carolina. We did some research and found a “Crew School” that taught you how to ‘go over the wall’ during a pit stop. We decided that this was the way to get to North Carolina so Zach started saving his money. In the spring of 2007 Marshal was drafted by the Baltimore Ravens and our Hawkeye experience was over. So we bought a new go-kart and started racing at Delaware Speedway again because the IKF Nationals were going to be our home track.***

***In July of 07 and Zach’s number was 07, he won his second IKF National Championship Duffy and today they sit one on each side of my TV stand.***

***In April of 2008, Zach enrolled in the “Crew School” and we loaded up his Explorer and moved him to North Carolina. It was very emotional for me but for him it was a dream come true. I knew if he wanted his dreams to come true it would have to start here. After two weeks of school they took the students to an ARCA race at the famous Rockingham Speedway in North Carolina and being the son I raised, he went up and down the line asking for a job and landed a job that day as the rear tire carrier for a team and also set up an interview for the following Wednesday at Andy Belmont Racing in Concord, North Carolina. The next week Belmont Racing hired Zach and put him to work cleaning the trailer. He cleaned the trailer so well they decided to give him a chance and he lasted the whole season. While working for Belmont he became friends with the crew chief Tommy Bear and driver Grant Enfinger. Also, while working with Belmont, Grant was putting together his own ARCA team and at the end of the season he left Belmont Racing to pursue his own career in racing and he brought Zach along with him as well as Tommy Bear for his crew chief. Grant was only racing the TV races so Zach would come home during the off time and work back here in Iowa and a week before the race Zach would fly back to North Carolina to help Grant get ready for his race and this went on all during the ARCA season. Of course Zach was always on me about getting a car to drive and finding money to get one. He still had his dream of driving one of these cars.***

***After the 2009 season with Grant, Zach came back to Iowa for Christmas and in January of 2010 he had to leave to get the car ready for Grant to race in Daytona. I took Zach to the airport and he told me “Dad I am going to try very hard not to come back here again.” As hard as that was to hear and it brought tears to my eyes, I knew my son understood what it took to follow your dream and to never give up.***

***I followed him to almost every race and I became the team photographer. I watched Zach grow into a young man that I was very proud of. Zach found a place to live and he worked very hard on the cars for Grant that season. At the end of the season again Zach came home for Christmas and again was putting pressure on me to get a sponsor so he could race. All he wanted to do was race and that was good because I knew he had not giving up his dream.***

***In February of 2011, I was in Daytona and ran into the crew chief Tommy Bear and we started talking about putting Zach into a race car. That led to a call from Bear, we all call him Bear and not Tommy, and he said that I could rent a Limited Late Model car and put Zach in a race on Memorial Day weekend at the most famous NASCAR race track where all the legends in NASCAR got their start and that was Hickory Motor Speedway in Hickory, North Carolina. This was going to be Zach’s first time in a stock car and for it to be at Hickory Motor Speedway was an incredible feeling for me.***

***We practiced on Friday, May 27th at Hickory. First time Zach got into the car and it wasn’t moving because he didn’t know how to put it in reverse, and of course he wouldn’t not ask anyone. The practice was cut short by rain but Zach did manage to spin it out a few times. The next day was the race and during the qualifying run Zach spun the car out again so we had to start last in a 22 car field. The first race Zach was running last in a 25 lap race when a red flag came out and they had to park the cars on the front stretch for quite some time. I don’t know what happen during that time but when the race started back up again with only 7 laps to go, Zach went from last to 9th and that was when I knew that my son is a race car driver.***

***Zach was with driver Grant Enfinger again that 2011 season. Grant obtained a ride with Allgaier Motorsports out of Springfield, IL so Zach packed up his stuff and moved to Springfield and lived in one of the crew member’s basement for the summer.***

***Zach worked for Allgaier with Grant for the rest of the summer until the last race of the season which was at Toledo Speedway in Toledo, OH. Again I received a phone call from Bear saying that we could rent a car from Doug Stringer and race it at the last ARCA race in Toledo. So we rented the car and went to Toledo with the help from Allgaier Motor Sports to provide us with the trailer and hauler. Zach spun out in qualifying and we did not make the race but everyone there realized that Zach did want to become a race car driver.***

***During the summer of 2011 I changed jobs. I had worked with a company for 12 years and a competitor lured me away to work for them. The company I was with before became an employee owned company and I was one of the Charter Members which meant I was there at the beginning of their shareholder stock options, so all of that money opened up to me when I left. I went to my tax lady Rose and told her my plans on getting my son into racing and she said, “You don’t want to do that Richard.” I told Rose, “You are looking at a parent who has buried two of his children and the only one I have left has worked very hard to follow his dream and I want to help him make that dream come true.“ I took the plunge.***

***Working for this new company I decided to introduce them to the world of marketing and racing. When the ARCA race came to Kansas City I invited all of my new co-workers along with the owner of the company, which had never been to a race in his life, down to the pits. I got them their credentials and it was the first night race ever at the Kansas Speedway. Zach had all the co-workers pushing the car around and they fell in love with him. The owner of the company, Doug Johnson, after the race asked me how much it would cost to have his company name on the side of the car and I told him we would talk about that later Doug.***

***With this new found money Zach and I decided to skip Daytona and concentrate on the short tracks since we didn’t have a sponsor at the time. I happened to be at the office in Kansas City where the company I work for was headquartered and my cell phone rings and it is Bear.***

***I knew this would be trouble because every time Bear calls he has something scheming. He told me we need to put Zach in the race at Daytona, I said no. He said yes. You need to get the money for the motor and we will use Grant’s speedway car. I asked Bear if he had asked Grant and he said no, we will use it anyway. I went into my new boss’s office and shut the door. I told Doug that it has always been a dream of mine to put my son in the race at Daytona and that I have the money for the car but I need the money for the engine. He leaned back in his chair and said, “Richard remember when we were at the race at Kansas and I asked you what it would cost to put my companies name on the side of a race car and you said we would talk about that later, is this later Richard?” I said that this was later. So Doug took a chance on us and gave us the money for the motor. Next we had to get the ok from ARCA to test our car at the schedule test in Daytona Dec. 16 through the 18th. ARCA did approve us to test so we went ahead and leased the motor.***

***Arriving at Daytona was very emotional for me. Here was the most famous track in racing history and my son would be driving on it. We have very good help in our Crew Chief, Tommy Bear, driving instructor Grant Enfinger, who we purchased the car from and crew member Dave Savicky. When Zach went out for his first laps I was standing on top of a hauler and it was very emotional. There was my son physically on the track at Daytona driving a car going 180mph. For two days we did single car runs and we also changed the motor to try and get more speed out it. After two days of single car runs ARCA approved that so it was time to get approved in the four car draft. That took place Sunday morning of the test and Zach started fourth and worked his way up from fourth to third to second to lead the draft. ARCA approved our draft test and we were approved to try and qualify this car in February for the ARCA race in Daytona on February 18th, 2012.***

***During the months leading up to the race our sponsor went all out on marketing this race for their company with shirts, jackets, new company slogan and inviting customers to the race. The pressure was really on us to perform because we had to be in the top 32 in the qualifying runs in order to make the race and if we weren’t we had to go home. Our sponsors were landing in Daytona at 1pm and qualifying started at 2:00pm so it was possible that they would only see Zach run 3 laps and if we were not fast enough that is all they would see. Talk about pressure, I had never relayed on other people’s money to race before and it was a lot of pressure.***

***Zach and Bear left our shop in North Carolina on Monday, February 13 and headed for Daytona, I was already there getting the living arrangements made and on the way down our truck that was pulling our 48ft trailer broke down. A bracket broke taking out the fan, the fan clutch, and the radiator. They sat somewhere in Georgia at a gas station and had no idea what was wrong at the time. Bear quickly called his friend from Empire racing who the very next morning dispatched a truck for us. They saved the day. Zach had the truck towed to a repair shop to get fixed and finished the journey to Daytona.***

***Wednesday , Tech day, did not go so well for us There was a lot of discussion going on between Bear, Zach and the ARCA officials but we did get it all approved to practice with a lot of work. Thursday practice started at 1:00pm to 5:00pm. During our first practice sessions the car was getting slower and slower until just before the end of practice the motor blew. ARCA let us stay until 6:30 working on getting a new motor in and they also let us come 45 minutes earlier on Friday morning to complete putting in the new motor. There was no more practice sessions so we didn’t know where we stood with the new motor. Zach laid down a time to put us 22nd in the field and we ended up 26 overall until they tech the top 10 and found 3 cars to be illegal so we were going to start 23rd. I was so proud of Zach and all those helped us get here. Just like Saturday night back home racing go-karts, here it was Saturday night and we were all together. But we were at Daytona Speedway living the dream. Zach finished 18th and the dream lives on. Where we go from here God only knows but one thing is for sure and that is we will not give up following our dream.***