

The top driver in the Steele family is the youngest

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Larry Steele recalls when son Dristian was 4 years old and in the preschool Head Start program. The boy's teacher displayed a laminated poster about goals and dreams. "Dristian's (dream) was to be a race-car driver," said Steele.

"We let him run with it and go forward with it."

"It" included earning 2018 Junior Dragster Driver of the Year at Samoa Drag Strip in Eureka.

Larry Steele admits the speed bug carried by his Uncle Bert skipped his generation and instead settled on Dristian, prompting a need for speed the preteen embraced in 2016.

"One day I was watching TV and my uncle asked me if I wanted to race like that, and I said, yeah," said Dristian. "And we went down to go watch the races.

"Then I got in one and I said, 'I want to do this!'"

Uncle Bert was renowned for racing the circle track in Coos Bay back in the '80s. These days, he's best known for his collection of classic muscle cars, particularly the 1968 SS Camaro he rebuilt to win Best of Show at the 2017 "Sea Cruise" in Crescent City.

"I've been doing cars forever, but (I got) really into it the last 10 or 15 years," said Bert Steele.

His collection has grown over those years to more than 30, stored in his massive garage and shop on the outskirts of Crescent City.

"I used to go up there when I was kid, about Dristian's age, and watch Uncle Bert on the circle track at Redwood Acres up in Oregon," Larry said. "He built an '87 IROC and raced it. It was exciting for me to be in the middle of that.

"But it kinda skipped me and went to my son. I still get to enjoy the excitement through him."

Neither of the Steeles was surprised that Dristian, at the precocious age of 10, took so easily to drag racing. "I knew he was good on his quad (four-wheel ATV), racing around, so I knew he'd be a good one to get going in drag racing," said Uncle Bert.

"I didn't have to learn much," said Dristian, "it just came to me as I went."

"He adapted well, adapted to it real quick," Larry Steele said. "I was a little hesitant at first to see my son out there at his age, but there was no harm in it going 45 mph. The next time he drove in the next season, he was going 75.

"He had butterflies in his stomach. I knew he was hooked when he said, 'Dad, I want to go again!'"

The sport's junior circuit allows drivers as young as 5 through age 16 in 16-foot dragsters, which are about half the size of professional cars. The youngest drivers still must be certified in track racing and pass a physical exam, Steele said.

They start out in 12-second cars that go about 45 mph down an eighth-of-a-mile track. The adults race a quarter-mile track.

Dristian soon graduated to a 7.90 dragster that topped 80 mph. The 7.90 is the max time allowed on the eighth-of-a-mile track. Weights are added to the vehicle to slow it down, if needed.

Against regional competitors in his age bracket from Redding and Sacramento, to Coos Bay and Medford, Dristian developed an edge.

"The secret is, there's three lights before the green," said Dristian. "At the last second before the last, that's when you hit the gas. Because there's the tiniest bit of delay, and that will help you go at the right time."

Last year, he racked up enough points from his top finishes to earn Driver of the Year.

"So that's pretty good, to climb up to the top with his points and minutes and time trials, hitting a light accurately," said Larry Steele. "He got pretty good at it."

Last year's Driver of the Year may have been his biggest award, but the biggest event he won was the Big Buck Shoot-Out at the Samoa Drag Strip. It was a money race, with a \$3,000 prize pool. Dristian took home \$2,500.

"I spent a little bit on a tiny, little dirt bike," Dristian said. "The rest is in the bank for later," his dad added.

At 12 years old, Dristian said he's won so many races, he's lost count.

He usually competes once every other week, during a four-month season through the summer. But this year, it was less often because of a setback in his Uncle Bert's health.

Dristian's most-recent win was Sept. 10 at Somoa, where he took first with a speed of 81.96 mph.

He's already looking forward to next season, which begins in April 2020. He'll be joined by family ... his dad's 1971 Camaro will finally be ready to run in the street-race category.

And Dristian's cousin, Neveah, will be old enough to join him on the drag track in Dristian's old car. She'll be all of 5.