

AUTO-BIOGRAPHY

TEEN TAKES GOLD FOR MECHANICAL MASTERY

SHANNON LEE MANNION

Meet Nathan Banke, an apprentice auto mechanic whose career is taking off with a silver bullet, nay, gold, matching the medals he won in May at the Ontario Technological Skills Competition in Waterloo and in June at the Canadian Skills Competition in Edmonton.

John-Paul Tapp, dean of the School of Transportation and Building Trades at **Algonquin** College, has high praise for Ottawa's wunderkind. "He was the most likely candidate for the skills competitions and he won them hands down. Nathan is a credit to his teachers who work with him and to his employer."

Nathan is currently working for Halley's Service Centre on Montreal Road, where manager Gord Halley and Nathan's colleagues show their pride in his achievements with a large congratulatory sign.

"The national competition was tough," admits Nathan, 18, who says he was probably the youngest of the 11 contestants, some of whom were almost licensed. He plans to have his licence by the time he's 20.

How did he do so well? Having a plan helps.

"Halfway through Grade 12 at Laurentian (High School)," he explains, "I had one more credit to go and I had to make a decision either to go to the Royal Military College for mechanical engineering or to take advantage of the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program. OYAP paid for the first level of my apprenticeship."

But why automotive when the program offers 130 choices, from "swine herdsman" to boat repairer?

Nathan replies, "Because cars have always been my passion. If there's knowledge to be had, I soak it up."

Being the apprentice, shops where he's worked would give him the niggling problems: trim work that needed righting or the electrical problems that make most mechanics shudder. Nathan approaches them with alacrity.

"Electrical is my forte," he says with enthusiasm.

OYAP allows a full-time student who is 16 or has Grade 10 or 16 credits to choose from a slate of interests and begin formal training toward apprenticeship while finishing a high school diploma.

Nathan was fortunate to work at a placement where he was paid. While completing high school and accumulating co-op hours, he went to **Algonquin** College two days a week to get his Level One in auto mechanics. He also took a night course in English two nights a week and worked Saturdays at Myers Cadillac Chevrolet.

His longer-term goal? Get his licence and work and save money for a year, then go on to university to study mechanical engineering, with a speciality in automotive powertrain design.

"I'll keep up the pace as long as I can," he adds. "I can't sit down."

But sit down he did at the restaurant down the street from Halley's, and while waiting for breakfast orders to be readied for the guys at the shop, Nathan talked about his automotive pursuit. Q: What are you driving at the moment? A: Nothing special, just a 1987 Mazda 323 GT, but I've had lots of vehicles.

Q: Well, how many could you have had between 16 and 18? A: Nine.

Q: Oh ... why? A: I didn't fix them all. I'd pick them up, drive them or sell them or something.

Q: When you competed in the skills competitions, was there anything that almost tripped you up?

A: There were tricks. For instance, the running lights weren't working. They'd soldered over the connections in the light bulb socket. They do things you'd never see in the workplace.

In another, they'd clipped the end of one of the fuses, but since I was following procedures, I simply removed it, found that problem and replaced it.