

Mike Bridges is ready to race. The Scottsdale 10-year-old is competing in the stock division of the All-American Soapbox Derby.

Getting
on their
soapbox

Families tout fun, rewards of hobby car racing

By Emily Seftel

THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

The Disney movie *Miracle in Lane 2* tells of a wheelchair-bound boy who gets a chance to win a trophy by competing in a soapbox derby.

After watching it, Gilbert resident Krista Osborne was sure of one thing: She wanted to be a soapbox racer.

That was almost two years ago. On Saturday, 14 year-old Krista and twin sister Karla will compete in the All-American Soapbox Derby in Akron, Ohio, for the second time.

Krista had heard of soapbox racing earlier. Her father, Carl, who had wanted to race when he was a kid, had talked up the sport.

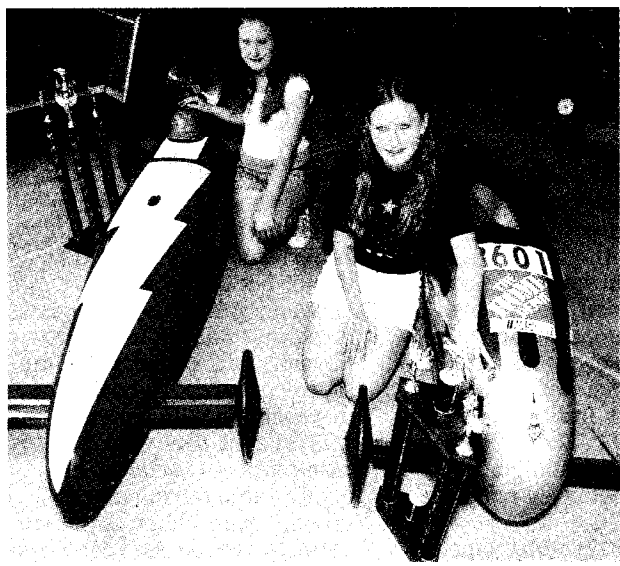
When she insisted she was interested, he took her to Tucson to watch a race. That sealed the deal. They ordered Krista a car so she could start competing.

The sport quickly became a family affair. At Krista's first race, Karla decided she wanted in.

Soapbox racing is divided into three classifications: stock, super stock and masters. Factors such as the car's shape and weight (including the driver) determine the competitors' divisions. Krista and Karla will compete in the masters and super stock divisions, respectively.

Another Valley enthusiast, Mike Bridges, 10, of Scottsdale, will compete in the stock division.

Mike started racing two years ago, after his grandfather got him interested. Mike's father, Shane, had never experienced soapbox racing. Now, it's a family hobby.



CORI TAKEMOTO WILLIAMS/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Karla (left) and Krista Osborne, 14, of Gilbert are taking their racers to the derby in Ohio for the second time. "A lot of my friends had no idea what it was," Karla says.

"It's full family participation," Shane said. "At first I didn't want to get involved because of the time commitment, but now I'm hooked. He and I built the car together and his stepmom works at all the races."

Family affair

And that's what makes it so appealing, said Jeff Iula, general manager of the All-American Soapbox Derby — that the nature of the sport encourages families to spend time together.

"The family involvement is not like soccer or Little League, where you just give them a ball or a bat and say,

Soapbox racers build family ties along with fast cars

SOAPBOX

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'I'll pick you up in two hours.'

"At the derby, you see Dad helping out at the starting line, Mom down at the end waiting for the kid, the sister is cheering them on. That's the biggest thing that most people will tell you."

Last year, the Osborne family logged more than 10,000 miles traveling to tournaments together.

"Most of the races are out of town, so there's a lot of time in the car, lots of talking. It's been really good that way," Carl said.

His daughters agree. Karla said that before she and her sister started soapbox racing, they didn't get to spend as much time with their father. Racing changed that. When they're not traveling, Carl helps his daughters work on their cars.

The competition aspect of the sport can't be ignored: Contestants race to win. But soapbox racing is not just about winning, the parents say. It's also about the skills their kids pick up, and the friends they make.

There are practical benefits. A couple of years ago, Krista

All-American Soapbox Derby

For more information on soapbox racing, such as race schedules and ordering kits, go to www.aasbd.org. To get information on clubs in Arizona, click on Local Race Sites, which is under the Community heading.

and Karla didn't know the first thing about tools; now they have their own toolboxes.

Other advantages are harder to quantify — the benefits of meeting other people who love the same things they do.

No one else at Mike's school is involved in soapbox racing, so it's fun to meet other people at the races, he said.

The twins feel the same way.

"With our friends, no one knows what we're talking about," Krista said. "We don't feel weird in Akron; we can talk about it with everyone."

This year, the tournament has about 500 entrants. Most are from around the country, but competitors also come from as far away as Japan and New Zealand.

The national tournament has been around since 1934,

Soapbox racing divisions

Stock: The cars are 76 inches long and have a plastic shell. With the driver, they can weigh up to 200 pounds. Drivers can decorate stock cars with markers and stickers, but aren't allowed to paint them.

Super stock: The cars are 76 inches long and can weigh up to 230 pounds, including the driver. Super stock drivers are allowed to paint their cars, and the plastic shell is rougher so it's easier to paint.

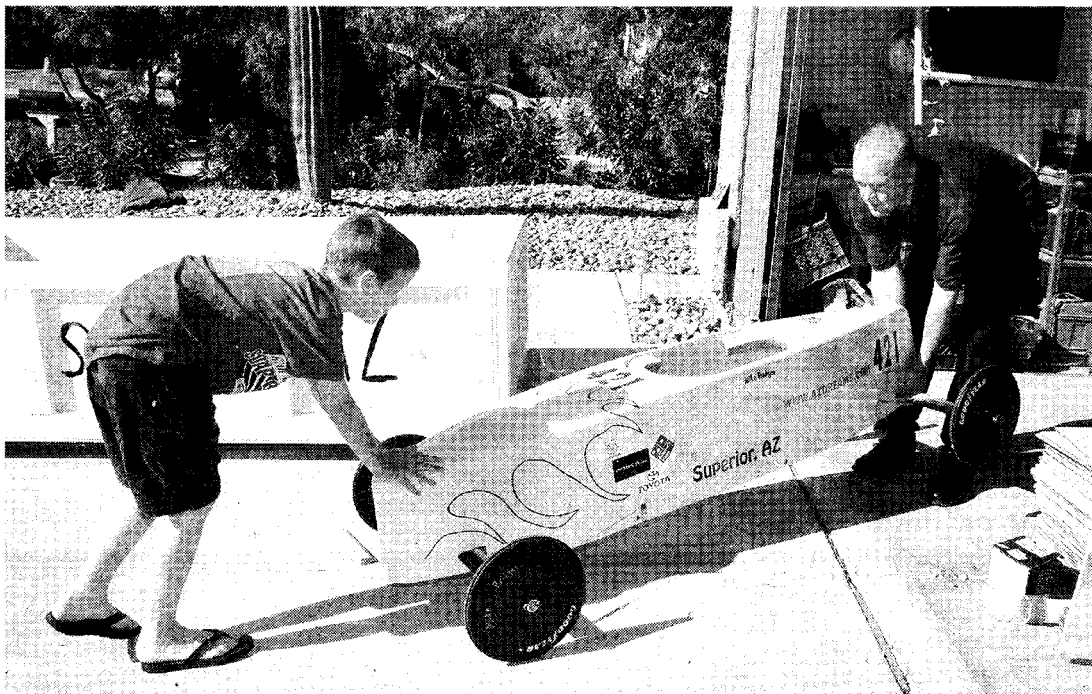
Masters: The cars are 84 inches long and have a fiberglass shell. Combined, the car and driver can weigh up to 255 pounds. The minimum age requirement for stock and super stock drivers is 8 years old; masters drivers must be at least 11.

"A lot of my friends had no idea what it was," Karla said. "They just thought you went downhill in some old car."

Mike has found that when he tells people about racing, it's often the first time they have met someone involved in the sport. He's convinced more people would do it if they just took the time to find out what it's like.

"More people would want to start doing it if they came to races," the fifth-grader said. "Definitely."

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MARK HENLE/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Mike Bridges and his dad, Shane, roll their derby racer into their Scottsdale garage. "It's full family participation," Shane says. "He and I built the car together, and his stepmom works at all the races."

but the sport's popularity peaked from 1959 to 1969, Iula said.

In the 1970s, its appeal plunged due to a number of factors: the 1972 pullout of longtime sponsor Chevrolet, which cited the changing interests of youths, and a 1973 cheating scandal.

The biggest factor, though, has been the increasing number of activities available to kids, Iula said.

"Today there are so many things we have to compete with, from soccer to Nintendo. Back then, you played in

Little League, or raced in the derby, or both."

Iula also notes that these days fewer people have the skills to build a car from scratch.

"Today's generation lacks three things: time, talent and tools," Iula said. "They don't have time (to build their own car) because they're involved in other stuff, and fathers of this generation don't have nearly the talent.

"They can hook up a VCR or DVD player, but as far as building something, they aren't quite as good. Because

of that, they don't have the tools to build (cars)."

The tournament saver was the plastic kit from which competitors assemble cars, instead of building them from scratch as they used to. After the derby introduced the plastic-kit car in 1992, the number of competitors at the tournament jumped to 205, from 160 the previous year.

Now, tournament attendance is back on the rise. But many people, the Osborne twins said, are surprised to find out that soapbox racing still exists.