

Soap Box Derby becomes popular again

More girls, wind-tunnel technology, computer modeling now the norm

The Associated Press

Updated: 1:22 a.m. ET Oct. 29, 2005

CLEVELAND - Alex Trecha folds his 11-year-old body into his red Soap Box Derby car to prepare for his first race of the day, and his father checks once more to make sure the racer is perfectly lined up.

Greg Trecha lovingly pats his son on the helmet and says, "Have fun." Then the boy from Cranberry, Pa., and his motorless car hurtle down the hill against another racer on a new track located near Lake Erie.

A lot has changed since the first Soap Box Derby in 1934. More girls are racing, wind-tunnel technology and computer modeling are the norm, and the cars are made mainly of plastic from easy-to-build kits.

But the sport almost didn't survive the loss of corporate sponsorship, the changing American family and the tastes of 21st century kids.

Over the last decade, Soap Box Derby racing has come barreling back thanks to a blend of tenacity, adaptation, renewed interest from national sponsors — including NASCAR — and a yearning for nostalgia.

"It's part of mom's apple pie, it's wrapped in the flag, it's from simpler times and it's a very family oriented event," said Tony Deluca, a retired deputy sheriff who has been the executive director of the All-American Soap Box Derby since 1989.

Photographer Myron Scott became enamored with the boy-built car race he was sent to cover in 1933, and a year later the first Soap Box Derby national championship was held.

At its peak in the 1960s, there were more than 20,000 kids participating in 250 clubs across the country. Each club sent one boy to the national championships every July at Derby Downs in Akron, Ohio. Celebrities such as actor Jimmy Stewart appeared, helping attract up to 30,000 fans and loads of media attention.

But the late John DeLorean, then general manager of Chevrolet and later one of the country's most infamous entrepreneurs, abruptly pulled the funding plug in 1972.

"I didn't think it fit in today's contemporary America," DeLorean said.

Along with its sponsor and \$1 million, the derby lost some of its luster.

"I know when Chevy pulled out after 1972, they all thought the Derby would fail within three years," said Jeff Lula, All-American's general manager. "And when I started here (in 1975) we had 99 kids at nationals and \$500 in the bank."

Local clubs disappeared overnight, going from 251 in 1972 to 138 in 1973. The malaise plagued the Derby through the 1980s, when there were as few as 83 clubs nationwide.

"We really roughed it for a few years," Deluca said.

The sport's decline was so precipitous that passionate supporters such as Lula — who can tick off from memory every national champion since 1934 — would regularly get asked: "Whatever happened to the Soap Box Derby?"

All-American slowly, if at times begrudgingly, adapted to revitalize itself.

In 1977, a rival group, National Derby Rallies, was started. It ran local "rally" races year-round — instead of just the local and national championships that All-American typically ran — so young drivers could qualify for the NDR national championship, prompting All-American to start its own rally series nine years later.

But the biggest change occurred in 1992. That's when All-American began making its own, easy-to-build kit cars, which now cost from \$415 to \$535 each, rather than sending out plans showing racers how to make one.

"We realized parents today didn't have the three things they had back (in the 50s or 60s): time, tools and the talent," Lula said. "You can build a car now in four to five hours, whereas back then it could take four to five months."

The number of local clubs jumped from 91 in 1991 to 98 the following year. Today, there are 160 clubs in 40 states.

As All-American was beginning to get its wheels under it again, major national sponsors started coming back, including Goodyear Tires in 1997 as the main sponsor. Before it relinquished its spot, Goodyear used its connections to align NASCAR as a Soap Box partner.

"We're not like other sports. You can't play NASCAR in elementary school. So the Soap Box Derby is our sandbox," said Andrew Giangola, a NASCAR spokesman. "And you don't need to be a hardcore racing fan to appreciate the all-American values of Soap Box Derby."

Not that sponsors or history matter to Alex Trecha, who placed fourth in the stock division on a recent Sunday.

"I don't really watch NASCAR," said Alex, who juggles school, soccer and Cub Scouts around racing weekends. "Racing was dad's idea. He asked, and I thought it was something really cool."

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