Champions, Cheaters, and Childhood Dreams

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Champions, Cheaters, and Childhood Dreams

Memories of the Soap Box Derby

Melanie Payne

The University of Akron Press
Akron, Ohio
For my mother Nathlie and my brother Dave.
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In the sections of the book that are written as narratives I tried to maintain the integrity of the speaker’s quotes. In these sections only, quotes may have been slightly modified for accurate chronology, clarity, and transition. I tried to do this without changing the meaning or intent of the speaker. I also changed the order in which anecdotes and quotes were recorded if it did not change the speaker’s story. I tried my best to maintain the speaker’s style and voice, which is why the grammatical errors are often left uncorrected.

These narratives are clearly marked with the speaker’s name at the heading of the section and are printed in italics. When long passages are quoted, they are also in italics but for stylistic reasons.

Much of this book is based on interviews with people who participated in the All-American Soap Box Derby when they were children or worked with the derby as adults. Although I took pains to confirm details and facts, there are stated opinions in this book that should be taken as just that. I hope that readers keep in mind that memories fade, perceptions change, and there are always shades of gray.
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Finally, I want to thank my husband Rodney who helped me in every way imaginable over the last three years to complete this project and tell this story.
INTRODUCTION

Before writing this book I knew almost nothing about the All-American Soap Box Derby.

The only things I remember about the Soap Box Derby when I was growing up were two old photographs in our family album. The photos, taken sometime in the late 1950s, show my older brothers in their racers.

In one photo my oldest brother is sitting behind the wheel of a racer that I now see never had a chance to win. The nose is blunted and the steering wheel is square. From what I know now of my brother’s mechanical ability, and unconventional ideas, this makes sense.

The other photo is of my mom and another brother. My mother is perched on the step of a promotional van painted with a Chevrolet logo and the words “Cleveland’s Soap Box Derby.” She is wearing a flared flowered and striped skirt with a coordinating sleeveless top and she appears to squint as if the sun is in her eyes. To me, she looked like a movie star. My brother is sitting in a more aerodynamically correct racer, wearing his helmet and looking like a winner, which he was not.

My brothers never did well in the Soap Box Derby race even though they raced for at least two years. And to hear them tell it, the whole thing was my father’s idea, even the blunt-nosed racer. By the time I and my younger brothers came along, my father had lost interest in one of his kids becoming a derby champ. And I never paid the Soap Box Derby much attention.
Even when I moved to Akron years later to work as a reporter for the *Akron Beacon Journal*, I was so disinterested in the derby that the only thought I gave it was to hope I would never be assigned to cover the race.

Had I come into the derby naturally, I would never have written the book. Instead, my road to the derby was paved by a crime.

I was working for the business section at the *Beacon Journal* covering a financial crime that involved several hundred Akron-area residents who were fleeced by an attorney-turned-investment adviser. One of my sources on the story was a gentleman named George Wilson.

George and I developed a working relationship over the year or more that I wrote the articles about the scam. As the story was winding down and the lawyer came under indictment, George called me and asked me to meet him for lunch to discuss something else.

I was excited about meeting with George and thought that he probably was going to give me another tip about another financial crime story.

Imagine my disappointment when George started talking about writing a book about the Soap Box Derby. His idea was to write a fiction book about a boy in the 1960s coming to Akron and building a racer, and he wanted me to help him write it.

I was stunned by the request.

First of all, I did not write fiction. And second, who in the world cared about the Soap Box Derby?

Over my sweet-and-sour chicken, I tried to think of a way to let George down easily. He was a nice guy and I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but there was no way I was going to get involved in this type of project.

George had been a volunteer with the derby and during the 1960s he was in charge of escorting visiting celebrities. He told me that he had collected scores of the *Beacon Journal* articles about the race and asked me to drop by his office and look at them before I dismissed the idea.

A few days later I dropped by his office where I found several hundred musty newspaper clippings.
“Read them,” George said to me. “You’ll see how big this thing was.”

I began to come by the office in the evenings and organize the articles by date. I discovered that George was right. “This thing,” the Soap Box Derby, was huge.

The race in the late 1990s had dwindled to a few thousand spectators, but at one time there were estimates of a hundred thousand people coming out for race day. The winner was on the front page of newspapers all over the country. Marching bands, drum and bugle corps, motorcycle brigades, and majorettes from across the country would turn out for the derby parade through the downtown streets. Hundreds of newspaper reporters and photographers would descend on Akron for race week, and the radio stations would broadcast from the race.

Movie and television stars would spend days in the city, hobnobbing with Chevrolet, Goodyear, and Firestone executives and the movers and shakers of Akron.

The boy who won the race became a celebrity, appearing on television shows and in the movies. The prizes rivaled those given to Miss America contestants. They included college scholarships, automobiles, and gold watches.

But even more important than the pageantry was the story that the derby told about America. The more I researched the derby and read George’s clips, the more I realized how much the social history of our country was reflected in this race.

Through the derby I saw the effects of the Depression, World War II, the baby boom, the Civil Rights movement, and the rise of feminism. When America was hungry, so was the race. When America was blissful and prosperous, so was the derby. When the nation reeled from political and moral scandals, it was the same at the All-American.

It became clear that another fiction book about a boy who wanted to enter the Soap Box Derby was not in my future. I wanted to tell the real story of the Soap Box Derby, and George and I set out to write a history of the Soap Box Derby. Unfortunately, before we got
started on the book, George suffered a debilitating stroke. I ended up writing the book without him.

I did, however, get to meet a fascinating group of men (and a few women) who shared their memories and recollections. From those memories came this book.

I can see how not having any Soap Box Derby memories of my own helped me to see the history clearly. I do not idealize the derby. The sweet and funny stories are here, as are stories of cruelty, deceit, and dishonesty. Some of the stories are sad.

But what I have tried to do is balance the collection to give an accurate and interesting account of a great American icon, the All-American Soap Box Derby.
Driving a car is one the forbidden fruits of childhood—another privilege just waiting for adulthood.

Children are taunted by the perceived benefits and advantages of becoming grown up. For some this is a challenge, leading to rebellion and disaster. For others the yearning for the great gift of age leads to a childhood wasted in sullen disappointment.

But for many children, probably most, the result is an innovative and imaginative imitation of an adult-only reward. Those children built the first soap box derby cars.

Children found that they could build their own set of wheels long before their teens. These cars could be built out of anything and could often be completed in one determined day.

Photos of children in these types of “cars” are evident from early in the twentieth century. A 1924 article in the magazine *The American Boy* details the construction of a “pushmobile”: “The Pushmobile industry . . . got under way shortly after the marketing of the first automobile, and had its origin in the brain of some wide-awake American boy determined to possess an up-to-date homemade vehicle. The same spirit that impelled him has led other ambitious lads to find ways and means to contrive duplicates or models of most of the much sought after pleasure producing devices of today.”

Even though it was not a real car, if “pushed” as its name implies, the car could coast a considerable distance and give a kid the feeling of driving. If it was sent downhill, it could pick up speed and momentum that would make the experience even more comparable to driving a real car. It required some skill, and like many of the
more memorable, exhilarating, and often forbidden activities of childhood, it was even a bit dangerous.

So it comes as no surprise that a Dayton, Ohio newspaperman in 1933 would happen upon a bunch of kids who were racing their homemade cars down a hill. The surprising thing is that his idea—to use a childhood pastime as a way to make money—would become so successful.

But it did.

The All-American Soap Box Derby, as it was later called, would grow from a few kids on a hill in Dayton to a multimillion-dollar international marketing event. In its heyday the Soap Box Derby race could garner a crowd of tens of thousands and capture the imagination of a generation.

How that happened is a tale of myth and money.

When money is in short supply, as it was in the Great Depression of the 1930s, Americans can become creative in making it. And making money was the original intent of the derby.

The Depression marks its beginnings in the crash of the stock market in 1929, and by 1933 institutions were failing and millions were out of work.

Yet out of this time emerges the spectacular and opulent event the Soap Box Derby was to become. Newspaper and car companies across America would spend hundreds of thousands of dollars and rally towns across America to come together to celebrate American youth.

It would give idle boys something to do. It would promote fun and goodwill. And it would provide hope for the future and the promise of a better life for the next generation.

But the derby had more to do with capitalism than it did with altruism and idealism.

The Chevrolet Motor Company wanted to sell cars. Newspapers wanted to sell more papers. And Akron, Ohio, where the derby eventually landed, wanted to save its city.

But the backers at Chevrolet, the advertisers and publishers of the newspapers, and officials of the city of Akron could not let the pub-
lic see the real reason they all wanted and needed the All-American Soap Box Derby. So instead, they manufactured an image and promoted a public relations event. It was a myth, but one that for many became a reality.

Sometimes when people begin to believe a myth, their actions can make it true. And in many ways this is exactly what happened with the Soap Box Derby.

Boys believed in the race. Their parents believed in the race. The public believed. Making money for car companies, selling news-
papers, and keeping the machine of capitalism greased and running smoothly—the derby’s tenets—was no match for what the race meant to the boys, their families, and their communities.

At one time the All-American Soap Box Derby race was a national obsession capturing the imagination of thousands of boys who each year would try to become the Soap Box Derby champion.

And for at least one Saturday in August, the nation’s attention would focus on Akron, Ohio, the home of the All-American Soap Box Derby.

The race did not start in Akron. It started about two hundred miles away in Dayton, Ohio with the idea of an innovative newspaperman.

Today reputable journalists try to distance themselves from the moneymaking facets of the newspaper business. It would be almost unthinkable for most serious journalists at a daily newspaper to walk past “the wall” that separates editorial from advertising and beg the latter to allow the journalist to write about and promote a publicity stunt designed to gain advertisers. But that was indeed what Myron Scott, the founder of the All-American Soap Box Derby, did when he conceived of the idea of the Soap Box Derby.

The jump between public relations and editorial was to be a trademark of Scott’s career. He worked for Chevrolet promoting the derby from 1935 until 1937, when he returned to the Dayton Daily News. After World War II, he went back to Chevrolet and became derby director.

In 1933 Scott worked as a photojournalist and reporter for the Dayton Daily News. The story goes that he was out looking around for material for his regular feature when he saw some boys who had attached axles and wheels to large crates and were racing them downhill. Scott was convinced that a competitive race of these makeshift cars could be a novel way to bring in readers and sell newspapers and ads.

“I went back to the managing editor and told him I had an idea which might be a very silly one, but which might be worth trying,” Scott told an Akron Beacon Journal reporter in 1935. “That was to
stage a citywide race of the homemade cars and to offer a cup to the winner.”

Jean Condit calls Scott’s story about stumbling on the idea of a race as “a lot of bull.”

Condit, eighty-one years old, lives in Denver. Her husband William was one of the original Soap Box Derby racers in Dayton, she said. It was her father-in-law, George Harrison Condit, who came up with the idea, she said, after seeing his son and his friends building the cars.

“His father said, ‘why don’t you have a race?’, ” Condit said. The elder Condit then called the newspaper and convinced them to send someone to photograph the event. “And that man Scott took all the credit for it,” she said.

Scott may not have originated the idea, but he did come up with the name, “Soap Box Derby.”

Many of the original racers were built from shipping containers for soap. Before the invention of cardboard, soap and many other household items were shipped to retailers in wooden containers. The boxes were sturdy and made of pine. Prior to the late 1930s they were not nailed, but were made with dovetail joints.

Cheese companies also shipped in this manner and undoubtedly some of the children may have been using those containers. Fortunately they were in the minority since the “Soap Box Derby” has a better ring to it than “Cheese Box Derby.”

Scott’s ability to coin a catchy name was evident years later when he came up with the name Corvette, for Chevrolet’s new sports car.

Scott held two races in the summer of 1933, an indication that organizing might not have been that easy. The first race attracted only eighteen racers. The second race, heavily advertised, was a real success.

That race in the late summer of 1933 in Dayton, the one that Scott referred to in the interview, attracted 362 children and nearly forty thousand spectators. The race also featured one girl, Alice Johnson, the daughter of a prominent local aviator. Johnson placed second in
the 1933 race, and one report said the crowd gasped when she took off her hat to reveal her long hair.

David Wyse won the younger division for boys under ten. Boys eleven and older had their own division, and a sixteen-year-old Dayton boy, Randall Custer, won that race. The race was filmed and shown at movie theaters throughout the United States. With the nationwide publicity, other city newspapers joined to sponsor their own races so that they, too, could send the city champion to the Soap Box Derby.

The next year the race was held on Burkhardt Hill in Dayton. The race to determine the Ohio state champion was held on Saturday, August 18. Thirty-four cities sent their champs; and on Sunday, August 19, the event was held to determine which of those would be the national champion. The spectators numbered fifty thousand and lined the street surrounding the race and trampled the lawns.

But it was a good year for the race. It coined the name of “The All-American Soap Box Derby” and it gained crucial financial backing.

The Detroit-based car company Chevrolet agreed to cosponsor the race with the Dayton Daily News. Chevrolet dealerships throughout the country sponsored local races. This sponsorship was the beginning of a nearly forty-year-long relationship between the automobile manufacturing company and the Soap Box Derby.

Two girls were contestants in the 1934 race, Evelyn Beddies and Alice Johnson. They were the last girls to race in the event until 1971.

Robert Turner from Muncie, Indiana, won the 1934 race.

According to a newspaper account, Turner was “driving a rickety old car made of scraps of wood without any semblance of bearings.” Turner’s car has alternately been described as made of barn siding and wood from a saloon bar. Whichever, the material costs for Turner’s car totaled twenty-six cents and its wheels were from a baby carriage.

The sorry state of Turner’s car was a possible reason for his win. The committee governing the race placed the two other finalists,
who had more sophisticated cars, behind Turner’s in an effort to handicap the race. The car driven by Claude Alexander of Chattanooga, Tennessee, started down the hill 4.6 seconds after Turner’s; and Jack Fustenberg of Omaha, Nebraska started rolling 5.7 seconds after Turner. When Turner won the race it was 1.4 seconds ahead of Alexander, but Fustenberg held the time for the fastest heat of the day.

The next year, Turner’s car was not even fast enough to win his local race, a reflection of the increased sophistication of the cars.

In 1935 the derby was moved from Dayton to Akron, Ohio. Many reports state that the race moved to Akron because it was hillier than Dayton. Anyone who has ever been to Akron would know the fallacy of this argument. While not completely flat, Akron’s few steep inclines cannot compare to the rolling hills of Dayton. Driving through that city today, it is easy to see why children were inspired to race homemade cars there.
The experience of using Burkhardt Hill for the race had undoubt-
edly led to problems with local homeowners. One can imagine the
damage to landscaping and the general inconvenience of having to
host fifty thousand spectators within a few blocks of a city street. But
Akron had something that Dayton could not match, and the race was
moved. Akron had promised Chevrolet that they would get a perma-
nent track for the race.

Akron needed the derby. And the city’s formidable combination of
savvy civic leaders, corporate executives, and a powerful newspaper
publisher saw that they could use the track to woo Chevrolet’s race
from Dayton.

Akron was the tire capital of the world. Goodyear, General, Fire-
stone, and the B. F. Goodrich tire companies had their headquarters
in the town forty miles south of Cleveland. In 1935 the derby was
advertised as being sponsored by “the Akron Beacon Journal and
America’s leading newspapers in cooperation with the Chevrolet
Motor Company.”

The involvement of Chevrolet seemed a natural for the Soap Box
Derby. The car company was sponsoring an event that featured cars,
albeit motor-less cars. As a public relations and community outreach
event, the derby seemed a sure-fire winner. The boys were future
car owners. And with an estimated ninety thousand spectators in
1935, Chevrolet’s sponsorship was a clear winner.

The economic depression had taken a toll on Chevrolet’s parent
company General Motors. In 1932 the net sales of its automobiles
had dropped almost 47 percent. The company, rather than retreating
from advertising and promotions during lean times, became a leader
in developing public relations campaigns designed to increase con-
sumer confidence. Optimistic consumers were more likely to make
purchases. And what better way to foster that optimism than to en-
courage the hopes of the next generation?

Varley Young was a friend of Myron Scott’s and an employee of
the Campbell-Ewald Company, an advertising and public relations
firm, that had as a major client the Chevrolet Motor Company. Young
and Scott convinced Chevrolet to sponsor the event.
Once Chevrolet was on board, there were good reasons for the tire companies to join and support of one of their major customers. The tire manufacturers fell in line behind the efforts to make Akron the home of the race.

Akron was hard hit by the Depression. Bringing a major event like the Soap Box Derby to the city was no doubt seen as a way to help in its recovery. In March of 1933 three Akron banks closed, forcing Akron to default on its bonds in 1934. According to a history of Akron and Summit County, by Karl H. Grismer, “During the period of Akron’s municipal insolvency, the financial condition of thousands of its citizens became desperate.” In 1933 and 1934 the sheriff served evictions on approximately three thousand Summit County families. At least twenty-five thousand people were laid off from rubber factories in the early 1930s, and many other saw their hours cut.

Akron’s vibrant downtown area, with its family-owned department stores Polsky’s and O’Neil’s, bustling specialty retail shops, restaurants, and office buildings was beginning to feel the pinch. Construction of the Mayflower Hotel, which eventually became the host hotel to the Soap Box Derby, began in 1929. During this period three other major buildings went up in Akron. The Mayflower was to be the city’s crowning glory, but the Depression cast doubt on its survival. The income from its 450 rooms did not allow it to meet even the interest payments on the mortgage. Getting the derby to come to Akron was a coup for the city and a boost to its financial coffers. It guaranteed media, celebrities, and hundreds of contestants and their families would come to town each year, and it assured that major corporations would spend money to see that the event was a success.

Chevrolet provided the derby with fifteen courtesy cars for use by the various media people and celebrities. The fifty-two local champions who came to Akron that year were housed in the Mayflower. A front-page picture on the Beacon Journal the day before the race shows the champ from Atlanta, Joe Harrell Jr., being served breakfast in bed by a hotel waiter.
Eddie Rickenbacker came to Akron to referee. Rickenbacker had been a race car driver before World War I. During the war he became a combat pilot. “Wild” Bill Cummings, a race car driver, was the chief starter. Cummings had won the 1934 Indianapolis Speedway classic. His race car was on display alongside the contestants’ cars at the Soap Box Derby show held in Akron that same week. Graham McNamee and Tom Manning, announcers for the National Broadcasting Corporation, were on hand to call the races. McNamee and Tom Manning pose in armor with Paul Brown in 1936. The year before Brown had lost control of his car injuring the men. (General Motors Corp. Used with permission, GM archives)
was the most famous radio sports announcer of the time. And a narrowly avoided disaster involving McNamee and Manning thrust the race into the national spotlight.

Paul Brown, a derby racer from Oklahoma, lost control of his car and hit McNamee and Manning. Even though Manning went on to continue broadcasting, the two were hospitalized and the accident made national news. An article in the *Akron Beacon Journal* called the two men “comrades of the ether” and wrote of them sharing a room at Akron City Hospital.

*Ernest Baer (driver) and Leroy Quinn on Tallmadge Hill in 1935, the first year the race is held in Akron.* (Akron Beacon Journal)