How I Saw It
How I Saw It

My Photographic Memory of the Soap Box Derby

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In Memory of Ralph Iula
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Introduction

Myron Scott was 25 years old for most of the summer of 1933. That summer, as a photographer for the Dayton Daily News, Scott discovered a few boys racing their homemade cars down Big Hill Road. He snapped a few pictures and asked the boys to return and bring some friends.

A week later, Scott found nineteen boys waiting to race. One car in particular, the boxy “old number 7” built by Bob Gravett, caught Scott’s eye. He snapped a photograph of it and it would become the Soap Box Derby’s icon for 40 years. Scott had to be impressed by the turnout—if nineteen boys could show up in a week, how many entrants and fans could show up with added publicity?

The Dayton Daily News set August 19 as the race date, with heats starting at 1:30 PM. Entry blanks appeared in the newspaper and the race was open to all boys from Montgomery County, Ohio, under 16 years of age. Entry blanks would have to be received by August 14, and there was not an entry fee—the country was in the worst year of the Depression. Boys were encouraged to participate and could build their vehicles without worrying about weight or design limitations.

On race day, Scott had to be thrilled. The event attracted 362 soap boxers and a crowd of around 40,000 fans. Randy Custer was the fastest racer of the bunch. Scott realized that if the local race attracted this kind of following, a national event would not only be feasible, but successful.

Scott contacted a friend, Varley Young, a member of the creative division of the Campbell-Ewald Advertising Agency. General Motors was one of Campbell-Ewald’s major accounts. Scott and Young decided to convince the firm that the support of a National Soap Box Derby would be “advertising well directed.” The idea was floated to Chevrolet and the company’s top brass liked what they heard and agreed to become the main sponsor of the race.

With capital in place, Scott contacted newspapers across the country to garner support for local races. This grassroots initiative would spread the Derby message to prospective participants in urban and rural areas. How could a young man resist the opportunity to “win fame, prizes, and a chance to star in the world’s greatest Amateur racing event”?

Maybe it was happenstance or just sheer good luck, but Myron Scott saw the expanded potential of a local event and the All-American Soap Box Derby became a reality.
THE 1930s
The Beginning

It all started with a news photographer who noticed boys racing down a hill in wooden vehicles. The man behind the camera was Myron Scott; the youths lived in Dayton, Ohio. Scott thought he could find more boys to race for the title of the fastest. The boys were having fun and the Soap Box Derby was born.

1933
News Sponsor Race: Open to All Boys Under 16 Years of Age, Dayton Daily News (OH)

1934
Soap Box Derby Sweeps Country, Casa Grande Dispatch (AZ)

1935
Saws Buzz, Hammers Pound as Juvenile Auto Racers Build Cars for ’35 Derby, Syracuse Herald (NY)

1936
Boys, Attention. Another Thrilling Soap Box Derby to Be Held in El Paso, El Paso Herald-Post (TX)

1937

1938
Lions Club Soap Box Derby Cars Will Be Checked and Placed on Display Friday Night, Billings Gazette (MT)

1939
Soap Box Derby Rules Simplified to Encourage All Young Boys to Enter, Daily Mail (MD)
When I was 22 years old, a buddy and I took a trip to Dayton, Ohio to interview Myron Scott for a book I planned on writing about the All-American Soap Box Derby. After all, I had been a part of the event since I could remember. My dad was involved with the race and I became fascinated with the summer spectacle, too.

Myron Scott, better known as Scottie, had previously worked for the *Dayton Daily News* and had snapped photos of boys piloting hand-made cars down Big Hill Road in June of 1933. Scott decided a larger race would generate reader interest and might provide some cheap enjoyment for economically-troubled Ohioans.

On August 19, 1933, 362 kids and a crowd of around 40,000 people showed up. The cars were a motley mix of all colors and sizes. Each driver had a “mechanic,” who was allowed to give the racer a 15-foot shove at the start.

The boys-only event was won by Randy Custer. His machine was a blimpish looking, three-wheeled vehicle. Custer’s car design might have been influenced by his father, Luzern, who was an associate of Orville Wright. Randy won a motor scooter, trophy, and a bouquet of flowers.

I guess the entry committee wasn’t that diligent, since the second place finisher was a girl, Alice Johnson. Her prize was a boy’s bike. It would be almost 40 years until girls were allowed in again.
A The relationship between the Akron Beacon Journal and the All-American Soap Box Derby started when the Beacon Journal sent its Soap Box winner to Dayton to compete in that year’s race, 1934

B 362 kids competed in the local Dayton race on August 19. An estimated crowd of 40,000 watched them rumble down the hill, 1933

C The first article ever written about the Soap Box Derby in the Dayton Daily News, 1933

OPPOSITE PAGE Randy Custer, the champ for the first unofficial Soap Box Derby, receiving his awards, 1933
Going National

Handicaps might make some horse races more competitive, but when it comes to Triple Crown races, all entrants carry the same weight. Maybe, Scottie (Myron E. Scott) and the first Derby board should have followed a similar path. Their decision propelled the wrong kid to the 1934 Soap Box Derby win.

When I went to see Scottie in 1975, I had a chance to ask about the Dayton event that brought local winners from 34 cities throughout the country to Burkhardt Hill. I always wondered how Jack Furstenberg lost. He had the fastest heat time, but ran a full ten seconds slower in the final. The winner was a boy from Muncie, IN, 11-year-old Robert Turner.

Scottie and the board had decided that handicapping the final would make for a better finish. Turner started down the hill 4.6 seconds before the other classification winner, Claude Alexander, and 5.7 seconds ahead of Furstenberg. Turner won by a mere 1.4 seconds. Scottie later admitted that he shouldn’t have handicapped the cars. I told Scottie it was great that Turner won because he loved the Derby his entire life. After that first race, the Derby committee rescinded the handicap rule much to the joy of thousands of entrants from 1934 on.
A The champions’ cars, including Paul Brown’s car from Oklahoma City, being fixed in the pits, 1936

B Derby helmet factory in Detroit, MI. White helmets were used in the local races from 1937–1939, 1937

C Derby General Manager, Jack Gormley, and his assistant, Harry Hartz, with the Derby promotional car they took to the New York World’s Fair, 1937

OPPOSITE PAGE

A A group of the winners, with Alice Johnson, the only girl driver that day, 1933

B Randall Custer, winner, who led the field in his three wheel special, 1933

C Myron E. Scott, and the Chevrolet ‘special’, which made a 7,000 mile tour contacting various newspapers, 1933

D A close finish, 1933

E Bob Gravett, Oakwood, OH, who was one of the first entries in the first Soap Box race. Gravett drove No. 7 in the Blue Flame race, 1933

F A general view of a ‘heat’ start, 1933
In the early years, kids were allowed to sled down the hill at Derby Downs, 1937.

Left to right: Jim Schlimmer, Akron Beacon Journal; Myron Scott, Derby founder; Shorty Fulton, airport and track director; Ed Hedner and Varley Young, Campbell-Ewald Agency; and an unidentified man at Derby Downs during its construction, 1936.

Aerial view of Derby Downs in Akron, OH, 1936.
A Robert Turner from Muncie, IN, won 1st place in the first National Soap Box Championship, 1934

B “Old No. 7” built by Robert Gravett, son of a Dayton metal stamping plant employee, competed in the first race. Although it didn’t win, Myron Scott chose it as the symbol of the Derby for the next 40 years, 1933

C First heat of the All-American Soap Box Derby at Derby Downs, 1936
Professional Drivers
At the Derby

Bill Cummings  1934–1935
Wilbur Shaw  1937–1954
Maurie Rose  1953
Bob Sweikert  1955
Bobby Unser  1971
Bobby Allison  1976, 2000
Dale Earnhardt  1988
Dick Simon  1988
John Andretti  1991
Lyn St. James  1992, 2004
Tom Sneva  1993
Jerry Nadeau  2002
Ricky Craven  2002–2004
Joe Nemecheck  2003–2004
Tony Stewart  2003–2004
Erin Crocker  2005
Jimmy Johnson  2006