

# How I Saw It









# How I Saw It

## My Photographic Memory of the Soap Box Derby

Jeff Iula and Bill Ignizio

Carol Slatter, Researcher and Photo Editor

Tom Bacher, Content Editor



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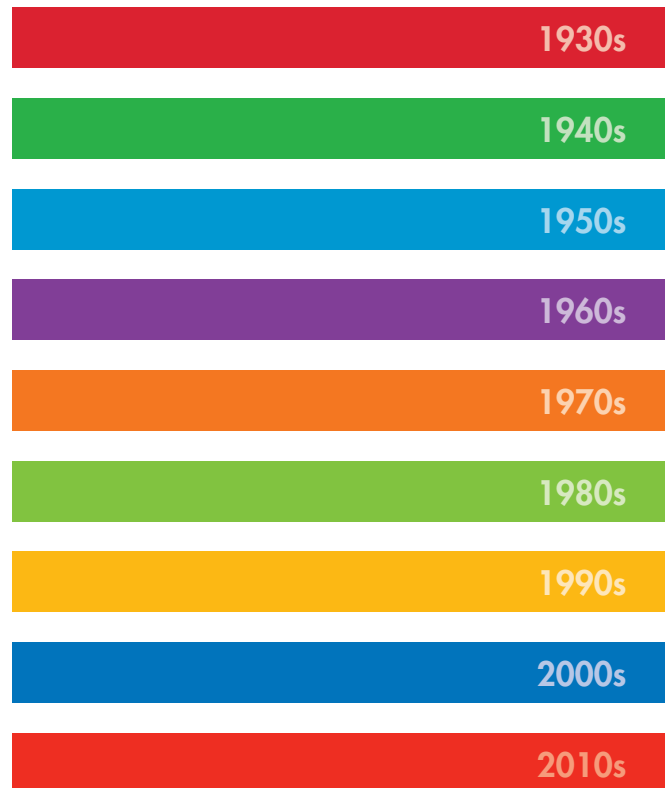
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Illustrations courtesy of

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- <sup>d</sup> Australian Press Bureau
- <sup>e</sup> Bill Ford
- <sup>f</sup> Chuck Ayers
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## In Memory of Ralph Iula



# Acknowledgements

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# Introduction

**M**yron 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.

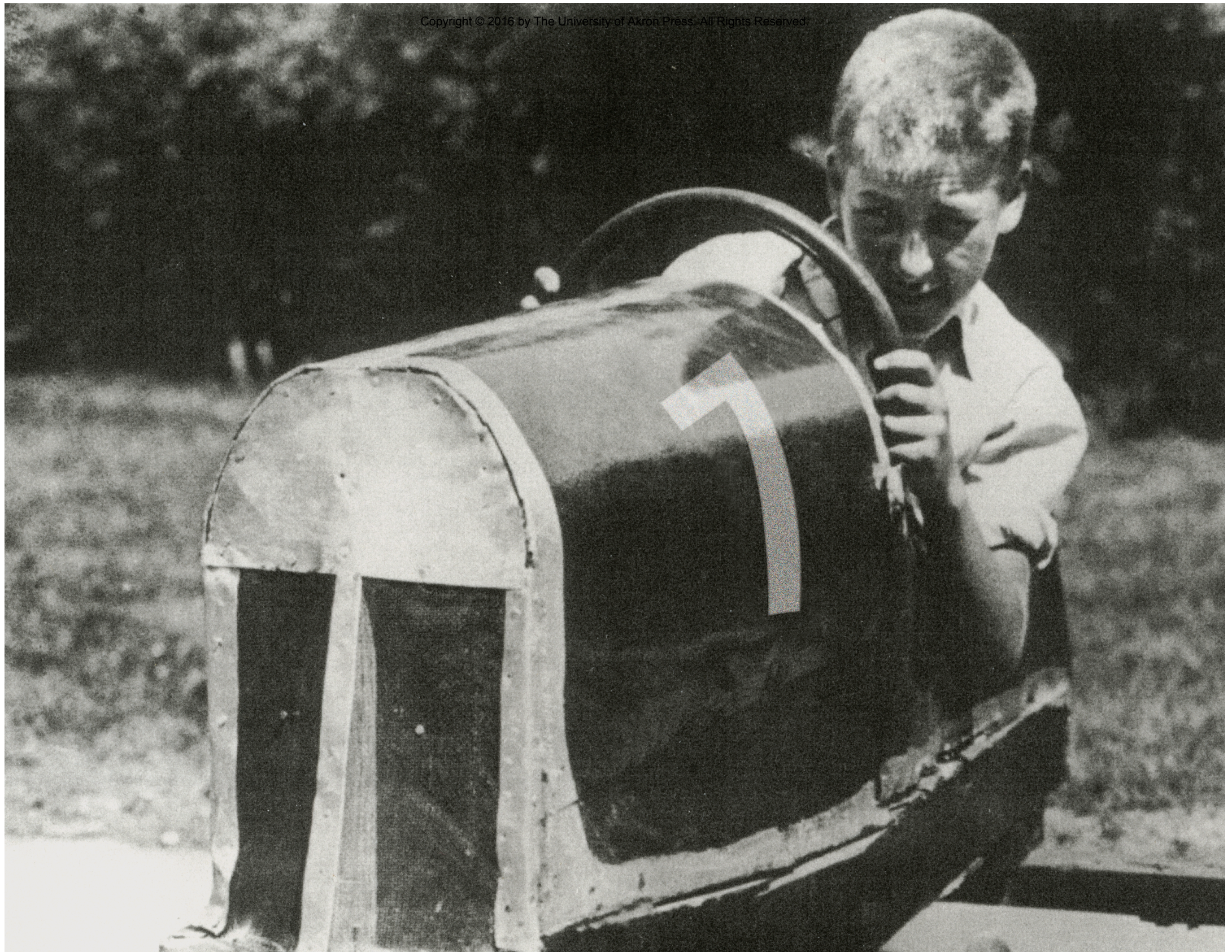
Scott contacted a friend, Varley Young, a member of the creative division of the Campbell-Ewald Advertising Agency. General Motors was one of Campbell-Ewald’s major accounts. Scott and Young decided to convince the firm that the support of a National Soap Box Derby would be “advertising well directed.” 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

**Come on Kids. You Can Sign Up Today and Get Your Rules Books for Soap Box Derby,**  
*Helena Daily Independent (MT)*

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)*



## Starting Down the Hill

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.

*Jeff Leach*





1930s

Contract of Participation in  
**The ALL AMERICAN SOAP BOX DERBY**

Akron Ohio April 12 1934  
City State Date

The Akron Beacon-Journal of Akron Ohio  
Name of Newspaper City and State

hereby agrees to enter the All American Soap Box Derby at Dayton, Ohio, on August 18th and 19th, 1934, at which time our entry will appear and for this privilege we will immediately pay \$..... on the signing of this agreement to become a member.

We to be furnished with weekly publicity, set of rules and regulations on how to stage the race both from the newspaper and race angles and ten original photographs for promotion of said sectional race.

It is understood that our newspaper Soap Box winner will be sent to Dayton, Ohio in August, to compete for the All American Soap Box Derby championship, at this newspapers expense, which includes the boy and car. It is further understood that the room, board etc. of the winner while in Dayton will be paid by the All American Derby Inc.

Akron Beacon-Journal  
Name of Newspaper

By.....  
Officer

The above agreement and receipt of \$..... is hereby accepted and acknowledged by us.  
The ALL AMERICAN SOAP BOX DERBY, INC.

By.....  
Agent



THE DAYTON DAILY NEWS SUNDAY, J

# NEWS SPONSORS RACE

Bob Gravett, 826 Far Hills av., takes his "Soap Box Race" for a trial spin. Young Gravett is one of the speed demons who will compete for the Dayton Daily News cup.

## ENTRY BLANK For Dayton Daily News 'SOAP BOX RACE'

Name .....  
Address .....  
Age ..... School .....

Open to any boy under 16 years, living in Montgomery co. No limitations as to weight, construction, streamlining, etc. The race is a free for all. All entry blanks must be in The Dayton News office not later than Aug. 14.

### BIG HILL ROAD: AUG. 19: 1:30 P.M.

Big Hill rd. runs off Southern Blvd.—Southern Blvd. runs off Dorothy lane.

There has been quite some discussion as to what boy owns and drives the fastest "Soap Box Racer." To settle the argument, The Dayton News is conducting a county-wide race, open to all boys under 16 years of age. The race will be run down the Big Hill Rd., which is paved, with a few curves. The course is three-tenths of a mile in length. Heat winners will race in the finals for the loving cup awarded by The News. Other prizes will include useful articles to boy racers. If you have four wheels and an old soap box, get it in shape for the sportiest amateur event of the year. Timers and officials will handle the race like big motor car races. Test trials 1:30. The date is Saturday afternoon Aug. 19. Be sure to fill entry blank and "Scotties." Dayton Daily News

**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

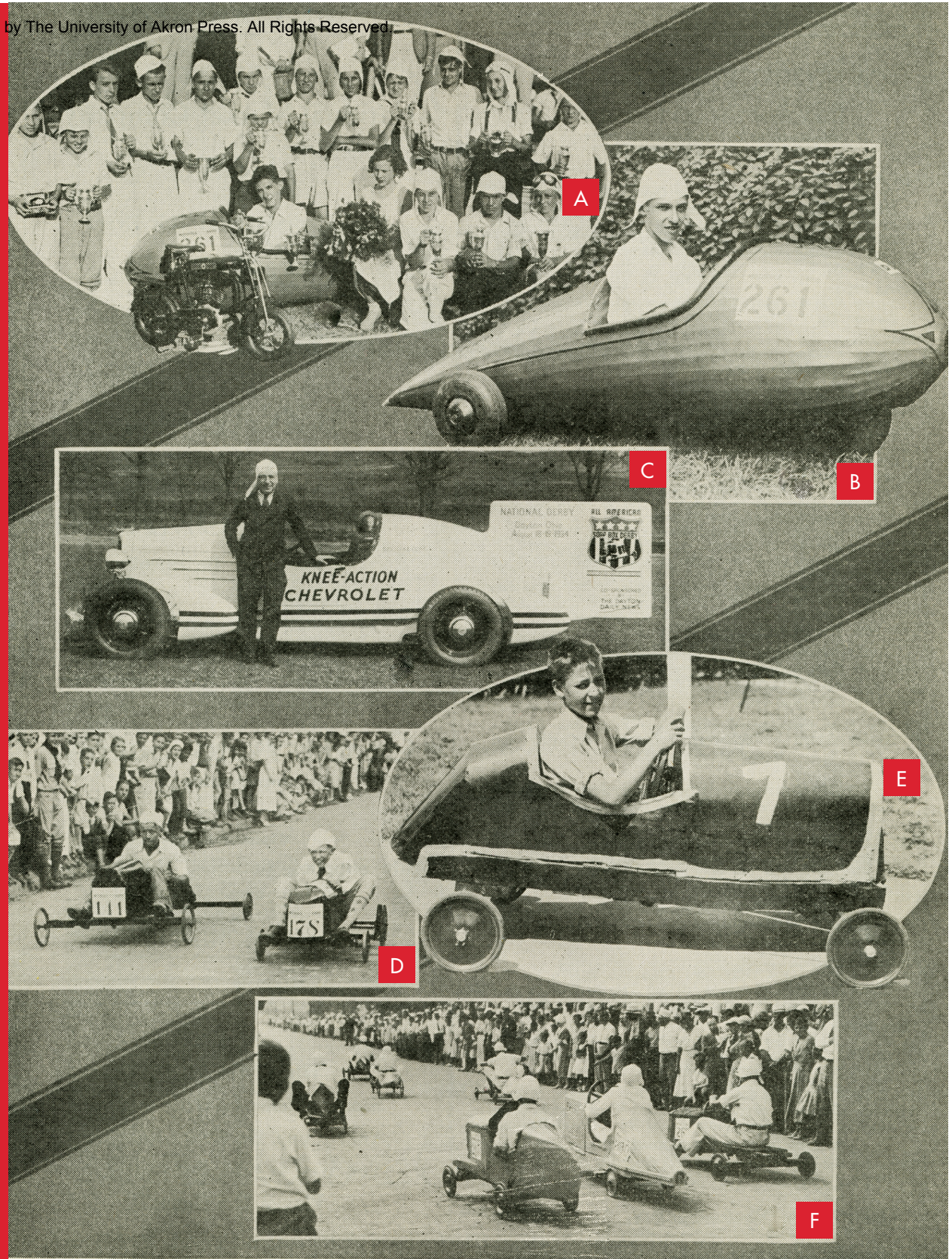


# Going National

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



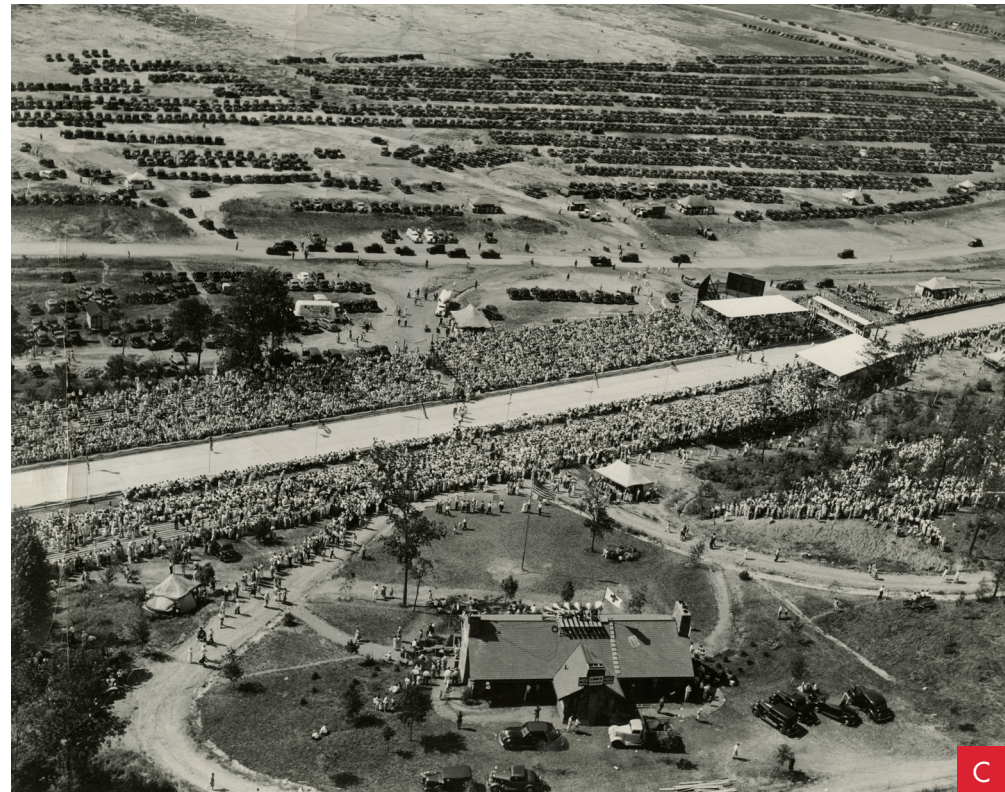




A



B



C

**A** In the early years, kids were allowed to sled down the hill at Derby Downs, 1937

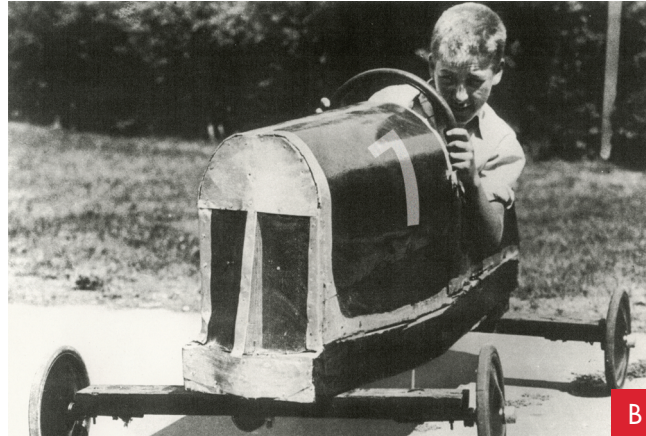
**B** Left to right: Jim Schlimmer, *Akron Beacon Journal*; Myron Scott, Derby founder; Shorty Fulton, airport and track director; Ed Hedner and Varley Young, Campbell-Ewald Agency; and an unidentified man at Derby Downs during its construction, 1936

**C** Aerial view of Derby Downs in Akron, OH, 1936





A



B



C

**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

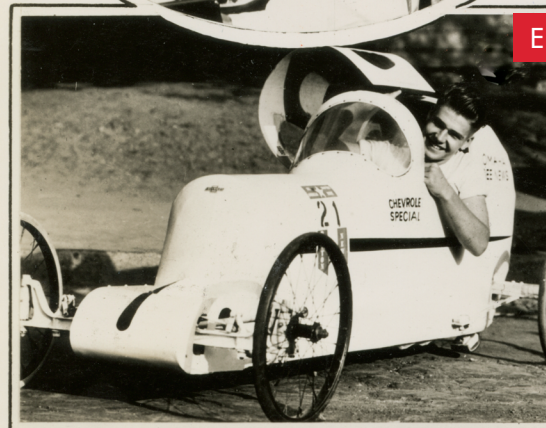
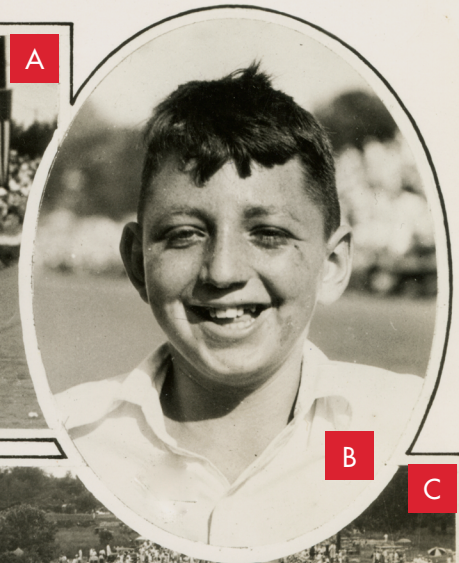
Tony Stewart 2003–2004

Erin Crocker 2005

Jimmy Johnson 2006

## 1934

### *Muncie Youth Wins National Soap Box Championship*



Eleven-year-old Robert Turner (photo No. 2) of Muncie, Ind., won the national championship, four years in college, and the plaudits of 60,000 watchers, as he flashed (photo No. 1) across the finish line at Dayton, Ohio, in the first annual All-American Soap Box Derby, sponsored by 34 leading American newspapers and the Chevrolet Motor Company. Part of the huge crowd is pictured in No. 3. Graham McNamee, famous NBC sports announcer, who described the Derby on a nationwide radio hook-up, is shown

(No. 4) as he broadcast while traveling down the graded course in a typical soap box racer. Jack Furstenberg, 15, of Omaha, won the E. V. Rickenbacker trophy for the fastest heat, and the Charles F. Kettering cup for the best constructed racer (No. 5). This was the only "closed job" entered in this year's event, in which 34 champions from as many cities were selected by time trials from more than 20,000 boys who built and raced their own creations.