

# Richmond's Soapbox Derby is On a Roll

By LIBBY CARTY MCNAMEE

**T**amara Lazzari has proven for the record books that skill speaks for itself. Although she may not have built the best-looking stock car, she immediately proved herself to be a stand-out at the Richmond Soapbox Derby. In addition to emerging as a multiple winner, last year she also won the first heat at the national championships in Akron, Ohio, not an easy accomplishment.

Proclaimed a "mini-NASCAR" by Richmond Derby director J.R. Downey, the Derby is a national youth racing program run from Akron, dating back to 1934. In what has been called "The Greatest Amateur Racing Event in the World," there are two types of cars—a basic stock car and a super stock car that is a bit bigger and carries more weight, usually for the older kids. The cars often reach exhilarating speeds of 25-35 mph.

Contestants must build their own cars using a kit they purchase from the national headquarters. The kits provide all the parts needed: wheels, brakes, axles, board, helmet and the all-important shell. Then each contestant tinkers with the parts to adjust the alignment and weights to achieve maximum speed.

Once the Derby is underway, contestants enter a starting ramp in heats of two, point their cars downhill, and compete double-elimination style. Since Derby administrators have found that the wheels and lane are two main variables, they switch them after every race so no one will have an unfair advantage. The entrant races the first heat of the 800-foot course with his/her own wheels and then switches wheels and lanes with the opponent for the second heat.

Local enthusiast Richard Cross has been involved in the Derby for

cars" gain more and more support over the years, "bringing out the best in sportsmanship."

When Cross began, the Derby was an event in which boys built their own cars with no help from their parents and raced them on city streets downtown. Eventually, it evolved into an event for both girls and boys who build cars according to a kit. Administrators check the cars before the race to ensure that they are safe and relatively equal in construction. Today the car driver wins the race by ability and technique, not due to superior car design.

Although it may take a day or two to assemble a stock car for the first time, once accomplished, entrants

can reuse it again and again. The cost of the basic stock car kit is \$550, while that of the super stock car kit is \$605. Don't let the fee discourage you—many contestants have local sponsors who chip in to cover the cost of the kit as well as the \$55

entrance fee. According to Downey, some entrants have as many as nine or ten sponsors at one time to cover the fees.

Another longtime Derby participant and aficionado, Peter Van Winkle founded the Richmond Soapbox Foundation as its own self-sufficient non-profit organization, not reliant on a secondary organization for sponsorship. Looks like the Derby is here to stay, so head on over to the Richmond Soapbox Derby on Saturday, June 4 at the Richmond International Raceway, Gate 6, beginning at 9:00 am. Admission is free for all spectators. In the past two years, over 40 boys and girls, ranging in age from 8 to 16, have competed in this thrilling downhill race. Two winners will go on to contend in the national championships on July 30.

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