



Allegany County, Maryland **SOAP BOX** **DERBY RACING**

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

Summertime during the 1950s included outdoor activities that created fun for hundreds of kids in Allegany County. Swimming pools, fireworks displays, fishing expeditions, scouting trips, and baseball games kept youngsters busy during the long school recess. While those activities remain popular, one highly publicized event nearly faded from the local scene after it was abruptly canceled more than six decades ago. What spectacle prompted spectators to crowd local streets hoping to catch a glimpse of a family member or neighborhood celebrity? Soap box derby racing, a phenomenon that swept across the United States and Tri-State region in the postwar era! The derby races proved to be popular attractions that brought together families, civic

groups, businesses, and city officials—a noble achievement. A look at how the races began shines a spotlight on a different era while also highlighting the successful derby program held in the city of Frostburg that has kept the sport vibrant.

In the past local boys constructed primitive soap box racers, referred to as “jitneys,” during the summer months and the results proved to be creative and impressive. Working alone or with a few friends, axles and wheels were salvaged from wagons, baby carriages, lawn mowers, and training wheel sets. The axles were typically fastened to wooden 2x4s and then attached to a framed sheet of plywood about 4 or 5 feet in length. The front axle assembly required

a bolt fastened at the middle, so the wheels would turn. By placing both feet on the steering assembly and pushing to the left or right, jitneys could be steered.

Braking systems proved to be an afterthought and usually amounted to dragging a pair of Chuck Taylor Converse shoes on the road surface. More sophisticated brakes involved attaching a short 2x4 timber to the vehicle's side. By pulling on the wooden handle, contact was made with the road surface. Another braking contraption featured a small board attached to a spring loaded hinge on the plywood floor. Depressing the board created contact with the road surface. None of the systems made much of a difference in slowing the jitneys and accidents proved to be common. And while the homemade racers could not be called sophisticated, each was unique and the result of creative engineering skills. Building and racing the vehicles always caused dad's tools to be shared among friends, but typically occurred without adult supervision.

A more sophisticated and safer approach to the building of homemade racing vehicles arrived in Cumberland soon after the close of World War II when civic clubs and business organizations decided to host soap box derby racing events under the auspices of a national organization called the "All American Soap Box Derby." The national organization formed in 1934

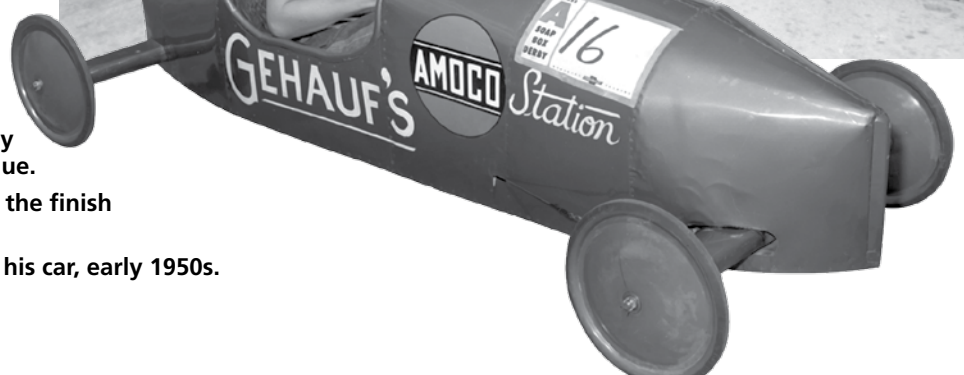


Facing page: First race of 1953 on Pennsylvania Avenue in South Cumberland. Pennsylvania Avenue School is in the background.

Top: Derby contestants getting ready for their races on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Bottom: Crowds line the street near the finish line on Pennsylvania Avenue.

Inset: Racer (unknown) posing with his car, early 1950s.



and subsequently hosted a series of races featuring unpowered cars called soap box derby racers, a name derived from the wooden soap boxes from which the racers were originally created. And like Allegany County jitneys, the cars relied on gravity for motion.

The formal soap box derby competition, while coexisting with the informal neighborhood races, offered interested boys a chance to refine their skills and compete on a higher level. Steering wheels, safety helmets, an improved braking system, and ball bearing wheels became standard equipment for all racers in the organized events, thereby increasing both safety and speeds. Although the vehicles were more robust, participants still assembled sections of their cars using humble materials such as plywood, corrugated metal, and discarded signs.

In 1947, the Cumberland Optimist Club introduced soap box derby racing to Cumberland when it held a race on Holland Street in North End. From newspaper reports, it seems the first race was influenced by All American Soap Box Derby rules, but not formally included in the process. Thirty-one boys from the Tri-State area divided into divisions between ages 11-15, and competed on the Holland Street course that was marked into racing lanes between Trost and Sylvan Avenues. A Keyser participant, sponsored by LaRosa Confectionary, won the championship race that was well attended.

Encouraged by the Optimist Club's inaugural event, local groups decided to make formal application to the All American Soap Box Derby. Chevrolet sponsored the races on a national level, while Eiler Chevrolet (located on North Mechanic Street) consistently promoted and sponsored the local competition. A second major sponsor was the Cumberland *Times-News* where J. Suter Kegg, sports

writer, featured articles about participants as a build up to the races. Mr. Kegg also served as a lead race official for a number of years.

Inclusion in the racing circuit brought strict rules for derby construction, and an official rule book was published which every boy was required to follow. A major purpose in the building phase was to bring families together in a collaborative effort. Fathers could assist, as could neighbors, friends, and relatives. Each participant also secured a formal sponsor



Neil Jones' soap box derby car, sponsored by Ort's Bakery, and memorabilia has been donated to the Allegany Museum in Cumberland, MD.

The drawing of Neil Jones, Cumberland's 1949 Derby Champ, appeared in the Cumberland *Times-News*.

who typically purchased the wheels and axles for the driver. To subsidize local racers, Eiler Chevrolet announced that mandatory materials could be purchased from the dealership "at cost." Additional supplies for each car could not exceed six dollars in value, although that amount was raised in later years.

During race week, cars underwent inspections where officials checked for total weight (car and driver could not exceed 250 pounds), and total length. The ball bearing equipped soap box wheels could not extend beyond the nose of the racer. An important inspection point also



Winner of the Pennsylvania Avenue 1955 Soap Box Derby was Roger Taylor. Oscar Lashley, President of the Jaycees is presenting the 1st place trophy.

involved the steering assembly that now included cables and pulleys attached to a steering wheel, a major improvement over the improvised jitney systems.

The outer appearance of cars varied greatly because different materials were salvaged for use, including oilcloth, cans, and corrugated metal. Allen Haines, a multiyear participant and well known street rod enthusiast, used a discarded Coca Cola sign found in the weeds near a neighborhood store. "I actually built the car myself. It wasn't pretty, but it was successful," recalled Mr. Haines. Carney's auto parts store in Cumberland sponsored Allen each year that he participated. Restaurants, service stations, clubs, and individuals from the Tri-State area pitched in to assist the youngsters.

The Cumberland *Times-News* built excitement by featuring stories about drivers, sponsors, and deadlines in the lead up to the first All American Soap Box Derby event.

One major change in the early racing series was the venue. Race officials apparently decided the Holland Street course was too steep, so a decision was made to hold the 1948 race on Greene Street. Photographs show the starting line to be in the vicinity of Smallwood Street and the finish line near Johnson Street. Photographs also show hundreds of spectators gathered along Greene Street and near the park at Washington's Headquarters. Dickie Burns, a 13 year-old from Keyser, defeated Carl Slemmer of LaVale for the first official championship to be held in Cumberland. The winner received a large trophy and four day trip to the national championship in Akron, Ohio.

In addition to the winner's prizes, additional awards were presented for Best Upholstered, Best Sportsman, and Best Constructed.

The 1949 race proved to be the most exciting of all the local events. Two competitors in the championship race, Allen Haines of Potomac Park, and Neil Jones of Midland, recalled the pre-race build up and championship competition more than five decades later.

Neil initially did not want to participate in Cumberland because he thought, "it would be too much work." After changing his mind, Neil decided to start work on a car sponsored by Ort's Bakery. "My mother, father, brothers, and most of the kids in Midland helped me build the car," stated Neil.

When the big day came, fans crowded the sidewalks of Greene Street hoping to catch a glimpse of the multiple heats. As the races progressed, both Allen and Neil won their heats and were matched in the championship run. The flag dropped and the boys sped forward. As Neil remembered, "I threw my weight forward" hoping to gain an initial advantage. Both boys remained deadlocked down the 800 foot course nearing speeds of 35 miles per hour, and both reported it was a close duel. The race proved to be so close that neither boy knew who won when crossing the finish line.

Allen reported that race officials huddled briefly to discuss the close finish. At the end of the conference, it was decided that Neil Jones had won a narrow victory in a time of 31.5 seconds. A trophy, a three-layer cake, and an

expense paid trip to Derby Downs in Akron were Neil's reward. Allen carried home a baseball glove, a watch, and the opportunity to compete the following year. In later years, both men enjoyed reminiscing about the duel on Greene Street.

In 1950, race officials once again changed the race venue because of traffic congestion in the Greene Street area caused by the Cumberland flood control project. McMullen Highway, at a location just south of the Circle Inn, was approved by the Maryland State Roads Commission. Today the location would be best described as near the entrance to the Industrial Park near Bowling Green. Another first for the 1950 event was a starting ramp that provided the racers with an initial burst of speed. Nearly 50 entries once again confirmed the popularity of the series.

In 1951, Pennsylvania Avenue in South Cumberland was selected as the location for all remaining official soap box derby races. The course was reported to be 1,000 feet long with a finish line near Fourth Street. By that time the annual event had grown to be more than a soap box derby race, as parades, proclamations of "Soap Box Derby Week," and food vendors, created a festive atmosphere that drew more than 5,000 visitors to South End, a number equal to 25% of today's city population. Civic clubs, parents, businesses, and city officials all cooperated to put on first class races. Officials added an additional attraction in 1955 when well known high school coaches Norm Getz, Bobby Cavanaugh, Bob Pence, and Bill Hahn, raced in "gasless buggies," larger soap box vehicles constructed

especially for the event. The 1955 derby proved to be the biggest in the seven year series. Unfortunately, the good times did not last.

In March 1956 John J. McMullen, publisher of the newspaper and race sponsor, received unexpected news when the All American Soap Box Derby informed him that the agreement between the newspaper and race organization would be ended. Although the Cumberland races initially exceeded the minimum of 50 entries, disqualifications and withdrawals dropped the final number per race to below the required specification. Officials in Hagerstown and Frederick were also notified they would no longer be authorized to host races, thereby leaving Baltimore as the only state venue. The loss of certification brought an end to Cumberland racing. Midland, Lonaconing, and Frostburg intermittently held unofficial races that drew spectators and participants, but without major sponsors the sport eventually faded from the county.

CUMBERLAND SOAP BOX DERBY WINNERS 1948 – 1955

1948	Greene Street	Dicky Burns
1949	Greene Street	Neil Jones
1950	McMullen Highway	Ernesto Mellon
1951	Pennsylvania Avenue	Ricardo Mellon
1952	Pennsylvania Avenue	Robert Gero
1953	Pennsylvania Avenue	George Day
1954	Pennsylvania Avenue	Jimmy Mellon
1955	Pennsylvania Avenue	Roger Taylor

Fourteen year old Deidre Waites was the first Frostburg Derby Days winner in 1977, topping 23 contestants (22 boys and 1 other girl).



After nearly two decades without soap box derby competition, Frostburg Elks Lodge 470 revived the sport when it decided to organize races for the July 4th weekend, as part of the nation's bicentennial celebration. According to Dale Iman, Elks member and current co-chair of the derby event, "The lodge wanted to provide the city of Frostburg with a bicentennial gift. We did not have the event in 1976, but were able to stage it the following year."

In the spring of 1977, T. William Preston formally announced the inaugural Soap Box Derby Days during a city council meeting and requested a 100 dollar donation from members. Mr. Preston explained the donation was on behalf of the local Elks Lodge 470, coordinator of the event. Arrangements included participation from Potomac Valley Television Cable Channel 8, which regularly covered local stories.

Officials for the first event included Al Via, Herk Humbertson, Don Peck, Vernon Wolodkin, Rick Rando, Coy Chaney, Joe Paletta, Ken James, and Bob Kamauff. Mr. Via, chairman, commented that Frostburg racing events would not be affiliated with the All American Derby due to excessive rules and because "professionalism had crept in." In fact, the All American event had been targeted for criticism after a number of cheating scandals, including one where a



Above: Diedre Waites receiving her winning trophy from Al Via at the first Frostburg Elks Derby Day races (1977).



Left: Deidre Waites and grandson, Kycin Waites (third generation Derby Day racer).

Bottom left: Travis Waites (Deidre's son) racing in 1994.

Photo courtesy Phil Beeman

Bottom right: Kycin Waites (Travis's son) racing the Jenkins Collision Center car.

Photo courtesy Phil Beeman



sophisticated arrangement of hidden magnets in the front end of a derby car gave one competitor an unfair advantage. Mr. Via explained, “(Our event) is practically the same as the official soap box derby...but our rules are not as strict. This derby is designed as a fun thing.”

Frostburg service organizations and veterans’ clubs provided resources to ensure drivers would meet the published standards. The Frostburg rules stated that no driver could weigh more than 120 pounds, and that sponsors must pay for all the materials going into the construction of vehicles. Age limits were listed as 10-14.

When race day arrived, spectators lined both sides of Main Street to watch the heats and finals.

The *Cumberland Times* captured the reaction of many who witnessed the event when it published, “It’s a Girl.” Deidre Waites of North Water Street, Frostburg, topped 23 contestants, including 22 boys and one other girl.

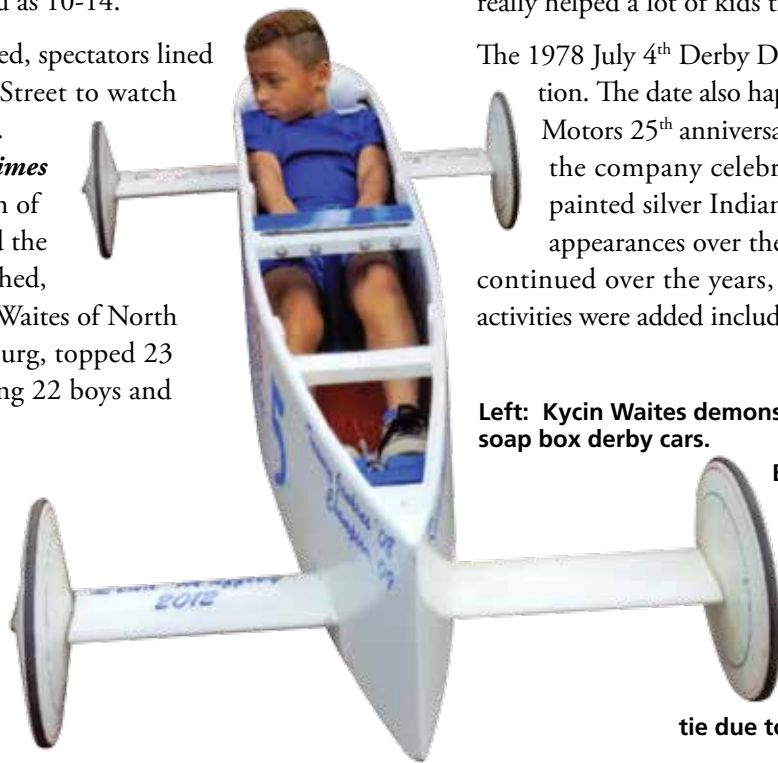
Four decades later Deidre recalled the exciting day. “We didn’t have brakes on the car—we had to hit hay bales at the bottom of

Main Street to stop. On race day I kept winning, so I had to keep hitting the hay bales. Eventually, the front part of my car sprung up and we had to tape it down. I was so happy that I won!”

Deidre’s family has continued the soap box derby tradition through Travis and Kycin, her son and grandson. The family ties to racing became even more special when Kycin drove the same car as his father. Deidre explained, “Sometimes individuals donate the soap box racers to the Elks, so they can be modified and raced again. The Elks have really helped a lot of kids this way.

The 1978 July 4th Derby Days enjoyed increased participation. The date also happened to coincide with General Motors 25th anniversary of Corvette production, and the company celebrated by providing a specially painted silver Indianapolis 500 pace car that made appearances over the weekend. As the racing series continued over the years, additional special events and activities were added including concerts and food vendors.

Left: Kycin Waites demonstrates the “tight fit” inside the soap box derby cars.



Below left: Hayden Heslop with the Armstrong Insurance car — the #1 car has been sponsored by Armstrong Insurance since the Elks Derby race inception.

Photo courtesy Phil Beeman

Below right: Hannah Wharton was one of the 2019 winners which resulted in a ten-way tie due to inclement weather conditions.

Photo courtesy Phil Beeman





Top: Staging area and starting ramps at the Frostburg Elks Derby Day races. Since 1977 the Frostburg Elks races have been held each year on July 4th.

Bottom: The finish line is at the Elks Lodge on Frostburg's Main Street; since 2012, a laser (see arrow) became the official judge for each heat.

The Frostburg racing series captures all the benefits of the All American Soap Box Derby series that was held decades ago, but also offers improvements. Dale Iman noted some of the changes, including one-time use of racing wheels. “As part of the construction, practice wheels are installed on the cars. The drivers may practice with those wheels, have their cars inspected for weight (200 pounds for car and driver), and then regulation wheels are given out the morning of the race. We keep the regulation wheels for use the following year.”

Another difference is the emphasis on vehicles exteriors. Mr. Iman stated, “We give them the primary regulations for building, but the exterior surface is up to them. Cars will range from the old box styles to sleek custom painted ones. Sometimes “wraps” with specialized art work are used. We do not place a money limit on the exterior.”

Perhaps the most obvious improvement in the racing series is the welcoming of girls—the older racing series focused exclusively on boys.

The Elks and city of Frostburg continue to enjoy the success they started more than four decades ago. Races typically draw 35 to 40 entries from the Tri-State

FROSTBURG DERBY DAY WINNERS 1977 – 2019

- 1977 Deidre Waites
- 1978 Brian Finn
- 1979 Randy Eichhorn
- 1980 Mark Wolodkin
- 1981 Bucky Tyler
- 1982 Will Vogtman
- 1983 Michael Warne
- 1984 Michael Whitehead
- 1985 Todd Vogtman
- 1986 Carrie Ann Clise
- 1987 Heidi Reamer
- 1988 Carson Rinehart
- 1989 Steve Cook
- 1990 Seth Wharton
- 1991 Josh Cook
- 1992 Amanda Yonkers
- 1993 Mary Beth Kennell
- 1994 Mary Beth Kennell
- 1995 Tara Emerick
- 1996 Michael Klepitch
- 1997 Brittany Morgan
- 1998 Andrew Farrell
- 1999 Jackie Ayers
- 2000 Jeremiah Recker
- 2001 Cassidy Emerick
- 2002 Justin Smith
- 2003 Jordon Wilson
- 2004 Ryan Kennell
- 2005 Evan Shircliffe
- 2006 Evan Shircliffe
- 2007 Ryan Kennell
- 2008 Zach Hager
- 2009 Tawney Jenkins
- 2010 Zachary Judd
- 2011 Luke Vinci
- 2012 Cross Ritchie
- 2013 Damon Scheid
- 2014 Ryan Kelly
- 2015 Garrett Williams
- 2016 Eli Sibley
- 2017 Isaiah Wharton
- 2018 Avery Mathews

2019

(Races cancelled, mid event due to inclement weather — 10 way tie)

- Cole Trenum
- Hannah Wharton
- Taylor Penick
- Kycin Waites
- Mariah Hershberger
- Isaiah Kozikowski
- Jakob Fullerton
- Brylee Lough
- Kyle Huff
- Carter Neilson

region, and more than one thousand spectators now line Main Street to enjoy the competition and festivities.

Mr. Iman notes the soap box derby event is primarily for kids and that many sponsors graciously assist. “We appreciate the sponsors and volunteers who mentor our children. This is a family event intended to bring children together with parents by having them work on a fun project.” The Elks national organization recognized the tremendous success of the program when it awarded Frostburg Lodge 470 its Best Community Service Project award; quite an honor considering the thousands of lodges across the country.

“Armstrong Insurance has sponsored a car in the Elks Derby Day race since its inception, and of course we love having Car Number One,” says Barb Armstrong. “What better way to give back to the community than supporting the event that has provided 4th of July Frostburg fun for many, many years. Even more fun than watching the cars run is watching the Derby Day morning unfold. Families set their pop-up tents early so that they can get their pictures taken, cars weighed, racing tires on, and food and coolers ready for the day. They polish, tighten, and adjust the cars—take family pictures, dole out advice, and cheer their drivers onward to victory. It’s small town red, white, and blue Frostburg at its best.”

No one is sure when the old style jitneys of the 1950s and 1960s lost favor. Perhaps parental concerns about safety were a major cause of their demise. Perhaps kids lost interest and no longer want to bang around with hand tools anymore. Or perhaps the times passed by jitneys just as Teslas silently streak by Chevy Impalas today. The end just happened and no one thought much about it.

There is much to be said for the organized racing events. Even the All American Soap Box Derby has evolved into Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) programs and categories for young adults. Yes, 20 year old kids may race in sanctioned soap box derby events. Fortunately, Allegany County residents may combine the legacy of jitneys with the excitement and festive atmosphere of the Frostburg Elks Derby Days—the best of both worlds.

The Frostburg Derby Days event has been cancelled for 2020 due to COVID-19 Virus — returning July 4, 2021!

Author’s Note: Neil Jones graciously provided information on his soap box derby experiences during interviews in 2004 and 2015. Allen Haines, Cumberland Maryland resident, generously provided his time and memories to Historical Research Methods students at Allegany High School for their volume on the 1950s, “Primetime.”

Glen Shaffer puts his heart and soul into building Soap Box Derby cars!

Written by: **Dan Whetzel**

“Building soap box derby cars is a passion with me.”

Glen Shaffer’s thirty four years of dedication to building soap box derby cars for youngsters is an ongoing story that continues to excite drivers and spectators at the Elks Derby Day in Frostburg, MD, where his cars are prominently displayed. While Glen’s introduction to the hobby was by chance, there has been nothing random about Glen’s dedication and passion to building cars over the decades.

As Glen remembers, “Around 1986, I was riding my motorcycle and stopped at the Frostburg 7-Eleven store to watch the soap box derby races. A friend’s son was competing and I wanted to see him. I began to look at the cars and decided that I could build better ones. Until that time I never had any association with soap box derby races or cars.”

As promised Glen and his friend, Ed Strickler, set out to build a car for Ed’s son, Matthew. The car building process intrigued young Matthew and he frequently visited Glen’s shop as the second car was being built. “As Ed and I built the car, Matthew would stop by to take photographs. He would always remark, ‘This car is awesome.’ Matthew’s “awesome” comments became the manufacturing name associated with all cars built by Glen.

Awesome #15 arrived with the assistance of Jim Stemple, Frostburg resident and friend, who wanted a car for his daughter. According to Glen, “We worked every Wednesday night for three or four months. Jim took notes, and then edited the notations into a manual that is available for others interested in building a soap box derby racer.”

Glen also created a safety inspection check list that officials use to monitor entries prior to race day. Instructions and lists presented in the binder are not affiliated with the All American Soap Box Derby, but do present similar rules.

An estimated time for building a car is three months, although the time depends on particular requests and circumstances. Using ¾ inch plywood for a base and ¼ inch lauan paneling for the covering, each car is hand crafted. The unique features incorporated into the cars, like the steering mechanism and braking assembly, were derived from inspiration. “I never had formal training. Building cars is God’s way of allowing me to be helpful,” explains Glen.