

'ROLLING SCIENCE PROJECT'

BY BRETT BUCKNER

PHOTOS COURTESY OF LET'S
GROW STEAMx AND
MIKE MILLIGAN

STEAMx Prepares for Its Third Annual River City Soap Box Derby This Summer

Jaylen Taylor is a “total car fanatic,” a shocking confession given he’s only 10 years old.

But Jaylen isn’t just a passenger to his obsession. He’s climbed into the driver’s seat of his father’s Camaro. His legs barely reaching the pedals as he cruises around an empty parking lot on the weekends.

“He’s not shy about getting behind the wheel,” said Jaylen’s father, Delontaye. “It’s just something he was born to do.”

Last year when Jaylen overheard Robbie Branscomb, president and CEO of the Columbus-based Let’s Grow STEAMx, talking about a soap box derby the organization was hosting, the decision to race was a foregone conclusion.

“I knew I had to do it,” Jaylen said. “I didn’t really know what soap box racing was at first, but I knew I was gonna race.”

Jaylen signed up to race not knowing he was joining the long—if scattered—history of soap box racing in Columbus that dates back to the 1940s. It’s a tradition that Robbie Branscomb and the Let’s Grow STEAMx organizers revitalized three years ago after it faded away in the early 1990s.

“So many people who are now working in fields of engineering and technology, had an affiliation with these derby races when they were growing up,” Branscomb said. “It’s definitely something that carries on to the next generation. We just wanted to help make that happen.”

The 2019 River City Soap Box Derby will be June 8, 2019 on 17th Street and Forest Avenue (next to Columbus High School). The race is open to ages 7-17 years old with a maximum of 24 racers allowed to compete on race day.

The soap box derby fits snugly into the overarching goals of Let’s Grow STEAMx, which sponsors events for pre-K through 12th-grade students based on the STEAM principles of science, technology, engineering, arts, and math. As part of their preparation for derby day, racers are required to attend at least one clinic.

“It’s a very relevant educational experience,” she said. “They are taking the lessons they’re already learning in the classroom and applying that knowledge to a real-world activity.”

Devon Singleton has raced in River City Soap Box Derby since its rebirth in the summer of 2017. Though only 10 years old, Devon’s taken away numerous lessons—and a second place trophy last year—from his time behind the wheel.

“Lefty loosey, righty tighty ... I’ll never ever forget that,” Devon

“They are taking the lessons they’re already learning in the classroom and applying that knowledge to a real-world activity.” *-Robbie Branscomb*

‘WE WERE ALL JUST RACERS’

To the novice, a soap box derby is mostly associated with the black-and-white images from *The Little Rascals* tearing down a hill—and occasionally the sidewalk—in a rolling jalopy made of stolen plywood and junkyard roller skates, with Spanky and Alfalfa realizing too late that the one part they forgot was brakes.

The truth isn’t so far off.

In 1933, Myron Scott, a photographer for the *Dayton Daily News* in Ohio, met three boys racing hand-made cars down a hill. Scott invited the boys back a week later for a more formal race he’d officiate—19 boys showed up.

Feeling encouraged, Scott approached his editor to promote the race and donate a \$200 prize on August 19, 1933. A total of 362 kids brought cars made from fruit crates and scrap wood propped up on wheels stolen from baby buggies and roller skates. According to police estimates, 40,000 people gathered to watch.

Soap box derbies sped into their heyday from the late 1940s well into the 1960s.

Boys’ Life magazine reported in May 1959 that about three million people witnessed or took part in some form of derby activity each year, whether it was one of over 160 local derbies or the All-American derby in Akron, Ohio, which drew 75,000 spectators alone, according to Smithsonianmag.com.

As the official sponsor of the All-American, Chevrolet distributed wheels, axles and rulebooks at their dealerships and awarded college scholarships to top finishers.



Columbus can boast both a soap box derby culture dating back to the 1940s and racing legend, Joe Lunn.

After winning in Columbus in a \$10 hand-built wooden car, the then 11-year-old from Thomasville, took the bus from Columbus to Akron—riding with a reporter from the *Columbus Ledger* and his mother, who had to borrow money to buy the ticket—to race in the All American Soap Box Derby.

During the first heat of the world junior speed race, Lunn crashed into a retaining wall just past the finish line. His car was falling apart. His chest was bleeding, but Lunn refused to quit. He’d win the title and “The Ramblin’ Wreck from Georgia” was born.

“I was, of course, stunned and still a little in shock from the crash,” Lunn told the *Ledger-Enquirer* in 2017. “We went back that evening and they presented me with a four-year scholarship and all the trophies that I had won.”

Lunn’s no. 35 car is in the soap box derby museum in Akron.

Mike Milligan’s father, Tommy, raced in Columbus as a child in the 1940s when it was held on 13th Street. In the ‘60s and ‘70s, Tommy got involved again, this time as a father with his sons.

“My dad was busy—with work and with five other children—but it was the time we carved out just for us,” said the 56-year-old Milligan. “We got such a connection, one on one, and that’s what I remember most.”

It was Mike who took to racing the most.

“[My father] gradually learned how to improve the speed of the racers, building them faster,” Milligan said. “I happened to be in the sweet spot when it came to building a winning racer. Plus, I was the right size and a pretty good driver.”

Milligan and his father traveled all over the Southeastern United States racing and “won quite a bit.” Though he never won a local race that allowed him to go to the All-American Race in Akron, he came close in 1975, only to be beaten by his brother, who was driving Milligan’s old car.

“It was fun for our family,” he said, “but it was really special seeing the look of perseverance in Dad’s eyes—from having raced as a kid in the ‘40s, then with his older kids in the ‘60s and finally putting it all together in the early 1970s.”

Girls began racing in 1970, but that

said, laughing. “I bet I heard it a million times.”

Under trained volunteer supervision, racers help build the cars, learning about its mechanics—steering, aerodynamics, weight distribution, suspension, steering—as well as racing rules and safety. They are also given up to four practice days leading up to derby day.

“It was fun,” he said. “We were going fast, but not too fast, and we’d learned how to control it, and really how to stop. We had lots of practice.”



didn’t really matter.

“We were all just racers,” Milligan remembers. “When we got in the car, we were all the same.”

“Sometimes, you don’t know who’s beaten you until after you cross the finish line.”

Milligan has seen the sport grow from pieced-together racers built with spare parts to the modern pre-fabricated cars with their mastery of aerodynamics, weight distribution and suspension.

“They have become like the gravity grand prix,” he said, “They really are a rolling science project.”

Milligan helped bring the derby racing back to life in Columbus for a time in the 1990s when he was raising a 7-year-old son.

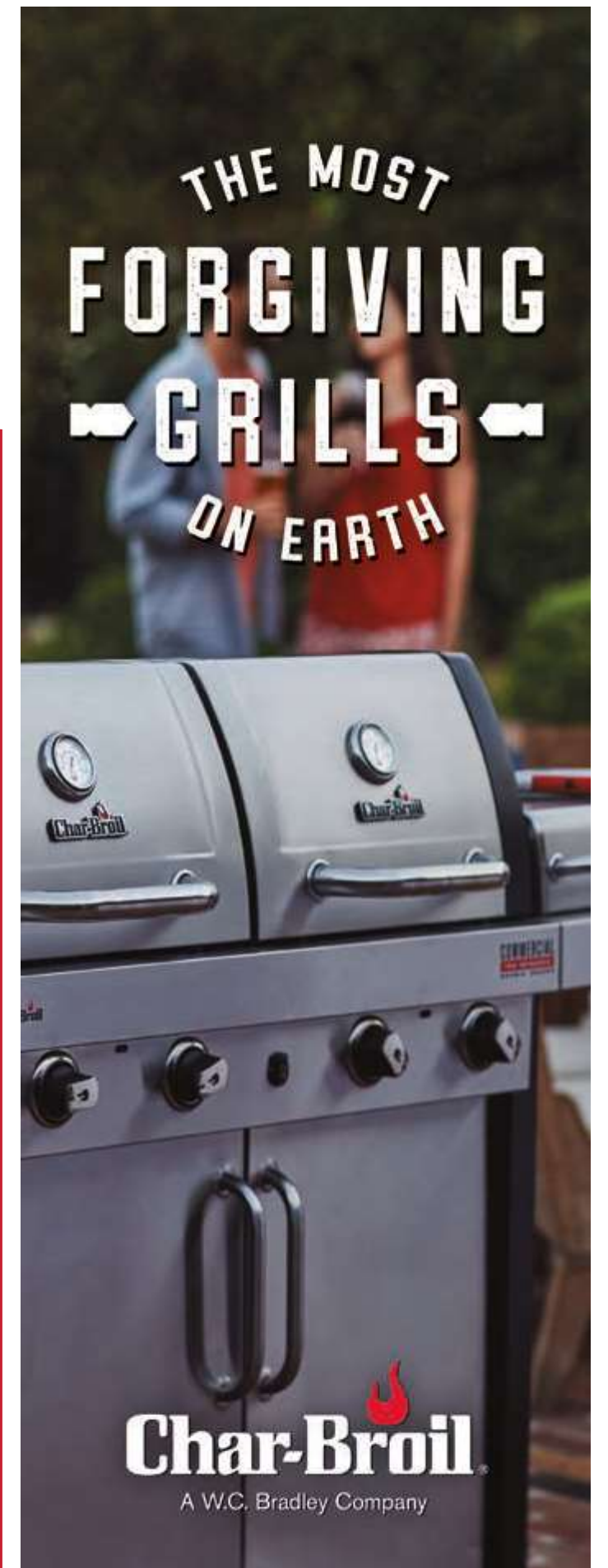
“I realized, he’s gonna miss out on all this great stuff,” Milligan said. “So I started the races back up.”

In 1993, according to Milligan, Columbus played host to the second largest soap box derby race in the United States. The next year, it hosted the largest race in the country. Milligan eventually left the area, and the derby in Columbus quietly disappeared ... until 2017.

As a child, Branscomb spent summers with her father, Henry Foster, who was the former director for the Flushing Meadows Soap Box Derby in Flushing, N.Y.

“I loved listening to his stories,” she said. “It was encouraging to hear about the kids in his programs. Kids who didn’t always come from the greatest background, and how they created opportunities for themselves through the soap box derby.”

“I wanted to do the same for the kids in Columbus.”





“We learned a lot about math and science and used that to be better racers.”

Better still, the kids are learning without knowing they’re learning. That’s what happens when careening down a hill at 25 miles per hour. Those skills will have practical applications and might unlock otherwise untapped, and much needed, potential, explains Devon’s mother, Tashee Singleton.

“There’s a lack of labor skills,” said Singleton, who is a co-founder and partner of Let’s Grow STEAMx. “We’ve become so office focused or technologically driven that we’ve lost the brick-and-mortar skills that have gotten us so far as a society. This gives us a chance to expose the younger generation to tools they’ve never had to use.”

Not to mention, learning how to be mechanically self-sufficient, should the need arise.

“I remember growing up, when something didn’t work, we got the toolbox out and tried to fix it ourselves,” she said. “Now, the first thing kids do is go to YouTube. [Soap box racing] is a unique sport that also teaches fundamental, practical skills kids will use for the rest of their lives.”

A FAMILY SPORT

Mike Milligan raced in Columbus in the 1970s and helped revitalize the derby in the 1990s. As an organizer, he realized it offered something he never considered as a kid.

“One of the most touching things I remember from when we brought that races back in the ‘90s,” he said, “was seeing people

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Although his own son is too young to race, Joseph Brannan volunteers his time to help local children build their racers.

“Building a derby racer requires constant interaction, and conversations can quickly turn from the car itself to just talking about life.” *-Mike Milligan*

with physical disabilities being able to compete on a level playing field in a sport. Soap Box racing really is for everyone.”

What separates Soap Box Racing from other sports is the interaction between the kids and their parents or the other adults who volunteer their time.

“Building a derby racer requires constant interaction, and conversations can quickly turn from the car itself to just talking about life,” Milligan said. “It’s a lot of work that is

also wrapped up in a lot of fun.”

What makes soap box racing special is that it strengthens relationships. Parents can do more than sit and cheer from the stands or simply drive their kids to practice.

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Since the early days of the Soap Box Derby, local companies have sponsored racers in the annual event.



“Personal mentoring as they’re building the cars, is crucial,” Branscomb said. “They’re working with their parents or community volunteers and having these great conversations. Sometimes it’s about the car, but more often than not, it’s about their lives, and the challenges they face on a regular basis.”

While parental involvement isn’t required, most parents want to be there.

“They come and they are fully engaged,” said Branscomb, who has seven children of her own. “I appreciate the commitment,

the time commitment. But I know why they are coming ... because it’s fun.”

With the average cost of a pre-fabricated soap box car running upwards of \$800, it’s simply beyond the reach of most families.

But with the help of local donors and sponsors, Let’s Grow STEAMx was able to buy a fleet of racecars that the children had to assemble, ensuring that everyone who wanted to race, could. That is especially important for an organization that aims to educate young people from all social, racial and economic

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backgrounds.

“It’s a great thing, especially for minorities,” Delontaye Taylor said. “I was raised in low-income housing. Soap box racing was not something we even knew to dream about. Now, to have my son actually out there driving a car down a steep hill. We were amped up.”

Jaylen remembers the first time he slid into the fiberglass car,

sitting snugly atop the ramp, holding his breath as he waited for the lever to drop that sent him rolling down hill, gaining speeds upward of 25 mph. Between the brim of his helmet and the top of the car—for maximum aerodynamics—Jaylen has about a quarter of an inch of visibility, like peeking through a cracked door.

“When I first got in the car, it felt kinda terrifying and fun at the same time,” he said. “I was thinking that maybe the brakes wouldn’t work or that I was gonna crash. But once it started I wasn’t thinking so much. I was just racing.”

Jaylen’s father wasn’t worried.

“It was cool watching him learn and seeing how happy he was, Delontaye Taylor said. “I had total faith in the system to keep him safe because they did so many tests and practice runs. There was a lot of preparation.”

Jaylen won third place.

“It was awesome,” he said. “But I thought I was gonna get second place, so I wasn’t too impressed with myself.”

Racers compete for cash prizes and trophies. This year, those in the sanctioned race will be competing for a chance to win an all-expense paid trip to compete in the All-American Soap Box Derby in Akron, Ohio, which has been held every year since 1934—save for four years during World War II.

“This year, if I can keep my face up and my chin down, I just might win.”

For more information about the River City Soap Box Derby visit LetsGrowSteam.org or call 706-577-3409. ☺

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