

# Akron Beacon Journal

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## LOCAL

# 75 facts about the All-American Soap Box Derby

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This year marks the 75th running of the All-American Soap Box Derby, an Akron institution that has left a stream of colorful memories in its wake.

In honor of the event's milestone, here are 75 facts about the derby:

## Its origin

1. The derby was inspired by neighborhood boys racing homemade cars on a Dayton street in 1933. When Dayton Daily News photographer Myron Scott spotted them, he convinced his newspaper to sponsor a citywide race. On race day, 40,000 spectators turned out to watch 362 kids race cars built of orange crates, sheet tin and baby buggy wheels.
2. The 1933 race was for boys only, but two girls snuck in anyway. One won second place and revealed her gender when she took off her helmet and her golden locks tumbled out.
3. The All-American Soap Box Derby was formed the following year. The 1934 race featured youngsters from 34 cities.
4. In 1935, the race moved to East Tallmadge Avenue in Tallmadge while a permanent location was being built.
5. Derby Downs opened in Akron in 1936.
6. The original steel bridge over the Derby Downs finish line was built during the Depression in 1937 as a Works Progress Administration project. It was torn down and replaced with a new \$250,000 bridge in 2000.
7. For years, the All-American symbol was a derby car with No. 7 on it. The car represented one built by Robert Gravett of Dayton in a pre-derby neighborhood race. Myron Scott thought the car exemplified his vision of a derby racer.

8. While an early car might have been made from a soap box, there is actually no record of such a creation.

The champions

9. The first All-American champ in 1934 was Robert Turner of Muncie, Ind.

10. The first country outside the U.S. to send a competitor to the All-American was South Africa, with local champ Norman Neumann, in 1936.

11. When 11-year-old Cliff Hardesty of New York came to Akron for the 1939 race, his arrival was preceded by 52 letters of protest from his hometown of White Plains. People were skeptical about his flawlessly built car. Race inspectors questioned Cliff for three hours, then asked him to duplicate the front suspension of the racer. They stopped him a half-hour later after seeing he had already built a better system than the one on his car. Cliff ran five perfect heats to win the world championship.

12. In 1941, 14-year-old Claude Smith became the first All-American winner from Akron.

13. In 1946, Gilbert Klecan of San Diego was dubbed “the Graphite Kid” because he smeared his face and car with graphite to supposedly cut down on wind resistance. Other boys followed suit, but to no avail. Gil won.

14. Poor and fatherless, Joey Lunn from Thomasville, Ga., won the sympathy of the crowd in 1952 when he smashed his car after winning the first heat. As a nurse tended to his scrapes and bruises, volunteers tried to repair his car with tape, strips of tin and a lunch box. He went on to win, even though his car shed parts in each heat leading to his victory.

15. A 1954 All-American competitor, Denny Zimmerman of Hartford, Conn., went on to race in the Indianapolis 500 and was named that event’s Rookie of the Year in 1971.

16. The first brothers to win All-American titles were Terry Townsend in 1957 and Barney Townsend in 1959, both from Anderson, Ind.

17. In 1973, champion Jim Gronen, of Boulder, Colo., submitted his car to a routine after-race inspection when officials found an illegal device inside and disqualified him. It became the derby’s most notorious case of cheating.

18. Girls were admitted to the derby in 1971.

19. “It’s a girl!” was the Akron Beacon Journal headline in 1975 when Karren Stead of Morristown, Pa., became the first female derby champion.
20. The first brother and sister to become All-American champs were Joan Ferdinand in 1976 and Mark Ferdinand in 1977, both from North Canton.
21. There has only been one repeat champion in derby history: Danielle Del Ferraro of Stow won in 1993 and 1994.
22. In 2003, rally stock champ Billy Blakely of Huntersville, N.C., was stripped of his world title after his car failed a post-race inspection. Officials found two issues with his car that rules prohibited.
23. The tallest and shortest All-American champs: Jim Miley of Muncie, Ind., at 6-foot-1 (1958) and Carol Ann Sullivan of New Hampshire at 4-foot-5 (1982).
24. The heaviest and lightest All-American champs: Garrett Kysar of Martinsburg, W.Va., at 166 pounds (2006) and Loren Hurst of Hudson at 49 pounds (1992).
25. The youngest and oldest All-American champs: Megan Taylor of Charleston, W.Va., at 8 years (1999) and Allison Bates of Twinsburg at 17 years, 8 months (2011).

#### Race years, divisions

26. Derby races were suspended from 1942 to 45 due to World War II.
27. One world champ was crowned each year through 1975.
28. In 1976, the junior division was created to attract youngsters ages 10 to 12. Two world champs were crowned through 1991.
29. In 1992, the derby added a “stock car” division with cars made from kits for families who found the derby too time-consuming. That increased the number of world champs to three.
30. The prototype for the stock car was built by Kenny Cline, who won the 1967 All-American. Cline spent 1,400 hours building his childhood car, but the kit car he designed could be assembled in four hours.
31. In 1993, the derby acknowledged kids who wanted to race year-round by sanctioning rallies. Top point-getters compete in their own three divisions at the All-American, increasing the number of total world champs to six a year.

32. Winning cars in the local stock, super stock and masters categories are confiscated and cannot be raced again. Rally cars are returned.

33. Competitors in the local divisions of the All-American may not race in the same division again. Rally champs can return in the same division.

Sponsors, celebrities

34. In the early years, derby champs got a \$2,000 college scholarship, while second and third place got a car. Race officials suspect that at least one runner-up threw a race to qualify for the car over the scholarship.

35. Today's All-American winners win a \$5,000 scholarship, courtesy of Goodyear, and a trophy.

36. The cast of NBC television's *Bonanza* was the star attraction at derbies in 1962 and 1964. During their 1964 appearance, cast members starred in the No. 1-rated program on television. *Bonanza* dad Lorne Greene attended the derby five times.

37. The celebrity with the most All-American appearances: actor James Stewart, with six visits.

38. Two future presidents visited the All-American: actor Ronald Reagan in 1951 and Vice President Richard Nixon in 1959.

39. Other celebrities in attendance over the years: Rock Hudson, Tom Hanks, Dinah Shore, comedians Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, and air ace Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker.

40. Chevrolet operated the derby through 1971, pouring about \$1 million a year into the race. When the automaker withdrew its sponsorship and clout in 1972, the race dwindled from 252 participating cities to 138 in a single year.

41. The 1970s saw a series of sponsors work to save the derby, including the Akron Chamber of Commerce, the Akron Jaycees and Barberton's Novar Electronics Corp., which served as the event's national sponsor from 1976 to 1988.

42. First National Bank became the derby's national sponsor in 1988.

43. Candy maker Leaf Inc. was the national sponsor in 1993-94.

44. Goodyear became the national sponsor in 1998.

45. From 2002 to 2007, the derby enjoyed high-profile partnerships with NASCAR, Home Depot and Levi Strauss Signature.

46. FirstEnergy Corp. became the program's title sponsor this year.

Now and then

47. About 500 youngsters ages 7 to 17 will compete in the derby Saturday.

48. The lineup features 280 local champs, 145 rally champs and 75 kids competing in the SuperKids Classic for special-needs children.

49. Derby racers will come from 40 states. At one time or another, all 50 states have been represented at the All-American.

50. The most states represented in a single year was 1966, when champs from 46 states raced in the All-American.

51. Only four cities have been in all 75 All-American races: Akron, Cleveland, Indianapolis and Anderson, Ind.

52. Champs at this year's All-American from outside the U.S. hail from Canada, Germany, Japan and New Zealand.

53. This year's racer from New Zealand will be the farthest-traveling competitor in the derby's history.

54. Other countries (or territories) that have participated in past derbies: Ireland, Australia, South Africa, Tasmania, Venezuela, Panama, Guam, Philippines and Puerto Rico. For many years, GM partnered with the U.S. Armed Forces in Europe and had an all-Europe race.

55. Champs from the Akron Local have won the All-American 16 times — more than any other local.

56. Girls have won 14 of the past 15 All-American titles in the local categories.

57. The All-American budget for 2012 is \$1.3 million.

58. The Akron operation employs seven people year round.

59. The All-American uses about 700 volunteers.

60. Last year's All-American attendance was about 10,000.

61. Historically, the biggest crowd was estimated at 75,000 in 1962.

## Rules

62. In the derby's inaugural year of 1934, the rules amounted to nine sentences. Almost anything went, as long as the vehicle was built by the boy who would drive it.

63. Today, derby rules amount to a 22-page manual.

64. When cars started getting too fast, organizers sought ways to slow them. One year, organizers banned the use of power tools in making them. Windshields also were banned in an effort to increase drag and safety.

65. In the late 1950s, to stop kids from souping up their wheels, the derby began providing identical wheels to each contestant, eliminating a major advantage of hard-core derby enthusiasts.

66. In the early years, racers built their cars from scratch and were limited to spending \$10.

67. The fastest car to race in the All-American was clocked at 53 mph in 1977. Today, with a shorter hill, derby cars reach nearly 30 mph.

68. From start to finish, a winning derby heat takes between 29 and 30 seconds.

69. The Derby Downs track was originally a 1,150-foot hill. After improved car designs led to breakneck speeds and hospital visits, it was shortened. Today, it is 989.4 feet.

70. The track record is 26.30 seconds by Tom Fisher of Detroit in 1940.

71. The record at the current track length is 28.24 seconds, by Hilary Pearson of Kansas City, Mo., in 2004.

72. A derby car costs between \$450 and \$600 depending on the division, plus \$120 for wheels.

73. Each combined driver and car must weigh the same in each category: 200 pounds in stock, 240 in super stock, 255 in masters.

74. Derby racers must send their cars to Akron 10 days before race week begins so they can be pre-inspected. This gives an opportunity for revisions, if needed.

75. The derby has never been rained out but has been rained on 18 times.

Compiled by Beacon Journal staff writer Paula Schleis. Sources: Beacon Journal archives, All-American spokesman Bob Troyer, former All-American general manager Jeff Iula.