

# Team effort made Soap Box Derby dream a reality

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The "bugs" are an annual tradition in Bush's Pasture Park. In late spring and early summer, they come out in droves, with bright colors and sleek bodies. Hundreds of spectators gather to watch.

The "bugs" today are more commonly known as Soap Box Derby cars, and this month's races continue a practice that began more than 60 years ago.

In 1951-52, interest among business and city leaders was growing for a Soap Box Derby track to be constructed in the Salem area. In late March, the Salem City Council unanimously adopted a resolution to lead to a "1,400-foot runway that is to be constructed immediately through the combined efforts of many Salem concerns and just plain citizens," the Capital Journal reported. The goal was to build a track that would nearly duplicate the one in Akron, Ohio, the home of the Soap Box Derby championship finals.

City Manager J.L. Franzen, along with City Engineer Harold Davis, surveyed and appraised possible sites. Davis' assistant, C.A. McClure, brought the idea to city leaders, the Capital Journal reported. They also created a list of materials that were needed to make the track a reality.

Soap Box Derby supporters also worked to drum up interest among boys throughout the Mid-Valley. The film "Winners All," about the 1951 Derby, was played at area schools during assemblies, at businesses such as North Salem Roller Drome, as well as civic groups. A public showing of the film was held at Bush Elementary School.

More publicity followed as the Soap Box Derby organization committee was filmed and was featured in a live broadcast on KSLM (1390 AM) in late March inspecting the site of the planned track.

The Salem Cherrians marching unit and the Oregon National Guard marched to the top of the course to open the dedication ceremony on July 12, 1952. American Legion Post No. 136 presented an American flag and a 40-foot-high flag pole at the top of the runway to the city as another feature of the park. The

day began with a parade of the "bugs," which started at Marion Square Park and finished at the new track. "Derby Downs" officially was given to the city at noon. More than 1,500 people attended.

The big day was July 13, when the boys would be competing for prizes, the largest of which was a trip to Akron to participate in the national finals, where a \$5,000 scholarship would be awarded. Three cars were to be raced in each heat in two classes: Class "A" for boys 13, 14 or 15 years old, and "B" for boys 11 or 12.

"A starting 'race' was clowned by Salem Mayor Alfred Loucks and Hollis Smith, mayor of Dallas, as the opener for the Derby. The two maneuvered midget autos of questionable construction to a belabored finish. Loucks won," the Oregon Statesman reported July 14, 1952.

A crowd estimated by the Oregon Statesman of between 6,000 and 10,000 people watched in person and many more listened as it was broadcast on KOCO (1490 AM) as Doug Adams, 13, the Class "A" champion, beat his brother Dan, 12, the Class "B" champion, to win the the championship. The Capital Journal reported "it was the first time in the 15-year-old history of official Soap Box Derby racing that brothers raced for the championship on any Derby racing."

Neal Reiling of Aurora finished second in the semifinals of the "A" event but won a prize for "the best constructed bug in the Derby." Prizes were presented by Gov. Douglas McKay, an honorary judge.

Doug Adams went on to participate in Akron, where he lost by a length in the first heat, the Oregon Statesman reported. Salem got its first local world champion in 1978, when Darren Hart won the junior race. Six more winners have come out of the Salem race since then. Girls began participating in the race in 1971.

Today, there are three divisions: Stock (for ages 7-13), Super Stock (ages 9-18) and Masters (ages 10-20).

Although the times have changed, the race continues to thrill spectators and participants each spring and summer much like it did in the summer of 1952.

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