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Driving Under the Influence -- of Dad

At Cub Scouts' Pinewood Derby, Fathers Pay for Extra Edge; A \$250 Track for a \$4 Toy Car

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Picture added by L. Chisausky

When the annual Pinewood Derby rolled around this year in Peotone, Ill., the Cub Scouts of Pack 315 prepared for the big race as millions of scouts across the country have done since the Eisenhower era. They started with the same \$3.55 kits -- a 7-inch block of wood, four plastic wheels and four nails to serve as axles. With saw and sandpaper and a bit of help from mom or dad, the boys turned the parts into miniature cars. On race day, they gathered in the Peotone Junior High School gymnasium, each hoping his car would coast down the track faster than the others.

And then, one by one, they lost to 7-year-old Jacob Chisausky.

Jacob and his dad, computer-hardware designer Larry Chisausky, had spent more than four weeks -- and hundreds of dollars -- perfecting Jacob's car. They used a \$9.95 tool from a site called Maximum Velocity to make sure the axle hole was perfectly round. For lubrication, they bought graphite powder with molybdenum particles.

LOW TECH, HIGH PERFORMANCE



See the world of high-performance gear⁰ for pinewood derby cars, in order of price.

The final step: Mr. Chisausky set up a \$250 aluminum track in the family basement and ran dozens of trials -- using an optical-beam timer (\$125) to clock the results to within 1/10,000th of a second. "You know," said Jacob, now 8, who beat 98 scouts for the title, "Pinewood Derby is my dad's favorite part of scouting."

Stage Moms, step aside: Here comes the Derby Dad. The Pinewood Derby, that cherished chestnut of the scouting calendar, is getting more intense -- thanks to a range of new companies devoted solely to giving kids (or their parents) an edge. Manufacturer DerbyWorx makes about a dozen products to enhance pinecar performance, including a \$17 axle straightener and a tool for rounding wheels (Pro-Wheel Shaver XT, \$38). Vendor Maximum Velocity, which started with a handful of specialized axles and wheels in 1999, now sells more than 200 parts. A site called Pinewoodderbychamp.com sells a 94-page book called "Ultimate Derby Secrets." Its pitch: "My sons have an entire wall full of First Place Trophies!"

DISTRICT Grand CHAMPION car picture added by L. Chisausky





Najlah Feanny

Bring the family: A father monitors the finish line at a Pinewood Derby race in Lansdale, Pa.

All of this is a far cry from the first derby, organized in 1953 by scout leader Don Murphy in Manhattan Beach, Calif. The idea was to get parents to spend time with kids to teach them rudimentary woodworking skills. Even now, the Cub Scouts' derby guidelines -- distributed on a sheet of paper that comes with each kit -- retain this simplicity: Cars can weigh "not over 5 ounces," for example, and can be powered only by gravity. Kids can also learn to maximize speed by adding weight toward the car's rear, reducing friction and drag, and lubricating axles for smoother operation.

Many of the latest pine-car performance boosters are far beyond the comprehension of the average 8-year-old. One recent video, "Pinewood Derby Speed Secrets," (ABC-pinewood-derby.com, \$14.99) includes the formula for potential energy and a discussion of the torque of the wheel's braking area. On pinewoodpro.com, it costs \$5.95 to download "Winning Pinewood Derby Secrets," a book that suggests modifying cars so that three of the four wheels touch the track (to reduce friction) and creating hidden chambers for graphite so the lubricant can keep oozing onto the axles race after race.

The Little-Kid Edge

Of course, for every kid with a hovering parent, there's another who worked a bit more independently -- to a perhaps predictable outcome. At a recent meet in Lansdale, Pa., 10-year-old Sam Portock watched as his wedge-shaped, blue and gold Webelo Mobile -- he named it after the Cubs' top rank -- lost to cars built by 7- and 8-year-olds. "My car isn't as fast because I had to build it on my own," he said. "The little kids have the advantage because their dads do all the work."

For many kids -- and their parents -- winning now means more than ever. To mark Cub Scouting's 75th anniversary, the organization is holding its first nationwide pinewood race this year. That means the 1.5 million kids now competing in 300 regional Cub Scout councils will have a shot at May's national championship in Dallas. "Pinewood Derby can be a very emotional event," says Jerry Dehoney, associate director of the Boy Scouts of America's Cub Scout division. "I wouldn't say the parents are like Little League parents -- but they can get a little too involved."

For scout leaders who want to keep the playing field even, the derby's high-performance subculture is creating new challenges. Carl Menk, a scout leader in Montclair, N.J., says he often chides dads over the public-address system when kids enter virtually flawless cars. Because the Cub Scout national organization sets only a few basic rules, Mr. Menk explains, it's up to local Cub Scout dens and packs to interpret them. (Many forbid the use of axles and wheels not included in the official kit.) "It's obvious the fathers are building these cars," Mr. Menk says. "Sometimes I take a dad aside and say, in a fun way, that I'll disqualify his car if it happens to win."

Derby dreams: Branchburg, N.J., Cubs



Najlah Feanny

Companies that sell pinewood tools and tips say their mission is not only to teach kids increasingly sophisticated skills, but also to give everyone a chance to use the latest technology. Derby dad and toolmaker Bill Launius of Millstadt, Ill., says he founded DerbyWorx two years ago in part to help families without sophisticated workshops. He says orders for his specialized pinecar tools quadrupled last year to 16,000. He expects to sell 30,000 to 40,000 pieces this year. "It was getting to the point where, unless you had access to a professional machine shop, you just weren't going to win," he says.

To help give grown-ups an outlet for all their enthusiasm, many scout packs in the past few years have added "Family Derbies." These open competitions let brothers, sisters and parents compete in their own contest. There's even an organized national league for adults: About a year ago, a husband-and-wife team in Marietta, Ga. -- they're former scout parents -- started the Woodcar Independent Racing League. The league invites people from across the U.S. to mail their pinewood-style cars to its headquarters, where the cars are raced by proxy. Results and car photos are posted on the club's Web site.

Derby Dad -- The Movie

Derby-obsessed dads are even the subject of a new movie. "Down and Derby" -- it features Pat Morita of "The Karate Kid," and is set for April 15 release -- is the story of dads who live vicariously through their sons' races. The comedy includes a dad who tries to pilfer a car design from another dad, and wrestles his son for control of a car. Says one of the movie's Cub Scout characters: "I can't wait until I'm a dad so I can build my own car and race it." (Director Eric Hendershot says the movie draws from his own experience as a dad of five Cub Scouts.)

For their recent pinewood race, Nikesh Patel and his father, Shailesh Patel, looked for every edge in designing their entry. The Hatfield, Pa., pharmacist handled the power tools and took pains to polish the tiny axles with fine sandpaper. Seven-year-old Nikesh designed the car, which emerged as a glossy 1950s-style hot rod he called the Burning Falcon. "I got to name it," Nikesh said.

On a Saturday morning in late January, the family traveled to his scout pack's race in nearby Lansdale, Pa., and Nikesh and his fellow Wolf Cubs lined the 32-ft. wooden track. Most were on their knees, bouncing and cheering as their cars sped down the slope in heats of three. Nikesh watched his car cross the finish line first in an early time trial, and pumped his fist.

But soon, the Burning Falcon started lagging. Mr. Patel, now standing near the scoring table with a knot of other fathers, examined the times from each heat and suggested the third lane was running slow. He also heard from other dads that they had polished their axles to a mirror-slick sheen using something called jeweler's rouge. "Next year, we're using jeweler's rouge," said Mr. Patel.

As the heats continued, Mr. Patel watched his son's car cross the finish line first. "Yes, Nik!" he shouted, looking around for his son. "Nik?" But by now, Nikesh had wandered away from the track to a group of boys across the gym, who were intent on a new pursuit: They were playing with yo-yos.

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Low Tech, High Performance

Here's a look at the world of high-performance gear for pinewood derby cars, in order of price:

ITEM/COST/VENDOR/LOCATION	COMMENTS
Speed to the Finish \$7.95 Maximum Velocity Inc. Peoria, Ariz.	In addition to this derby-tip book, site sells wheel polish, axle straighteners and pre-carved car kits. Site founder Randy Davis got started in 1999 when his sons were Cubs -- and quit his software design job two years ago to run the site.
Pro-Wheel Shaver II \$18.25 WinDerby.com Tonawanda, N.Y.	Plastic wheels in some pinewood kits are slightly oval, say insiders, who blame the molds used to make them. This tool, made by manufacturer DerbyWorx and available on many sites, is used with a power drill to make wheels round.
Red Heat car kit \$39.95 Air City Hobbies Dayton, Ohio	Forget carving and sanding: Car body comes pre-shaped, weighted for top speed and primed for painting. It meets pinewood specs -- but not the spirit of the competition, scout leaders say.
Daytona 6-Lane derby finish line \$365 NewBold Products Roswell, Ga.	Uses infrared electronic eyes at start and finish lines to time cars to within 1/10,000th of a second. Large digital readout above the track.
Freedom six-lane aluminum track \$1,235 Piantedosi Oar Co., West Acton, Mass.	This oar maker began selling wooden derby tracks as a sideline 15 years ago. It added faster aluminum versions in 2003 -- accounting for 85% of the 2,000 tracks it expects to sell this year.

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