

Scouting's Pinewood Derby: Driving under the influence of dad

By JONATHAN WELSH, *The Wall Street Journal* via the AP

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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.

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."

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.

Of course, for every kid with a hovering parent, there's another who worked a bit more independently.

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, 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," 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."

To help give grown-ups an outlet for 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-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.)