

# Thrills on the hills: It's soapbox season



[Gary Poignant](#)

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1 / 8 Madeline Hughes, 9, will be entering the St. Albert Soapbox Derby for the first time this year thanks to Gary Poff, a long-time volunteer cart builder and technician with the organizing group. Photo; Gary Poignant

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There are thrills on the hills once again: soapbox season has arrived.

From St. Albert to Okotoks, 10 gravity-powered soapbox races are scheduled from May until September.

"I love the excitement and joy you see on the children's faces on race day. There's nothing better than that," said Gary Poff, the 78-year-old chief cart builder and tech lead for the St. Albert race.

Poff has spent countless hours volunteering since the event was first held 13 years ago, and the retired great-grandfather embraces his crucial role.

"Anyone who needs their cart built or is having problems can come here. We'll help them out," he said.

Many have received expert assistance from Poff, including two sisters who signed up for this year's race after watching a familiar face scoot down the course in 2022.

"They saw their cousin racing and they wanted to give it a go," said Iain Hughes, father of 10-year-old Sawyer and Madeline, 9. Their carts will be ready to in plenty of time for the June 17 event, which runs along St. Vital Avenue hill.

While the costs to build a soap box cart from the standard Go-Kit package is about \$350, a partnership with main derby sponsor Fountain Tire and other St. Albert-area businesses makes the race available to every child.

Race director Bob Fisher says the hope is to have 40 kids in the 150-entry field after a referral by the St. Albert Family Resource Centre (SAFRC) and other social agencies.

"It gives the kids a sense of belonging to participate in an event as big as the soap box derby," said Tara Gorman, operations manager at the SAFRC. "They challenge themselves, which builds their self-esteem."

The community support is contagious, as those pitching in range from members at the St. Albert Seniors Centre to high school woodworking students from nearby Morinville. Fisher says those volunteers cut plywood frames to help kids and parents finish off their carts.

While most entrants have carts from previous races, Fisher estimates there will be 30-35 new builds this year.

Competitors race in age categories of 6-8 years, 9-11 and 12-14, all getting a minimum of three races. While there are winners in each age group, all competitors receive a race T-shirt, plus lunch. There is also prizing for cart design and cart theme.

Carts start on a ramp and roll down an 800-metre track protected at the bottom by a line of hay bales. While the average speed is between 20-30 kmh, the top speed registered by a St. Albert RCMP radar gun last year was 35 kmh.

Fisher says strict conditions for both cart and rider must be met before entering a race. "Safety is a top priority," he said.

In Okotoks, more than half of the children registered are competing thanks to the generosity of local businesses.

"About 60 per cent of kids are sponsored by a company. We never turn any child away," said Trish Henderson about the just-finished June race, which included children between 8 and 14 years.

The race, now in its 33rd year, is always held on the town's Crystal Ridge Drive and features a 100-foot elevation drop along an 800-metre course.

"It's a great day for our kids. It's also a family day. You'll see parents and grandparents out there cheering on their kids," she said, adding EMS is on site, and there are hay bales at the bottom to stop any runaway carts. "Last year we had 42 new drivers, so sometimes people steer off the course."

In addition to business support, there is also a team of volunteers helping make the race possible, including the Okotoks Dawgs junior baseball team.

"Everybody who races gets a competitor's medal and a goodie bag, and the winner gets a trophy," said Henderson, adding there are also prizes for most enthusiastic driver and best crash recovery.

<https://www.stalbertsoapboxderby.ca/>



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