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BRUCE EDWARDS/St. Albert Gazette
Gary Poff takes at a derby cart assembly workshop at Fountain Tire in preparation of the 12th annual St. Albert Soap Box Derby in June.



RACE READY Co-owner Mike Kilick tries out a derby cart during an assembly workshop at Fountain Tire in preparation for the 12th annual St. Albert Soap Box Derby which runs June 14-15. To read more about the upcoming derby see page 36.



Gary Poff helps families prep for St. Albert Soapbox Derby

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On the main day of the St. Albert Soap Box Derby, kids jabber with excitement, dads tinker with eye-popping go-karts while volunteers arrange the karts on a steel ramp ready for take-off.

Hayden Taggart, 6, wants to climb into his first go-kart this year, and he's hoping his grandfather, Terry Krug of the Edmonton Street Rod Association, will help build the right model.

A driver who knows his mind, Hayden has decided he wants a red go-kart with firefighter stickers and a ladder. The car is a nod to his father, a local firefighter.

When asked why he would like to race, the Grade 1 Ecole Sacré Coeur student replies, "My friend Theo did it before and he said it was fun."

Krug, who builds his own cars and street rods, added, "We went to the soap box race last year and decided to get involved this year. It will be something for him and I to build it in the garage. And hopefully, his dad can help."

Race organizers are aiming to attract 200 kids ages six to 14. Some are racing for the first time. Others love the adrenaline rush of speeding downhill on St. Vital Avenue and dream of racing professionally.

Gary Poff is a volunteer who joined in 2012 and contributed long hours to the growth of the derby. His latest contribution was hosting a free live Q & A on how to build go-karts on Saturday, March 23 at Fountain Tire St. Albert, the derby's



Hayden Taggart, 6, tries out a derby cart.

presenting sponsor. Both Hayden and his grandfather attended the question period.

Poff's contribution has been so significant, the 2023 derby organizers created the Gary Poff Award. The award's namesake was the first recipient.

"Gary has been with the soapbox races from the beginning - 12 years. He is instrumental in building karts every year especially for community racers who might not have the chance to race otherwise," said Michael Sands, Fountain Tire

owner. "He's designed the braking system and built the release track. He has a real love for cars and kids who love cars."

Poff's passion for cars runs in the family. Born in Shelburne, Nova Scotia, his father was in the service until 1944. By the time he was a teen, the East Coast family had moved to Edmonton where he attended Eastglen High School.

"My dad liked cars and my brother-in-law was car-crazy. When I was 12, my brother-in-law bought me my first car, a 1928 Ford Roadster. He was a hot rodder and we spent Saturdays in his garage working on the car. I dismantled it and brought in more power. I took it from a four-cylinder engine to a V8 flathead," said Poff.

At 18, he enlisted in the navy for five years before returning to Edmonton and obtaining a power engineer's ticket where he worked at the Misericordia Hospital as a shift engineer.

Married with two sons, Poff tired of shift work and quit. Following his passion, he opened Larry Dennis Auto Sales named after his two sons, and Gary's Autobody in St. Albert.

Now retired, Poff continues to pursue his love of cars and vehicles. As a member of St. Albert Cruisers, he owns a 1941 Chev pickup, 1949 two-door Meteor sedan, 1968 Chevy Nova and a 1974 Eldorado Convertible.

With time on his hands, volunteering for the Soapbox Derby was the next logical step.

"The first time I saw the kids come off the ramp, I was hooked. It's the look on

their faces," Poff said.

As a man who had developed a working knowledge of several trades through the decades, he immediately put his skills to use.

"The first year, they had a rickety old wooden ramp for the karts that was ready for firewood. First thing I did was build a steel ramp on my driveway. I had all the tools," said Poff. "A few years later, I built two trailers that would tow three karts up the race hill at a time. I've built the brake assembly, and I've built karts for sponsors and about 20 community karts."

He was also instrumental in developing a template for all the karts with standardized wheels and a steering wheel to keep everything on an even playing field. Kits are available through the derby.

"It's like an IKEA model. The kit is pre-cut and you can assemble it in your living room with a screwdriver."

And during race day, he stands at the bottom of the hill and repairs any karts that are damaged during the race.

"It's small stuff. Wheels fall off a kart. The steering wheel locks. We make repairs before the karts are sent back uphill."

Poff is leading a one-day build session titled *Hands On Your Cart* on Saturday, April 27 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. This is an opportunity for parents and caregivers to receive hands-on build experience. The session is free, however registration is required at stalbertainfoodderby.ca.

The Soap Box Derby takes place June 14 and 15. ■