

And they're off . . .

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It wasn't Montreal's Formula 1 Canadian Grand Prix; however, St. Albert's 11th annual Father's Day Soap Box Derby generated much the same excitement.

Propelled by gravity, 132 registered racers, all between the ages of six to 14, barrelled down St. Vital Avenue's steep incline this past Saturday. These fearless young racers dominated the day, and threats of impending rain failed to dampen the adrenalin rush and thrill of possibly winning.

"We had a lot of good growth from last year," said Bob Fisher, derby director. In 2022, organizers registered about 85 racers.

Both sides of the hill were packed with racers, families and passersby who picked up on the enthusiasm. Comfortably seated on a camping chair, Jacqui Gillespie from Comox, British Columbia was visiting family in St. Albert and dropped by.

"I love it. It's exciting. The kids seem so excited. It's very well-organized and the kids are so good. I don't know how they go down the hill so fast and stay in control. And they have such smiles on their faces as parents cheer them on," said Gillespie.

The 2023 Fountain Tire St. Albert Soap Box Derby Awards were in multiple categories. First place winners who cruised to victory were Jeremy Reiter (Age Group 6-8); Nathan Yanew (Age Group 9-11); and Jace Tremblay (Age Group 12-14).

For the most competitive racers, speed was a big deal. The fastest racers were Cecil Dykshroom at No. 23, clocking in at

37 kilometres per hour. Ethan Fehr at No. 39 and Jace Tremblay No. 54 tied at 38 km/h per hour.

From the moment racers slid off the ramp and hit the asphalt, family and friends on the sidelines cheered loudly regardless of spinouts and crashes. But for James Jones, 11, hunched in his motorless cart, the experience was everything.

"I wanted this for a few years. This year we got the kit in time," said the Grade 5 Hillgrove student, who unfortunately did not do well. "For the first two races, I skidded out, but for the last one I finished out."

After James flipped direction and hit the curb, the young racer and his father Ryan hypothesized the cart may have been carrying too much weight on the back. But there's a good chance they will return next year and test out their theories.

As in the case of the Jones family, the event was a community-building experience for volunteers, service groups, and local businesses such as Fountain Tire who stepped up to sponsor the event. Even local politicians and celebrities scrunched into a cart for the VIP races.

VIP racers included St. Albert councillors Ken MacKay, Mike Killick and Wes Broadhead. MLAs Marie Renaud and Dale Nally also braved the cloudy day. In addition, Shelly Nichol, executive director of the St. Albert Chamber of Commerce, Jen Henderson, *St. Albert Gazette* editor and Shelley Passek, executive director of St. Albert Family Resource Centre joined the races. Nichol was declared the winner.

Each race was launched in the same way, with a mobile ramp placed on the hilltop. Three kit cars were loaded onto



the ramp side-by-side, but at a respectable distance to avoid crashes.

Despite every car requiring standard wheels, steering column and back seat, there was not a single duplicate design or paint job. One car celebrated the Oilers while another was painted in military camouflage. One racer blew down the hill in a dinosaur-styled cart while, yet another was seated at a replica black Trans Am with a golden eagle painted on the hood. Comfort was also important to another racer who showcased a padded office chair for added softness.

Kudos for Best Cart went to three inventive custom jobs. Mason MacDonald raced the Shaggy Dog cart. The exterior was completely carpeted to look like a long-haired dog complete with tongue. Instead, Malcolm Wolfe raced a prototype Lego Cart that looked constructed from hundreds of multi-coloured plastic bricks. And Jake Barbeau paid tribute to essential services with his Red Fire Truck.

Denise Olinky from Sherwood Park was seated on the sidelines. Her family was in the trucking business for 45 years and anything on wheels is of interest. Just as she attended the now shuttered Edmonton Speedway with her teenagers, Olinky now supports her grandchildren at the derby.

"It's a great opportunity for kids. I was just talking with someone from the Lions Club, and the gentleman told me lots of kids don't have the opportunity to race either because of lack of money or they don't have the ability to build a cart. It was nice to hear the Lions are buying carts and reaching out to kids to help. There's a lot of single parents out there."

Fisher pointed out Lorie Scheurwater and Michael Sands, the new owners of Fountain Tire, have sponsored many children to help them realize their first taste of racing.

Judging by the smiles on everyone's faces, there's a good chance everyone will return for next year's event. ■



▲ Mitch Sabourin readies his grandson's car for soap box derby competition.
 ◀ Things are tense in pit lane as drivers assemble for the start.

Photos by Bruce Edwards/St. Albert Gazette



▲ Racers are a picture of concentration during wheel-to-wheel derby action.
◀ Drivers duel during the annual Father's Day Soap Box Derby on St. Vital Avenue in St. Albert.
▼ Spectators cheer on their favourite drivers during the race.



▲ Laney Griffeth was spotted ready to go racing on St. Vital Avenue in St. Albert.
◀ A Lego car rules the block(s) on derby day.
▶ Zelda Wiens is all ears — and smiles — as she gets ready to make some fur fly at the soap box derby.

