



Chapter 12

The Soap Box Derby

Summer, 1962

Boys, it's important to play by the rules. If you cheat, you will disgrace your family, your community, and yourself. You will feel terrible. One time, I built a soapbox derby racer entirely on my own as specified in the rulebook. I asked for advice from my family, but the work was all mine. As a result, the car definitely looked as if an unskilled fourteen-year-old had built it. It was ugly. Others boys and their families cheated. Their racers looked as if they had been built by professional mechanics; and they were. As you might expect, the race didn't go well for me, but things turned out fine in the end. Here's what happened.

I sat on the side of my racer, one foot inside, and the other on the ground. There were three lanes. In one was a sleek black racer that was as thin as an arrow, low to the ground with "Wood's Mortuary" prominently identified as the sponsor on its side. The second racer, not as sleek as the black car, but still far better-looking than mine, was painted fire-engine red with its sponsor's logo, "Applewood Liquors," applied perfectly in white with gold accents. Both logos appeared to have been painted by professional sign painters.

Embarrassed by my racer, which I built entirely on my own, I avoided eye contact with the other drivers. My car's rough and bumpy exterior was white. I hand painted my sponsor's logo, "The First National Bank of Golden" on my racer's ungainly form. It was barely legible. Ahead of us were six more racers - all better looking than mine. We were inching forward and would soon be at the starting gate. How had I gotten myself into this?

From the moment I saw the advertisement for the Soap Box Derby on TV, I was hooked. Chevrolet sponsored this nationwide competition, and they'd hired a good-looking character from the TV show *Bonanza*, Little Joe Cartwright, to pitch their cars in TV ads. At the end of a new car add, Little Joe mentioned that Soap Box applications were available at local Chevy dealers for all aspiring driver/builders. I loved cars of all kinds, so the next day, I headed to Golden's Stevenson Chevrolet on 13th Street, just a block from Mitchell Elementary, to pick up the materials. At 14, I wasn't old enough to drive legally, so a soapbox derby seemed like a great way to bridge the gap from building model cars to driving real cars. Soap Box Derby racers were homemade, engine-less, gravity-fed racers that coasted down steep hills.

I collected the application and instructions and read the materials while walking home. I learned that a Soap Box kit was required for all applicants. The kit included essential parts like wheels, axles, miscellaneous hardware, a helmet and T-shirt and — most importantly — the detailed instructions for how to build a racer. At twenty dollars, the kit was expensive. And that didn't include the cost for the remainder of the materials required to assemble a first class-soapbox racecar — like plywood, lumber, exterior materials, and paint.

After dinner, I sat down with Dad to review the application and instructions. There were lots of rules for the soapbox driver/builder and his family. First and foremost, the driver had to be the builder. Parents could supervise, but the construction, with a few exceptions including paint, upholstery and steering wheels, were to be performed by the driver, age 15 or younger, who would sit behind the wheel. There was also a weight limit. The combined weight of the car and driver could not exceed 250 pounds. By then I weighed 150 and was 5'10". I was no longer fat, but I was big for my age. My father was concerned that my derby racer could not weigh more than 100 pounds, especially since the wheels and axles combined weighed nearly 25 pounds.

Then there was the matter of the cost. Dad figured that the additional materials including wood, siding materials, and a steering wheel would easily cost thirty dollars more, bringing the total cost to fifty dollars. That was a lot of money in 1963. I surely didn't have that much in my savings account, and it was a sizeable amount for my parents. Looking at the application, Dad read a section where it was suggested that enterprising young drivers seek sponsorships for their racers, much like real stock-car drivers. For a financial contribution, the sponsor's name would be painted on the side of the racer.

Mom suggested that I call on Mr. Patridge, the bank president, to seek the bank's sponsorship of my soapbox derby. "After all," she said, "You have a good reputation with him. He still talks about the day you broke Pony."

So the next morning, I found myself sitting in Mr. Patridge's office waiting for him to finish a conversation with an older man in the lobby. Soon he walked into his office and while closing the door said, "Hi Chop, great to see you. It's been awhile since you helped me out at the ranch. How's your mom?" He went on, "I hate Bill Parfet for stealing her away. She was one of the best employees we ever had." He sat behind his desk and, while lighting a cigarette asked, "What brings you to the bank?"

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"I'm hoping the bank would be interested in sponsoring my Soap Box Derby racer," I replied. Mr. Patridge knew all about the Soap Box derby which, at the time, was one of the top-five sporting events in the US; as many as 70,000 people gathered in Akron, Ohio, each August to eat snow cones and cheer on hundreds of boys who were the champions of local races around the nation. Our local qualifying race was three weeks away in nearby Arvada.

Mr. Patridge asked lots of questions about the derby, my qualifications as a driver/builder, and what the bank would get for bankrolling the operation. "The First National Bank of Golden will be painted in big bold red letters on both sides of the car," I explained. "Everyone will see it when I roll down the course."

He thought about it for a minute. "How much is all this going to cost?" he asked.

"Fifty dollars," I replied nervously. Again he thought for a few minutes, then pulled out a checkbook and wrote a check.

"Here's sixty," he said. "I have never, ever seen a construction project come in on budget, so you'll probably need a little more. Good luck!" he added, as I thanked him and headed for the door.

With financing secured, I immediately went to the Chevy dealer, bought the Soap Box Derby kit, and hauled it to Mom's office. She took the kit and me home on her lunch break. At home, I inspected the contents, then opened the instructions on the dining room table and started to make a list of materials I would need. After I showed Mom Mr. Patridge's check, she agreed to drop me at Duvall Davison's lumberyard on her way back to work.

I picked out a flat sheet of plywood, several straight 1X4s and 2X4s, and a variety of screws, brackets, and other materials that were recommended in the instructions. It soon became clear that I would not be able to get everything home by myself. We lived a mile away, and up the Arapahoe Street hill. Mr. Davison, seeing the concern on my face, asked what everything was for and after learning it was for the Soap Box Derby, he offered to drive me and my collection of materials home in the lumberyard truck.

That evening I reviewed the plans and instructions with Dad, explaining how I planned to build the soapbox racer. He offered suggestions and showed me his meager

collection of tools in the basement. The tool collection included a hammer, handsaw, several screwdrivers, pliers, and a paint-spattered electric drill. Most were covered with dust and had not been used in years. Dad had many great qualities, but being a handyman was not one of them. He was a good painter though, and had painted every room in the house on a regular basis, as Mom's color palette changed. That accounted for the paint-spattered electric drill: it included an attachment he used it to mix paint.

The next morning I set to work building what I was sure would be the finest racer in Jefferson County. We didn't have a garage, so the driveway would have to serve as my shop. I drew the shape of the racer on the plywood that would serve as its platform. It started from a point at the front, widened at the middle for the cockpit to the maximum dimension allowed by the rules, then tapered to another point at the rear. I then used the maximum dimension allowable to set the height of the car, not understanding that a slimmer and lower car would be better. In doing so, I unknowingly designed what would be the least aerodynamic vehicle in the derby.

Just as I was getting started, my neighborhood friends — Mike, Stevie, and John — stopped by to survey the project, offer constructive criticism, and deliver insults. Mike Hartmiester was my best neighborhood friend. He was three years older than me, but we shared a passion for cars that bridged the age difference. The four of us had spent hours building model cars in the basement of my house. We had been quite good at it and had dominated the winner categories at the local Hested's model car competition for several years running.

I had no construction experience and struggled to build the racer. Every task was a new adventure. I didn't know to predrill holes for wood screws, or that a nail was not the right device for connecting wooden parts. I grew frustrated and would end those days spent on the driveway in the hot sun ready to quit. But I couldn't disappoint Mr. Patridge. Eventually, my racer took on an awkward and ungainly shape, but it was at least turning into something. With the frame exposed, it sat in the driveway, looking like the skeleton of a clumsy, long-dead dinosaur rather than the sleek racer I had hoped to build.

"That thing looks a little strange," Mike offered, surveying my progress — or lack thereof. "You sure you got the shape right?" Mike was kind. He didn't say how bad he really thought it looked.

"It will look good when I add the plywood exterior," I replied, trying to hide my concern with a confident response.

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By this time, the local race was less than a week away and I had two major problems. First, I didn't have a steering wheel. And second, the car had no exterior skin to cover the dinosaur-skeleton-like frame. Bill Parfet, Mom's boss solved the steering-wheel problem. As allowed in the rules, one of his mechanics built a wheel from metal tubing that was bent into a round shape and welded to another pipe that served as the steering column. With direction from Dad, my friends, and several mechanically inclined cousins, we worked out the complicated cabling that attached the column to both sides of the front axle and allowed the car to be steered. Keeping with the rules, I did the installation while all the others bickered over the most effective solution. Finally, when I turned the steering wheel, the front wheels responded by cutting left or right.

Selecting the exterior material was a bigger problem. To test the weight of the racer, Dad and I carefully sat it on our bathroom scale, which we moved out to the driveway. The little needle swung back and forth and finally settled at 92 pounds. I had only eight pounds left to enclose the car. The plywood panels I had planned to use were way too heavy. I was on the edge of panic. What could I use that would not weigh more than eight pounds? Just then Mom, bringing a plate of chocolate chip cookies to the job site to keep our strength up, saw the worry on our faces and asked what was wrong. After hearing the dilemma, she asked, "Weren't the floats at the Homecoming parade enclosed with chicken wire covered with paper mache? Why don't you just stretch chicken wire over the frame, then cover it with paper mache? How much could chicken wire and a few sheets of newspaper weigh?"

With a solution in hand, and only two days to go before the race, I covered the frame with chicken wire, then soaked sheets of newspaper with wallpaper paste and carefully laid them over the chicken wire. The results were not good. The paper blistered as it dried, giving the racer a very lumpy and uneven skin. To make matters worse, the paper skin started lifting at the seams, making the racer look as if it was peeling after a bad sunburn.

There was no time to think of another solution; the race was drawing near. I found a gallon of unused white house paint in Dad's leftover paint collection and applied it liberally to the racer, hoping in vain that it would seal the peeling paper. Next, I sketched "First National Bank of Golden" on each side using a copy of the bank's logo as a guide, then painted it bright red. Given the bumpy condition of the exterior, this produced uneven results at best. No matter, time was up. The racer was declared finished.

My friends and family assembled to review and comment on the finished product. They inspected the racer from head to stern, pushed and poked at its blistered skin, kicked the wheels, and tried the steering. Cousin Fritz summed it up best. “Ain’t nothing you can do to make it look good now. Let’s just hope it’s faster than it looks.” They wished me luck and walked off shaking their heads.

The next day, Dad and I pushed the racer up wooden ramps into the back of a borrowed pick-up truck and along with Mom, headed to Arvada for the race. We arrived at the parking lot to find it overflowing with boys and their dads unloading racers. As I surveyed the field, an uneasy feeling came over me. Their cars were beautiful. Most were shaped like narrow wedges, low and sleek. The best had smooth fiberglass skins with professional paint jobs and rolled and pleated Naugahyde interiors. My interior consisted of a pillow I had stolen from the living room sofa as we loaded the truck. Professional sign painters had applied the other sponsors’ logos. I felt sick.

The racers were inspected from top to bottom, and while I had the ugliest car in the field, it did manage to pass the technical review. While some failed and had to be loaded back on their trucks, on-the-spot corrections ultimately made most if them ready to race. All the time the inspection was going on, other boys came by to look at my racer and snicker.

“Build it yourself?” one asked.

“Looks like it,” another answered for me before I could open my mouth.

So, that was how I found myself lined up between the sleek black and red racers. As we pushed our cars toward the starting line, my steering wheel began to feel strange. Prior to the race, officials had added wooden blocks to the steering mechanism that prevented the racers from moving in anything but a straight line. The course was straight downhill, and no one wanted cars moving from one lane to another. But my wheel wouldn’t move even the inch that was allowed. I yanked the wheel in frustration and heard a loud pop. My steering cable had snapped.

I signaled for Dad to come check it out with me. Apparently the wooden blocks had been installed incorrectly and had damaged the cable. We sized up the situation, and then he asked, “Do you think we have time to fix it?” Remembering the struggle to get it working the first time and without a cast of friends and cousins to

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help land on a solution, I said, "No, I want to go home." The broken cable had given me the opportunity to pack up and leave, and take my ugly racer with me.

The next day I found the problem. The screws that had been used to attach the wooden steering control blocks had nearly severed the cable. My yank on the wheel had finished the job. I removed the blocks, cut a new length of cable, attached it to one side of the front axle, and ran it through the guides, around the column and eventually to the other side of the front axle. I turned the wheel and to my surprise, everything worked.

I was angry, frustrated, and humiliated. I had spent weeks in the hot sun out in the driveway, building what turned out to be the worst looking car in the field, and I hadn't even gotten to make a run. At that moment, I decided to change things. I called Mike, who lived a block away, down the steep Illinois Street hill. I told him that I was headed his way and to wait for me in his front yard.

I found the pillow on the sofa where Mom had returned it following the race-day disappointment. I put the pillow in the racer, donned my plastic helmet, and climbed into the racer that was sitting at the top of and pointing down our sloping driveway. I released the brake and the racer started rolling toward 5th Street. I turned right at the end of the driveway and with momentum building, I rolled toward Illinois Street and the steep descent that led to 6th Street and Mike's house.

After making a hard left on Illinois, the racer gained speed quickly. Growing concerned and hoping to slow the acceleration, I pulled on the brake lever. The brake lowered to the pavement, but did nothing to slow the speeding racer. It was about as effective as dragging a foot out the door of a speeding automobile. I was panicking! I couldn't tell what was racing faster, my heart or the soapbox racer. The left turn onto 6th Street was coming quickly and the racer was moving faster and faster! I scanned the intersection and luckily saw no cars coming in either direction.

I pulled the wheel to the left to make the turn, and as soon as I did I felt the rear wheels start to slide. Fortunately, the length of the axles prevented the car from rolling over. I continued to pull to the left, and the car continued to slide. Soon the racer traded ends and I was travelling backwards very fast toward Mrs. Anderson's house, which was across the street from Mike's. I looked up from my seat on the sofa pillow and gave a nonchalant wave to Mike, John, Stevie, and several others as I hurtled backwards down 6th Street. Tail-end first, I crashed into Mrs. Johnson's front

yard, cutting a large divot in her perfectly manicured lawn. They all ran to the crash site to find me shaken but not hurt.

“Wow,” Mike exclaimed. “That was so cool! Can I go next?”

Pulling the car from Mrs. Johnson’s lawn, my friends replaced the divot and patted it back in place. They pushed the racer across the street to Mike’s house, where plans were quickly laid for everyone to have a turn.

Soon, with lookouts placed at the intersections and the car back in place at the top of our driveway, each of the boys took a trip down the Illinois Street hill. Before long, we learned to turn the wheel into the slide at 6th Street, keeping the racer headed in the right direction and eventually allowing for a rolling stop at the end of the block. I remained disappointed by my showing at the local race, but I took solace in knowing that I had built the racer myself and couldn’t imagine a better ride than from my driveway on 5th Street, down Illinois to Mike’s house on 6th.

A few days later, Dad and I were in the bank to deposit a check when Mr. Patridge saw us standing in the lobby. “Hey Choppy, how did you do at the Soap Box Derby?” he asked. “Not so well,” I answered, but before I could add any of the unfortunate details, Dad jumped in.

“He didn’t win, Fred. But Chop did well,” Dad explained. “The bank was well represented.” And then Dad added, “He played by the rules and built the racer totally on his own, which is more than I can say about any other car in that race.”

“That’s all I can ask for,” Mr. Patridge replied. Then turning to me he said, “I just bought a horse for my grandson that needs breaking. I need a good young man to help. You up to the task?”

“When do we start?” I replied.