Side

BY PETER EGAN

Time, Tools and Talent

While driving my Ford van into the city recently to purchase a 12-ton hydraulic shop press so I could install some 6-ounce Lotus suspension bushings, I turned on the radio and hit the Scan button.

The radio automatically cycled me through mercifully short doses of Hip-Hop, post-modern deconstructionist Sullen Rock and, of course, Oldies You Didn't Like All That Much The First Time Around, Even When Your Brain Was Only Half Formed. In between were a few spluttering pundits of the Far Left and Right, and at least one evangelist who pronounced "God" with more than one "d" on the end, so it sounded like "Goddd-duh." I listened to some Metal, but it seemed to have impurities in the alloy.

So I did what I always do and headed for the low numbers, where National Public Radio can be found.

I tried classical music first, but it was a bit too baroque and powdered-wig for my tastes. Music can inspire me to do a lot of funny things, but dancing the minuet is not one of them. So I switched over to one of the NPR talk and news stations.

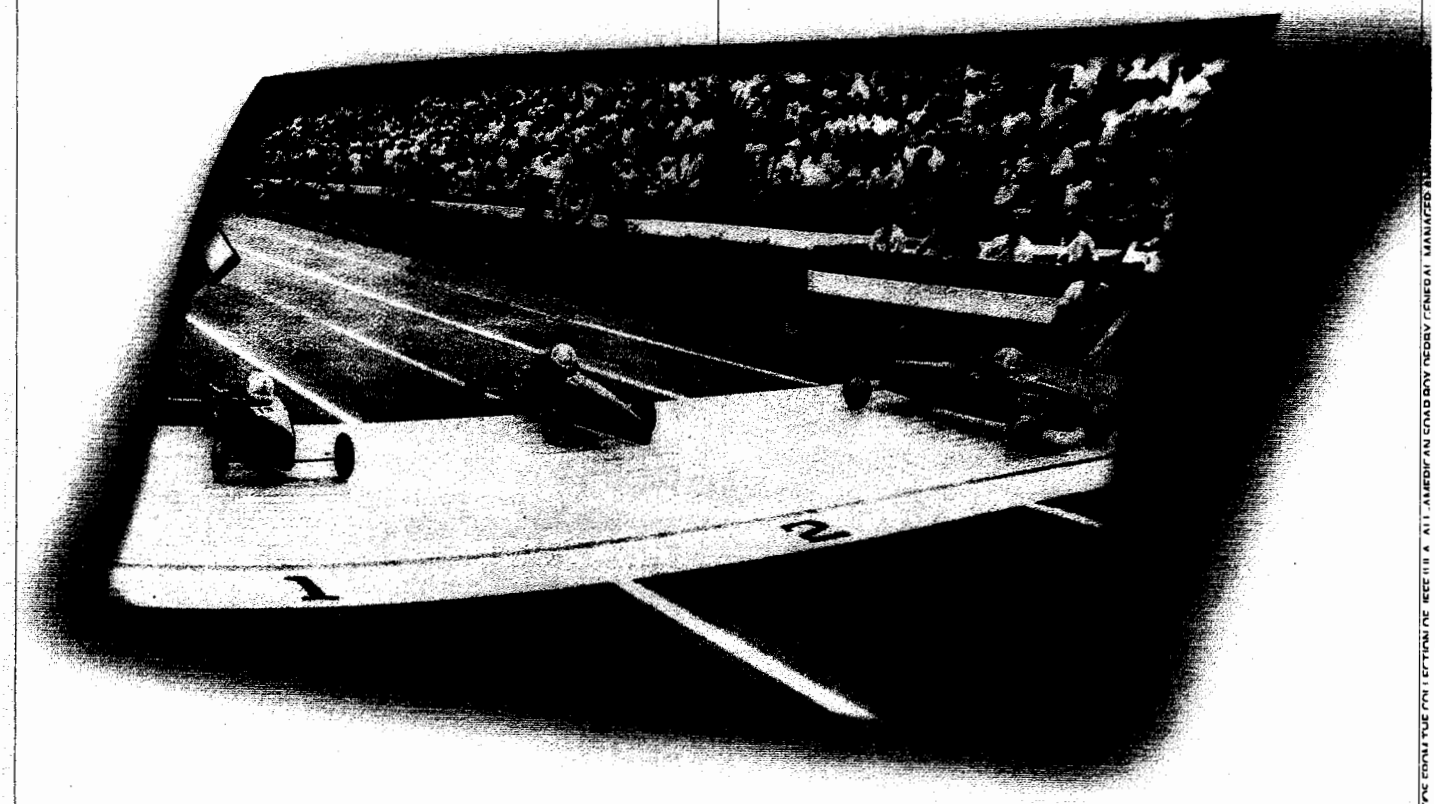
I can't tell you which show was on, but I found myself in the middle of an interview with a man who runs the Soap Box Derby. My ears perked up.

I hadn't thought about Soap Box Derby cars in years—nor even heard them mentioned. Sleek downhill racers on spidery, narrow wheels, drivers bent forward so their helmets blended aerodynamically with the hood, an illustrator's speed-lines trailing straight back from every surface. American classics, those little cars.

As a kid, I was always trying to pressure Don Steffen, our local Chevy dealer, into promoting a local Soap Box Derby so I could build a car, go to Akron and theoretically win the big race. Don demurred, probably because our town was so small there wouldn't have been many entrants.

Also, our hills were so steep he was probably afraid some kid would crash and burn—even though the cars carried no fuel. Yes, the hills were that steep.

Anyway, I never built an official soap-box racer like the ones you saw in pictures, with plywood formers and taut outer skin. Instead, I built a series of go-kart-like coaster cars, as did a number of my like-minded friends. We raced and had fun, but the designs were highly eccentric. There were no rules or design discipline. Wheels fell off; steering failed; mothers called the drivers home for dinner. Fish sticks with ketchup, on a good day. Sometimes you were not so lucky. Many ate hotdish.



Meanwhile, back on the radio, the man from the Soap Box Derby (I regret that I didn't catch his name) was explaining that the Derby has changed a lot to accommodate modern times. He said it's very rare now to find a family with the resources to build a traditional soap-box car.

What modern households are currently missing, he said, are "The Three T's: Time, Tools and Talent."

He went on to explain that, among homework, TV, e-mail and computer games, kids no longer have any spare time to dedicate to a slow, evolving craft project. Essentially, they don't have "hobbies," in the traditional sense of the word. Chances are their parents don't have time for this stuff, either. Furthermore, he said, there are very few tools in the average suburban garage now, and most people don't know how to use them, anyway.

He added that these shortcomings had inspired the Derby organizers to come up with a simple car kit that could be assembled in 4½ hours or less. Without these kits, there wouldn't be enough participants.

I shut the radio off and stared through the windshield at a blank spot on the horizon. It was a fascinating program, but I didn't want to hear any more. Stories like this always make me a little sad—and worried at the same time.

One of my own time-wasting ploys—which also keeps me out of the workshop—is to read a lot of history, with a heavy emphasis on World War II (I like the airplanes). And nearly every historian, soldier or military pilot at some point attributes much of America's success in WWII to the mechanical know-how of all those kids who came off of farms in the late '30s and early '40s.

We had a whole generation who could fix tractor engines, weld broken plows, paint barns, sharpen drill bits, replace V-belts, repair roofs, thread pipes, stretch fences, replace tires and grease axle bearings. When people like this got into the war, they didn't have much trouble learning to rivet aircraft wings, sew parachutes, drive tanks, build pontoon bridges, operate gun turrets, fly Thunderbolts or repair a Pratt & Whitney radial engine.

And, after the war, helping a kid with a soap-box racer probably didn't seem too difficult, either. My own youth was filled with adults who could make things, expertly.

But that was then, and this is the Age of Information. We no longer have half the U.S. population living on farms, and we seem to get further and further removed from both Nature and the instinct for manual craft. And now, as the man on the radio said, our kids no longer have hobbies. Not city kids, anyway.

On my way back home late that afternoon, I saw several pickup trucks pulling stock cars on trailers, turning off Highway 14 and no doubt headed to Madison International Speedway. This is a nice little paved half-mile oval track nestled in the hills not far from our rural home.

Barb and I generally go to these races at least once every summer—often when local hero Matt Kenseth is there, visiting his roots. Sometimes we just go to sit outside, eat a hot dog, have a beer and watch the races. And even when we stay home on Friday nights, we can see the lights of the track glowing in the night sky, and hear the distant wail of racing engines. It's a sign of summer.

When I pulled into our driveway that evening, I walked into the house and said to Barb, "Let's go to the stock-car races. It's a beautiful evening, and the season is almost over."

I suddenly needed a strong dose of physical reality—smoke, noise, hardware, stars overhead in the sky, maybe a moonrise over the hot dog stand. We called our friends Lee and Paula Heggelund, and they went to the races with us.

We went early, for once, and caught something we'd missed on previous visits.

Before the races begin, the teams line up all the cars that'll be competing that evening, and the spectators are invited to come down onto the track, meet the drivers and examine the cars. So of course we went right down there. All the drivers were standing next to their cars, signing autographs and handing out postcard-size photos of them and their cars.

It was fun to look at the Late Model and Sportsman cars, most professionally prepared to a high standard of excellence. But what really impressed me was a new class I'd never seen before:

Bandits.

This is an inexpensive racing class for young—or merely novice—drivers. Minimum age is 14. Only stock, 4-cylinder fwd cars are allowed in the group, with Dodge Neons and Ford Probes filling most of the grid. They have rollcages and safety harnesses, and they allow aftermarket wheels (with DOT tires) and limited exhaust loudening, but everything else is basically stock. There's an $850 claim rule. In other words, a kid can buy a well-thrashed $500 Neon, put another $500 into it and go racing.

Emphasis on the word, "kid."

I met a couple of 14-year-olds who were racing, standing quietly next to their cars, wearing real driver's suits and handing out signed postcards. Some chatted with their girlfriends and school chums. Parents discreetly watched from afar, or from behind the fence, letting their boys have their own moments of glory under the floodlights.

I turned to Lee and said, "Can you imagine being able to prepare a race car like this and have your friends come to the track when you were 14? Still two years away from your driver's license! This is the dream."

We talked to several of these young drivers, and frankly I was amazed at their polite modesty and down-to-earth earnestness in showing us around their cars. They were all able to describe in great detail how they'd prepared their cars, stripped out the unneeded road equipment, etc.

I suddenly had a vision of one of these boys dragging a jack out of the garage and changing his own tires, tightening the lug nuts with a torque wrench. A refrain began to float through my brain, mantra-like: *Time, Tools and Talent.*

So they weren't gone everywhere from the American scene. Not all kids were mall rats, computer geeks or moping replicas of doomed musicians. Somehow, against all odds, a few families had managed to make an end run around the cyberspace culture, raising their kids to handle tools, understand simple physics and manipulate real objects in the material world. And, on a Friday evening, they were out-of-doors, doing something under the night sky.

We clambered back up into the grandstands, the racing started and I got myself a beer. It was a beautiful evening.

As we sat there, watching these kids race, Barb pointed out that the moon really was coming up over the hot dog stand. Just a sliver, mind you, but a moon nevertheless. ■

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