

Soap Box Derbies

By The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre

Soapbox derbies are youth gravity-racing events. Founded in 1934 in Ohio, USA, the event features several racing teams who design small go-kart-like vehicles and race them on a downhill racecourse. These vehicles are powered by gravity and are started by several members of the race team pushing the kart over a hill's peak. The only motorized features of the vehicle are often steering and braking systems. Like other racing events to originate from Ohio, Soapbox Derbies became a popular pastime for many Americans who travelled from across the country to watch and participate in the yearly event. After securing promotion from the automotive company Chevrolet Motor Division in the late 1930s, the pastime expanded to becoming an across-North-America affair, with smaller leagues appearing across the US and Canada by the 1940s.



WINNERS FIRST ANNUAL SOAP BOX DERBY. Lined up in their Soap Box cars in which they placed among the winners in the First Annual Soap Box Derby sponsored by Prescott Branch 97, of the Canadian Legion, on Friday, are, left to right, Bob Putman in his "Beetlebomb" which placed first for the beautiful silver trophy and bicycle; Billie Countryman in his "Zip" which came second for the fishing outfit; Kennie Ferguson in his "Comet" which placed third and took the camera, and Kevin Donevan in his "Inter City" which placed fourth and won him a Pro baseball glove. Each boy also received a miniature trophy which will remain in his possession.

—Photo by Lloyd Photo Studio, Prescott.

In Prescott, the first Soapbox Derby was held on September 3rd, 1948, a part of the Prescott Legion 97 Branch's Labour Day Festival. An estimated 1000 festival attendees lined St. Lawrence Street as roughly a dozen racing teams tested out their soapbox karts on the track. Bob Putman and his "Beetlebomb" kart took home first place, receiving a silver trophy and a new bike as his prize. Other medaling competitors in the inaugural derby included Billie Countryman driving "Zip", Kennie Ferguson driving "Comet," and Kevin Donovan driving "Inner City".

Although he ranked 4th overall in Prescott's inaugural Soapbox Derby (referred to at this time as the Koster Kart Derby), Kevin Donovan went on to become a star of the derby scene in the following years. In 1949, he put up a monumental victory at the 2nd annual Prescott Derby, winning the race an estimated 15 seconds ahead of the 2nd place competitor. This win drew the attention of several higher-up soapbox derby officials who signed Donovan to race for the Dominion championship, in which he took home gold as well. Named as a member of Team Canada's Soapbox racing team, Donovan competed across Ontario and New York State throughout the early 1950s.

Run by L.L. Morell, the annual Soapbox Derby became a main fixture of the Legion's annual Labour Day festival. By 1951, the competition had several changes, such as officially allowing girls to participate as drivers, alongside the introduction of classes based on age. These groups were drivers 5 years, 6 years and 7 years of age. The highest award named "The Golden Glove" trophy was also introduced in 1951. By 1953, the event featured roughly 25 karts per event. To promote fairness and compact any potential incidents, each kart was supplied with the same pre-approved wheels and axles, while a small committee of local engineers inspected each vehicle prior to the event. However, as quickly as the event became popular, its downfall was as fast.

By the late 1950s, the annual event, alongside the Legion's Labour Day Trike event for youth aged 4-years and under, drew its lowest attendance, having (as the Prescott Journal described it) "more trophies than participants". The Prescott Legion hosted its last-ever Soapbox Derby in 1956, and their final Trike race in 1957 before ending the festival for good by the early 1960s. Although the practice of Soapbox racing remained popular across North America until the 1970s, Prescott's interest in the event was short-lived. Although there is no definitive answer as to why the event became "unpopular" all of a sudden, several factors, such as the Spencerville Fair hosting its own version of the event and Prescott's most famous Soapbox star, Kevin Donovan, aging out of the competition, are possible factors as to why the event faded out in Prescott.

In the following decades, Soapbox Derbies occurred several times within Prescott. The Kiwanis Club, was one of the leading organizations within Prescott throughout the late 20th century, often hosted these events as part of their annual Kids Day activities. An annual street festival that raised money for various causes supporting Prescott's youth. By the 1970s, the Kids Day event was one of Prescott's largest attractions, featuring a parade, activities, food/clothing drives and competitions.



Kiwanis Soap Box Derby



Kiwanis Soap Box Derby

Although the Soapbox Derbies were not an annual feature of the late September event due to the contests declining popularity in Canada, each year the organization did attempt to find competitors for the event. Throughout the 1970s, 80s and 90s, several of these events were held on George Street, with the course running from St. Paul's United Church to King Street drawing an average of a hundred spectators to the event. The final Soapbox Derby took place in the early 2000s, prior to the Prescott Kiwanis Club's merger with other local branches.

The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre
Open Wednesday - Saturday, 11-5
202 King Street West, Prescott, ON

