

Pinewood Derby brings out the kid in Cub Scout dads

By Allen Wingblad
special writer

SOMETIMES IT seems you just can't separate the men from the boys — particularly when it's Pinewood Derby day.

Touted as one of the more dynamic events for Cub Scouts and their families, the annual model car race is known for stirring up excitement and bringing out the competitive nature of not only the scouts but, in many cases, their dads.

And this year's competition for Farmington Pack 162, held Sunday at the American Legion hall, was no exception.

"The Pinewood Derby is almost like going to the drag races. It's really something to be able to see it," said Cub Master Jim Maki.

"I've always got excited over the race — helping build the cars, giving pointers, helping with the rough cutting and that kind of thing. It's really just as exciting for a lot of us adults as it is for the kids."

Indeed, the Legion hall was abuzz with nervous anticipation as the race got under way amid checkered flag banners and a flashing, free-standing traffic signal.

THE REGULATION 32-foot track, six lanes wide, stood ready for each entrant who anxiously waited with his homemade wooden racer.

"A lot of the adults really get wrapped up in this," said Alan Cox, an assistant Webelos leader whose

two sons were among the competitors in this year's race.

In fact, he said, parental enthusiasm was starting to get a bit out of hand over the past few years, especially in judging the competition. Cox came up with a device to determine automatically the winner of each heat.

This year's derby was the second to be judged with an electronic finish line, developed specifically for the race by Cox, and deemed accurate to within one-hundredth of a second.

Using photocells and timers, a \$300 tabletop contraption was put together to cut back on judging time and, perhaps more importantly, eliminate disagreements among parents.

"There was a lot of grumbling around the finish line before we started using this . . . and it was getting to the point where we couldn't even get people to help judge the race," said Cox. Now, he added, the whole event moves right along.

"The clocks don't lie — nobody can dispute a clock," he said.

CONGRATULATIONS abounded as this year's winner, 6-year-old Tiger Cub Rob Bates of Farmington Hills, accepted his first-place trophy.

And while Rob didn't have much to say about the race except that it "feels good" to win, his father, James Bates, was beaming.

"I'm very proud. I think it's great for these kids . . . everyone really seems to enjoy the racing," Bates said.

Scott Morell took second place, with Tony Moran placing third in the final heat.

So what is the secret behind a winning Pinewood Derby entry?

According to some of the scouts' dads, it's imperative that the wheels are properly set and sanded.

Some swear by the use of graphite as a dry lubricant to reduce friction, while one particular dad, whose son has had more than his share of success at the derbies, insists that there is a real secret — which is to remain a secret — behind getting the cars up to maximum speed.

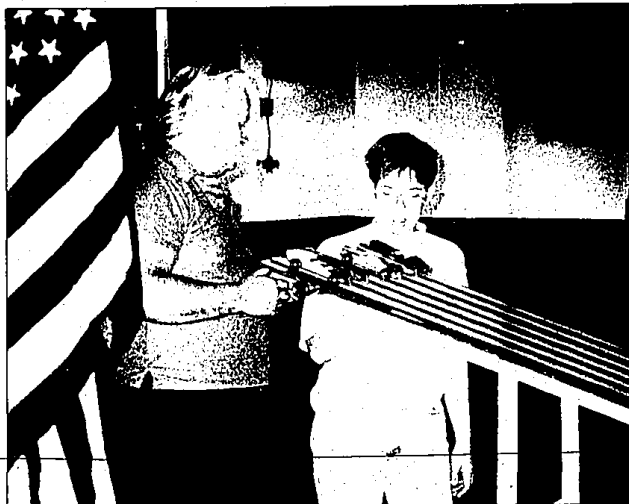
And there is one factor that they all seem to agree upon, including the kids: You really need a lot of luck, and the scouting spirit.

BETSY CAMPBELL, whose son Andrew has been racing in the Pinewood Derby for five years, says there is always a lot of talk about shaping the car so that it's aerodynamically sound. Dads often try to apply other engineering techniques to an entry's design, which more often than not turn out to be less helpful than planned.

"It really has to do with just a lot of luck, much more than anything else," said Campbell.

If the kids learn something from the whole ordeal and have a good

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The Pinewood Derby appeals to adults like David Crisp (left) and youngsters like Joseph Bender. They prepare cars for racing during the recent derby at Farmington's American Legion Hall.

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