

# Going the Distance

By W. E. Butterworth IV

Illustration by Joe Snyder

## An Eagle Scout service project helps disabled children participate in Soap Box Derby races.

**H**EATHER AMENT, A bespectacled 4-year-old with no use of her arms and legs, sat strapped in a two-seat soap box derby car. Seated beside her was a Boy Scout co-pilot from Troop 41 in New Berlin, Wis.

"She was scared," said her mother, Holly. "I saw that fine sweat she gets

just before going down for surgery. I was scared, too."

Seconds later, Heather's car took off down the starting ramp. It rolled along the 1,000-foot track, racing a car maimed by another disabled child and Scout co-pilot.

Suddenly, grins and smiles replaced scared expressions, and the September sun in the southeastern Wisconsin sky seemed to shine especially bright.

The New Berlin Soap Box Derby Special Race for Special Kids had begun again.

### An Eagle Scout's vision

The race started in 1985 as Tom Sisson's Eagle Scout service project.

"Tom so enjoyed the soap box derby," said Kathlene Sisson, his mother, "that he wanted everyone to be able to do it."

New Berlin's derby is a local event, not governed by the national organization, said Sisson, who is both a member of New Berlin's Soap Box Derby Commission and a commissioner with the Potawatomi Area Council, BSA.

To complement the event's Class A, B, and C racing categories her son, Tom, devised a class S -- short for special -- for youth aged 6 to 21

slowed by muscular dystrophy, cerebral palsy, and cognitive and other disabilities. The Class S racers are sponsored by Bob Johannsen of Entré Computer Center.

Standard soap box derby cars carry only one person. And depending on an individual's disability, each required differing amounts of help to safely race. So the next step required modifying the race cars.

### Building a race car

Tom came up with a car similar in style to the regulation racer, only wider and with two seats, two steering wheels, and two brake handles. The design allowed Scouts to ride with and, if necessary, assist another racer.

Soap box derby racing dates back to 1934, when cars actually were built of wooden boxes. Today's use modern materials, from metal for framing to plastic for bodies.

Tom's troop made the first custom cars in 1985. For 1994, Technical Metal Specialties Inc. built nine new two-seaters. The body covers open 90 degrees—"Like a dragster," said designer Roy Rathke—allowing for easier entry and exit.

Troop 41 Scoutmaster Henry Reed said the cars' identical designs allow for driver skills to be tested. "The key skill," however, he added with a smile, "is to drive straight."

### Go!

In 1985, the first year of Class S racing, 18 disabled youth participated. The 1994 event hosted 130 racers in all four classes. Of that total, Class S counted 23 racers from New Berlin and nearby communities.

"The derby is one of the finest examples of mainstreaming available to the children," said Tom McGivern, special education coordinator for New Berlin Schools.

### Winners all

Each racer went home as a winner. All received a plaque and a photograph showing them with their car.

And there was something more.

"Heather is very proud," Holly Ament later wrote race organizers. "She gets all beaming when we tell people about the race. Her eyes sparkle.

"It is so very much more than a race. You wonderful people are doing much more for every child and parent than you will probably ever know. Don't ever tire of it."

"We don't," Kathlene Sisson said, wiping away a tear. "And we won't."•

A  
SPECIAL DAY  
FOR SPECIAL KIDS  
The 11th annual New Berlin  
Soap Box Derby Special Race for  
Special Kids takes place Sunday,  
Sept. 10, at Valley View Park in  
New Berlin, Wis.  
For details, contact Kathlene  
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