



And they're off! Soap box derby returns to Westerleigh

Published: Saturday, October 01, 2011, 4:44 PM Updated: Saturday, October 01, 2011, 8:42 PM



By Michael Sedon

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Springfield Avenue in Westerleigh was transformed into a motor-less speedway Saturday afternoon as volunteers and parents launched their children off ramps in homemade race cars during the sixth annual Westerleigh Park Soap Box Derby.

More than 20 entrants, ages 7 to 13, competed for the best time in their age group and overall, as well as head-to-head heats with winners advancing to the next bracket.



Staten Island Advance / Hilton Flores

Paul Bajada 12, of Oakwood Beach as he takes off from the starting block in his soap box car "Let it Rain".

The first year the race was held in

Westerleigh Park, but the steep incline caused lighter racers to zoom down the path a bit too fast, so it was relocated to Springfield Avenue, said Georgetta Lakeman, a volunteer with Friends of Westerleigh Park, a group that meets each Saturday to help clean and maintain the neighborhood park.

Some of the cars resembled a more traditional soap box car design -- low to the ground with wheels flared out from the oval chase -- while others showed off some parents' ability to tap into their inner engineer.

"You can tell the difference between the ones that are made and then the stock cars," Ms. Lakeman said.

One such homemade design resembled an acoustic guitar, which whisked Arianna Rubano, 7, of Westerleigh, down the one-block stretch to the finish line.

"I made the mistake of asking my daughter what kind of a car she wanted, and she said she wanted an acoustic-guitar-shaped car," recalled a chuckling Chris Rubano, of Westerleigh. "And a father can't say, 'no.'"

"I just like music a lot so I thought of a guitar," Arianna said of why she wanted that design.

Rolling down the street

Springfield Avenue, which runs the length of Westerleigh Park, was the scene of the 6th annual Soap Box Derby where children ages 7 to 13 rolled along the thoroughfare in stock or custom-made race cars trying to get the fastest time of the day. More than 20 participants in three different age groups enjoyed the day-long event put together by volunteers for the Friends of Westerleigh Park in conjunction with the city Parks Department.

While everyone was having fun at the race, many parents and spectators agreed the most important element of the derby was quality time spent with their children building the cars in their back yards and garages.

The racers had three-time champion 11-year-old Heather Naeder, of Westerleigh, in their sights as the racer to beat, and she was easily recognizable in her pink zebra-print stock car tricked out with stickers, bedazzled with sparkling jewels and her name emblazoned on the side.

"It's the wheels," said Miss Naeder of the secret to her success in past years. She admitted feeling a little "nervous and excited" just before the race.

Spectator Richard Wisniewski, of Westerleigh, admired the fuel efficiency of the racers' cars as he surveyed the field trying to guess who will be the day's winner.

"I think that's part of what makes Westerleigh a good neighborhood, the fact that the park nurtures events like this," Wisniewski said.

Christopher Hamm, 11, of Westerleigh, and his father had to modify the car they built last year -- by lopping off the front end and extending it -- since the tween had grown too much to drive it.

"It has a trunk here," Hamm pointed out, which contained some emergency WD-40 just in case his wheels needed any oiling during the race. "And we added the brake."

Win or lose, everyone received a trophy, donated by Vinny Scotto of Great Kills, for their efforts.

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