



Staten Island soap box derby has winning formula

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By

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- For the young, and young at heart, Saturday's seventh annual Friends of Westerleigh Park Soap Box Derby offered equal measures of thrills, good sportsmanship and the kind of community spirit the neighborhood is renowned for.

"We have brothers and sisters racing each other here today," said Brett Coop of the city Parks Department, which co-sponsored the event. "I'd hate to be at the dinner table tonight."

But no worries on that score.

For the 20 racers, ages 7 to 13, were unfailingly well-mannered, even in defeat and even after plowing into hay bales set up for safety's sake on Springfield Avenue adjacent to Westerleigh Park where the races were run.

When Demetria Boussios, 7, bested her cousin, Michael Bivona, 8, she proclaimed herself "happy and excited," while Michael said he was "a little happy," allowing Demetria had done a "good" job.

The cars -- some made from car kits and others from scratch -- had cool names, like Secret Weapon, the one C.J. Larino, 11, rode to victory, and Bulldog, the homemade model driven by Vincent Scotto, 9, with "built by Dad, Papa, Son," etched on the side.



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Staten Island Advance / Hilton Flores

Michael Bivona 8, of Ft. Wadsworth is really moving downhill in his North Shore Post 7172 soap box car.



Another winning car, driven by Eric Miranda, 10, was built by Eric and dad Marc.

"It's dad and son, going in the garage, making it, painting it," explained Mr. Miranda.



Staten Island Advance/Hilton Flores

Demetria Boussios 7, of Westerleigh flies down Springfield Ave. in a J & J Towing soap box car.

Ten of the cars that raced were either built or rebuilt by Westerleigh businessman and former professional racer George LeBlanc, now retired from the track.

"I raced cars all over the country," said LeBlanc. "I loved to race. But I'm 65 now and my racing days are over. I love to watch my cars race, because I know they're going to win. It's my last chance to be a big fish in a small pond. When I was racing, I was usually a small fish in a big pond. I'd really like to see this expanded to a two-day event."

The derby is the outgrowth of an effort first mounted by Denise Lakeman of Friends of Westerleigh Park after a grandson and neighborhood boy suggested it. Each year, she said, it has grown.

Family, friends and neighbors lined Springfield Avenue to take in the action -- even if they had nobody in the race.



Enlarge

Hilton Flores

Soap Box Derby drivers are waiting for their turn. It's the 7th Annual Soap Box Derby in coordinated between the NYC Parks & Recreation & the Friends of Westerleigh Park. (Staten Island Advance/Hilton Flores)

7th Annual Soap Box Derby gallery (10 photos)

Paddy O'Neill and his rescue Labrador mix, Ban, checked out the race from behind the hay bales, with Ban jumping on top of the bales for a better view.

"I've lived here all my life," said Peter Klee from the sidelines. "It's wonderful community spirit."

Said Elaine Adamo: "I've lived here for 30 years. It's such a close-knit community. We're all here for each other and the kids are so good. I come to give moral support."

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