

There once existed a time when self worth was not equated to possessions. A person's self worth was reflected in their craft and skill. This was a time when the success of a family was judged by the amount of quality time spent together, not the size of their home. After the Industrial Revolution, individuals were rarely required to produce much of anything. Purchasing power became the new translation of worth and the more possessions one had, the more successful that person was. Arms of credit were extended and people found themselves spending more time working to pay off debts and less time at home. This dynamic filtered through society and ultimately pulled the family fabric apart, securing a nation obsessed with more, content with less.

In 1933 "The Greatest Amateur Racing Event in the World" as it would come to be known was founded. Reporter and photographer for the Dayton Ohio Daily News, Myron Scott witnessed three boys racing engineless cars on an inverted brick street. An idea was born. Myron asked the boys to return a week later with their friends. Nineteen showed up and competed.

In the summer of 1933, Myron Scott would hold the first Soap Box Derby featuring 362 contestants. Cars made of orange crates, sheet tin, wagon and baby buggy wheels and everything of "junk value" were raced in front of over 40,000 viewers.

Myron and his media influence sold Chrysler on the idea and Soap Box Racing took off nationwide. Rules and regulations were established, heats were implemented and 52 cities nationwide began holding local races to send winning competitors to the championship finals in Akron, Ohio. By 1937, The All American Soap Box Derby was hosting 25,000 local entrants in 120 races with an estimated 1 million spectators.

I was lucky enough to witness the Oceanside leg of the All American Soapbox Derby on the street behind my house. It was here that I experienced a transformation. Was I living in 2007 or 1935? The years have changed but the ideology of soapbox racing has not.

As society has grown farther away from one another, soapbox racing has grown closer together. The ideals instilled in its birth have remained true throughout the changing decades. Soapbox racing is one sport that requires a child and a mentor to work together. A child cannot build a car themselves and cannot drive themselves to the races. The bond established while crafting a car with a mentor or a parent far outweighs the “love” bought with a credit card. At the competitions, a child that may not enjoy group sports has the opportunity to participate on a singular level, surrounded by friends and fellow competitors. In turn, communication skills are achieved and friendships with people from far away are made.

I spent hours talking and filming the competitors, family members and novices on site that day. What I discovered was that craftsmanship and all of the positive values it perpetuates is alive and well in the soapbox racing community.

In 2008 The All American Soap Box Derby will hold its 71st event. Over 500 participants will race in Stock, Superstock and Masters Divisions. Competitors will represent 43 states and the countries of Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Guam and the Philippines. Ranging between 6 and 17 years of age, the racers will reach speeds in the upwards of 30 miles per hour.

Observing society today is a lesson in faster, more and now. People have relationships in cyberspace, not in the physical present. While technology may bring us closer together, in many ways it is pulling us farther apart. A conversation with a friend in Beijing may be interesting; but, a conversation with a grandparent held across the table has far more sustenance. Family traditions are being traded for time spent working for a bigger house.

Culture is becoming homogenized through globalization and the television has become the new babysitter. Ours is a society that equates self worth to possessions.

Soap Box Racing, a sport that surfaced almost a century ago does not subscribe to this ideology. Soap Box Racing is a depiction of the ideals established in America so long ago: build something from the ground up and see what happens when it is put to use. Work together as a team to accomplish a goal. Communicate with others, even those you do not know. Competition allows for growth and knowledge. Everyone has the opportunity to succeed.

As I watched Betsy Smith and her brother Jaime fly down that hill in the cars they had crafted with their father, I realized that self worth defined through accomplishment, craftsmanship, communication, competition and individuality are alive and well in the culture that is Soap Box Racing.