

NATIONAL SCOUTCAR RACES

info

Scout
Information
Centre

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About the time that American Scouts were staging their first Soap Box Derby, it occurred to Haydn Dimmock, then editor of 'The Scout' magazine, that a similar event might be arranged in Britain. However, whereas the American Soapbox car was simply a streamlined shell for coasting downhill, his idea was to make the British version a real test of skill not only in driving but also in designing and constructing a vehicle to be pedal-driven.

The first Soap Box Derby (later to be sponsored and called the Unipart National Scoutcar Races) in Britain was held in 1939 and the idea so caught the imagination of the British Racing Drivers Club that it arranged for the two semi-finals to be held on recognised motor racing tracks at the Crystal Palace and Donington Park during scheduled race meetings. The Finals that year took place on the world famous Brooklands Track and were a huge success.

With the coming of war, the event could not be continued and it was not until 1950 that it was resumed. It was dropped for 1957 because there were many other big occasions in celebration of Scouting's Jubilee that year. However, it was once more in the calendar for 1959 when a large crowd watched an exciting race programme in The Forest, Nottingham.

Popularity grew and, like so many good things, the idea has been taken up by others both in this country and overseas. However, the fact remains that, as far as is known, the Scoutcar Races are the only events involving the actual construction of pedal machines.

Although there have been rule changes and innovations from time to time, there has always been a control over how much may be spent on the construction. The original limit was fifty shillings (£2.50 in today's currency). Nowadays, for entries in the Novice and Premier Classes, the limit is £50 and, though costs for the Championship Class are unrestricted, as for the other Classes the challenge is to make as much use as possible of scrap and cycle parts which cost nothing.

Although speed is the principal objective (26.86mph from a standing start over a mile course has been achieved!), the Races have been notable for the very high standard of workmanship and design ingenuity put into the considerable engineering skill is demonstrated by the young mechanics.

Competitors may enter one of three Classes, Novice for newcomers, or competitors unplaced in the previous two year's events, Premier for competitors who have been in the first four in their Class Final in either of the previous two years, and Championship for Venture Scouts. The first two Classes are subdivided to provide separate events for Cub Scouts and Scouts.

Apart from the prizes and trophies awarded for cars attaining the highest speeds in their sections, a number of special awards are made, including one for the fastest Cub Scout in the Novice Class and one, the Haydn Dimmock Trophy, for 'the car with the most ingenious construction'.

There is ingenuity too, in the names given to the cars entered. 'Col. Sandy Vole Strangler', 'Tutenkhamen's Velocepedal Sarcophagus MKVI', 'St. Michaels' Missile' and 'Lazybones' are specimens!

In 1962, the event became known as National Scoutcar Races, and the British Motor Corporation undertook sponsorship, providing not only trophies and prizes but offering support of many of their local dealers and distributors with workshop facilities and advice for boys engaged in building the Scoutcars. Sponsorship passed to Unipart and the full title of the event was Unipart National Scoutcar Races.

In 1964, the course length was reduced to 352 yards (1/5th mile) to increase the excitement and provide closer finishes.

A Grand Prix event was successfully introduced in 1980. The original experimental rules have since been modified and involved teams of 4

drivers, endeavouring to cover as many laps as possible of a 500 yard circuit in 20 minutes, with drivers taking it in turns to complete one lap.

The Races are held at a different venue each year - Brighton, Cleethorpes, Blackpool and Plymouth being among them. They are assured of many thousands of spectators, many of them holiday makers who thoroughly enjoy all the fun and excitement of the day. There has also been television coverage on several occasions and the Scoutcar Races have also been the subject of a number of sound broadcasts and documentary films.