

DESERT DERBY

BY ALLAN T. DUFFIN

PHOTOS BY NEAL FREEMAN



B

ig kids driving tiny cars. It was a crazy idea, and I never thought I would see it happen, but it did. In the spring of 2003, I watched in awe as ten midget racecars -- one shaped like an airplane,

some rolling on gigantic wheels, all of them lovingly handmade out of staples and scrap wood -- barreled down a makeshift half-mile course carved out of the sun-baked desert. A huge crowd lined the route, braving the hundred-degree heat to watch this very odd soapbox derby race. In the middle of a war, on a remote airbase far from home, all of us were able to relive our childhoods for a few precious moments.

We had arrived at the small aerodrome, tucked away in a remote location in the Middle East, on a blazingly hot morning in March. The cargo door of our KC-135 Stratotanker opened with a deliberate hum, and we braced ourselves against the inrush of scorching heat and sunlight. We scrambled down the crew entry ladder onto the concrete ramp and breathed the desert air. Nine other airplanes would touch down around us, unloading another 100 maintenance troops to join our initial contingent of twenty. We were all Air Force reservists, activated for full-time

duty and immediately shipped overseas to support combat operations during the first several months of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Many of us barely had time to say goodbye to family, friends, and employers; none of us knew how long we'd be gone.

The air campaign for Operation Iraqi Freedom kicked off within two weeks of our arrival, and our squadron worked day and night in twelve-hour shifts to keep our KC-135s flying. Airplanes were launching and landing within minutes of each other. The pace was blinding. We repaired the broken ones as fast as we could, towing them in careful zigzags around our tiny piece of the parking ramp. We installed new brakes, filled empty fuel tanks, swapped out malfunctioning equipment, and rubbed the airplanes' bellies for good luck. All of us worked together, casting our differences aside, focused on fixing airplanes. But after the fall of Baghdad in mid-April, our workload slowed considerably. Soon we found ourselves with too much time on our hands and not enough to keep us occupied during off-duty hours. Our airbase did have a well stocked recreation center, but the troops could only stomach so many movies, pool

tournaments, and video games. People were getting restless.

As a squadron commander it was my job to gauge the health and welfare of the troops. I knew we weren't going home anytime soon. We were thousands of miles away from our families with a mission that was slowing down by the day. Was there something creative and fun that we could do together, something to take our minds off the tedium? Our aircraft maintenance personnel were good with their hands. Many of them loved to build things. I racked my brain for a first-class idea. I mulled it over at my desk, on the flight line, over chow, and during staff meetings. I wanted to do something unique. But what should it be?

The answer was right in front of me.



Gone before its time: The Flinstone car bites the dust as it crosses the finish line. The car was crewed by a last-minute team of volunteers, as its original builders were forward-deployed to another base prior to the race



Since I was terrible at driving vehicles that had manual transmissions, naturally the base issued me a government pickup truck equipped with a stick shift. One night while I was lurching the truck around the base, listening to the gears grind and praying that I wouldn't stall out again, I had a flash of brilliance. I smiled to myself. I had come up with one very wacky idea.

But would it fly? I needed to bounce it off a co-worker. I looked around my office for a likely candidate and settled on Sam, one of our senior enlisted troops. He was built like Mount Everest with a personality to match: confident, no-nonsense, someone you could count on to deliver an opinion without any fluff. I approached him with my idea. He was very receptive.

"You want to do *what?*?" he said.

I stood my ground. "I'm totally serious, Sam." He gazed up at the ceiling and shook his head. "It's creative, all right. But who's going to participate? Nobody likes to look silly, Major."

"Good point," I said. "But how about we give it a shot? What do we have to lose?"

He raised an eyebrow at me. "We?"

Next I talked to my squadron staff. My idea was so popular that they asked me to explain it twice, to make sure they had heard me correctly the first time. With their enthusiasm ringing in my ears, I drove up the road to pitch the idea to my boss. He was a risk-taker by nature, so I figured I had a good chance at getting the go-ahead. The worst he could do was to laugh me out of his office. I strolled into his building and stomped the sand off my boots. He listened patiently as I explained

my idea.

"You want to do *what?*?" he said.

"A soapbox derby race," I answered.

"Like we used to do when we were kids."

He adjusted the glasses perched on his nose and thought for a minute.

"What would the cars be made out of? There's no hardware store around here, you know."

"Scrap materials lying around the base," I replied. "Old soda cans, pieces of plywood, sheet metal, string, whatever we can find."

He nodded. A smile poked at the corners of his mouth. "Tell me more," he said.

"We'll form teams of four people each, and do it as a relay race around the camp.

One person will push the car, and another will sit in it and steer. At each checkpoint they'll switch out so the other team members have a turn in the driver's seat."

"It's nuts," he chuckled. "Go for it."

One of my fellow officers, a colorful character named Chuck, liked the idea and volunteered to help. He penned a set of rules for the race, tacked sign-up sheets on the bulletin board at the recreation center and challenged everyone to draft blueprints for their cars. Interest was scant at first, but as word spread through the camp we noticed a brief but growing list of names scribbled on the sign-up list. People were still laughing at the idea, but its very oddness proved appealing. Eventually even Skeptical Sam joined the project as a judge.

One night during shift changeover I saw Chuck hunched over his desk, his hands grasping a stubby pencil and several pages

of graph paper. He saw me and grinned from ear to ear. "Working on my design," he explained in his gentle southern drawl. Sketched on the graph paper was an intricate layout for constructing a soapbox derby racer. It was beautiful. At that moment I realized that my crazy idea just might work.

By the registration deadline, ten teams had stepped forward and submitted construction plans for their vehicles. A panel of high-ranking leaders reviewed each plan to ensure strict compliance with the rules of the competition. Our civil engineers supplied tools and basic construction materials. Then the racket started. For the next month the chatter and whine of power tools, hammers and handsaws echoed throughout the camp. Airmen became craftsmen overnight, turning out car parts one by one:



Soapbox Derby Racers get ready to rumble as a team leader, pointing down the track, gives his driver final instructions.

wooden wheels lovingly carved by hand, frames fashioned from castoff plywood, steering mechanisms strung with knotted bungee cord. It was off-the-cuff engineering at its finest.

Finally, on race day, we unveiled the soapbox racers to everyone on the base. Some cars had simulated dashboard gauges, headlights and license plates. The silver grille of Number 31 sported a faux Mercedes emblem. The nose of another car was emblazoned with bloodshot eyeballs and sharp teeth. Two of the teams had crafted sleek, aerodynamic vehicles resembling Formula 1 racecars. The largest vehicle, fittingly numbered "01," resembled a monster truck. Slathered in bright orange paint, its option package featured exhaust pipes, a jumbo-sized steering wheel, an air intake on



the hood, and a rear-mounted rack for all four team members' safety helmets.

Not every soapbox racer looked like a car. A team of aircraft mechanics designed theirs to resemble a C-130 cargo plane, complete with green paint scheme, tiny wings and a pilot's control wheel. Two little propellers jutted forward from each wing. Proudly stenciled on the side were the words U.S. AIR FORCE. Parked near the mini C-130 was the most melancholy-looking racer of the bunch, the Flintstone-mobile, lined with leopard-print fabric. Taped to the seat was a piece of paper that read, "Racers needed for this car! Team members are being forward-deployed." It was a poignant reminder that despite the fun we were having, a war still raged around us. At the last minute an ad-hoc group assembled to rescue the Flintstone car and drive it in the race.

To kick off the festivities we hosted a short opening ceremony and played the national anthem. Then a volunteer emcee fired the starter pistol, and the soapbox racers hit the road. Jockeying for position, roaring forward

at the breakneck speed of 12 miles per hour, the competitors dashed their way around the camp. The C-130 car was a green blur, its driver gritting his teeth as he steered the vehicle with anxious hands. At each quarter mile, the driver and "pusher" jumped away from the car to be replaced by other members of their team. During the procedure one of the other cars careened sideways, forcing the replacement driver to chase it down the street until he was able to grab the steering wheel and maneuver the vehicle back on course.

Flying over the asphalt and periodic speed bumps, a few of the drivers watched helplessly as accessories flew off their cars and wooden wheels crumpled underneath them. A hasty yank on the hand brake could cause a minor traffic accident. As the competition unfolded over the next two hours, the better-designed racers rose to the top as the less fortunate were rolled off to the side. The C-130 car zoomed through heat after heat, its cardboard propellers spinning happily in the wind. The Flintstone car, wheels askew and leopard skin in shreds,

begged to be put out of its misery. As it crossed the finish line its left rear wheel popped off and the vehicle skidded to a halt. Unfazed, the driver thrust his arms in the air and cheered in mock victory.

In the final heat a soapbox racer that was sculpted like a bullet broke through the tape at the finish line. Sure, we were happy for the winning team, but being number one wasn't really the point anyway. For that brief moment, the shell of adulthood fell away and we shared childhood joys long forgotten. I'll always remember all the happy faces I saw that day.

With the competition over, we donated our soapbox derby racers to the children in the local village so they could enjoy them. Several months later we returned home from our deployment, our racing aspirations left in the sand of the desert but the memories fresh to share with our own children. Not a bad legacy for a crazy idea that wasn't so crazy after all. ■

ARMY TEN-MILER

AUSA ★ KBR

23 Years  & Running



OCTOBER 7th ★ 2007 ★ WASHINGTON, DC
armytenmiler.com A Tradition of Excellence



LEAD SPONSORS



MAJOR SPONSORS



KBR

Hⁿ
Health Net
Federal Services

FASHION TIME
The Time Store

94.7 THE GLOBE
WORLD CLASS ROCK

GEICO
geico.com



PRICEWATERHOUSECOOPERS

TANDBERG new balance

Distribution of this announcement is not an endorsement of these products and services by the DoD, Army, or Federal Government.