

PINEWOOD DERBY HISTORY STARTED WITH THE FIRST RACE IN 1953

"I wanted to devise a wholesome, constructive activity that would foster a closer father-son relationship and promote craftsmanship and good sportsmanship through competition."

Don Murphy, 1953

Pinewood Derby History is made



Don Murphy
Cub Master of Cub Scout Pack 280C
Founder of the Pinewood Derby
Manhattan Beach, CA

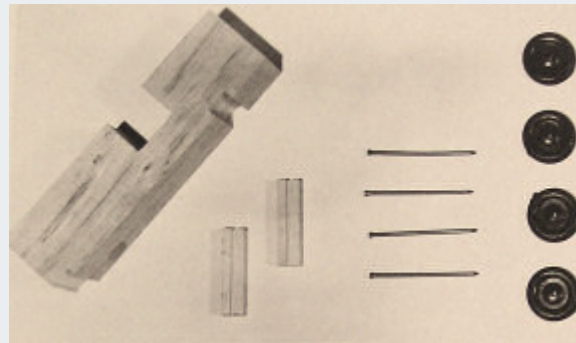
[The story of the pinewood derby](#) starts with Don Murphy, Cub Master for Pack 280C in 1952. Don Murphy wanted to create a new father-son Cub Scout activity he could do with his 10 year old son who was too young to race in the Soap Box Derby, which requires the boy to drive a home made car down a hill. Don's young son couldn't wait 2 years to race in the Soap Box Derby, so "Dad" Murphy wanted to invent another activity to do with his son and the younger boys in his Cub Scout Pack. The ideas started percolating in Don Murphy's mind. His dedication to family values and Cub Scouting ideals, drove him, as stated in the quote above, to develop the idea of racing miniature pinewood derby cars down a track. He just needed to figure out a basic kit for these cars and design a track to race them on.

Don had been a model maker all his life, so the idea of racing small cars down a track came natural to him. It would be a fun and safe father-son activity for younger boys. He presented his idea of racing miniature pinewood derby cars to the Management Club at North American Aviation where he worked. They sponsored the Soap Box Derby, so perhaps they would also sponsor the first pinewood derby car race. The Management Club was excited about Don's new idea and agreed to sponsor the very first Pinewood Derby Car racing event for Pack 280C by donating trophies along with funds to make the car kits.

"I'd made models of airplanes, cars, boats, and any number of other structures and remembered the pleasure I got out of doing it," Don said.

PINEWOOD DERBY RACING GETS TRACTION

Don's idea of racing miniature pinewood derby cars immediately gained traction with the Pack leaders . Don and several of the Cub Scout Pack Committee members, who were skilled with wood working and electricity, set about building a two lane 31 foot race track complete with a battery powered finish gate made from door bells and switches that would light a red or white light bulb to indicate which car won the heat.



Pinewood Derby History - first pinewood derby car kit

Murphy decided the car kit should consist of a 7 3/8 " block of pine wood with small wooden struts that would hold the axles. The "axles" , were nothing more than finish nails. The pinewood car would resemble a Grand Prix Racer. The little block of soft pine wood could easily be carved and shaped into any design the boy could imagine. Murphy also wrote the rules that would govern the race.



Don Murphy's Drawing of Original Pinewood Derby Car Design, 1953

"Pack 280C had seven dens and den mothers," remembers Murphy, "and totaled 55 Cub Scouts at the time. The original block of wood in the pinewood derby kit was carved down in the forward third to a kind of cockpit. We put the wood, wheels, and nails into a brown paper sack with an assigned number. To race the cars, some Cub Scout fathers built a 31-foot race ramp with two lanes and a battery-run finish line made from doorbells. Light bulbs would identify the winner."

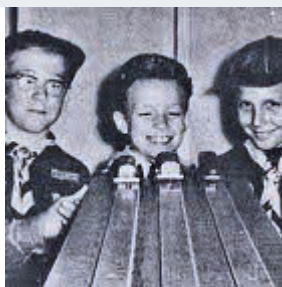
The pinewood derby car kits were assembled in brown bags, numbered and handed out at the April 17, 1953 Cub Scout Pack meeting held at the Manhattan Beach Scout House. The boys were instructed to complete their pinewood derby cars by May 15th for the big race.

On May 15, 1953, the Scout House at Manhattan Beach was packed with enthusiastic parents and cub scouts ready to race their miniature pinewood derby cars. Cub Master Murphy decided to make three

"classes" of racers based upon the boy's age. Class A was for 10 year olds, Class B for 9 year olds and Class C for 8 year olds.



First Pinewood Derby Car Race - Manhattan Beach Scout House 1953



When Don Murphy saw the looks of excitement on the faces of the young scouts (and their fathers), he knew he had created something special.

LOS ANGELES IS OFF TO THE (PINWOOD DERBY) RACES!

The very first pinewood derby race at the Scout House in Manhattan Beach was a huge success and the news traveled fast.

The Los Angeles City Recreation and Parks Department asked Don Murphy and the North American Aviation Management Club for permission to conduct pinewood derby races at city parks. Don agreed

and Los Angeles was off to the races!

On March 17, 1954, the first pinewood derby race outside of Cub Scouts was held at Griffith Park in Los Angeles, sponsored by the Herald Express newspaper and the Los Angeles City Recreation and Parks Department. Like Don Murphy's first race for his Cub Scout Pack, the city-wide races were a big hit, just as Murphy had envisioned.

In early 1955, the Los Angeles pinewood derby "scene" was already promoting the second annual pinewood derby. The Parks Department pinewood derby kits were made available at over 100 city playgrounds. Cars were built and raced in "preliminary trials" all over the city in January and February, followed by "District" pinewood derby races at 7 playgrounds on March 5. District winners would qualify for the city-wide pinewood derby championship. On March 12, 1955, 116 derby finalists were ready to race for the **Los Angeles Pinewood Derby Championship**. Over 300 hundred people showed up for the finals at Griffith Park!

Don Murphy's pinewood derby was on a roll.

CUB SCOUTS GET ON TRACK

Don prepared a booklet titled, "PINWOOD DERBY" and sent it to the BSA National Office to promote pinewood derby as an event to roll out nationally to all Cub Scout Packs. The Boy Scout National Office knew that Don Murphy had created a fun, exciting father-son activity. It was perfect for the Cub Scouts. While the California "pinewood derby scene" was running races throughout the Los Angeles parks system, the Boy Scouts prepared to roll out the pinewood derby as a Cub Scout event nation wide.

Don reflects, "I gave them (BSA) my permission to proceed with the program. I was quite rewarded knowing that I had made a contribution to the Boy Scouts of America and created a meaningful family event that has become a worldwide tradition among millions of Scouts today."

The October 1954 issue of Boys' Life carried the first description of the pinewood derby; a one page article briefly describing Don Murphy's Pack 280C pinewood derby race. While the pinewood derby car specifications were drawn in a detailed engineering drawing and the pinewood derby kit was shown, there was no mention of how to run a race or where to purchase a car kit, presumably because the National Supply Division hadn't found a supplier yet.

The very first Boy's Life pinewood derby article included Don's pine wood car drawing along with two pictures taken from the first pinewood derby race and concluded by saying, "**plans for the track, and starting and finishing line mechanisms may be obtained by sending 15 cents**" to Boys' Life magazine! That was it. There was no mention of car kits yet.

Most of the rules and regulations of the Pinewood Derby remain the same as Don Murphy wrote them over 50 years ago. The car length was evened out at 7" but the other dimensions remained the same. In 1977, the wooden struts were moved to the current axle offset position as today's car. The wooden struts were removed altogether in 1980 in favor of the solid pine block we use today. The wheels have changed several times as well. The "skinny wheels" were changed to a wider tread in the late 1970's and remained essentially the same since then with only minor modifications.

PINEWOOD DERBY FIRES ON ALL CYLINDERS!

Today, the Scout House in Manhattan Beach is still in use by Cub Scout Pack 713 as well as Girl Scout Troops. Cub Master, Gary McAulay, took over Pack 713 in 1997 and through some research discovered that his Pack is a direct descendant of Don Murphy's Pack 280C that ran the 1st pinewood derby race at his very own Scout House. Gary then set about finding Don Murphy who still lived in the area but hadn't been involved with scouting for over 20 years! Gary located Don Murphy in nearby Torrance, CA and one day knocked on his door to ask, "Are you the inventor of the Pinewood Derby"?

Don and Gary became instant friends and were known as "The Founder and The Finder". Gary honored Don by asking him to be the Grand Marshal of Pack 713's pinewood derby races at the old Scout House. Since that day, Don Murphy became reacquainted with scouting and participated in many pinewood derby events.

Pinewood Derby Car racing is now the premier annual event of the Cub Scouts, thanks to Don Murphy's vision in 1953. It is estimated that over 50 million kids have built pinewood derby cars since that infamous day in 1953.



Gary McAulay and Joe Gargiulo under same clock that hung on the Scout House wall at the 1st pinewood derby race in 1953.



Gary and Joe at the Scout House proudly holding their cars. Gary is holding the car he made with his Dad in 1965 and Joe is holding the car he made with his Dad in 1966 along with the car he made with his son in 1999.

MURPHY AND PINEWOOD DERBY CELEBRATE 50 YEARS



Don Murphy was Cub master of Pack 280C in the Los Angeles-area community of Manhattan Beach when he came up with the concept and rules for a father-son project that had Cub Scouts design, build, and race miniature pinewood derby cars. Fifty years later in 2003, Murphy, still a vigorous 83 years old, was the guest of honor at several 50th anniversary pinewood derby events in the Golden State, including the Scout House in Manhattan Beach where the first pinewood derby race was held.

One of the most spectacular of these took place in March at the Blackhawk Museum in Danville, near San Francisco. The annual "Blackhawk 500" pinewood derby, which the museum has hosted since 2000 for Cub Scouts from the Mount Diablo Silverado Council, was turned into an extravagant celebration of the derby's golden anniversary.

The Blackhawk Museum is affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution and provides a variety of programs for youths throughout the year. "This [derby] is one of the best ways to reach children and tie it to our educational mission," said museum staff member Nora Wagner.

The museum is an ideal location for such an event because it originally opened as an automotive repository. Cub Scouts raced their miniature cars in a display area surrounded by classic automobiles from the early 1900's and unique models such as early Corvettes from later in the century.



Council President Gregg Noel (left) presents a citation to Don Murphy.

In addition to the Blackhawk Museum's anniversary spectacular, Don Murphy attended at least two other events that celebrated the 50th anniversary of the popular Cub Scout racing event he developed in 1953.

In Los Angeles in May, the Petersen Automotive Museum teamed with the Western Los Angeles County Council 's Crescent Bay District to host a pinewood derby celebration. About 100 Cub Scouts from 20 packs competed in the district championship race and show and design events.

Don Murphy's contribution to the derby's legacy was honored with a presidential proclamation from President George W. Bush, and commendations from National Director of Cub Scouting Alan Westberg, California Governor Gray Davis, California's U.S. Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, and Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn.

Cub Scout Pack 713 Cub Master (and pinewood derby historian), Gary McAulay, hosted the biggest celebration of all, at the Manhattan Beach Scout House, the derby's birthplace. Pack 713, a direct descendant of Pack 230C, which held the first derby, hosted a citywide commemoration for the city's Cub Scouts, staging several races with retro 1953 cars in the same Scout House which was the site of the first derby. Don Murphy and former Cub Scouts from the historic first race in 1953 were present to stage dramatic "rematches."

Cub Master McAulay presented Don Murphy with a plaque recognizing Don Murphy as the pinewood derby founder and the Scout House as the place where the first pinewood derby was held May 15, 1953.



Joe Gargiulo, founder of Pinewood Pro, and Gary McAulay, Cub Master Pack 713, show off their pinewood derby cars next to the plaque that Gary presented to Don Murphy commemorating the first pinewood derby race in 1953.

Little has changed in the pinewood derby car race since 1953. An estimated 50 million children (girls and boys), along with fathers, mothers and grandparents, have built and raced pinewood derby cars. Cub Scouts Pinewood Derby car racing has been adopted by the Girl Scouts, Awana Grand Prix, Royal Rangers, Kub Kar Rally, Shape N Race Derby, WIRL (Woodcar Independent Racing League) as well as the US Military, corporations and many others to "promote relationships, craftsmanship and good sportsmanship through competition."

Don Murphy passed away July 9, 2008 at the ripe old age of 90. He left a legacy that only few could dream of, having created a part of Americana and touching the hearts of over 50 million people of all ages. Don will forever bring smiles to people world wide through pinewood derby racing.

God Bless Don Murphy, the inventor, founder and great granddaddy of pinewood derby racing!!



Two Cub Scouts await racing their cars, 1953



Steven Gargiulo after winning district pinewood derby

Don Murphy knew he created something special when he saw the smiles on the boy's face. The smiles and look of excitement are the same today as they were in 1953.

Pinewood Derby has meant so much to me, not for the competition as much as the precious time and memories I have of building my car with my Dad some 40 years ago and more recently with my son.

I vividly remember working closely with my Dad to design and build my car. I came from a big family and Dad always seemed to be working, so this was our special time, just him and me. I worked so hard and I was so proud of my car. We did it together. I had fond memories of this father-son project because I lost my Dad when I was rather young. Over the years, I lost the car too!

Last summer, while clearing out my parent's home for the last time, I found MY pinewood derby car, in perfect condition tucked away in the attic. It was a surreal moment, as if my father had placed it there for me to find one day. It had been there for 40 years.



My pinewood derby car didn't win a trophy for speed, nor an award for best paint job or best craftsmanship or coolest design, but still, it is one of my most prized possessions...it is the pinewood derby car that I built with my Dad.

I now keep it on my desk in plain view, so I never lose it again.

This article was written by Joe Gargiulo, founder of www.pinewoodpro.com , with information gathered from first hand research and discussions with Gary McAulay. It may be reproduced with the following citation: [Pinewood Derby History](#), Copyright (C) 1999-2009 [Pinewood Pro](#), <http://www.pinewoodpro.com>