

Derby

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Tuesday night was the first of several heats at the Trumansburg Fair, a tournament of vehicular carnage twisting a bracket to Sunday’s championship heat. There are several pools: one for four-cylinder cars, a six- and eight-cylinder hybrid class, a round for pickups and SUVs, and one for mini-vans. The top two from each get a bid to compete Sunday. The two cars left standing after that go to Syracuse for a bid at the state title, Sept. 6 at the New York State Fair. It’s not a sport for the money — the Trumansburg champ stands to win \$550 — it’s for pride.

“It’s really not a money-maker,” Milligan said. “It’s similar to hunting; it’s a hobby for these guys. You can’t make a living running demolition derbies, that’s for sure. They do it because they love doing it, they want to be the best in the county and have the chance to be the best in the state.”

It all starts at the county fair.

‘For the love of the game’

Several weeks ago, 18-year-old Emmitt Houston, of Danby, and his cousin used a spare \$250 to buy a beaten-up, six-cylinder 2000 Chevy Malibu. Where some teens are looking to buy their first car — a milestone for many — Houston had different ideas.

“I pretty much tore it apart, got it ready to go for the derby,” Houston said. “We ripped out carpets, windows, seats, bumpers if you want. We chained up the hood, wired up the gas tank and the battery ... mostly so if they fall off, they don’t end up on the ground.”

While JM Productions holds a number of demolition derbies throughout the state, many are intended for people just like Houston. They’re for the kid living at home looking to compete or someone without the tools to weld their car doors shut. They’re the ones whose cars are reinforced with duct tape, and whose hoods and doors are held shut by chains.

“The biggest thing is finding a way to pay for that car,” Milligan said. “Some of the guys might get it from a junkyard or the newspaper classifieds. Our shows are for the rookie who wants to buy a car, strip it down and bring it to the fair, and have an equal shot against a guy who’s been in the derby 15 years. He can’t do anything more to his car than you can, even if you don’t know how to set it up.”

People get into the game for the same reason. Many are raised in it. Milligan inherited the business from his father, but some rookies like Houston, running in their first race, are drawn to the sport by the promise of adrenaline and plain old fun.

“It’s like being at a red light that turns green, and the guy’s supposed to go left, but he doesn’t budge,” Milligan said. “You’re beeping your horn at him and just want to ram him in the back, you know, like most people would want to do. Being out there, being able to smash and crash into other cars, it’s an adrenaline rush. Once you do it, most people love to do it.”

The pursuit of perfection in this arena is driven by the lust for victory, a forge that over time grinds out people like Todd Weaver. Hailing

More to see

What: If you missed Tuesday’s demolition derby, more derby action will take place Saturday and Sunday at the Trumansburg Fair. Grandstand events starting at 7 p.m. Saturday include a monster truck show, followed by a pickup truck/SUV demolition derby and a minivan demolition derby. At 9:30 p.m. Saturday, there will be fireworks. The demolition derby final is set for 5 p.m. Sunday.

Where: Trumansburg Fairgrounds at 2150 Trumansburg Road.

Fair admission: \$5 for adults, children 12 and younger free.

Grandstand admission: \$2 until 3 p.m. Saturday, \$7 after the parade.

Parking: Free, on-site parking. For a full schedule, visit trumansburgfairgrounds.info/events/

from Newfield, he’s the returning Trumansburg champion and arrived Tuesday night like royalty, a caravan of four cars in tow to be used for the week’s derby events. He won last year in the No. 13 car, which he took to the state contest and brought back to Tompkins County for the chance to “finish it off” — that is, if he gets the opportunity.

“If I have to go out in that, someone’s going home broken,” Weaver said.

That championship was a long time coming for Weaver. Covering for his father in the pits, Weaver got his first shot at being a derby driver when he was 18. Over the years, he’s taken his share of second-place finishes, losing out to perennial champ Mike Adams several times. Last year, with Adams absent, Weaver finally took the title.

“This is where you want to be; you want to be the best,” Weaver said.

The sport that bounced back

The popularity of demolition derbies has been on the rise the past several years. It wasn’t lower because of a lack of enthusiasm, Milligan said, but a lack of resources. A federal “Cash For Clunkers” program instituted by the Obama administration in 2009 sent many of the vehicles derby drivers would look for straight to the crushers.

“They’d pour acid down all the engines, destroying a lot of the cars you’d normally use in the derbies,” Milligan said.

In addition, the cost of scrap metal rose dramatically, with Milligan saying cars that would normally sell for \$150 today were going for around \$500 at the time.

“Obviously, some of these guys have decent jobs, but some are just getting by and can’t afford to drop \$500 on a derby car and put more money into it to get it up to snuff,” Milligan said. “People just said, ‘the hell with it’; they didn’t want to put that kind of money into it.”

Today, scrap prices are back down, and with more than 40 cars in Tuesday night’s field, Milligan believes his sport is hardly ready for the junkyard just yet.

The derby

The future of the demolition derby as an institution was more than clear Tuesday night as a packed crowd wedged into the grandstand of the Trumansburg Fair. As firefighters soaked the grounds to keep the dust down, old engines with better days behind them roared to life, ready for one last hurrah before the crusher.



Simon Wheeler / Staff Photo
Jay Milligan, of Hamburg, New York, talks to the assembled drivers Tuesday evening before the start of the demolition derby at the Trumansburg Fair.



Simon Wheeler / Staff Photo
Todd Weaver of Newfield, center, secures the hood on one of his cars Tuesday evening before the start of the derby.

Digital

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Weaver sat gripping the wheel of his stripped-down Ford, only one piece of hardware left — the speedometer, the word “WIN” written on it in red paint.

“My game plan is to win,” Weaver said before the race. “I’m going to keep the front end clean, use the back end, outweigh, out-think and out-drive everybody out there. That’s not usually a problem for me. I’ll pick on ‘em from outside, like a sniper.”

He came out strong, bursting into reverse and colliding with an opposing car with a resounding thunk, all 12 cars meeting in the center in a chaotic fray, kicking up dust. When they all separated,

several were already immobilized, the competitors spewing them with mud and a cloud of acrid smoke.

Weaver stuck to his plan, looping and dodging through the wrecks, staying away from what he could, sneaking hits like a boxer when he could. Eventually, it was down to two cars — Weaver and Kirk Hoyt in the No. 77 car. The two went at each other, an aerial dogfight on four wheels, 77 eventually getting caught.

The crowd went wild, Weaver revving his engine for one last assault before ramming into the front and going up over the hood, a cloud of smoke obscuring the view.

When the smoke cleared, the crowd erupted. Weaver was one step closer to his second title.

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