

Historical Clippings

Three Lakes Museum

February 2025

In the early 1970's a group of dedicated Three Lakes residents were working hard to promote and improve the community. One successful and popular event that *Three Lakes Unlimited*, a volunteer group, ran for more than a decade was the Ice Box Derby at Sheltered Valley.

Phil Burnside, former publisher of the 1970's Three Lakes newspaper *Northern Son*, was a field editor for *SnoTrack* magazine when this article he wrote on this event was published in the January 1980 issue.

In Three Lakes, Wisconsin, a new winter sport was created from scrap materials, family teamwork and good old American ingenuity. They call it...

THE ICE BOX DERBY

The six-year-old racer adjusted his gloves, feeling the tension every competitor feels just before the moment of truth. His helmet muffles much of the outside sounds—race officials talking track conditions, setting heats, preparing the course—and he is alone with his thoughts.

He looks over at the competition. It's a mean-looking sled, black with chrome exhausts and a wrap-around windshield. His opponent looks straight ahead, up over the starting ramp and into the deep blue sky ahead. Neither racer can see the hill below, dropping like a cliff to where, so far down, the flagman marks the finish.

"Ready, gentlemen?" Both racers look over the starter, who holds the release lever calmly. They each nod their heads. No time now for fear.

Suddenly the starting chute flips forward and the long, smooth hill comes into full view. Hundreds of spectators, tiny in the distance, are spread out along the course. The race is on, and now there is only time to wrestle your sled and the hill, only time to shift your weight to help steer. The handlebars feel like the only solid thing in the whole world, and you're gaining speed fast.

You feel the wind on your cheeks, feel every bump on the carefully prepared track. There's that rough spot ahead, and you brace yourself to make sure you don't lose control like three others before you already have.

Your skis hissing on the compacted snow, you're sure you'll make it over, and you do, without any trouble at all. For the first time in the race you take your mind off your sled long enough to look around. You're halfway down and still gaining speed. Your competitor is only feet away, and falling back slowly. You're beating him out, but it's going to be close. You've seen other races lost in the last split second, and you know you don't have that trophy in your hands yet. You have to run at least two more heats to win it all. Your opponent starts gaining and you begin to worry. You bring your attention back to your sled, focusing your entire body on making it move even faster. You strain in your seat as if you could push your 80-pound rig just that little extra.

You cross the finish line to a cheering crowd. You've won, but just by a foot. As your sled glides to a stop, you smile and wave. You've done it. You've made it through this heat.



The young racers compete one-on-one off a starting ramp, down a long hill at Sheltered Valley to the finish line. An Open Class lets their folks get a taste of the fun too

photos by Kurt Krueger and Phil Burnside

The annual Ice Box Derby at Three Lakes, Wisconsin, was started five years ago as a weekend diversion at the end of winter. It was an excuse for families to get out and enjoy the warming spring sun, and for fathers and their youngsters to build their own sled and find out how good a job they could do as a team. The event caught on in a big way.

Last winter over 25 sleds competed in the day-long Derby with over 60 entrants in the five weight classes. The kids can enter in Flyweight, Bantamweight, Lightweight or Heavyweight classes. (Racers use sandbags to bring their sleds up to racing weight.) At the end of the day, the adults get their chance to join in the racing fun with a special Open Class event.

What is an Ice Box Derby racer? In appearance it is very similar to the more traditional summer Soap Box Derby racer, except the body is mounted on downhill skis rather than wheels.

Ingenuity is the guide word, and every year new design principles are utilized, some featuring fully-enclosed cockpits, four-point independent suspension and rack and pinion steering. The more basic rigs, however, have always performed well.

Each sled in competition is required to have steering and braking systems equal to their job, and must meet certain requirements as to width and length of skis, overall width and length and, of course, weight limits dictated by class. In most cases, the sled's sponsor will change drivers as weight classes change, making for even wider participation.

There are no requirements as to specific construction details, but the builder of any sled should be aware that a 60- pound rig with a 60-pound or heavier rider will have to take considerable punishment on the way down the course. Build your sled stronger than you think you need to. Many who don't never reach the finish line.

Building the sleds, regardless of how they end up in the standings at the end of the day, is always rewarding for everyone involved. Dad gets to spend some time on those long, cold winter nights with his son or daughter planning and building the rig, and more often than not Mom gets involved too. Towing the sled behind the family snowmobile for just plain fun or for serious secret testing on secluded hillsides or experimenting with new lubricants only adds to the fun.

Youngsters down to four years old have all competed safely, and while there are always some spills during the day, no injuries have ever occurred during the races. Contestants are required to wear helmets and some parents have built their sleds with roll cages and lap belts for added safety.

How do the racers get back up to the top of the hill for the next run? In Three Lakes, the Derby sponsors borrow the municipally-owned, Northern Lights Snowmobile Club operated trail drag tractor, a Tucker Sno-Cat for the day. Several racers are hitched up behind the Sno-Cat and dragged to the top. Individuals who often use their Derby sleds as kiddie-tows on family snowmobile outings, usually bring their snowmobiles for hauling the kids back to the top on practice runs.



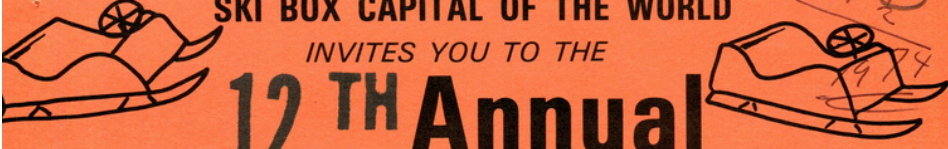
Old snowmobile parts never die—they fade into Ice Box Derby racers, the winter equivalent of the Soap Box Derby machine

And the six-year-old racer who won his Lightweight heat? He lost the trophy in the final heat to an outstanding sled made of skis, a big plastic wastebasket and a steering set-up salvaged from a 1968 Panther. But already he's planning next year's sled. The Ice Box Derby will be back and so will he. And he's sure he can beat them all.

1986 - The 12th Annual

THREE LAKES, WISCONSIN -
SKI BOX CAPITAL OF THE WORLD
INVITES YOU TO THE

1986
1974



12TH Annual SKI BOX DERBY

Sponsored by Three Lakes Unlimited

Sunday, March 2ND

ON HWY 32 1 MI.
E. OF THREE LAKES

11:00 a.m.

Entry Fee
1ST, 2ND, 3RD EACH EVENT
**CRAFTSMANSHIP AWARD TO
BEST SLED CONSTRUCTED**

8 Classes	
1 Fly Weight	- 100 Lbs.
2 Bantam	- 125 Lbs.
3 Light	- 150 Lbs.
4 Middle	- 175 Lbs.
5 Heavy	- 200 Lbs.
6 Unlimited	
7 Over 50	
8 Consolation Event	

WEIGHTS INCLUDE
DRIVER & SLED TOGETHER

SPECS: Overall Body Limit 6 ft. - Width 3 ft. - Height unlimited
Skis no longer than 7 ft. - no shorter than 5 ft.
Skis no wider than 4 in. - no narrower than 2 1/2 in. (limit 2 skis side-by-side)
No rudders, rails or runners
All drivers required to wear safety helmet
No driver permitted to pilot sled in prone position (lying on stomach with head the foremost part of the body)
No restriction as to type of material used
Hook required on front of sled for tow
No age limit
Sled must be steerable
Skis with seat only, prohibited
Race Chairman has final decision - can disqualify any sled
If you have doubt if your sled is eligible, contact Race Chairman.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, CALL:

This community and it's people are what makes Three Lakes.
Check out your town. Become a volunteer. Make things happen.

If you have more information or stories to share about the Ice Box Derby,
or any Three Lakes history, please contact the Three Lakes Museum
where we are saving the past for the future.

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