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Soap box derby championships to see fourth generation of Muncie family

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(Photo: Jordan Kartholl / Star Press)

MUNCIE, Ind. — Since 1952, the Wallaces have raced in soapbox derby competitions, and they’ve had a pretty good history of winning, too.

Next week, the family will look to continue its history of winning on the soapbox hills, but they also will hope for a more important victory, as Dave Wallace battles a serious health condition.

When 9-year-old Kaylee Wallace won her first race in Anderson last month, no one in her family was expecting it — not even her dad.

“I’m still at awe about it. I still want to cry about it, just because it’s my daughter. Wow,” Dave Wallace, Kaylee’s dad, said. “At the very end it was just like ‘holy smokes, she’s actually going to win this,’ and she won and that’s just something I wanted to see, which was pretty cool.”

Kaylee’s win broke a near 10-year dry spell. The family’s four-generation tradition ended in 2010 when Brooke Wallace, Dave’s cousin, competed in her last race.

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Brooke Wallace is shown in this photo from August 2010 with her soap box derby car and her father John Wallace at their home after she had won a national title at age 20, her last year of eligibility. (Photo: Star Press)

For almost eight years, the family waited. There wasn’t anyone to compete — until Kaylee gained an interest in the sport.

Though the Wallaces haven’t forced the sport on any family member, Kaylee’s participation meant more than carrying on a decades-long tradition: it meant fulfilling one of her father’s greatest, and potentially last, wishes.

When she was 8 years old her dad, Dave, showed her soapbox derby YouTube videos and some accolades he won to pique her interest. After that, she was hooked.

Now, Kaylee will compete in the All-American Soap Box Derby World Championships in Akron, Ohio, July 15-21.

Although the sport runs in the family, they weren’t expecting Kaylee to be a natural.

“We took a 7-year-old car and a little girl that’s never raced before and went over to Anderson,” said John Wallace, Kaylee’s great uncle. “The expectation of winning over there with a rookie driver was pretty small, but we won.”

Continuing a legacy

Like in the Wallace family, soapbox derbies have a lot of history in Muncie and surrounding counties. For years, drivers would race at Broadway Hill at McCulloch Park before a derby track was built in the late 1950s.

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Kaylee Wallace fine tunes her soap box derby racer with her father and uncle at their Muncie home. The Wallace’s have raced in the soap box derby for four generations. *(Photo: Jordan Kartholl / Star Press)*

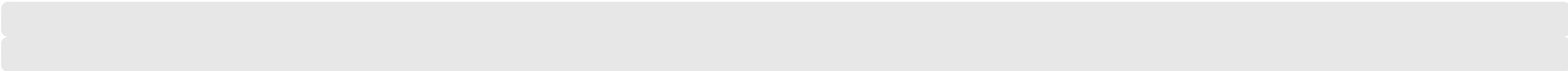
Derbies started in 1933 when 19 boys raced down a hill in Dayton, Ohio. A year later, 34 boys competed on that Dayton hill in the first official race, where Muncie resident Bob Turner won.

Since 1935, the All-American Soap Box Derby World Championships has been held in Akron, Ohio.

For many, qualifying to race in Akron is a milestone. Drivers occupy the Derby Downs — home to the All-American Soap Box Derby World Championships since 1936 — for a week. Drivers like Kaylee travel from all over the U.S. to compete, but only seven leave champions.

For the Wallaces, soapbox derby is more than winning. Participating means carrying on a tradition — it was their rite of passage.

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“It was just kind of something we were kind of born into it, I guess,” said Logan Wallace, John’s son. “The rest of the family did it, so it’s just something we all got to look forward to doing when we got old enough.”

“Yea,” John and Dave said in unison.

When Dave started racing, his uncle John showed him everything he needed to know. Now, he’s helping Dave, or as John calls him “Davy,” with Kaylee’s soapbox derby career.

“We’ve been very close ever since he was born,” John said. “He’s always been my favorite of my nephews and nieces, all that. Through the years, I’ve spent a lot of time with Davy and we built cars together from the beginning when he was racing.”

Winning in Anderson

In the days leading up to the competition, Kaylee focused on just learning how to drive. She didn’t drive down a hill until the day before her race.

“She’s very smart, very mature,” John said. “I’ve worked with some rookies before and it takes ‘em forever to really get a grasp of what they’re doing.”

She listened intently as John, Dave and even Logan walked her through the steps.

“It was rough,” Kaylee said. “The track — every time I would hit a bump, I hit this big bump on the side and it would curve me, so it was just hard.”

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Kaylee Wallace fine tunes her soap box derby racer with her father and uncle at their Muncie home. The Wallace's have raced in the soap box derby for four generations. (Photo: Jordan Kartholl / Star Press)

In spite of the bumps, she did what great uncle John taught her: she kept her head and goggles low and her eyes fixated on what was in front of her.

Her pale yellow derby shell covered in Sharpie doodles of her name, flowers and family portraits kept zipping down the hill heat after heat — losing only once.

“(When I got to Anderson) I was like ‘Um, I don’t think I’m going to win, there’s too many people here,’” she said.

But after she beat a girl who’s already won the All-American Soap Box Derby World Championships once, the family knew she had a chance.

She left Anderson exhausted with a trophy, a smeared purple, blue and pink butterfly painted face and one regret.

“The worst thing was I put three friends in the losing bracket,” she giggled. “I was so mad.”

The next day, she spammed friends and relatives with text messages about her victory. It was something the Wallaces didn’t expect — especially her dad, Dave.

“Dave has stage four melanoma cancer and it was just really one of his biggest wishes to see Kaylee, even just down a hill would’ve made him happy enough,” said her mom, Ashley Wallace. “So, her winning the whole thing was even more emotional for him.”

Seeing a wish through

In summer 2017, Dave was at work when he scraped his back against a work vehicle. Blood was dripping down his back, but he asked his boss to stay — he needed to finish the job to provide for his family. He didn’t think twice about the mole on his back.

That evening he went to the hospital. There, doctors gave him his diagnosis — stage three melanoma, a disease that killed his cousin a year prior. At 7 a.m. the next day, he went into his first surgery.

They removed a 9 mm tumor. He then waited 90 days to start any treatment.

“I worked ‘til I couldn’t work no more,” Dave said. “Until, I was like, ‘Man I can’t do this.’ Every day was wearin’ me out too quick. So, I come home and we started treatments.”

The first two treatments, both immunotherapy, didn’t work. So, he started chemotherapy and radiation. Shortly after beginning his new treatments, Dave had a brain and full-body scans. They found 17 lesions in his brain, spots on his lungs and a spot near his heart.

When he went back, the legions were shrinking, but they nearly doubled. His next brain scan is right before Kaylee competes in Akron on July 13. At the end of July, he’ll go back in for a reading of the results and have a full body scan.

“We’re trying to get me into remission. We get into remission, we’re good,” said Dave, who now has stage four melanoma. “You could be in remission for a day. You could be there a week, a month, a year, two years, 10 years. I’m hoping for 10 plus. I want to see my kids graduate. I want to be there to see my grandchildren.”

For now, Dave said he’s staying positive as the family gears up to head to Akron for the week, and though Kaylee is nervous because of the number of people, she’s most worried about leaving her cat, Angel behind.

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Kaylee Wallace fine tunes her soap box derby racer with her father and uncle at their Muncie home. The Wallace's have raced in the soap box derby for four generations. (Photo: Jordan Kartholl / Star Press)