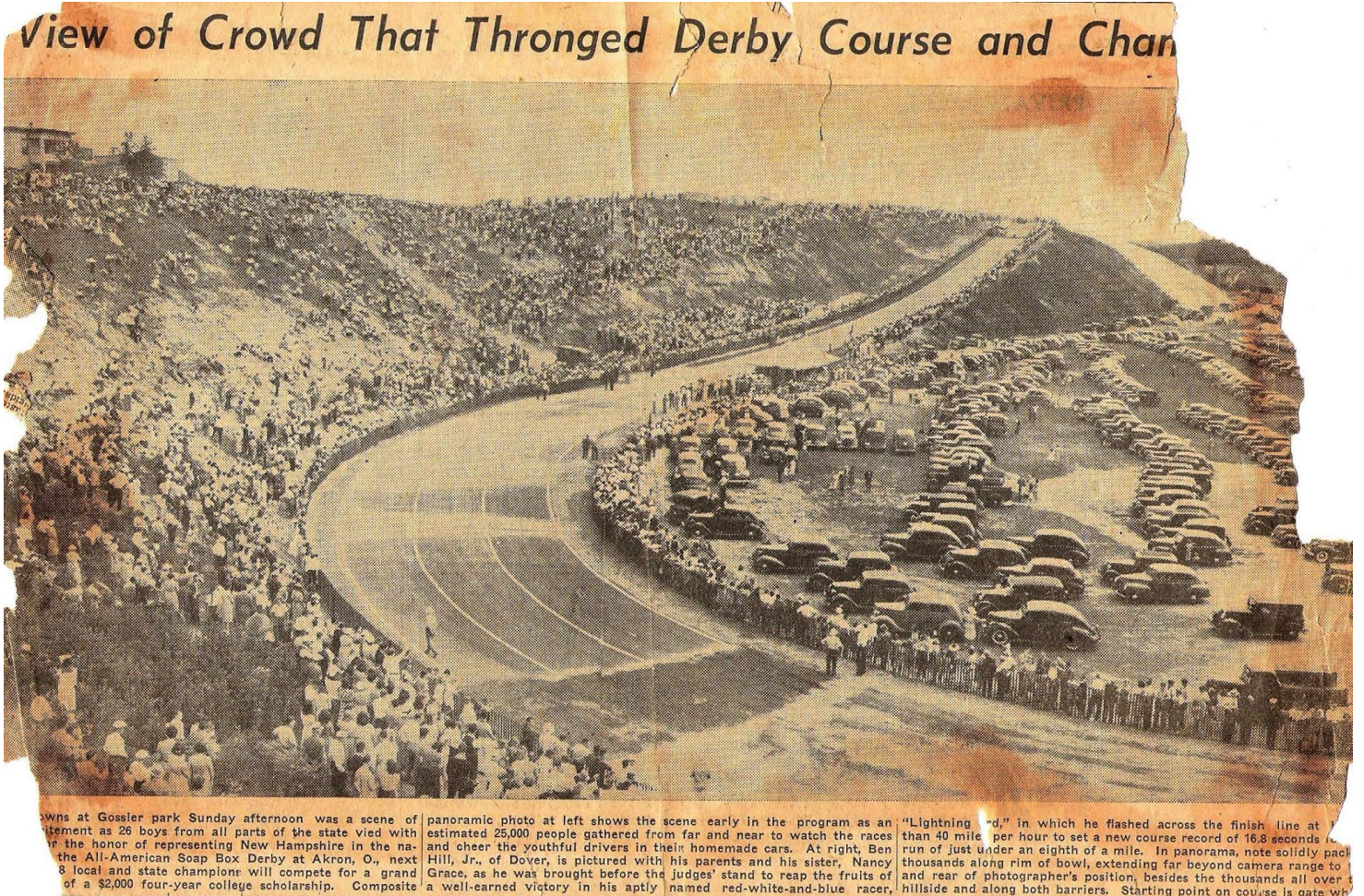


IN THE CITY: The fastest kid on 4 wheels

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Author: JOHN CLAYTON



SINCE EVERYONE IS still buzzing about yesterday's Sylvania 300 at the New Hampshire Motor Speedway -- everyone but me, that is -- I figure it's time to go with the NASCAR flow and write a racing story.

Naturally, mine comes with a Manchester twist.

Instead of writing about cars with more horsepower than the field at the Kentucky **Derby**, I want to write about kids with four wheels, plus courage and savvy and brains. That's why I'm writing about Manchester's 1940 **Soap Box Derby** race. Why 1940, you ask?

Because that was the first year the event was held at **Gossler Park** on the city's West Side. In previous years, the race was held on a makeshift course on Smyth Road, but in an effort to give Manchester kids "the finest coasting slope in the nation," city officials went all out.

"Constructed with the aid of Works Progress Administration funds and labor supplied by the Parks

and Playground Department, the coasting slope at **Gossler Park** will be the first of its kind ever erected in New Hampshire," The Manchester Leader reported.

Parks Superintendent T. Edward "Happy" **McIntyre** was the man in charge of the project, but on July 20, 1940, the 640-foot slope known as "**Derby Downs**" belonged to 50 kids who came from all over the state to race in their homemade buggies.

Being the major metropolis that it is, kids from Manchester dominated the field, and darn near every neighborhood and every ethnic group had its own favorite son in the race.

(And yes, back then, they were all sons.)

There was Larry Ulin from 123 Russell St., Wilfred Ganem from 74 Cedar St., and Robert Robillard from 336 Dubuque St., whose car was sponsored by Champagne's Market, which billed itself as "the food center of Notre Dame." There was Amedee DeBlois of

Pearl Street, Pericles Bolos of Harvard Street, Herman Eluto of Belmont Street, James Kelley of Blodget Street, Irving Deslongchamps of A Street, Francis Bourassa of Ash Street, and for you North Enders, there was Sterling Smith of 18 Brook St.

Also tucked in the field was a seventh-grader from the Varney School named John "Mickey" Gage, and it would behoove you to remember that name.

The pre-race pageantry was what you would expect of Manchester in 1940.

The three-time state champion drum-and-bugle corps from the Henry J. Sweeney American Legion Post ushered the 50 racers down the flag-lined, three-lane track, with four troops of Boy Scouts and National Guardsmen from the 172nd Field Artillery Unit on hand for crowd control.

Oh, and in a move that would prove necessary, they parked the National Guard ambulance at the bottom of the track.

A 10-minute, pre-race rain shower made the track a bit slick, but writing from behind rose-colored glasses, The Leader reporter claimed "the rain served to air-condition the atmosphere and make it comfortable for the 20,000 spectators and racers alike."

Not so much for the racers, as it turned out.

"Francis Bourassa was the first one of the afternoon to meet trouble," The Leader said. "He lost a tire about 20 yards from the finish line ... and a couple of skinned elbows for the driver resulted.

"Wilfred Ganem had a tough break when the roll-over his car went into after winning the fifth heat was damaged too much to risk another 40-mile-per-hour spin down the macadam," the paper added.

"Another youngster retired with injuries he received when his car went out of control and turned turtle in the middle of the course," the reporter noted, but nothing could match what befell 11-year-old Robert Brown of Goffstown.

"His car threw a tire, shot diagonally across the center lane and upset," the newspaper reported.

"His injuries consisted of a broken tooth, cuts and bruises on his chin, a punctured nostril and a gash on the back of his head that took several stitches to close."

Mickey Gage emerged from the mayhem.

He didn't make his first run until the 18th and final heat of the first round, when his buggy -- dubbed the "Red

Lion" -- clocked in at 17.2 seconds to nose out Larry Ulin. He matched that time in his second heat, besting Robert Michael of New London, and in his third trip down the track, he beat Pericles Bolos to the finish line and posted a course record of 17.1 seconds.

That record won him a whopping \$5 savings account at the Amoskeag Savings Bank, but when he won the final race of the day -- topping David Carr of Bristol and Harvey Wilmarth of Claremont -- John "Mickey" Gage had won himself a trip to Akron, Ohio.

In 1940, that's where they held the All-American **Soap Box Derby** -- still do, in fact -- and for Mickey, that meant a ride in a more sophisticated means of transportation.

There was a send-off from the train station in Manchester, and an overnight ride on the "Wolverine" from Boston to Cleveland.

And then he was racing for all the marbles in Akron.

Alas, the "Red Lion" would roar no more.

"The little Granite State representative was eliminated in the running of the second preliminary heat of the All-American International finals before a cheering crowd of spectators estimated at more than 100,000 persons," wrote Manchester Leader reporter Kenneth Kearns.

"Although he lost, New Hampshire's representative can more than hold his head up in defeat," he added, "for Mickey bowed out of the competition in one of the fastest heats of the afternoon."

"My dad definitely mentioned the **Soap Box Derby** as an important part of his childhood," said Mickey's son, Jeffery Gage.

"Although I never raced, I built a go-cart with his assistance when I was in the sixth grade," he added. "We made the whole thing out of wood and I still remember his instructions on weight distribution and friction reduction so we could maximize speed."

Mickey had speed off the race track as well.

He was a three-sport star at West High -- football, basketball and baseball -- and as a running back at the University of New Hampshire, he set a career rushing record that lasted until 1973.

Sad to report John "Mickey" Gage passed away on July 24, but I'll think of him every time I visit my alma mater at the **Gossler** Park School.