

Racing for the Hearts of Kids and Dads Alike

Thanks to one man's vision, the Awana Grand Prix has served as an outreach to clubbers and their fathers for more than 40 years.

Ken Starett couldn't seem to solve a particularly persistent problem. His Awana program at First Baptist Church in Elyria, Ohio, was thriving in every way – with one noticeable difference.

“We were reaching over 200 kids, but every time I would have an event, the dads didn't show up,” said Ken, who doubled as Awana missionary to Ohio at the time. “I really didn't have any ministry to the dads at all.”

Then, one afternoon over 40 years ago, Ken found the answer to his prayers while on a leisurely walk through town. “I saw a crowd gathering in a park. I was curious, so I went to see what was going on,” he said.

The throng of people was attending a local Boy Scout troop's Pinewood Derby wooden car race. “When I saw this commodity of a block of wood, my idea was, ‘Wow. If I sent that home with a kid, a dad would get his carving knife out and start whittling on this thing, and he might show up at our race.’”

From local race to national event

It wasn't long before the first Awana wooden-car race competition took place in 1964 at Ken's church. The event was such a hit that an open race was run the next year at nearby Graham Road Baptist Church. Soon other clubs were asking to join the fun, and a phenomenon was born.

Over four decades later, the Grand Prix has grown into one of the most popular Awana special programs. In 2004 alone, over 4,100 churches have purchased more than 25,000 car kits. An estimated one-third of Awana-registered churches – and 200,000-plus clubbers – participate in Grand Prix annually.

A key early supporter

However, the race wasn't initially received with open arms. “We used to have a missions conference every year,” Ken related, “and some of the leaders didn't seem interested in it and thought it wouldn't work.”

Awana Co-founder Art Rorheim wasn't one of them, though. The Awana executive director at the time, Art connected Ken with a purchasing agent, John F. Stahl. Ken and John teamed up to formulate the official Awana Grand Prix in just one week.

“I'd pretty much written the how-to book,” Ken said. “We just adopted the rules I had used. Little did we realize that this commodity would go all over the world.”

The race was dubbed “Grand” instead of the French “Gran” to give it a flavor specific to Awana and to differentiate it from the Boy Scouts' Pinewood Derby race. A plastic injection mould patterned to create

vehicle wheels and bearing the Awana logo was donated by a Christian businessman. An Awana Grand Prix logo was also developed.

Building the track

Ideas for the dimensions for the first track were taken from the Pine Wood Derby kit. The first track was built over a three-week period in the garage of one of Ken's friends.

Ken's wife, Mary Louise, came up with the idea for a finishing gate at the end of the track. She bent a coat hanger into an arch from which she hung red, blue, green and yellow ribbons, which corresponded to their respective track colors, and sewed nickels to the ends of each.

"As the car came down it would flip that ribbon. It was an aid for the eye," said Ken, who maintained that the initial finish-gate design was better than any of the designs that succeeded it. "I've had a number of finishing gates made. One was made by NASA in Cleveland. They did a good job of putting a man on the moon, but they didn't do such a good job with the finish gate detector."

Constructing the cars

Modifications were regularly made to improve the race. Ken originally purchased wheels from JC Penney, who supplied Boy Scout materials at the time. When he began having difficulty getting enough kits, he decided Awana could manufacture its own.

"Economics for Awana were so different in those days," Ken said. "This was a really big deal. Art made an announcement at our Thursday prayer meeting that we could now make our own wheels. He said it would be worthwhile, and we'd get our investment back before long."

Cars on the original track broke when they hit the ending bumper, so the dimensions of the track were extended 10 feet for run-off. The block bodies of the cars were altered to an easy-building slot system, which replaced initial hole-drilling procedures, and a stamping procedure was implemented to produce axles with smooth edges.

Perhaps the best modification was the addition of sound effects to create an authentic racing atmosphere. John F. Stahl, ever the salesman, talked a local police department into turning on all its car sirens.

"That's where we got the sound of the sirens used when a car goes off the track," Ken said of sound effects that were in use until CDs began to be included in kits in the late 1990s. "This way the kids felt like they were in the Indy or Daytona 500."

Fun with a higher purpose

Ken designed the race to link two essential components: gospel message and promptness. The gospel is presented at every race, and participants must turn in their cars on time or else they'll miss the race or the judging. That way the event can be completed within two hours out of particular consideration for unsaved parents who may be attending a church event for the first time.

“No parent is late to miss the message,” Ken said, “because they have to have their cars in.”

Ken’s ultimate Grand Prix car

Over the years, Ken has seen all sorts of amazing car designs and performances. His personal favorite?

“A kid came in one year with a replica of a 1929 Model ‘A’ Ford pickup. That was perfect,” Ken said. Ken, who drove that actual make and model, was fascinated. “I tried everything to get that car away from that kid. His dad wouldn’t let him sell that car! I would still buy it today.”

‘It was awesome to see that kid’

Ken grew up as an orphan, raised by his grandparents. At age 12 he attended Sunday school in a one-room schoolhouse, where he was given a card containing three words that he says would eventually change his life: “Jesus loves you.”

“That made me angry because I knew it wasn’t true,” he said. “Nobody loved little orphan boys, and nobody loved me.”

Perhaps that’s why Ken, who trusted Christ at age 19 and currently serves as Awana field director to the Caribbean, treasures one particular Grand Prix story.

“In Amhurst, Ohio, there was a leader who would go to the orphanage, pick kids up and take them to Awana,” Ken said. “When it came time to build the cars, there was not one to help them. He would bring them to the church and help them build their cars. One of them made it to the championship race in New Philadelphia, Ohio. He won first place. I still remember him taking a flying leap and landing on the back of that leader after he won. It was awesome to see that kid.”

The more things change ...

Ken marvels at the sophistication of today’s Grand Prix. A stackable track can be purchased for \$495. Manuals can be obtained with CDs, and patch caps and jumpsuits are available. Clubbers’ creativity is now exhibited in cars constructed from toothpicks, old Pepsi™ bottles, bananas and other odd materials.

But Ken reminds one and all never to forget the bottom line. “It’s a tool that can be used to spread the gospel to many hundreds of people. That’s still the main reason for all the pit parties and races.