

Humor Me

By Ronald P. Culberson

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“No Pining for the Derby”

The note had been on my desk for several weeks. “Prepare Car for Pinewood Derby”. I felt a hive break out on my neck just thinking about it. I enjoy the Pinewood Derby about as much as I enjoy extensive dental work.

If you're not familiar with this historic event, let me get you up to speed (so to speak). The Pinewood Derby is an activity in which Cub Scouts race cars that they have built from a block of pine wood about the size of two sticks of margarine. It's designed to be a parent-son activity which strengthens the family bonds so the son will not need therapy when he reaches 30. Trouble is, it can put a parent *into* therapy.

The challenge of the Pinewood Derby is that the kids can't build the cars on their own. Building a car that has any chance of winning requires adult power tools and fine wood crafting techniques that most adults don't possess. Ask any high school shop teacher why he's missing a finger and I bet he'll tell you it's because he once tried to build a Pinewood Derby car without the help of an adult.

Our Pinewood adventure started five years ago, when my son and I made our first car. It was a disaster. The only way I made it look remotely like a car was to lop off the sides with a chisel. Along the way, I knocked off the back corner and chipped a huge chunk out of the axle well. By the time I got everything fixed, the car looked like...well...it didn't look like anything. It finished next to last. My son and I did not bond that year.

The next year, I used a wood shaver lathe thingy to cut the car into a shape that resembled the DeLorean from the movie *Back to the Future*. It looked a lot better than the year before but I still managed to gouge out a portion of the axle well *and* my left index finger. This car came in third from last. We were gaining on it.

The third year, I suggested that we go for the Style Award. Realizing speed wasn't really an option, my son was excited about the possibility of an award. We contemplated designs that were most like a block of wood thus requiring minimal carving. We chose an ice cream sandwich. I burrowed out the sides and put spaced indentions on the top. It looked exactly like an ice cream sandwich. And surprisingly, the car came in third for speed! However, there was a mix-up in the judging that year and no Style Award was given. I wrote my congressman.

Last year, we tried again for style and built a Snickers candy bar car. I simply rounded the edges and added a “bite” to the corner. It looked good enough to eat. But, the car

came in fifth for speed and we lost the Style Award to a kid whose car looked like a Boy Scout pocket knife. What a suck up.

This year, fed up with our failed attempts at both style and speed, we decided to buy a pre-carved kit that required no tools. The man at the hobby store said the kit was designed for people who needed a car in less than four hours. I loved this idea. Then I opened the box. Instead of “Some Assembly Required”, the box should have said, “None of these parts fit together. Good luck.”

In order to meet the Pinewood Derby specifications, I had to make major modifications to the kit. I replaced the fenders, rebuilt the axle wells, replaced the axles and wheels, and added weights. I had to buy new paint to replace the sludge that came with the kit and toss the cloudy glaze in exchange for a see-through alternative. In the end, I realized the time for this less-than-four-hour kit was calculated in dog years.

I finished building the car three hours before the race. And I must admit that the car looked good. And the best part? It almost won. We lost by only 5/100 of a second. We did win the second place “You’re a Loser But Here’s a Prize Anyway” Trophy.

My son and I don’t have our names etched in the historic registry of Pinewood Derby winners. However, I am happy to inform you that my son won’t need therapy and I still have all my fingers.

Until next time, just humor me.

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