

A Pinewood Practicum

How handy workshops can offer help to not-so-handy families.

WHEN 90 PERCENT of your Cub Scouts show up at an event, you must be doing something right. That was the case last February when Pack 402 in Urbana, Ill., held its first pinewood derby workshop. Offered a few weeks before the pack's annual race, the Saturday workshop offered apartment dwellers, single moms, and not-so-crafty dads access to the tools and expertise some Cub Scout families take for granted.

"Parents were sort of frustrated because they didn't know where to start," says Cubmaster Tori Exum. "It was like, 'You've given me this block of wood; what do I do with it?'"

At the workshop, boys and their parents learned just what to do with their blocks of wood. Pack and community volunteers were on hand to help families with every step, from planning to painting. Some boys arrived with nothing but an idea and left a few hours later with a finished car. Others dropped by on the way to various activities to get help with roughing out their cars, leaving the sanding and painting for later.

A similar scene plays out each spring in David McRae's Cedar Falls, Iowa, garage. McRae, the Cubmaster of Pack 55, has hosted annual derby workshops since he took over the pack three years ago. "I just wanted people to have a good solid start on figuring out the right ways to do things," he says.

Just Like Henry Ford

McRae and Exum both use an assembly-line approach, dividing their workspace into stations for different tasks. The typical Cub Scout starts at



the design table, where he sketches his dream machine onto a car-size template. After an adult makes sure the design isn't impossible, the boy transfers it to wood.

Then, it's on to the cutting station, where the Scout either uses a coping saw or hands off his block to an adult to cut out on a band saw. (Note: It's not appropriate for Scouts of any age to use power tools.)

From there, it's on to the sanding station. Once the car is as smooth as time and patience will permit, he takes it to the weigh station, where he can check it on an official scale and add extra weight if needed. The final step is the paint station, where the Scout paints and then blow-dries his car.

Boys also can add wheels to their cars at the workshop, but McRae says doing so could cause problems. "If you get the car completely done, they'll go home and play with it," he says. "A lot can happen in a couple of weeks' time."

Centering on the Scout

Exum says the workshop has an added bonus: It reduces the number of dad-built cars in her pack's derby.

McRae agrees. "The idea is to get the boys familiar with the whole process," he says. "Maybe by the time they're Webelos Scouts, they'll take the block of wood and do it all themselves. It's very rewarding to help out the boys, especially the ones who have never done it before and the families that just don't have the means or the space to do it" ♣