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# Soap Box Derby hopes green image sprouts a sponsorship

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Enlarge By Tom Puskar, AP

Jeremy Fischer, of DuBois, Pa., races at the All-American Soap Box Derby on July 25, in Akron, Ohio.

By Bruce Horowitz, USA TODAY

The Soap Box Derby, an American icon clinging to nostalgia in a digital age, has hit a financial pothole that threatens the winner's-circle dreams of kid cart racers coast-to-coast.

Desperate for a title sponsor after two years without one, the 75-year-old youth racing program is on a mission to reinvent itself as something it's always been but never thought to promote: green.

PHOTOS: Soap Box Derby rolls along

"Nothing is greener than gravity," says Bill Evans, chairman of the board of All-American Soap Box Derby, whose kid-built racers coast downhill without a lick of gasoline, hydrogen or electricity. The contest for boys and girls ages 8 to 17 puts a premium on aerodynamics and minimizing rolling resistance.

Local winners from around the nation race in the annual July championship in Akron, Ohio. But as the 2009-10 season gets underway, going green will require a different kind of green: title sponsorship money. In a world of multimillion-dollar sports contracts, the derby needs a relatively paltry \$250,000 annual sponsorship to stay afloat. But in the past year, 400 companies have turned down its pleas.

"Companies tell us they don't even have a marketing or sponsorship budget for 2010," says Jim Huntsman, CEO of the International Soap Box Derby, the not-for-profit group that runs the All-American. "We're in trouble."

The derby is in the red after decades of making money. It has lost money three out of the past five years. It recently lost its line

of credit, and the group is "living hand to mouth," Huntsman says.

Initially sponsored by Chevrolet and more recently by Goodyear, Home Depot and Levi's, the derby now has no title sponsor.

The recession has sports from NASCAR to the NFL feeling a sponsorship pinch. After years of double-digit growth, the \$11.5 billion sports sponsorship business flattened to 0.7% growth in 2009, says the IEG Sponsorship Report. "The sponsorship landscape has been turned upside down," IEG senior editor William Chipps says.

But the derby also is fighting an image of being old-fashioned. "We recognize we've got to change the face of the derby. If we don't change, we won't be around," Evans says.

Which may explain why it has Facebook and Twitter pages in the works. It hopes to link up with a focused, thirder-

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which may explain why it has Facebook and Twitter pages in the works. It hopes to link up with a forward-thinking sponsor with an alternative energy bent.

"Everyone is looking for alternative ways to save energy," Evans says. The derby is considering adding categories beyond downhill racing for high school and college students. There could even be uphill races for wind- or solar-power vehicles created by older students, he says.

Some say it could work.

"Here's a sports property that's been green longer than [Al Gore](#)," says Paul Swangard, managing director at the Warsaw Sports Marketing Center at University of Oregon. He says a major alternative energy company, such as [General Electric](#), might want to consider sponsorship. "To own a property for \$250,000 sounds pretty good — on paper."

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