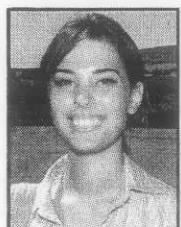


# Downhill all the way for box car racer Bridie



THEY were innocent days back in the Fifties, when there were no PlayStations or Wiis, and when people found amusement and entertainment in simple things.

SAMANTHA NOVICK takes a look back at the An Tostal Box Car Derby, which brought 40,000 people on to the streets of Limerick

ON a fine April day in 1953, four box car racers took to Lord Edward Street for a race. But this just wasn't any race. It was the final of the An Tostal Box Car Inter-Firm Derby, and that day upwards of 40,000 supporters thronged the streets of Limerick to cheer them on.

"We were stunned when we saw the crowds," said Paddy O'Connell, who was piloting the metal and wood racer for James McMahon's shop. "It would have been far and away the biggest crowd that I've seen line the streets of Limerick before or since. Times have changed, but even for a top-class rugby match I don't think that you'd ever see as many people."

And from the top of the street all the way down, patiently and orderly, the people lined up to get a good view. Children in front. Mothers, fathers, colleagues and friends behind, young and old. All dressed in their Sunday best—men in their hats, women wearing cloth gloves.

The four racers had all won the right to be there by beating teams from other firms in preliminary races in the weeks leading up to the final. Besides Mr O'Connell, the three other competitors looking to win the title for their employers were Hector Newenham of Limerick Motor Works, Gordon Taylor of Matterns, and Bridie Hannigan, who was behind the wheel for Todds.

The word on the street was that a man was going to take home the trophy.

"I didn't think that I had a chance," Bridie recalled. "I worked as a shop assistant in Todds and the owners of

got kind of nervous about it all. Our team was really serious about winning."

Bob Walsh and Seán O'Brien of Todds spent hours over several days putting together the premier racer. But they needed Bridie to drive it. One of the stipulations of the contest was that car and driver had to weigh under 12 stone.

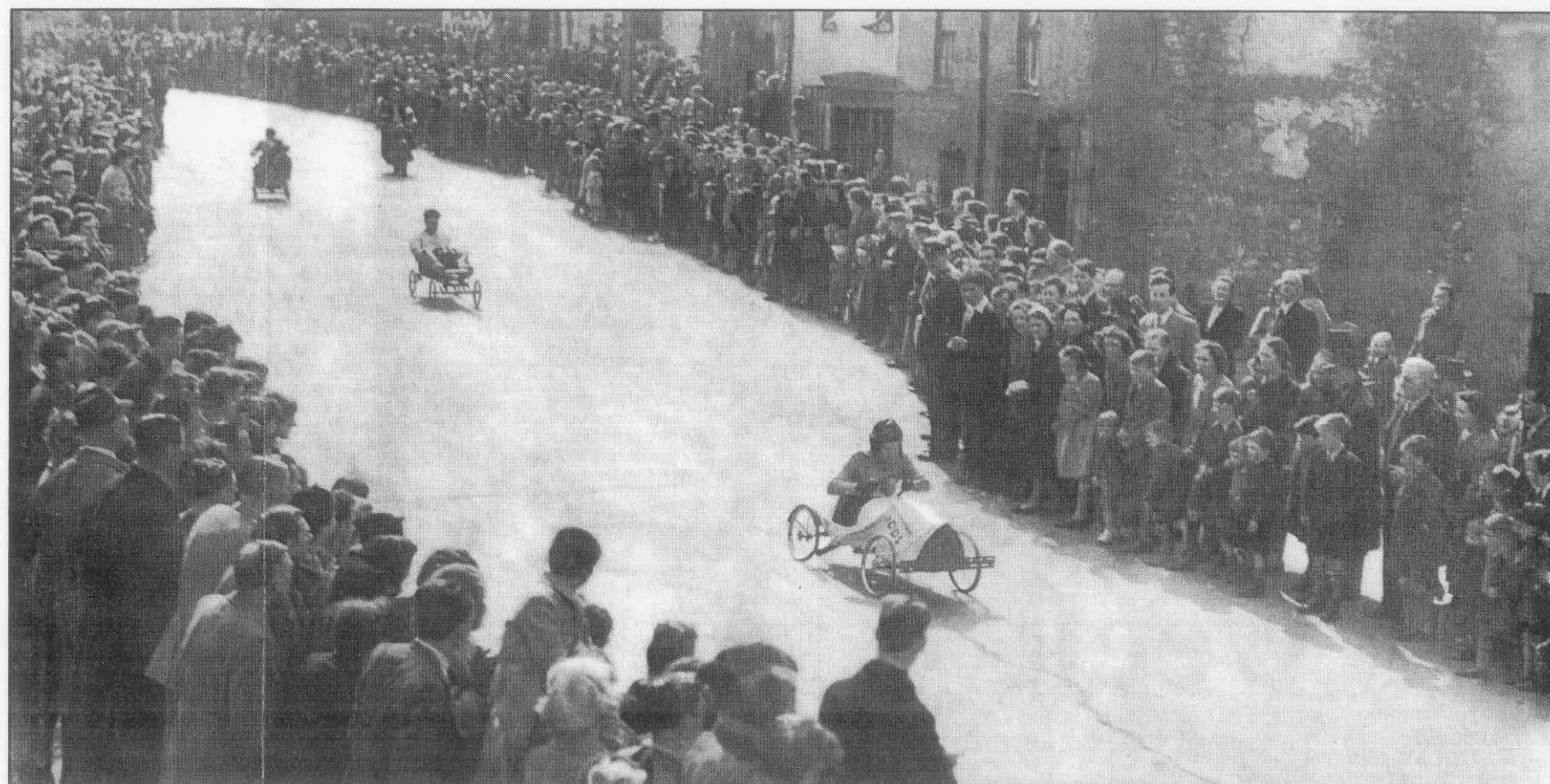
Each team had their own strategy to get into top racing form. Bob and Seán would push Bridie and the car down some of the steeper streets around the city. Paddy remembers putting his team's box car into a friend's truck and racing it down the hills near Clonlara to practice.

"I was picked to drive our car because I was working in the office and I was light," said then 21-year old Paddy, who was given a motorcycle crash helmet to wear from top cyclist Mickael Martin. "It was a very big competition between the firms involved and we worked hard because we all went into it wanting to win."

The stakes were high: at racetime the teams would not only be tested in front of their neighbours, but the derby would make the news nationwide. Filmmakers from Pathé News brought their cameras and recorded the event for one of their newsreels, which was shown before films in cinemas around Ireland.

"I remember arriving at the race and I couldn't believe that the film cameras were there," said Ronnie Long, who was part of the Matterns team and worked on the organising committee. "I don't know how they came to be there but it really showed that it was the local event of the day."

Now with the pressure on, the four



Main picture: crowds look on as Bridie Culhane leads the way in the An Tostal Inter-Firm Box Car Derby

Right: The contestants, Bridie Culhane, Gordon Taylor, Hector Newenham and Paddy O'Connell get ready for the off

Above: Bob Walsh and Sean O'Brien help Bridie Culhane get her box car ready



From the sidelines men, women and children shouted out for their side as men readied behind the cars to set them off. Bob Walsh and Seán O'Brien had got together behind Bridie's car and gave it a mighty shove, sending her flying past the other competitors. She gripped the steering wheel tightly

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The word on the street was that a man was going to take home the trophy.

"I didn't think that I had a chance," Bridie recalled. "I worked as a shop assistant in Todds and the owners of the shop kept asking around for someone to drive the car. They couldn't get anyone to take a chance on it. I was young, so, eventually, I just said yes."

But Bridie didn't know what she had got herself into.

"I didn't realise how big it was at first," she said. "It was really for a bit of a laugh in the beginning, but then I

got kind of nervous about it all. Our team was really serious about winning."

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Now with the pressure on, the four cars and drivers took their marks at the starting place at the top of Lord Edward Street, near the back gate of Sarsfield Barracks. An alarm sounded, and then they were off.

"It was overwhelming, but I really had to forget about all (the spectators) and concentrate on what I was doing," Bridie remembered. "I never realised that we would have such a crowd."



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From the sidelines men, women and children shouted out for their side as men readied behind the cars to set them off. Bob Walsh and Seán O'Brien had got together behind Bridie's car and gave it a mighty shove, sending her flying past the other competitors. She gripped the steering wheel tightly with her leather gloves as her car made a loud rattle down the street.

Hector Newenham, in a sleek wooden and metal racer with small wheels, had also got a quick start and was close behind. Bridie had no time to look back; with her glass goggles on tight and her head down, she steadied herself for the first turn.

The other drivers kept their eyes on the road as they pulled around the corner with lightning pace. Paddy, who had got a bit of a slow start, had picked up speed and was right behind Hector, who was beginning to slip in the line. Gordon, shouting and putting his fist in the air, came next.

"It happened so quick and you had no time to think," Bridie said, who on the way down had picked up momentum and now was a length ahead of the others. Hector and Paddy were next in line and the gap was tightening.

As the crowd whipped by on the sidelines, Paddy came out of the turn close behind Hector. The two were nearly neck-and-neck the entire way, but towards the end neither could catch up to Bridie. Her sleek white car was a blur as it made its way towards the paddocks at the end of the street.

"All the fellows were committed, and we tried our hardest," Paddy said. "I didn't know who was leading, but she was in the distance. Not a one could get her."

The competitors passed the People's Park, but Bridie was still lengths ahead of the rest. As they got towards the end of the street, Bridie whizzed across the line, with the crowd erupt-

ing in cheers and applause.

Seconds later Hector Newenham came next, followed by Paddy O'Connell and Gordon Taylor. Men rushed out to grab the cars as they crossed and pull out the excited drivers for handshakes and congratulations.

"It was all excitement, and after the win I couldn't believe that it had actually happened," said Bridie, who became a bit of a local celebrity for that one week in April 1953. "I won the silver cup and they put it in the shop window and everyone came by to look at it and ask questions."

So what was Bridie's secret? "Well," she said, "once you started going there wasn't much else you could do about it."

Despite the outcome that day, everyone in Limerick left the derby in a good mood, said Ronnie Long.

"In the pre-TV days people had to make their own entertainment," Mr Long said. "That was the key thing. It

was a way for us to make a bit of fun. Today everyone has so much and there are too many distractions."

The derby came towards the end of the An Tostal festival, a national event that went on for a few years in the mid-Fifties to celebrate the different counties and cities across Ireland. In the week before the derby, the city hosted a large sports parade that also saw hundreds of spectators.

But only when Munster took home the Heineken Cup would anything come close to the crowds seen on the day of the derby, Mr O'Connell said. He hinted that this kind of civic support may be a thing of the past.

"I think that in recent times Limerick has lost that big-time," he said. "People are not as interested in sport and there are all these video games, television and computers for people to busy themselves with. This was different. Nearly the entire population of Limerick came out for it"

## Hit's official-local web users are rugby mad

By ANNE SHERIDAN

IT'S official: Limerick people are rugby and GAA mad! While Dubliners are more interested in pubs and movies than residents of any other county, and Corkonians are more occupied with electoral matters, an analysis of the fastest-rising search terms on Google.ie has revealed Limerick's true passions.

Like Kerry, GAA and rugby are the chief leisure interests in the county. Tickets for GAA, Premiership football and rugby matches also attracted lots of interest in Google searches but tickets for the Oxegen music festival and Electric Picnic were even more in demand.

Meanwhile, Louth is the county in Ireland most interested in property, while Kildare tops the chart for shopping.

According to the report, people in Galway were concerned about the impact of changes to the learner-driver rules, having been the leading searchers for the term "driving licence".

When it came to travel plans, Australia was the most popular destination, followed by Thailand, with destinations such as Lanzarote, Turkey and Malaga also in the top ten.

But the most searched term overall was YouTube, the online video-sharing service, which is a subsidiary of Google. Wikipedia.

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