

The Race Is On!

Slot Car Racing is Alive and Well in Ridgeley, WV



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Club member's cars lined up ready to start the race.

Bob Maiers began his love affair with “big and little cars” at age five when his parents gave him a quarter midget race car. He went on to become a full-fledged race car driver and then, working with his father, a restorer of race cars. Over the years, he has amassed a huge collection of carefully restored race cars and related memorabilia. However, his major contribution to local racing fans has been to keep the hobby of slot car racing alive and well in the Cumberland area.

The initial heyday of slot car racing was in the 1960s, when nearly every neighborhood had slot car racing. It was common in both cities and small towns, often in bowling alleys, and was provided for soldiers at many military bases. Ten or more slot car race tracks were open for business in the Cumberland area alone.

The decline started in about 1969 for several reasons: the Vietnam War took many young men away from home;

model cars started being sold by department stores cheaper than the tracks could sell them; bowling alleys began to remove slot car racing because it was distracting customers from bowling; and television and other entertainment took more and more of people's recreational time and interest. There was a minor resurgence in the 1990s, but this was curtailed by computers, computer gaming, and the Internet.

Bob bucked the trend. He decided to set up a slot car race track in the early 80s. He figured the area could only support one, so he tracked down and bought all the remaining (disused) tracks he could find. He sold some of the tracks he located, keeping two. One is in his home museum; the other he set up for the public. As he tells it, he paid \$350 for the track and accessories and committed to \$200 in rent for a spot at the Cumberland Mall. He figured he could “make a fool of himself” for \$550.



Members of the Slot Car Club (left to right): Steve Lutz, Bob Maiers, Leroy Smith, Dave Beal, and Don Norris with the model slot cars they've made, ready to race.



Left: This photo gives an idea of the size of the track; 136 running feet of vintage track that dips and curves around the room.

Above: A close race at the finish line.

The track began operation in the mall hallway. When it attracted big enough crowds, it was moved into a room. When this grew too expensive, he built a room for it in Ridgeley, West Virginia, right over the state line from Cumberland. The business flourished for years, with the track open six nights a week. Today, it operates as a club and generally is only open one or two nights a week.

On a recent Monday night, members of the club gathered with the models they've made to run races. These small cars run on over 136 running feet of vintage, expertly-

maintained track that dips and curves around the room. Drivers enthusiastically build and modify model cars, but Bob lends newcomers cars and encourages them to see if they like slot car racing before they invest too much money. Bob says slot car racing is the only thing he does all week that enables him to forget everything else. Club members concur. Win or lose, it is fun all the way.

New members are always welcome. Contact Bob Maiers at 814-356-3730 to learn more.