

WWWVROOOM!



Power Tool Drag Racing is the brainchild of artists Steven Laurie, left, and Brandon Vickerd. Right, kids from the Jane and Finch community work to transform everyday power tools into racing cars as part of the York University program.

Using power tools to tear up the drag strip

JENNY YUEN
Toronto Sun

Life is a drag, for these Jane and Finch kids — but only when they're going head-to-head on the racetrack.

Frank Danquah, 15, examines a wooden board that is about one metre long and has been cut into the shape of a skateboard. In the centre is a yellow belt sander, attached to the wheel of a lawn-mower. There are several LED lights and the cut-off ends of exhaust pipes for decoration. And soon, all these pieces will be fit for NASCAR.

This is the effort of Team Robotic Swagg — composed of seven kids from the Jane and Finch community who have been meticulously working on their racer for six weeks.

It's Power Tool Drag Racing, a York University-run pro-

gram for 14 kids, ages 10 to 14, which allows them — under the guidance of instructors — to make racing machines which incorporate power tools.

"We had a bunch of ideas about how our style of our car would look — it's fast," said Danquah, a Grade 6 student at Oakdale Park Middle School. "Some parts of making it was challenging, but it got easier for me. I also had help from the times I used to do stuff like this with screwdrivers and hammers."

Power tool drag racing may sound a bit weird, as it has been on the down-low until now.

While there is little available information on the origin of the sport, a group of guys from San Francisco were the first to create rules and a website, boasting "blown big-block belt sanders, nitro burning funny saws and wheel



standin' weed whackers."

The rules of San Francisco's Power Tool Drag racing league is simple: Finish your machine before you arrive. Stay away from the liquor. Go faster than everyone else. Don't Crash. Win money.

Toronto's contest is a little more PG with a poignant educational aspect.

"I came across power-tool drag racing league in San Francisco where locals got together and built these drag strips," explained Steven Laurie, a York University Art Gallery education assistant, who co-ordinates the power tool drag racing program with artist Brandon Vickerd.

"I thought about how to incorporate that kind of unity in a youth program because it's an area of need. The thing with this drag racing is it's a group of artists or locals that have taken to being creative with mechanical devices and with the skill knowledge they have, cobble something together."

The idea is to use art to bring awareness to a particular type of discipline. The instructors and mentors will do all the dangerous stuff — such as cutting the boards for the students — but it's left to the students to make the racers and ensure they work.

"We're just trying to provide them with a basic understanding of how the machine works so they can take those inner workings and apply it to their dragster," Laurie said. "So this is how a belt sander works, now how would you push your dragster forward and then what else would you need? And then they decorate it and accessorize it to give it personality."

During six, hour-long Tuesday classes, participants learned the basics about how to tie together art and the practical skills needed to succeed — everything from putting a nail in a board to using a glue gun.



Instructor Brandon Vickerd gets set to take one of the power-tool cars for a test drive as the kids look on.

The other machine built by the group — members of Team Supreme — resembles a dinosaur. Sporting a decal of a pirate skull and crossbones, the racer's "spine" has triangular spikes sticking out of it. The device includes a flat wooden board with a yellow belt sander in the centre.

"This community is really underserved and a lot of shop programs in many schools have been cut back," said Colin Harry, 44, a mentor and a mechanical designer. "Communities that are better served usually have specialty after-school programs and some of these kids don't have that. It perhaps might

serve as a spark, so maybe one or two kids will leave the program and say that was really cool and want to start building things on their own."

That's how Harry, who wishes he could have participated in such a program as a kid, got into building robots. "Initially, some of the kids

were lukewarm and didn't know what to make of it — even some people I tell, don't quite know what to make of it — but obviously the kids are really excited and I think this is a much better way to introduce them to the trades, instead of having someone come into their school and do

a dry thing and talk. Because they're going to remember this when they're making career choices," he said.

Clarissa Amofa, 12, from Brookview Middle School, said she would try the program again or take something similar to continue building on the skills she has acquired.

"I'd like to learn how to make model cars," she said. "I like learning how to use the airbrush and different tools. My favourite right now is the drilling tool to drill wood in. I learned how to use a glue gun. I'm so happy and was so excited."

Last Tuesday was the last class for this group. For the last half of the session, the mentors set up a 15-metre wooden track for a test run of both Team Supreme and Team Robotic Swagg's devices.

The students watched in anticipation as Vickerd braced the kids for takeoff. The countdown started: "Three ... two ... one."

It was like a scene from *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* when Chevy Chase is about to plug in his outdoor Christmas lights. Plug in. Team Robotic Swagg's car took off like a shot, taking 2.4 seconds to reach the finish line, before crashing into a blue garbage pail at the end of the track. The kids all cheer and give each other high-fives.

Mariam Elmi, who works at the Boys and Girls Clubs of Jane and Finch, said this program also provides kids with life skills.

"It brings out a lot of creativity because a lot of these kids don't talk much and gives them a sense of leadership. A lot of them have an interest in the construction field," she said. "There's a lot of excitement, a lot of jealousy from the other kids who didn't get to come."

The ultimate showdown between Team Supreme and Team Robotic Swagg will happen on Tuesday in the parking lot of the Yorkgate Mall, near Jane St. and Finch Ave.

jenny.yuen@sunmedia.ca

BUILDING A POWER TOOL DRAG RACER

It takes about \$20 in scraps

You don't need to be an expert in power tools but you should have some know-how or get someone who does to help you. You will need just a few common items:

■ In-line skates

- Screws
- Bolts
- Zip tie
- Scraps of plywood
- Pieces of 2x4
- Tub/shower roller
- Circular saw
- Drill

The drag racer will be built out of a circular saw and some rollerblades for less than \$20 using scraps. If it's all new products, the whole project could cost around \$50 to \$75.

— eHow.com



torontosun.com/racing
Watch the races