



ORANGE BUCKET

# A Soapbox Racer for James

It was the  
boy's dream  
to race, but  
death might  
cheat him  
out of it

By Christine Langlois

James Birrell  
(foreground)  
with brother  
Ben and big  
sister Rebecca.

SEVEN-YEAR-OLD James Birrell lay propped up in his pyjamas on his hospital bed in the family room one spring evening in 2001, enthusiastically describing to his new friend, aerospace engineer James Mewett, what his ideal soapbox racer would look like. “Big James” (as the seven-year-old soon began to call him) sketched the outline on paper as the boy explained that he dreamed about a car modelled on France’s famous high-speed TGV train. For refer-

ence, James’s dad, Syd, retrieved train books from James’s upstairs bedroom in their Peterborough, Ont., home. Syd loved hearing the excitement in his son’s voice as he confidently answered Big James’s questions about the racer.

“What colour should it be?”

“Orange.”

“What number should be on the side?”

“Seven.”

As they talked, James lay very still so as not to trigger the nausea that had plagued him since his latest round of chemotherapy treatments. But when his little brother, Ben, and big sister, Rebecca, ran through and accidentally shook the bed, he made quick use of his bright-green plastic bucket—labelled JAMES’S BARF BUCKET in black magic marker—before getting back to directing the pencil sketch.

Four years earlier, James had been diagnosed with a rare pediatric cancer of the nervous system, called neuroblastoma. Recently the disease,

which is often first detected as a large tumour in the abdomen, had spread throughout his body after a hopeful 18-month remission. Doctors had told Syd and mom Pam there was no hope once neuroblastoma recurred; treatment could slow the progress of the disease and relieve some pain, but their son could die at any time.

Just a couple of weeks before Big James's visit, the boy's condition had worsened quickly, leaving him near death at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. His parents had had to make the terrible decision of whether to stop all treatment or go ahead with one last experimental drug, which might buy them a few more weeks. As they had done several times before, they asked James whether he wanted to try a new medicine. "Yes," he told them. "When I have to make a choice, it will always be to keep fighting cancer."

## KINDRED SPIRITS

Soon James, recuperating back at Peterborough Regional Health Centre, was well enough to sit up in bed and chat with ward clerk Carole Mewett, Big James's wife, about one of his favourite topics: the annual Peterborough soapbox derby, coming up in September. Since he was three, he had watched the race from his father's shoulders. He had often said to his parents, "I'm going to do that race when I'm bigger." Now, he told Carole, he was almost old enough, but he didn't have a soapbox racer.

What James didn't know was that the Mewetts were serious about soapbox derby racing. Big James, who races *Roxanne*, his Mazda RX7 (top speed 210 kilometres an hour) on weekends, had built winning soapbox racers for both of their children out of scrap material from his aeronautical engineering business, AirTech.

And that's not all the Birrells and Mewetts had in common. Carole had seen the elaborate K'Nex building projects and the bridge made out of hundreds of Popsicle sticks that Syd and James had embarked on during James's long hospital stays. It occurred to her that her "nerdy engineer" husband, who loved all things mechanical, and the Birrells would enjoy each other's company. First she checked with Syd that he'd be interested. Then, though she had no expectation that James would actually race, she asked her husband if he would help the boy build a car. He agreed, and a few nights later he was at the Birrells' sketching racers.

After Big James left and their three kids were asleep, Syd and Pam talked

# The couple had grabbed at every chance to make happy memories for their family.

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about the racer and Big James's offer of help. All through their ordeal, the couple had grabbed at every chance to make happy memories for their family, to wrest some joy from even the worst days. Every trip to Toronto for cancer treatment became a chance for adventure. Sometimes they went by train because Syd and James were train-crazy. One time when they drove, on the spur of the moment they stopped at a crane manufacturer they'd noticed from Highway 401 and were offered—and accepted—a crane ride.

But now James's death was imminent. James knew he was dying, and they had talked about it together. Race day was four months away; what if he didn't live that long? "We don't want to give him false hope," Pam said. But building the racer was a life goal for the boy. No matter how little they accomplished, the project would be a wonderful distraction for both father and son. And they were grateful a stranger was willing to open his heart and get close to their little boy, knowing how soon their friendship would have to end.

A couple of nights later, Big James finished the pencil sketch and Syd taped it up on the family-room wall, where James could see it from his bed.

Soon Big James returned with cardboard and markers. He spread the cardboard on the floor beside James's bed and drew the lines of a full-size template of James's racer. James slowly cut out the pieces. When he got tired, he handed Big James the scissors. As they worked, they talked about the design, where they would get the wheels, how the steering mechanism would work. When the drawings were complete, Big James asked James to "officially" sign off on them to signal that construction could begin.

## A LANDMARK DAY

Big James offered space in his company airplane hangar as a construction site and suggested that Syd schedule regular visits. However, it quickly became clear that any visits would need to follow James's schedule; they never

knew when he would be too weak to get out of bed. So Big James decided nothing was as important in his day as a half-hour visit from James and his dad. “We can accommodate him any time he’s up to a visit,” he told Syd.

Each morning, Syd and Pam waited anxiously for James to waken to know what the day would hold. Both self-employed—Syd as a church organist and Pam as a singer and voice coach—they worked their schedules around their son. On bad days, when James’s pain was intense, they comforted him, taking turns reading to him from *The Lord of the Rings*, his favourite book; waiting for a nurse’s visit; listening for the phone call from his doctor about medications. Sometimes they were told to bring James to the hospital for pain control.

But on good days, when the medication was working well and he wasn’t feeling too nauseous, James would get up and tell his Dad, “I’m going to eat my breakfast, and then I want to work on my racer!” On those mornings Syd would call to say that they were coming, then bundle James into the Subaru station wagon, along with his wheelchair—and bucket, just in case. And when they got there, either Big James or his foreman, Alan Chandler, would stop what they were doing and start working with James.

In between visits, the two would

confer about how to set up the next step so that James could do as much of the work himself as possible. “We won’t work on the racer when you’re not here,” Big James told him.

James managed to visit the hangar most days in June, although sometimes he could only sit in his wheelchair and watch. Other days, he donned goggles and dust mask and held the sabre saw with Alan, cutting the plywood for the brakes.

One day he was feeling quite energetic, and he and little brother Ben suited up in old oversized T-shirts to put a coat of primer on the plywood shell. James, wearing his signature train hat to cover his bald head, worked with a brush while Ben managed a roller.

Even on days when James would arrive in his wheelchair, sometimes he felt so revitalized by their project that he would leave under his own steam. Once, as James watched from his wheelchair, Ben decided to take the racer belonging to Big James’s daughter for a spin. After watching his brother take a couple of runs down the little grade outside the hangar, James decided he wanted to don the helmet and climb into the racer himself. Soon he was gliding down the grade while Ben waited his next turn.

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**(Top) James builds his soapbox racer with AirTech's Alan Chandler; (bottom left) James and brother Ben paint the racer; (bottom right) James with his dad, Syd, and an AirTech employee admire the racer's form.**

As the weeks passed, Syd kept friends and family informed of the progress of the racer and James's condition through group emails he'd write late at night. On July 4, the day James installed the wheels, Syd wrote:

"Today was a bit of a landmark day in the progress of the soapbox racer. James's friend Cameron joined us at the airport to install the wheels under the guidance of Alan. Now the project has jumped from a nice piece of woodwork on a bench to something with wheels. The boys took turns sit-

# "We won't work on the racer when you're not here," Big James told him.

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ting in it and gliding across the floor. No brakes or steering yet, but what a ride with those high-tech wheels and their fancy ball bearings, hardly any rolling resistance at all. There are times when the project seems quite futile, with James barely able to use a screwdriver while slumped in his wheelchair; then there are days like today, where he marches in, tells me he doesn't need my help and gets to work. The second Sunday in September is not quite so unattainable as it seemed last week, encumbered as it was with pain."

## PRACTICE RUN

With race day approaching and the racer almost complete, Syd and Big James had to face the fact that James wouldn't be satisfied to just build the racer; he desperately wanted to drive it. Up until this point, taking the racer down a steep hill had only been a remote possibility for the adults. And a terrifying one at that. But now, with the big event only ten days away, it was time to let James take his new *Orange Rocket* for a test run.

Syd and Big James scouted out a suitable hill on the edge of town—freshly paved, very little traffic, a long easy slope. Dangerous ditches on either side of the roadway were the main concern; James had never driven a racer on a hill before. Would he be able to steer straight?

On the drive over to Whittington hill, with the racer in the back, James was relaxed and quietly excited, chatting about how he planned to drive down the hill. But Syd could feel cold fingers of panic gripping his stomach.

What was he thinking to allow his dying son to do this? James was too fragile. He was on heavy pain medication. What kind of father would let his chemo-compromised seven-year-old in the end stages of cancer hurtle down a road at 30 or 40 kilometres an hour in a plywood contraption with 45 kilograms of lead-weight ballast and wheels salvaged from a snowmobile?

# Would it be so terrible for his son to die doing something he passionately wanted to do?

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At the top of the long hill, with Big James warding off other traffic from the bottom, Syd helped James into the racer. He asked him, “Are you ready for this?”

“Yes,” James said with a wide grin.

Syd gave him last-minute instructions on steering. But still he hung on to the back of the racer in an agony of indecision. Then a reckless thought crossed his mind. His son was going to die soon. Would it be so terrible for him to die now, doing something he passionately wanted to do? Syd lifted his hand from the plywood and let go.

James headed straight down the hill, while his dad jumped in the car to follow. The boy headed for Big James, easily avoiding the ditches. In less than a minute, he pulled his racer up neatly at Big James’s feet, just as his dad arrived. Coolly, he let go of the steering wheel and gave Big James a thumbs-up and a grin.

Syd sent out an email that night: “It is clear that neither chemo nor narcotic pain patches nor brain tumour nor anything else is affecting [James’s] judgement, for he steered true and straight and pulled up beautifully next to Big James at the bottom of the hill. Three more practice runs, each a little faster, and we reached 35 kilometres an hour. We are “Go” for the soap-box derby. Three months ago I would hardly have thought this moment possible.”

James had demonstrated he was a careful and competent driver. And now he just wanted to make it to race day. But the huge question remained: Would he still be well enough?

While James talked happily about racing, everyone else knew that the disease that was killing him could unleash its terrible pain at any moment. It had done so many times before, instantly sending the child into the downward spiral of a full-blown medical crisis. But it was clear that James fully expected to race. He managed to attend a couple of days of school after

Labour Day, and in his school journal he wrote: "In three days, it will be the soapbox derby!"

When James would tell his mother about how he planned to drive the course, she was always careful to remind him, "We'll have to see how you feel that day."

Even as the racer took shape, as she filled out the entry form for the derby, she never said to him that he would race. As she had throughout his illness, she resolved never to lie to him.

Now, as the days ticked down, Pam worried. *What am I going to tell this child if he can't race? Where am I going to get the emotional strength?*

The night before the derby, Syd and James met Big James at the hangar for a final check of the racer. Big James and James carefully cleaned all the wheel bearings with a secret formula that Big James had used for his own kids' cars. They did a last check of the brakes. They worked quietly and methodically. Big James thought for the hundredth time what an engineering mind his little friend possessed.

And all Syd could think was, *Please let James be well enough tomorrow.* When they were done, they stowed the racer in the Subaru and agreed to meet the next morning at the Birrells'.



**(Top) James in his racer at the soapbox derby; (bottom left) Big James lends his support; (bottom right) James with his dad, Syd, on race day.**

## THE ORANGE ROCKET TAKES OFF

September 8. Race day dawned hot and sunny, and James woke feeling cheerful and not complaining of any new pain. His nurse arrived to do his blood work and pronounced his platelet levels satisfactory. Pam prepared his pain medication in the kitchen while James ate a bowl of Shreddies and, in typical seven-year-old fashion, loudly gargled his orange juice.

Soon Big James and Alan were bustling into the house along with relatives and friends, all eager to be part of the big day; then off everyone headed to the derby hill.

Race spectators were arriving in a steady stream. A camera crew filming the event interviewed James and asked him what he was going to think about when he was flying down the hill. "I'm always thinking about having fun. 'Cause I sure am having fun!" he said.

A soapbox derby consists of a series of elimination heats: Two racers are positioned on a steep ramp held in place by stops in front of the front wheels. At the signal, someone pulls a big lever under the ramp to free the wheels and the two racers glide down the ramp onto the road and race downhill to the finish line some 800 metres away. The driver who wins that heat goes on to race again; the loser is eliminated from trophy contention.

When James's turn came, he betrayed no jitters. Syd and Big James nervously watched as the boy steadily climbed into his racer and stared intently down the course. When his name was called, he raised his right hand to signal to the race official that he was ready. The ramp stop dropped and they were off.

James steered his *Orange Rocket* straight down the course, overtaking the car in the left lane in the nick of time to cross the finish line a fraction of a second ahead. "The winner is James Birrell," the announcer called. James pumped his two arms in the air in pure joy. "I did it!" he yelled.

Pam helped James into a red wagon she'd brought and pulled him back up the hill to save his strength. At the top, the adults conferred and realized they were all feeling the same thing: raw fear. "I just want this to be over," Syd told Pam. Nine-year-old Rebecca agreed. "I can't watch James do this," she told her mom.

But James was having the time of his life. He won his second heat, then his third heat, then his fourth. He was slowly eliminating his competition so that by his eighth heat, he was one of only a handful of racers left. And at 51 kilometres an hour—clocked by an off-duty police officer with his radar gun—he had the fastest time so far. There was now a tantalizing possibility that he could be among the day's three winners.

## A LIFE GOAL

The eighth heat started out the same as the first seven, with James in the lead. But then, a slight over-correction around a pylon marking a crack in

the road caused him to lose control. Everyone watched, mouth gaping, as the *Orange Rocket* crossed into the other lane just before the finish line. Narrowly missing the opposing car and the race official, James spun 180 degrees and crashed backward into the curb.

Adults came running; James was lifted out of the racer and quickly pronounced unscathed. But the rear axle of his *Orange Rocket* was bent, and James was disqualified. His soapbox race was over. He held on to the record of fastest time, but came fourth. There would be no trophy.

Unexpectedly, the loss hit Syd hard. Why couldn't his son have won? Why couldn't they have had the fairy-tale ending? It wasn't as if he was ever going to have another chance.

Then he caught himself. James had accomplished something that no one thought possible four months ago: He had lived to reach this day. And he had achieved a life goal—he'd raced in the soapbox derby. This was one of the best days of James's life. And if he was disappointed, he hid it well, as he had learned to do throughout his ordeal.

"Am I out?" he asked his mother matter-of-factly. "You're out," Pam confirmed, but there were no tears from her son. When Syd and Big James arrived at the finish line, James gave

them each a long, hard hug, his helmet askew and his brown eyes shining. THE DAY after the race, James's pain returned. Although he had a few more good days, he never regained the strength he had before the race. But over and over from his hospital bed he loved to watch the video of his "spin crash."

James died at home on December 18, 2001, just a few weeks after his eighth birthday. His Orange Rocket hung from the rafters of his family's church during his memorial service. In his eulogy, Big James Mewett said, "I will always remember September 8, 2001, and a seven-year-old boy named James Birrell intently racing, oblivious to the fact that he was at the centre of our universe that day. I will remember the magic of that most perfect day."

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*Syd Birrell has published the emails he wrote during James's illness. Partial proceeds from "Ya Can't Let Cancer Ruin Your Day: The James Emails" go to the James Fund for Neuroblastoma Research through the Hospital for Sick Children.*

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## CRIME FOR DUMMIES

*Everyone knows crime doesn't pay—except, maybe, these nitwits.*

### *Never Speak Until Spoken To*

When the victim took the stand in a trial against two men accused of assaulting and robbing her, the district attorney asked, "Are the two perpetrators of this terrible crime present in the courtroom today?"

Before the victim could respond, the two defendants raised their hands and said, "Here, Your Honour."

Amarillo Globe-News, submitted by J. K. MACANAS

### *Lose the Sweet Tooth*

The burglar's first mistake was confusing a cookie jar for a piggy bank. His second mistake was running when he heard a police officer command him to "Stop! Move away from the cookie jar."

According to the *Augusta (Georgia) Chronicle*, the officer was on the scene for a good reason—he's actually a cookie jar in the shape of a policeman and lives in the kitchen. His "voice" was activated when the thief lifted its lid.

Submitted by SHANNON MORAN