



Derby at the Minnesota State Fair, 1971 (MHS COLLECTIONS)

Demolition Derby



IT SHOULDN'T SURPRISE ANYONE that the demolition derby—that staple of county fairs all over the country—is a product of American inspiration. It might surprise you, however, to learn that the phenomenon dates only to the 1950s. I suppose, though, that people who lived through the Great Depression and World War II were more inclined to drive their precious cars into the ground rather than deliberately into other cars.

I am continually astonished to encounter urban dwellers who have never seen or heard of what I grew up referring to as “the demo.” This, after all, is a sport [*sic*, I suppose] that was nationally televised by ABC throughout much of my youth. I still try to make a point of getting down to my hometown Mower County Fair for its annual derby.

The beauty of demolition derby is that there is something in it for everyone. If you're one of those people who enjoy action films with lots of chaos and wasteful absurdity, the demo dispenses with plotline and character entirely and just gives you the carnage and noise. And if you're of a more philosophical or even fatalistic bent,

there may be no purer Darwinian commentary on modern America. The demolition derby is atavistic spectacle at its best, and it's hard not to delight in the violent revolt of obsolescent machinery. Kids, of course, just flat out love it, even if its lessons are elusive at best and morally confusing at worst.

This 1971 photo from the State Fair—which, sadly, no longer seems to play host to the demolition derby—represents, I think it's fair to say, the competition in its heyday. There was still plenty of sturdy, late-model American stock, and you'd see some real protracted doozies at even the smallest county fairs. The ersatz paint jobs haven't changed much in the intervening decades, but in most of the derbies these days you'll have to endure the compact and mid-size categories, which tend to have all the drama of a flyweight undercard at a local gym. You could always hold out, though, for the combine demolition derbies, a relatively recent development, where the sheer lumbering size of the contraptions makes for an even noisier, messier, and absurd affair.

—Brad Zellar

Brad Zellar is a Minneapolis author who also likes to take photos. Among his books are Suburban World: The Norling Photos (2008) and House of Coates (2012).



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