

Road to a reborn car sector could be downhill in a souped-up soapbox – Ian Smith

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A competitor takes part in the Red Bull Soapbox Race in Alexandra Park, London. Picture: PA

Scotland is renowned the world over for the high-end, intricate precision of its manufacturing and engineering. This is what we have done for centuries. We have remained ahead of the curve and been the envy of the world with our relentless pursuit of manufacturing and engineering excellence.

And whilst, our indigenous motor manufacturing has sadly declined, that too, was an area where we excelled particularly in the first half of the 19th century and of course latterly with the illustrious plants at Linwood making Chrysler and Hillman cars. So, what, if we were to build a new vehicle using our technology and engineering prowess? What if we were to go back to basics and breathe fresh life into a form of transport which could take to the streets (in a controlled environment), but yet again show that, nonetheless, we are capable of building a motor vehicle that ‘turned heads’? Moreover, what if this vehicle had no motor?

That was the question posed by Joe Pacitti of Ceed (Scotland’s Centre for Engineering, Education and Development), recently whilst talking to Livingston Round Table, who are organising Scotland’s biggest Soapbox Race taking place in Livingston this summer.

Clearly inspired by the Red Bull Soapbox races which have become a Global phenomenon in over 100 countries, Livingston Round Table has been working tirelessly to bring a charity Soapbox race to Livingston.

Joe rightly points out that Scotland’s thriving Manufacturing and Automotive sectors, could be using the Soapbox Race to motivate and inspire young Scottish Engineers of the future.

Just look at what we currently have building vehicles and how strong Scotland are in this sector. Emergency One based in Cumnock remains the UK's leading manufacturer of Fire & Emergency vehicles, and of course Falkirk-based Alexander Dennis is the world's largest manufacturer of double decker buses, and Volvo & Terex manufacturing construction Haulers in Motherwell – just a few shining examples of a thriving automotive manufacturing sector in Scotland.

That's not to say there are not academic entrepreneurs-in-waiting, with plans on the drawing board for an evolutionary new car design that can be manufactured, built and developed here which, with appropriate funding, might set Scotland's motor manufacturing on a new path of automotive excellence.

We could even start with a motor-less Soapbox Racing car as a concept - such is the thrill and spills of the popular sporting pastime. A Soapbox racing car – or Cartie - as it is more commonly known – are piloted by amateur drivers who've built their home-made racers by hand and with no engine or pedals, they're powered by gravity (the slope of a hill!) and of course a lot of courage. It's a thrilling combination of comedy and carnage as some very unlikely looking motor-less vehicles hurtle down the hill reaching speeds of over 30mph.

it's also a fantastic opportunity for Scotland's manufacturing community to showcase its ingenuity, expertise and innovation.

As event organizer, it was our idea to really engage with the people of Livingston, and we're very keen to get young people away from their social media apps & mobile phones, and have them excited about a great fun, real life event and if enough enthusiasm is shown by locals, what's to say that it might not inspire young people to genuinely look at the engineering and automotive industries as potential career options?

Above all, this is very much community orientated and received huge support from West Lothian Council who have agreed to a small road closure for the event, together with space for spectating which will take place just up the hill from their HQ in Livingston.

In promoting the event, we thought what better place to start than with CeeD and we certainly got loads of ideas from Joe Pacitti whose boundless enthusiasm gave us a unique take on how powerful this event could be in promoting engineering skills in Scotland. From a kernel of an idea, engineering ideas flourish. Who knows, perhaps a World beating Soapbox from Scotland isn't such a fanciful notion after all?

All the information for competitors, spectators, sponsors and much more is at www.LivingstonSoapBoxRace.co.uk

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