

## Crashing encouraged at these races

The Free Press      By Dan Nienaber  
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— Anyone who has gotten caught in the Twin Cities on a Friday at 5 p.m., bumper to bumper at the intersection of Highway 169 and I-494, can understand the concept of compact car races at the Blue Earth County Fair: Too many vehicles cramming into a space that's too small. There was one obvious difference between a traffic jam and Sunday's race, however: The racers were encouraged to just bash their beat-up old cars into those jerks cutting in front of them.

"Fans love the crashing and banging," said Bill Macgregor, president of the River Valley Off Roaders. The group organizes an earlier race at the Watonwan County Fair, Sunday's race and a third race in two weeks at the Nicollet County Fair in St. Peter. "We try to tell the racers it's not a demo derby, but ..." Some of the best racers find ways to get ahead of the pack without causing too much damage. That was the strategy for Jake Romsdahl and Leigh Aspelund, two friends from St. James who logged first- and second-place finishes, respectively, at the Watonwan County Fair races.

"We try to be sneaky by going around them and not through them," Aspelund said before Sunday's first heat.

"But there are a lot of people who try to go through you, though," Romsdahl quickly added. High berms kept the little cars (Romsdahl drives a 1999 Chevy Metro) from going off the track. But it wasn't uncommon for drivers to go up the side of the berms to pass the car in front of them. The short, oval race track was barely wide enough for two lanes of traffic and included a couple bumps to make things a little more interesting.

The race has been a popular event at the Blue Earth County Fair for about seven years. One of the first races, which was on private property, was videotaped. Adam Schmidt, a River Valley Off Roaders member, showed the tape to the fair's board of directors, then asked if it could become a grandstand event. "They thought it was pretty funny," Schmidt said. "It's become pretty popular since starting out in a woods at a member's house."

More than 800 fans paid to attend Sunday's race, pushing the fair's overall grand stand attendance to its highest total in years, said Terri Maine, a fair board member who was selling tickets. She estimated more than 1,000 people attended the rodeo Saturday and

another 600 attended the rodeo Friday night. About 400 people were at the tractor pull Thursday night, Maine said.

She partially credited extra advertising for the fair's 150th year celebration for the higher numbers. More vendors, free shows and a carnival also helped, Maine said. Another benefit was Mankato's annual Hickory Street RibFest is this coming weekend, so it wasn't conflicting with the fair as it has in the past.

"We were saying last night that we've been seeing faces here that we haven't seen in years," she said.



A couple bumps in the track allowed Adam Cox to log a little air time while driving in the compact car race at the Blue Earth County Fair in Garden City Sunday.



Short on sponsorships, Jeff Becker added some humor to his compact race car. The cars are built to both race and withstand some bumping from fellow racers.



A large crowd of compact car race fans at the Blue Earth County Fair Sunday helped push overall grandstand event attendance to one of its highest totals. [www.mankato-freepress.com/local/local\\_story\\_214231956.html](http://www.mankato-freepress.com/local/local_story_214231956.html)