From Romans to Ricky Bobby: The Missouri Red Bull Chariot Race

How Red Bull turned a dreary afternoon into a block party

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Missouri senior AJ Perez taunts the growing crowd on Saturday, April 11 at the intersection of Tenth and Cherry Street in Columbia, Mo. Perez's team Balboni would go on to sweep team Chibizzy in their race.

On the back of every can of Red Bull is a message that reads, "Red Bull is appreciated worldwide by top athletes, busy professionals, college students and travelers on long journeys." While a statement like that is usually vague and hard to refute, it was impossible to deny during the Red Bull Chariot Race on April 11 at Harpo's.

Students, parents, journalists, local business owners and even Red Bull's own stunt bike athlete, Aaron Colton, turned out in full force to support the festivities. The event, held to celebrate Harpo's 55th anniversary, was so massive that it closed down the four-block radius surrounding the intersection of South Tenth Street and Cherry Street.

The race, which is hosted annually by Red Bull in college cities, tasks participants with assembling teams of four to build their own "wacky" chariot. Then, on the day of the competition, 24 of those teams compete in head-to-head relay-style races, stopping in the middle to complete a puzzle and swap out their passenger. Points are awarded for race performance, team theme, and design novelty.

"It brought us all together, and we're in it for the experience," University of Missouri freshman Josh Estes said. "I mean, they closed down four blocks for this, and it's gonna be something great to tell my kids about."

As the afternoon of racing began, anticipation became palpable as emcee Dre'Co announced the first head-to-head matchup, a race between team Balboni and team Chibizzy. The crowd roared as team Balboni took an early lead in the corner, which they would extend following a speedy completion of their puzzle to secure the victory.

Races like this continued all afternoon. The Basement Bouncers secured a tight victory over Boats and Harpo's. Sigma Pitbull quickly dispatched the Fake Snow Society after an abysmal puzzle performance. Josh Estes' Talladega Pikes suffered a heartbreaking loss to Da Wizards, after their chariot overturned on the track.

Not everything was sunshine and rainbows, however, both figuratively and literally. Cloudy skies in the early afternoon threatened to derail the contest with rain, but thankfully cleared up following a brief sprinkle. Additionally, teams such as Kraken the Track and The Sandlot saw their chariots fall apart on the track. Both teams would go on to finish the race, with The Sandlot even winning theirs.

Throughout it all, excitement never wavered. Attendants packed behind the track's barricade like sardines, dancing and chanting — although that is most likely because everyone had consumed at least two Red Bulls by this point. Even the audience members on the top floor of the parking garage at Tenth and Cherry could be heard screaming down to the racers.



Red Bull Stunt Bike Athlete Aaron Colton performs a block long wheelie in front of the crowd on Saturday, April 11 at the intersection of Tenth and Cherry Street in Columbia, Mo. Aaron would go on to perform other tricks like burnouts, and standing on his bike. (Deacon Lipsmeyer)

During halftime, Colton came down to the track for a death-defying trick performance on his custom motorcycle. Starting with a mix of wheelies and stoppies, his tricks only increased from there, eventually riding the bike while standing and finishing with a massive burnout that covered the entire intersection of South Tenth and Cherry.

The second half kicked off with a daring race between the Columbia Fire and Police Departments, ending with a photo finish in the police's favor. Dumb and Dumber beat out The Plastics by a sizable margin. Then, the Red-Haired Racers managed a narrow victory against fan favorite, The Spartans.

As the race drew to a close, contestants waited eagerly while emcee Dre'Co walked to the track to announce the top 3 teams. Crowd members held their breath as the first name was read, "The Spartans"; cheers erupted throughout the street. A second-place announcement of "Dumb and Dumber" followed, to similar fanfare. Then, first place: "Tricera-Top Speed." One last uproar of applause emerged from fans as the teams donned the podium.



The Columbia Police Department kept a tight race with the Columbia Fire Department on Saturday, April 11 at the intersection of Tenth and Cherry Street in Columbia, Mo. Ultimately the photo finish would result in a narrow victory for Columbia Police. (Deacon Lipsmeyer)

While Red Bull may not actually give you wings, participants and audience members alike left the competition on cloud nine. By traditional 55th birthday standards, the event was truly a smashing success and a reminder of why Harpo's has become a Columbia institution. So here's to 55 more years, and at least 12 more chariot races on Tenth and Cherry.

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