

Off to the races, with remote control Shop draws young crowd with customizing center

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SCOTT SHAW THE PLAIN DEALER ; Longtime friends Jack Prause, left, of Shaker Heights and Rick Maicki of Cleveland Heights opened an interactive experience-based store focused on car racing at Beachwood Place Mall in June. American Hot Rod Racer gets packed on weekends, when kids are off school and the glass-enclosed "press box" is filled with birthday party guests.

A one-of-a-kind, 60-foot race track flanked by tiered seating and a glass-enclosed "press box" catches the eye of passersby at Beachwood Place mall.

It's all about making the experience seem real for kids that visit American Hot Rod Racer, a store that allows customers to build their own remote-control and pine wood cars so they can race them on the spot.

The concept was the brainchild of Rick Maicki, a former management consultant from Cleveland Heights. His inspiration: going to a pinewood derby race with his 8-year-old son, Jack, a Cub Scout.

In an annual tradition, Cub Scouts are given blocks of wood to create their own gravity-powered cars that they race against their peers.

"I saw kids get highly energized over a three-second race and thought 'there is a market here,' " Maicki said.

His store, which opened in June, takes things a step further. In addition to \$20 pine wood cars, customers can design and assemble their own remote control vehicles that range in price from \$35 base models to \$250 high-performance racers.

After kids build and decorate their custom cars in the "garage," they move on to the "license bureau" where their photo is taken and printed on a faux driver's license.

Then they're ready to race.

Racers are introduced through a speaker system, and eight 41-inch plasma television screens broadcast race results in real time.

"The experience makes it more valuable than just having a toy," Maicki said.

He came up with the idea last year and pitched it to his longtime friend Jack Prause.

The former dorm-mates met as freshmen engineering students at the University of Michigan. After college, the pair went their separate ways but took similar career paths. Both got master's degrees in business administration and became management consultants.

Prause was living in Illinois when Maicki asked if he would like to join forces in starting the company.

In January, the duo, who are now 39, decided to go for it. By March, they had landed a retail spot at Beachwood Place.

Maicki, who is board president of the Children's Museum of Cleveland, remembered Michael Gollini, a design professor at the Cleveland Institute of Art who had helped the museum create exhibits.

He hired Gollini to do the interior design, and one of his students, Matthew Schaefer, to create race car illustrations

that are featured throughout the store. They worked with a tight budget, and did their best to create a polished, professional look like that of a national chain, Gollini said.

"Some people feel like you have to raise \$3 [million] to \$4 million first off" to start a business, Prause said. But that's not necessarily the case. "You can start small. It's a very capital efficient way to come out of the box."

Now Prause and Maicki are seeing interest from outside investors, and soon expect to announce a second store location in another U.S. market.

"There's lots of interest by mall owners for this concept," Prause said. That's because the store has the ability to draw traffic that wouldn't otherwise be at the mall.

Eventually, he and Maicki plan to open stores across the country.

Customer feedback from their first store will be invaluable in their expansion, he said.

However, there are two other recent start-ups in other parts of the country with similar plans. St. Louis-based RideMakerz and Chicago-based RaceLine Motorworks have each opened two stores over the past year that allow kids to build custom cars.

But Maicki and Prause aren't worried.

"It's a big space," Prause said. "It's absolutely validation that this was a hole to fill."

American Hot Rod Racer is often compared to other interactive toy stores, like Build-a-Bear or American Girl Place.

Maicki said that while they're all part of a trend toward experiential retail, their store is different.

"Here you build the car and you can play and interact again and again," he said. Customers can bring their cars back to the store and race again for \$5. The store hosts several special events, including remote control car races every Wednesday at 5:30 p.m.

"A lot of what we're doing is creating a community for customers," Maicki said.

And, unlike dolls and stuffed bears, cars are typically appealing to both genders.

"It definitely skews a little bit more toward boys, but we've had plenty of girls that come in," Prause said. "It's something that if you're not a Cub Scout, you don't really get a chance to do."

Prause and Maicki have a lot of ideas moving forward. For one, Maicki said he would like to add educational components that will help kids learn more about how cars work.

So far, the retail concept has been a success -- and not just with children.

Mom and Dad often join in on the fun, and the store has attracted car buffs in their teens and early 20s.

That was with practically no advertising.

"Each month has been better than the previous month," Prause said. "We're growing quickly and it's largely been through word of mouth."

Amanda Pohlman heard about the store from a neighbor when she was looking for a place to have a birthday party for her 6-year-old son, Tyler.

Maicki said birthday parties make up 15 to 20 percent of the store's business.

Pohlman of Shaker Heights said the youngsters enjoyed using the hands-on tools to put their cars together, noting that it wasn't too tough for them to figure out.

"The kids were so engaged," she said. "At one point when we were racing it was so loud people in the food court could hear us."

Tyler and his 10 friends were thrilled to leave the store with their own race cars. Pohlman bought them each the base, \$35 models as part of a birthday package.

"Now he wants to go back and race it again," she said. "We'll be back."

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