

= Saturdays of Thunder =

" Saturdays of Thunder " is the ninth episode of The Simpsons ' third season . It originally aired on the Fox network in the United States on November 14 , 1991 . In the episode , Homer takes a fatherhood quiz and realizes that he knows nothing about Bart. He strives to be a better father and learns that Bart is participating in a Soap Box Derby . Homer and Bart make a racer together ; however , it is not very good . Bart decides to drive Martin 's far superior racer instead , after Martin is involved in an accident where he receives a series of serious skin burns . Homer is at first devastated , but decides that he must be a good father and support Bart.

The episode was written by Ken Levine and David Isaacs , and directed by Jim Reardon . American actors Larry McKay and Phil Hartman both made guest appearances as a television announcer and Troy McClure respectively . " Saturdays of Thunder " features cultural references to films such as Ben @-@ Hur , Lethal Weapon , and Days of Thunder . Since airing , the episode has received mostly positive reviews from television critics , who praised its sports theme . It acquired a Nielsen rating of 14 @.@ 9 , and was the highest @-@ rated show on the Fox network the week it aired .

= = Plot = =

Homer takes a fatherhood quiz and discovers he knows next to nothing about his son . He signs up for therapy at the National Fatherhood Institute and after a confidence @-@ building pep talk , offers to help Bart build his own soapbox racer , which they dub " Li 'l Lightnin ' " , for the upcoming Soap Box Derby . Bart is reluctant to want his father to help him , concerned that he may cost him the race . However , Homer refuses to hear any of it , insisting to help him out . At the qualifying race Bart and Martin , who has built a high tech , aerodynamically superior racer , form an alliance vowing that either must somehow beat bully Nelson and his very intimidating racer , the " Roadkill 2000 " , " armed with every dirty trick in the book . " As the race starts , Bart can barely reach any kind of noticeable speed with Li 'l Lightnin ' and the car falls apart before reaching the finish line .

Martin 's car wins the race. but was built too aerodynamically precise and the steepness of the hill causes it to careen past the finish line and crashes . Martin suffers a fractured arm in the accident and thus cannot race against Nelson , who finished second . Martin offers Bart the seat , and even though Bart believes Homer will be devastated if he abandons the racer they built , he accepts the offer as there is no other way he can race and win .

As Bart feared , Homer is bitterly disappointed over his decision . Homer is so upset that he even refuses to go to the final race to support Bart , insulting him and Martin and acting spiteful toward Bart and the rest of the family . Troy McClure starts crying too . Marge decides that she has had enough of Homer 's surly attitude and confronts him , by telling Homer that she defended him when people , including her sisters Patty and Selma , called him an incompetent father . However , she states that his latest behavior proved he is being selfish and if this is how Homer wants to act on such an important day for Bart , he really is a bad father , a statement that only makes Homer feel worse . Maggie tries to cheer Bart up but he ended up calling Los Angeles .

As Bart gets ready to race in the final match with Martin 's newly tuned racer , Homer thinks to himself about how wrong he has been . After retaking the fatherhood quiz again , he realizes that Bart needs his support regardless of whose racer he is using and he rushes off to the race . At the starting line , Homer wishes Bart good luck and tells him that no matter how the race ends he will still be proud of him . The race is tough as Nelson pulls every dirty trick in his arsenal , but through his skill Bart finishes first and the team enjoys their victory .

= = Production = =

The episode was written by Ken Levine and David Isaacs , and directed by Jim Reardon . The inspiration for it originated from a line in " Itchy & Scratchy & Marge " , a previous episode in which Marge bans Bart and Lisa from watching their favorite cartoon , The Itchy & Scratchy Show , and Bart says " I 'm gonna go build a soapbox racer instead . " Actor Phil Hartman made his fourth guest

appearance on The Simpsons in this episode as the voice of celebrity Troy McClure . The character appears at the beginning of the episode in I Can 't Believe They Invented It ! , a television show that Homer watches . Larry McKay guest starred as the television announcer at the Soap Box Derby .

The idea for the subplot of Homer 's parenting originated from a real fatherhood test executive producer Sam Simon found and brought to the Simpsons studio . Levine later commented on writing the episode , " At the time David and I were writing this , my son , Matt , was about Bart 's age . [...] So for me there was a certain amount of guilt associated , like ' Do I know my son 's hobby ? Do I know my son 's best friend ? ' etc . " The scene in which Bart welds on his racer resulted in an argument between the staff of the show and the Fox network 's censors . The censors were concerned that children would imitate Bart by misusing welding tools ; however , the staff was able to convince them that very few children have access to welding tools .

= = Cultural references = =

" Saturdays of Thunder " features a number of references to popular culture . The title of the episode is itself a play on the film Days of Thunder , starring American actor Tom Cruise . The song used at the end of the episode is " Wind Beneath My Wings " , a song by Bette Midler . While Homer is watching television at the beginning of the episode , Marge and her sisters , Patty and Selma , go through a catalog of different hairstyles ; Patty tells her sisters that she wants Mary Tyler Moore 's hairstyle , referencing the American actress known for her roles in television sitcoms . When Marge and her sisters head to the beauty parlor , Homer promises Marge that he will take Lisa to the video store . When they arrive at the store , Homer watches a clip from the latest McBain film that sees McBain 's partner being brutally shot in the chest , a reference to a similar scene in the film Lethal Weapon . McBain 's partner is black , a reference to the fact that Dirty Harry 's partner is black in the film Sudden Impact .

When Homer calls the National Fatherhood Institute , he is put on hold and Harry Chapin 's song " Cat 's in the Cradle " plays in the telephone while he waits . Cast member Harry Shearer based the voice of Dave , the director of the Fatherhood Institute , on actor Mason Adams . At the institute , Dave gives Homer a copy of the book Fatherhood by American actor Bill Cosby . In a subsequent episode , " Dog of Death " , Homer throws the book into the fireplace as replacement for wood . When Homer and Bart build the soapbox racer , Mac Davis 's song " Watching Scotty Grow " , sung by Bobby Goldsboro , plays in the background . The whipping and spikes coming out of Nelson 's racer are a reference to the chariot race in the film Ben @-@ Hur . The idea of Nelson 's racer being " armed with every dirty trick in the book " was based on the 1973 Soap Box Derby World Championship scandal , when a 14 @-@ year @-@ old boy was stripped of his title two days after winning the national race for cheating . During the final race , Homer stands up in the crowd to cheer on Bart and his body is silhouetted against the sun , a reference to a scene in the film The Natural . The theme song from The Natural plays in the scene .

= = Reception = =

" Saturdays of Thunder " originally aired on the Fox network in the United States on November 14 , 1991 . It received high ratings due to the fact that it was immediately followed by the premiere of the music video for Michael Jackson 's song " Black or White " . In its original American broadcast , the episode finished 26th in the ratings for the week of November 11 ? 17 , 1991 , with a Nielsen rating of 14 @.@ 9 , equivalent to approximately 13 @.@ 7 million viewing households . It was the highest @-@ rated show on the Fox network that week .

Since airing , the episode has received mostly positive reviews from television critics . Niel Harvey of The Roanoke Times called it a " classic bit of Simpsonia , " and the Daily Record said it is " definitely one not to miss . " The Orlando Sentinel 's Gregory Hardy named it the sixth best episode of the show with a sports theme . Michael Coulter of The Age commented that " Saturdays of Thunder " is " one of the many excellent " The Simpsons episodes to feature a sporting theme . He went on to say : " A ' classic ' Simpsons , insofar as it boasts a plot , rather than a sequence of

surreal pop @-@ culture parodies . " The episode 's parody of Ben @-@ Hur , however , was named the eighth greatest film reference in the history of the show by Total Film 's Nathan Ditum .

Bill Gibron of DVD Verdict looked unfavorably on the episode , writing that it " has a premise ? Bart builds a soapbox racer ? that frankly has very limited modern day appeal . We can 't really get into the whole Martin / Nelson / Bart race dynamic and today , soapbox derby has been technologized all out of proportion to the point where very few , if any , practice it . With such a narrow target , many of the jokes just don 't work . " Gibron preferred the subplot of Homer 's attempts to become a better father .

Nate Meyers of Digitally Obsessed was more positive about the episode , commenting that the episode 's emphasis is on Homer 's parenting , like many other season three episodes , and " contrary to popular opinion , Homer is actually a good father who tries to do good by his children . " He thought the racing sequences featured " good animation and direction " , but considered the highlight of the episode to be the clip from the film McBain that Homer watches in the video store . Meyers gave the episode a 4 / 5 rating . DVD Movie Guide 's Colin Jacobson , who listed the episode as one of his favorites from season three , said that " on the surface , ' Saturdays of Thunder ' essentially just rehashes " the theme of the previous episode , " Lisa 's Pony " , in which Homer tries to be a better father for Lisa . Jacobson commented that " Saturdays of Thunder " , however , " simply seems funnier than ' Lisa 's Pony ' . The soapbox derby elements provide lots of great gags . [It] offers a great episode . " Like Meyers , the authors of the book I Can 't Believe It 's a Bigger and Better Updated Unofficial Simpsons Guide thought the highlight of the episode was the McBain video .