

HARD RIDING AHEAD FOR THE CINDER BOYS

by Buddy Fuller

This was 'It!' I had waited 15 years for this moment. The time, May 31st, 1951; the place, Palmietfontein Airport; the occasion, I was captaining the first South African speedway team to leave this country and campaign overseas. So, in the early hours of that May morning, seven of us, - Bob Raw, Harry du Toit, Alec and Joe Blankfield, Maurice Fenton and Toby Boshof were my companions - , took off and set course to pick up new machines and equipment before making our way to Holland. From the moment of that first take-off the tour was a story-book adventure. In the short period of three months we rode in Holland, Denmark, Germany, Norway and Sweden, travelling in a motor bus bought at The Hague for £175, which was stripped of its seats to carry our machines. It was painted green-and-gold and carried the important announcement, "South African Speedway Touring Team."

There was only one thought among the team as we prepared for our first match in Holland, - at Rijswyk. Officials in South Africa must also have been asking the same question. It was: Will this first overseas tour be a success? Could we hold our own with the best in Europe and Scandinavia without such stars as Henry Long, Bob Serrurier, Doug Serrurier and Fred Wills in our line-up? We need not have worried. We won the majority of our matches (11 out of 18), despite injuries to myself and Joe Blankfield. Record crowds came to see the Springboks, and Sweden, which boasts about 800 riders with more teams than England, has invited South Africa to send a team again next year. The South African Speedway Association has accepted. Yes, it was a most successful tour, despite the high cost of living, unfamiliar riding conditions and long trips between meetings. Now the whole speedway world knows that the sport of the flying cinders is very much alive in the Union.



Ken Middleditch, captain of Poole (British Third Division Champions) and English Junior international teams, who leads the nine-man Overseas team in South Africa this season. This is Middleditch's third visit to the Union.



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It was while travelling through the Scandinavian countries that I received a cable from the South African Speedway Association asking me to take time of and visit London to arrange for a tour of South Africa this season by "the strongest team ever to visit the Union. Suggest you arrange nine-man 'mixed' team," was the advice. It was done, - and the results you will see on the circuits of Wembley Stadium (Johannesburg), which is surely the home of South African speedway, Prince George Park, Boksburg, Bloemfontein and possibly Durban during the next few months. We have had several British teams and one Dutch "eight" touring the Union during the past few years, but

this is the first “mixed” outfit. It should be tremendously popular. And I can tell you that this nine-man team, - Middleditch, Lewis. Duval and Grierson (all of Britain), Redmond and Mardon (of New Zealand,) Andersen (Norway), and the Swedes, Sune Karlsson and Ake Linquist - , is the strongest combination to visit our tracks.

The fair-haired Ken Middleditch, captain of Poole (Third Division leaders) and England junior international teams, leads this “foreign legion.” It is his third visit to South Africa and, I hazard, you will see a different Middleditch. He was the outstanding member of Jack Hodgson's team which was here two seasons ago. Since then he has shot right to the top of British speedway. There's not a First Division club which wouldn't pay big money to secure his transfer. So far there's nothing doing. The likeable Ken prefers to stay in the lower division where he averages more than 10 points (maximum, 12) per meeting. He has the highest points average of any British speedway rider. Of course, the man everybody wants to see on the South African circuits is the New Zealander, Geoff (“Ruse”) Mardon. Last year he was ranked Number Eleven in his country. Yet, going over to Britain to join his countryman, Trevor Redmond, at Aldershot (Third Division), he rocked the speedway world by getting into the last 18 (two reserves) of the world championship. It was an all-time record for British speedway. The performance had First Division clubs “falling over themselves” to secure the transfer of this fabulous new star. In the end Wimbledon, the London First Division club, got his signature, - and paid over a cool £1,050 for the privilege. The Wimbledon fans didn't mind. In his first league outing he totalled eight points.

Tony Lewis (Poole and England) and Trevor Redmond (Aldershot and New Zealand) have both been consistent performers in this year's spate of so-called junior international matches. Jock Grierson, captain of Leicester, who were runners-up in the Second Division, and Reg Duval, a heavy points scorer for Liverpool Chads (Second Division) complete the British section. The 24-year-old Duval was the first of the overseas riders to arrive in the Union. He was an immediate sensation. The reason? Because in his first practice ride on a borrowed machine and on a strange track he broke the Wembley Stadium one-lap record. He was one-fifth of a second inside my own record of 19.1 seconds for the one-lap and so became the first man to break 19 seconds. It was a great performance. In his second meeting he became the new record-holder with a dash of 18.8 seconds. Duval was well on the way to defeating the new world champion, Jack Young (Edinburgh) in a league match just before the Liverpool man left for the Union. But the champion pulled out of the heat with a loose front wheel. Duval went on to score a maximum 12 points.

The South African touring team can tell you a lot about Henry Andersen, the Norwegian champion. We saw a lot of the cinders thrown up by his back wheel during our three outings against him in Norway. He was Norway's leading points scorer against us, - and you'll like his all-out riding style. Sune Karlssen, - a famous surname in Swedish speedway - , was the Swede's leading points scorer during their tour of Britain. Ake Linqvist makes his first overseas trip, - and gives up his role as the leading ice speedway star in order to come here.



Ake Linquist, one of Sweden's leading speedway track and ice riders, who tours South Africa this season with the nine-man mixed overseas team, seems to be in danger of falling as his body just skims the ice in this spectacular exhibition of cornering on a Swedish frozen lake track. Linquist may give an exhibition of ice speedway during his stay in the Union.

Yes, ice speedway is the rage of the Swedish winter. Tracks are built on frozen lakes with piled-up snow forming the safety-fence. Front and rear wheels are made with two-inch steel spikes which pierce the ice and prevent wheel spin. This makes it possible for a rider to travel at a high speed with his machine thrown well over at the bends. His body just skims the ice and it looks very spectacular. The wheels have special guards which act as a safety device in case of spills. Linquist will bring his ice speedway wheels to the Union and the South African Speedway Association will try to arrange a demonstration.

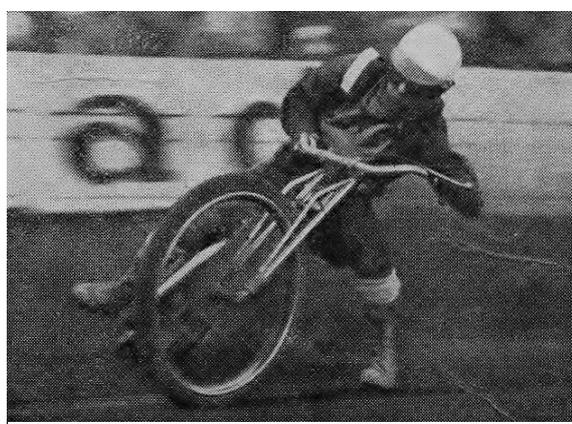
So much for this strong touring team. Can we hold them? I think we can. South Africa has more top-ranking riders available for Test selection than at any other time in the 22-year-old history of speedway in this country. Henry Long and South African champion Bob Serrurier both campaigned in Britain this season with much success; Fred Wills, Wembley match-race champion for 18 months, and the 6ft. 3in. Doug Serrurier were not available for the overseas tour.

And the seven-man team made such progress that it now becomes a case of: Who gets left out of the national team? You see, we are right back where I started this story, - the first-ever South African touring team. You remember "lofty" Len Rehorst, the 6ft. 7in. manager of the Dutch team which toured here last season? He was overseas manager of the Springbok team, getting us bookings in other countries and fixing up accommodation. Now, the Springbok team gave Rehorst's boys plenty of cinders, - and a 5-0 beating in the international matches when they toured here. Yet, Rehorst doubted the strength of the seven riders who were in his country to represent South Africa. We gave him the answer in the best possible place, - on the circuits. Our first four matches, ridden within eight days, were all won. We beat Dutch teams 45-28 at Rijswyk, 38-34 at the difficult Feyenoord Stadium (a rectangular track), 41-31 at the famous Amsterdam Stadium, which was built for the 1928 Olympic Games, and 41-31 at Nimgen. Two more wins followed in Denmark, and it wasn't until we met Norway at Oslo with only five riders, - Joe Blankfield (broken wrist) and myself (severe bruising) were on the injured list - , that we met our first defeat.

This was during our long trip through Norway to Northern Sweden and in five weeks we covered 6,000 miles in the old motor-bus. It was in Sweden that we met the most enthusiastic speedway riders, officials and fans in the world. There are more teams in the three Swedish divisions than in Britain. What is more, on their home tracks the Swedes invariably beat the best of the British teams. At Eskilstuna, in Northern Sweden, we rode on a 212-yard circuit. It's less than half the size of the Wembley Stadium or Prince George Park, Boksburg, circuits. And so to Skelleftea, the most northern speedway circuit in the World. It is only 180 miles south of the Arctic Circle. We were the first overseas riders ever to appear on this circuit with its special spring safety fence, red shale track and magnificent grandstand and dressing-rooms. The population of Skelleftea is only 1,200, yet 7,500 went through the turnstiles that Sunday afternoon. Swedes travelled over 100 miles to see us beat Skelleftea 47-37. Ever heard of people going around with sunglasses on at midnight? We did it



Harry du Toit, one of the leading point scorers on the Springboks overseas tour, gets in front during the Springboks 38-34 win over Rotterdam at the Feyenoord Stadium. Du Toit met with a serious injury soon after arriving back in the Union and will be off the track for several months.



Tearaway Maurice Fenton gets on a full lock during a spectacular broadside at Rijswyk in the first match of the Springboks' overseas tour. Fenton gained his biggest success in speedway when he won an Open event, which included all the leading Scandinavian riders, at Burtresk.

at Skelleftea, where the sun shines all night during the summer. It was just one of hundreds of unusual first-ever experiences we had on this tour. Anyway, there was another long road journey down the length of Sweden, across to Denmark by boat, through Germany and back into Holland for the four international matches. We were very tired, and so were our machines, for they had not had a complete overhaul since the day we started practising at Rijswyk. This was the reason, I feel, for our 3-1 defeat in the internationale with Hollad. It won't happen next time!

And so back to South Africa with only a fortnight to spare before the start of the South African season. All seven riders were very much better for their overseas experiences. I take nothing away from the performances of the other touring riders when I say that Bob Raw made himself into a star on the trip. He was the first to reach a century of points and he maintained his form right to the end. It's remarkable if you consider that Raw was a last-minute selection when Doug Serrurier was not available for the trip. You're going to hear a lot more of the tearaway Bob.

What of the future of South African speedway? Well, it's been a tough uphill struggle, but the goal has been reached and the sport of the flying cinders is now, I think, a permanent fixture in South Africa. The management of Wembley Stadium and the riders have all done their bit towards the goal and the crisis is now over.

You want to know about some of our up-and-coming riders. First on the list is Fred van Zyl, a stylish youngster who last season seldom troubled the top-rankers. He has made big progress on the South African Speedway Association training track at Vlakplaats (15 miles outside Johannesburg on the Heidelberg road) during the close season, and he was the first rider to break 80 seconds for the four laps on the Wembley circuit this term. He also broke the one-lap flying start record with a dash of 19.3 seconds but, unfortunately for him - and fortunately for me - , I managed to lower that time by a fifth of a second, less than five minutes after Van Zyl had chalked up a new record. But you'll hear plenty about Van Zyl in the future. And other names to keep in mind are Roy Bester, Fred Lang, Vern McWilliams, George Matthews and Ronnie Roodt. They will all be hitting the high spots before long.

Now here's a warning. Many people, usually youngsters, think that a novice can become a full-blown rider within the space of a few weeks. Forget it. Months and years of hard training with moments of success and longer periods of disappointment go towards the "arrival" of a new star. In South Africa we are all amateurs, so there's no easy money to be earned. In fact it is only through generous expense allowances by speedway officials that riders can maintain the high standard set here. Look at some of the costs for a top-ranker: new machine, £200; new engine (one a year necessary,) £100; tyres, £4 10s. each!; engine spares, £20; leathers, £30; dope and oil, £1 a meeting; insurance premium, £1 a meeting. Yet, the public has become speedway-conscious. Big weekly crowds on the Rand tracks enable the promoters to help the riders with the expenses and it is a fact that speedway officials and riders work together, for the benefit of the sport, in complete harmony. Yes, there is a big future for speedway in South Africa.

MISTER SPEEDWAY

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Three times South African champion, . . . twice runner-up, . . . holder of the Wembley match-race championship, . . . captain of the 1951 Springbok touring team, . . . a star with Hastings and Liverpool in British speedway, . . . is his riding record.

His successes on the cinders have not been gained without injuries. In fact he's had more than his fair share. Broken jaw, fractured base of the skull, broken leg, both collar-bones fractured and numerous broken fingers is the list, - which read more like an army clearing station report after a battle. But he's still riding, - and among the top-flight South African speedway stars.

This is the Fuller known to the speed fans. But it is only a fraction of the work he puts into the game. Behind the scenes he grades the track, advises on the track and facilities for the riders, helps everyone with his machine, plays a big part in the administration of speedway. Why he's even been known to run out on to the track in his leathers during a meeting and take charge of the hose pipe when he felt a part of the track needed special attention. Yes, this is what makes him South Africa's Mister Speedway.