

SUPERBIKE CLASSICS – SPEEDWAY

A “Superbike South Africa” article,
by Gavin Foster, published January 2016.

Judging from Sir A. P. Herbert’s 1928 description of his first attendance of a speedway meeting in 1928 it’s clear that the eminent English novelist, playwright and politician was no bike fan. Commenting on the Australian form of dirt-track motorcycle racing that had just arrived in England, he said “Even as a spectacle the horrid motor-bicycle wins. True, it does not jump hurdles, and true, there is not much beauty about the dirt-track; and yet it has a kind of modern, macabre, Stravinskian, Capekian beauty. The vast stadium by night, the track lit brightly at the rim, the sea of shadow in the centre, the mountainous black stands behind packed with a shouting, invisible multitude, the starry sky of London above... Heavens, the noise! It is like ten million mechanical drills performing in unison. It swells and falls as the riders take the corners; it echoes about the cavernous concrete halls, drowning the feeble acclamations of the crowd; it dies slowly as the riders stop, and the end of a race seems like the end of a battle. It is titanic and terrible and monstrous; and yet in that enormous place, made by those monsters, it seems appropriate and right. And I do believe I rather liked it.”

Herbert’s musings are quoted in The Sportspages Lecture delivered in 1999 by sports historian Jack Williams, who tells the fascination story of the rise of speedway in Britain between the two World Wars. This was largely due to the appeal it had for people who otherwise had absolutely no interest in motorcycles or motorsport. The race meetings, a series of heats in which four riders raced incredibly noisy machines sideways on shale for just four anti-clockwise laps of a short oval, were packed with high-speed action. The spectators could see every inch of the track, and the 100 km/h speeds thrilled people who’d grown up with horses and carriages.

Speedway was very different to any other form of motorsport in that it was almost entirely commercially driven, and the lives of top riders in those days were much more glamorous than those of their road-racing counterparts. Leagues were formed with teams from different towns, cities, districts and countries doing battle and the game was on. Speedway, raced mainly on greyhound tracks until the late ‘30s, rapidly gained popularity to match that of the dog racing, which is probably where the commercialisation began. The two very different sports remained closely linked for many years and the stodgy Auto-Cycle Union (ACU) that still controls motorcycle racing in the UK as MSA does here today largely ignored the phenomenon - their secretary once described the professional riders and promoters as “an almost unavoidable evil”. This was partly because they were afraid that motorcycling would be tainted by the presence of bookmakers at the trackside.

Williams points out that speedway was from the beginning a professional sport, with very little opportunity for amateurs to compete because of the high costs involved. Top racers were rewarded much more handsomely than football players in the early days, earning appearance money, prize money and bonuses for each point scored - three points for a win, two for second place and one for third. Belle Vue Aces of Manchester’s team captain Frank Varey subsequently recalled that the speedway riders were the ones going around in flash cars, not the footballers. The racing was dangerous though, with a couple of dozen British riders dying in the first decade of the sport.

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by the Dickensian name of Sprouts Elder. The lanky American, who had Australian and South American championships under his belt was a real showman, demanding £100 appearance money per meeting on top of his winnings. He sometimes rode in five meetings a week and allegedly earned £50,000 during his three years in the UK – an average of £1,388 per month. Pretty good going when you consider that the average Englishman earned about £13 a month back then. In 1930 he published the first ever book on speedway, called “The Romance of the Speedway.” In it he casts light upon his wildly unorthodox riding position thus; “As regards my own style of riding, I have often been criticised for the habit of bending down over my machine during a race, and a great many folk seem to think that I am wondering where the "horses" have got to. This is an entirely wrong impression, for what on earth would be the good of looking at the motor while on the move? You can't coax an engine by looking at it and making a noise like an oil can. The real explanation of this little manoeuvre on my part is that I am taking sly backward glances under my armpit to see where the other riders are.” Elder eventually took his substantial winnings back to the USA, invested and lost the lot in a silver mining venture, joined the California Highway Patrol, sweet-talked them into sponsoring a number of speedway events, suffered life-threatening injuries in a road accident that led to his premature retirement, and finally committed suicide in 1957 after his wife died. He promoted speedway energetically throughout his life, saying in his book that “As for excitement, it licks a bull-fight. Once you get the speedway habit you look upon bull-fighting as a kind of dairy farming.”

As the novelty wore off and the 1930's recession hit home spectator numbers dwindled and many disappointed promoters abandoned ship, but the popular venues with top riders still attracted anything between 20,000 and 90,000 paying spectators for the major meetings and around 7,000 for the lesser events. Women loved the sport, and some reports imply that they outnumbered the men in the grandstands. A publication called Speedway Express ran a regular column called Speedway Girls that gave advice on what make-up and clothing to wear to speedway events. Women weren't there only as spectators in the early years, though. A number of them started racing and one, Fay Taylour soon became truly competitive against the top men. In 1929 she represented Ireland in an international event at Wembley in the UK, and set a new lap record while winning against the best men that the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Australia could offer. She also raced in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, where she beat some of those countries' top men, but upon returning from her second tour to the Antipodes discovered that the ACU had banned women from speedway racing. A promoter had set up a women's race for an assortment of modestly talented females, and one crashed and broke her collarbone before the racing even started. Trackside medics had to remove some of her clothing in full view of the spectators, and the subsequent media uproar led to the ban. The way Fay heard that her career was over was annoying. ‘They'd put women on the tracks to get publicity, and now they were banning them for the same purpose,’ she wrote. ‘I was on my way back from Australia at the time, and when I arrived a friendly promoter said, “I'm sorry, girlie, but it means you too”. His offer of a free ticket to watch the racing was galling.’ Curiously, the ACU was more sexist than the spectators, who loved and respected Fay not because she was a woman, but because she was simply a great racer. She switched to racing cars, including in the 1938 South African Grand Prix, before retiring from motorsport in the late '50s.

The promoters worked hard to keep interest high, but at times acted like professional wrestling promoters do today – very badly. They paid good money to the top riders and as little as possible to the rest, making the sport unaffordable for many racers. They exaggerated attendance figures and young Wimbledon rider Ronnie Greene was reportedly instructed by one promoter to pick a fight with an opponent to get the crowd worked up. Another used to argue loudly with ACU officials, throwing his hat on the ground and jumping on it in mock frustration. Other efforts to attract spectators included having the competitors race on donkeys

instead of motorcycles, persuading a couple of farmers to race on horse-drawn chariots, and including a parade of elephants in the program.

In the early days of speedway any powerful motorcycle would do, with competitors arriving with Vincent, James, BSA, Velocette, Rudge and various other stripped-down bikes. Before long, though, the weapon of choice became a 500cc single cylinder four-stroke engine in a purpose-built frame, with a single footrest, a clutch for the starts, a single gear and no brakes. That recipe still works today, although the modern Czech Jawa and Italian GM engines are much more powerful and the bikes considerably lighter. A modern methanol-devouring speedway bike weighs about 77 kg and produces about the same number of horsepower, giving it startling acceleration and a speed of around 130 km/h in the blink of an eye. The races are run in much the same format as they were all those years ago, and the sport is still huge, particularly in Europe where the U.K., Sweden, Poland and Denmark are the main players. Because of improvements in safety levels there are relatively few fatalities and top racers who travel from race to race around the UK and Europe can bring home more than R15 million a year in sign-up fees, appearance money, start money and prize money.

Dave Collins – the man who rode for England and South Africa in the same series.

British born Dave Collins, born in 1927, is surely unique in that that his speedway racing career spans four decades – he raced here and in Europe from the late 1940s until well into the '70s. His first earnings on two wheels came about in an unusual way after he was evacuated as a child to a small town in Gloucestershire to keep him safe from Hitler's bombers during the Blitz. That proved to be near-fatal as he was almost hit by a crashing Junkers 88 that was being pursued by Hurricanes. Dave's friends bet him that he wouldn't be able to find his way back to his parents in London 170 km away on his dikwiel bicycle. "Being wartime, there were no signposts and it took me a while – I slept in haystacks. When I got there my father told me that I had to go back, and he'd buy me a camera. Anyway, I went back and was then put in a home for being troublesome."

Dave came out to South Africa in 1948 and bought a speedway bike from Buddy Fuller, the multiple SA champion who grew speedway into a major sport here in the '50s, '60s and '70s. He also sporadically raced professionally in the U.K. and Europe in the '50s, '60s and '70s. "You couldn't make a living from it here, but in England I did well enough," he remembers. And he had lots of fun. In 1953 he was invited to Spain as a member of a British team intended to promote the sport in that country. "We were there for ten weeks, racing at night when the weather was cooler, after a day's bullfighting. It was a bit funny because we had accidents after the races finished because there were no straights to recover in. I hit the fence after one race and we thought I'd broken my leg to pieces. When they got me to the medics they found it was all red paint from the kickboards around the bullfighting arena." The riders, known locally as "El Suicidos" had to approach the British consul for financial assistance to get home to the U.K. when the fun was over.

Buddy Fuller was a real operator who always got things done, by hook or by crook. He organised a number of unofficial test matches between the U.K. and South Africa in the '50s and '60s, and although Dave was a member of the South African team the fact that he had both South African and British passports meant that he could be used to plug gaps in the Pom side. This included switching sides mid-season to replace top British racer Alan Hunt who was killed while racing at Wembley in Jo'burg in February 1957, and captaining the winning English side in an unofficial three match series in Cape Town ten years later.

So, what does Dave Collins think of speedway today? "It's become an industry now," he says. "You must watch the speedway grand prix on TV – it's unbelievable. These blokes, all top line, are on the edge of disaster. I don't know if you enjoy speedway, but for me, having ridden it all of my life, it's very exciting."