

“Superbike South Africa” article, February 2016 'The Ride to Slide', by Gareth Davidson, photos Clinton Pienaar

The following article and accompanying photo shots on **Walkerville Speedway** are reproduced from the monthly 'Superbike South Africa' magazine, February 2016 issue, courtesy of editor C. Pienaar.

In the January issue, Gavin Foster, one of our contributors, wrote about the history of speedway.

As the magazine hit the shelves we were contacted by a bloke by the name of Bobby Devine. Bobby is not just any old person he is seen as a local legend within the speedway community and having read Gavin's article, he posed a challenge to us to try our hand at speedway. Not being one to shy away from any challenge on two-wheels, I very quickly accepted.

Having never witnessed a speedway event before, except for a seeing few images on the net, I visited You Tube, in secret to do a little research of my own and I soon realised that I had dug a very deep hole for myself. Speedway is not for the faint-hearted and I say this because the few videos I saw had riders throwing themselves and their bikes quite violently into the barriers. This did not give me much confidence to become a professional speedway rider in just one day! My brain was now farting and the little voice inside my head was not making the situation any better.

Speedway, in South Africa, is very much alive and well but, as is the case with any form of motorsport in our country, new blood is desperately needed to keep it growing. Having a look at the Speedway-SA website, it is plain to see that we have some serious talent and motorcycle legends in their own rights walking amongst us. Clinton and I travelled out to a speedway circuit, hidden in the town of Walkerville, situated in Gauteng where we were welcomed by a couple of competitors of the sport and they were accompanied by the machines that I was to ride.

One of the machines that caught my eye was what looked like an old superbike from the '80s that had an excuse for a sidecar bolted to the left hand side of it and a very uncomfortable seat - only hard steel and fibre glass accommodate your rear on this machine. This 'bike' was named the Aussie Sidecar and apparently I was to ride pillion, acting as a counter-weight for the rider. To say I was a little worried about putting my safety into the hands of someone I'd never met before was a massive understatement. With a lump in my throat, I attempted to delay the, moment of truth a little by asking the guys to walk me around the track, hoping they would offer some words of advice about what to do and where to do it. As there are only two turns on a speedway track I could not, unfortunately, delay my fear and worries for too long; the time had come and the Aussie sidecar was up first.

I changed into my motocross kit as I thought that was what one would wear on such machines but when I stumbled over to the guys waiting for me, they all packed up laughing. I think I was a tad under-dressed for the occasion because the rider of the sidecar was wearing a full leather suit that had most definitely seen better days, but he was in leathers nonetheless. Climbing onto the machine, after all the laughter and comments had subsided, I was briefed how to hang my body off the side to assist the rider with traction and turning. I've ridden some of the fastest motorcycles in the world which gave me quite serious adrenalin rushes but never have I



experienced an adrenalin rush like this. The feeling of almost scraping your helmet on the gravel as you try to hang as low as is humanly possible while a hungry 1,000cc superbike engine unleashes all its might to the back wheel in attempt to flick you backwards into the barrier is mind boggling. To top it all off it was only once we had finally come to a complete stop that I realised the Aussie sidecar did not have any brakes! I was actually relieved that hadn't known before because I might very well have chickened out!

With my hands still shaking and my brain not in 100% working order I asked to ride the solo speedway bike right away. At first glance a speedway bike does not look like much and, well, that's because it isn't! With only one gear available, a forward one, an accelerator, two round wheels, one foot rest and a 500cc thumper propelling you, they should rather write the words 'hard work' on the side of the motor instead of the manufacturers name. I immediately forgot about all of the videos I had watched on You Tube and turned on my beginner switch, over-thinking even the simplest things about riding. Luckily for me, as I set off I did not stall the bike. With that out the way, I was set on one thing; sliding this beast like so many of the greats that made it look so easy. Well, at least I had the want to do it as when I took the first turn a little sound came out of my mouth. Some say you would call it a scream, and some say it was the voice of fear itself. all I knew it was the sound that your bum makes when you have way too much wind but it was coming from my mouth! I couldn't even get the bike to wiggle, never mind slide. Okay, so I admit that this is not something that you can master in one day and then ask for an international race license to be issued!

I had to stop circulating as there was a young chap rolling on the floor who looked to be having difficulty with his breathing. I immediately stopped on the side of the track only to find out that he was unable to control himself from laughing at me. When he was finally able to breathe again, he mumbled 'Let me help you.' These fine words were uttered by multiple Northern Regions Champ, DJ Devine. He walked me through the bike again, and, what body position I needed to use. He walked onto the circuit and told me to fully accelerate as I got to him and also said the words; 'trust me'. Yeah right, it was quite hard to find trust in myself at that point so how was I supposed to trust him?

Anyway, we got on with it and what do you know, the bike was much easier to control when it was drifting. Every lap he moved closer and closer to the start of the turn and right at the end of the session I managed to slide the bike from the start of the turn to the end. I'll admit it was not the most sideways slide you'll ever see in a photograph but, to me on the bike, it felt like I could check the rear tyre pressure at the middle of the turn.

This was quite an experience and coming from a full superbike background, I found speedway to be really fresh, for want of a better word. *Gareth Davidson.*

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A quick word from Bobby Devine :

“Speedway in South Africa at the moment is building up again, by that I mean we have a lot of new guys starting to ride and older riders returning to the saddle. Ever since the popularity of Corobrik in Edenvale (talking about mid '80s to early '90s) speedway racing has always had a big following, and now with tracks like Walkerville, Randfontein, Port Elizabeth and George, we can add the extra spectacular sidecar racing, as well as giving guys on quads, MX bikes and Peewees the opportunity to race on a dirt oval, so oval dirt racing is picking up again.

The popular type of racing at Walkerville at the moment is Team racing, which is how Europe clubs run. This is made up of 2 teams with 5 riders per team, 2 riders per team per race, and bonus points are added to the mixture, (bonus point for a team 1st and 2nd, or 2nd and 3rd,) which leads to very close, fierce battles to protect your place and your teammates.”

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