

## Byron Bekker – Early Days in South Africa

In the last issue of this fanzine we heard of the young Byron Bekker's excitement on getting his first bike for Christmas when he was 3 years old. In his early schoolboy years as well as watching speedway at Wembley, Johannesburg and nearby Corobrik, Germiston, he would have been listening to stories of riding and racing, for although dad Dudley didn't race speedway as a youth but took to rugby as his sport, grandad Johnny Bekker certainly did, having rode for Klerksdorp Hawks and other teams around the Johannesburg area in the 1950s and early 'sixties, and gaining selection for South Africa's national team in Test Matches both at Cape Town in the Union and Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia - today's Zimbabwe.

Johnny Bekker rode alongside South African greats such as Fred Wills, Doug Davies and Henry Long as well as visiting tourists Ron Mountford, Alan Hunt, Eric Boothroyd, etc. and graced young Byron with many stories of daring and do, both on and off the track, - just imagine the incidents that were bound to occur on a 1,500 mile round trip to Rhodesia and back across Africa 60 years ago ! - and all for a night's speedway racing. And so it seemed only natural to mom Kim and dad Dudley that their lad would eventually want to turn from pedal power to horse-power one day. At the age of 11 Byron got his first motorbike, a 500cc Weslake 4-valve speedway machine, - no messing about with mini-bikes, road bikes with brakes, or even Junior class Honda's: straight in at the deep end with a 60 bhp racer ! Dad bought the Weslake from Richard Knight, former Mildenhall/Ipswich/Kings Lynn rider who'd spent winters down-under in S.A. and together they made their way out to Walkerville where Gerald Richter, present day track curator for Lakeside and Swindon had just reconstructed the Raceway there on the local Showground.

Of course there were more than a few spills from those early rides, and Byron still recalls that he almost broke his foot in one of his very first rides, but it was case of getting back on the bike the next weekend and learning not to let a few knocks put a would-be speedway rider off the sport: it was the only way to progress, trying to get the back-end to slide yet not let it slip too far and loose it completely. Eventually dad agreed he was ready for bigger things so next it was down to the new Wembley stadium in Jo'burg to get Byron on to the programme. (The original Wembley known to Johnny Bekker had been redeveloped in 1978 and a bus terminus built on its site,)

At Wembley in 1999 one of the junior riders' main trophy races was for the Silver Sash competition where at the same meeting the seniors competed for the Golden Helmet. At 12 years old Byron took the Sash in his debut year and repeated his success again in the following two successive years, as the action transferred to the Brakpan track, 25mls East of Jo'burg. By now Byron's performance, though he was only 14, was such that he was riding against the adults in the senior races and in 2002 he did the double by winning both the Silver Sash and the Golden Helmet finals but in an act of generosity that reflects the lad's personable nature so admirably he gave the Sash and junior title to Jarred Harvey, the next best scoring junior !

Byron's successes at home in South Africa over this period are shown in the following table:

1999 – Silver Sash,		
2000 – Silver Sash,	SA U21 Champ,	Nth-West U21 Reg'l Champ.
2001 – Silver Sash,	SA U21 Champ,	Nth-West U21 Reg'l Champ.
2002 – (S.Sash -declined),	Gold Helmet	Nth-West U21 Reg'l Champ, 3 <sup>rd</sup> S.African Chmpshp.

By 2004 the local shale-shifters had moved to Wild Things Raceway near Glenvista and 16 year old Byron was already racing in the senior Premier Class against 4-times national champ Eugene Smith and his older cousin Martin Bekker (who was to become the next South African champ in 2005.) By virtue of his U21 record of being a double national junior champion, and with support and endorsement from the MSA (Motorsport South Africa, the national controlling body,) he was accepted to compete in the World U21 Championship round in Rawicz, Poland and although he didn't qualify for the Final at Wroclaw he gave a creditable performance in his first ride within Europe, his first time outside of South Africa, to score 5 points. A week or so after returning home the Bekkers received an invitation from Newcastle, a promotion that prides itself as talent spotters. George English considered Byron's performance in Poland to have been enough for him to warrant a 2-week trial with the Newcastle Gems Conference League side. Byron impressed enough for him to be kept on, and at that late stage in the season he scored 39+4 points in 7 league matches for a CMA of 5.06 and was given a contract by the Tyneside club. However, Newcastle decided not to track a Conference League side in the following season and consequently Byron was loaned out to Scunthorpe, where he stayed for the next five years. His performances and results during this period are well recorded and can be found in Edition 1 of the Fanzine.

Each UK winter it's Byron's practice to return home to stay with his parents in Gauteng Province in the Republic of South Africa, and he keeps race-fit by entering the monthly speedway meetings at Walkerville

Showground outside Johannesburg. The Speedway Riders Club there runs a full year-round programme of fixtures, and both the national championship and the regional North-Western Championship are decided in line with conventional present-day practice of multiple rounds over the course of the season: when the season is 12 months long and overlaps with the UK summer season it inevitably means that its impossible to take part in all the rounds of these championships and top the points list for the title. Nevertheless there have been numerous successes and accompanying trophies that have the name Byron Bekker against them, including:

- S.African Golden Helmet, - won 3 more times on the trot in 2005, '06 & '07 (making 4 wins overall at 3 different raceways; - he suffered ef's in '08);
- Golden Boot, - 2008, '09 & '10. (In 2007, after setting a new Walkerville track record in his heat he had engine failure in his semi-final and cousin Martin Bekker took the prize);
- Buddy Fuller Memorial Trophy, - 2009;
- Alan Hunt Memorial Trophy, - 2008, '09, '10 & '11.

The latter AHMT successes are particularly noteworthy, for they bring together three phases in South African speedway racing and the Bekker family, and complete a cycle of events that started more than 50 years ago. The trophy raced for today at Walkerville Raceway is the original silverware presented to the first winner, Brummie's Doug Davies, just 10 days after the fatal crash of Cradley Heath's first home-grown star Alan 'Whacker' Hunt at Wembley Stadium, Johannesburg in February 1957, after which the memorial meeting was held to raise funds to finance the return of Alan's widow and 2 sons back to England. That trophy is donated as a prize today thanks to local sponsor Boet Strijdom (above rt. with Byron, presenting the AHMT in 2009,) who had won it himself in 1975 at the nearby Springs Speedway. As a young boy Boet had regularly attended Wembley race nights with his family and his elder sister has recently confirmed that they were present on the night of Alan Hunt's crash and were witness to the tragedy.



On the night of Feb. 1<sup>st</sup> 1957 a double header was staged at Wembley: first on was Wembley Lions v. Durban Hornets, the visitors skippered by Hunt, and which the Lions won 43-32. After the interval Durban took on the Klerksdorp Hawks, in the penultimate heat of which Hunt's bike seized up and he was hit by another rider. That second match was abandoned at 38-32, for which the scorers included, for Durban: Johnny Gander 10pts, Jimmy Gooch 8, Alan Hunt 6; for Klerksdorp: Eric Boothroyd 10pts, Neil Mortimer 9, Johnny Bekker 5.

By an enormous twist of fate the grandfather of Byron Bekker, present AHMT holder, had raced in the final fateful match of one of the Heathens' greatest riders, and whose memory is perpetuated today by virtue of Byron's successes !

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Author Colin Jewes with Byron at Scunthorpe in 2008.