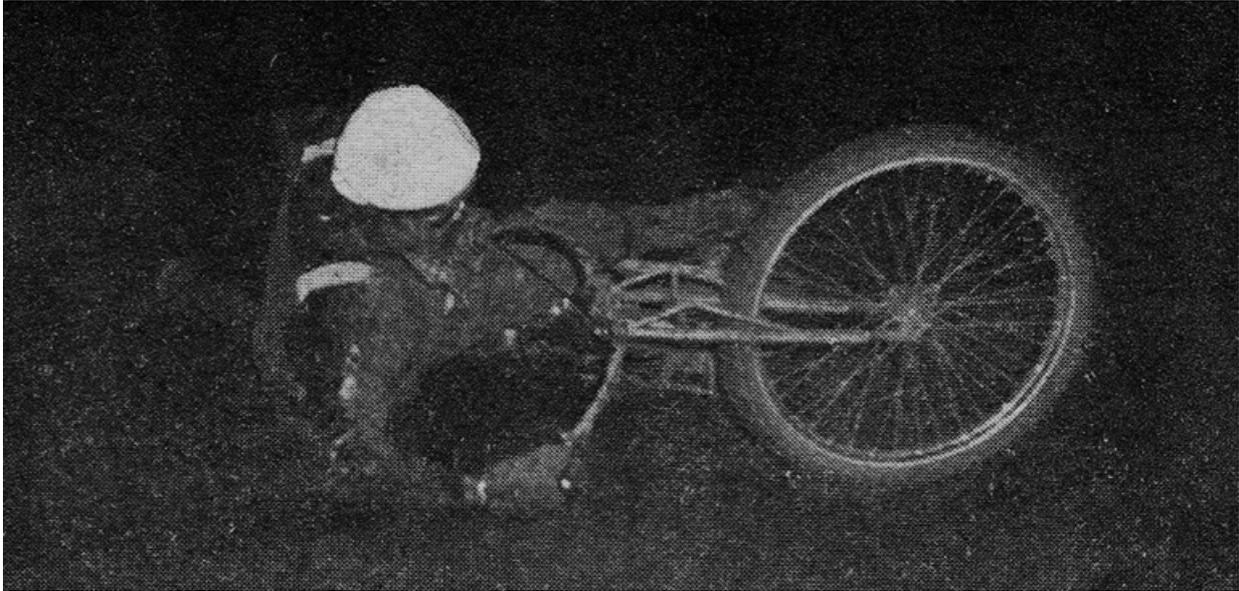


## " SPEEDWAY ! " by E.R. Bridges ( published Johannesburg, Jan 15<sup>th</sup>, 1954 )



Broken bones are the hallmark of a speedway rider. Not even thick leathers can prevent the pain of a slide like this along hard cinders. The rider in this spectacular fall is **Harry Serrurier**, one of a family of five riders.

### **Roaring Exhausts: the Thunder of Applause; Motorcycles Roaring on a Cinder Track, - thats SPEEDWAY !**

It is Friday night at the Wembley speedway track, Johannesburg. Four riders crouch over their machines at the starting gate. They are dressed like men from another planet; unrecognisable in padded leather suits - and clumsy from bulbous helmet to steel-shod boot. The engines roar at full throttle. In the darkness beyond the arc lights the crowd goes silent, tense with expectation. Suddenly the tapes go up. Like wounded animals the machines leap away, tearing down the black stretch of track, rounding the first bend in a shower of spattering cinders. Four times they make the circuit, bunching on the bends, spreading out on the straights. In less than 80 seconds - the checkered flag drops for the first flying figure and the noise of exhausts dies away.

The crowd is on its feet, filling the arena with the roaring of their voices. There are more than 5,000 of them on the stands, about half of them women and many of them families of husband wife and children. They are true speedway fans; they were here last Friday and will be here again next Friday, absorbing every second of this exciting sport. Speedway has had the biggest postwar boom of any sport. In South Africa the average weekly total attendance is 20,000 for the five existing tracks, - Johannesburg, Durban, Springs, Randfontein and Krugersdorp. On Test match nights Wembley alone pulls in 12,000 to 15,000. In Britain speedway has the third largest following, soccer and cricket taking the first two places. In almost every country on the Continent the story is the same. The explanation of course, that for hair-raising thrills speedway has no equal. But it might be true to say that the sport is an expression of postwar restlessness. You could pick the worlds finest bunch of paratroop-commandos from a speedway track. Only the demands of war could rival it for split-second judgement and sheer, calculated recklessness.

In each race a speedway rider goes four times round a rectangular track, about 150 yards by 50 yards. He races against three other riders, one of whom is a team mate. The track is loosely surfaced with cinders about an inch deep, - and is very slightly banked at the turns. His machine is very light, exceptionally fast for its size and has an odd-shaped pair of wide, high handlebars for ease of control. There are no gears, no brakes, - only one foot-rest and a throttle that gives full power with half a turn of the wrist. Altogether it looks as harmless as a child's toy, - and the curiously erect posture of the rider gives an air of unreality to the proceedings. For the rider this rectangular track

becomes an oval and to round it at an average speed of more than 40 miles an hour, he must skid - or rather slide - , the entire length of the shorter sides. To do this he comes down the straight at full power, - between 50 and 60 m.p.h. - , and then hurls his machine on to its side, sticking forward a steel-shod boot to maintain balance, or to accentuate the skid or, perhaps, to check a fall. Throughout this terrific sweep the front wheel is turned into the skid. The braking action of the front wheel, plus the drive of the rear wheel, counteracts the forward motion and sweeps the bike from one corner to another. The broadside is a breathtaking manoeuvre. From the grandstand it seems impossible that the rider can avoid crashing into the fence, or fail to collide with another machine. It is a manoeuvre that calls for cool, clear judgment. The rider must not begin too soon or too late and, above all, he must resist any "panicky" impulse to reduce power at a critical moment. Throttle control, in fact, is the secret of speedway riding and only an instinctive assessment, backed by experience, brings the confidence that enables a rider to shave another machine, or skim the fence in a wide slide that will put him in the lead as they roar down the straight. Another winning factor is the get-away at the gate. One-tenth of a second here means success or failure in getting the vital lead at the first bend. Psychological tension at the starting gate, as engines roar at full throttle with the clutch held in, is enormous. At this stage the riders have their full weight forward, otherwise the acceleration when the clutch is released would rear the machine on its back like a startled bronco.

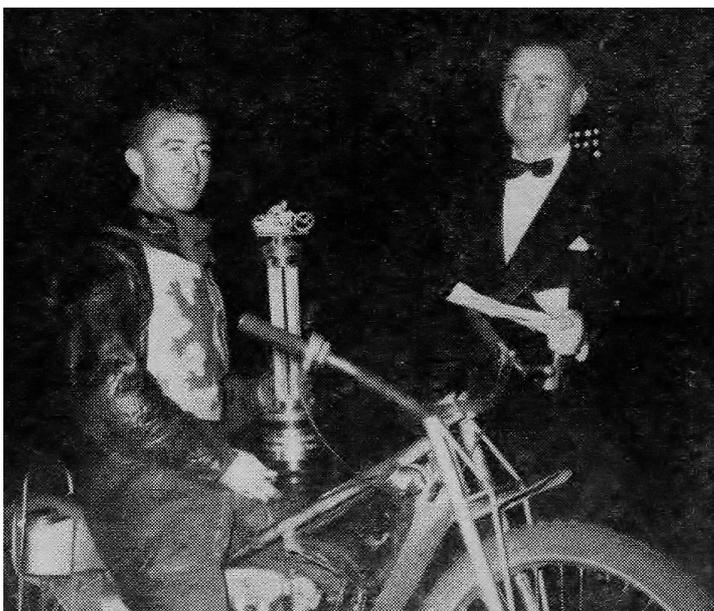
These are the elements of a race that is crazier than anything Alice saw in Wonderland, but ultimate success depends, too, on the degree of co-operation between team-riders. They race in pairs, - and it is the duty of the one who is lying second to block his opponents. He must not hesitate, when necessary, to "chop" or deliberately cross ahead of his rival. Good technique of this type sends the fans into ecstasies. Because he has no brakes, the rider has only one realistically safe way of stopping in an emergency, - he must throw his bike to the ground. "Dropping the bike" is a manoeuvre taught to every novice because it may mean his own life, or that of another rider who has crashed ahead of him. There is, however, a much more abrupt way of stopping, - crashing into the fence. Fred Williams, the world champion, now leading the British touring team in South Africa, possibly owes his life to a team mate, Bob Oakley, who took this course at Bradford last year. Dramatic photographs of the incident show Williams looking round apprehensively in a fall. Oakley sized up the situation in a split-second, and, with a mighty wrench, headed his machine into the fence. Carried off with three broken ribs and a fractured spine, he muttered: "My first thought was not to hit Fred."

Speedway riders insist that the sport is as safe as Rugby, - or at least as safe as driving through Johannesburg! But the accident statistics hardly bear this out, although fatalities are happily rare. An insurance report in Britain last year listed 174 claims from 60 tracks, with no less than one in every five involving disability for more than six months. The report called for a new helmet design, limited speeds for novices, and the elimination of "slick" tracks (smooth-surfaced patches). It added that the claims ratio on South African tracks was "satisfactory." A broken collar-bone is, in fact, hallmark of a speedway rider. References to accidents (always called "unlucky" or "unfortunate") run through club reports in Britain, - where professionalism makes speedway more fiercely competitive than it is in South Africa. Broken backs, crushed skulls, fractured limbs, pulled ligaments, damaged spines and internal bruising are mentioned again and again. Everyday penalties like bruises, aches and abrasions, - worked out by the club masseur - , are, of course, not worth mentioning. In the light of these undeniable risks what is it that keeps a rider in speedway? The only answer that seems to be all-explanatory comes from Buddy Fuller, 'Mr Speedway', three times national champion and the man who has done more than anyone else to build up the sport in South Africa. Now full-time Chairman of the Speedway Riders' Association, Buddy Fuller says: "*It's a religion. It's that way with every rider. It gets you like a bug. If you're not riding, you're itching to ride; you're practising, tinkering with your motor, or just mooching round the track.*" 'Mr Speedway' has had his accidents. In 1949 he had a pile-up in England that knocked him unconscious for a week and sent him home with a paralysed face, a brace to keep his jaw in position and an eye that would not close. He started riding again, captured more titles, captained a touring Springbok team, rode in Tests against touring sides and philosophically took two more serious spills. The second, necessitating the removal of his

spleen and the amputation of a finger has kept him out of the saddle, - but for how long no doctor can be sure. When you have got religion like this it is not enough to spend all your waking hours in its service, your place is on the track among the flying cinders.

For professional riders overseas the rewards for these risks are high. Champions such as Fred Williams, "Split" Waterman, and the Australians Jack Young and Ronnie Moore, earn between £3,000 and £5,000 a year. It is estimated that the World Speedway Championship at Wembley, London, is worth £100 a minute to the winner. Not surprisingly, all roads lead to London for leading riders. Australians and New Zealanders (the sport, developed from dirt-track racing, was imported into Britain from Australia in 1928,) seem to be the most successful, but South Africa has been put on Britain's speedway map in large letters by one name, - Henry Long. Speedway fans are fiercely

partisan. This is a sport of hero-worship, - and, about South Africa's hero, the Wembley crowd speak with one voice. For style and technique, Henry Long, they say, is "*the greatest flier of them all.*" Long began riding in 1946 at the Old Barn, a track built with pick and shovel by Buddy Fuller and fellow enthusiasts, and the home of speedway until the move to Wembley in 1947. He was "spotted" by Fuller immediately as a natural rider and, within two years, had defeated his mentor in a Wembley championship. In 1949 he made his first trip to England to gain experience. Last year was the first season he did not return and his club, Belle Vue, Manchester, spent a lot of money on cables in an attempt to change his mind. The South African title eluded Long until 1952, - but in that year he capped his claim to be the country's leading rider. Now his sideboard



Henry Long, the South African champion who is famous in British speedway, receives the coveted Schlesinger Trophy from Mr Gilbert Brown, general manager of Wembley Stadium.

groans under the weight of cups. Long's progress, astonishingly rapid, was undoubtedly due to help from his father, Alf Long, one of the finest motor mechanics in the country and three times winner of a Durban-Rand motor-cycle race. Alf Long admits that he was not keen on his son taking up speedway - but, since he had been responsible for putting him on two wheels as soon as he was out of a pram, he was hardly in a position to object. Now Alf Long is in the pits wherever Henry rides. Some rivals say it is not a combination of Henry's skill and Alf's mechanical knowledge. Somewhere, they mutter, the Longs have discovered an "atomic fuel." Long's progress is astonishingly rapid because, ordinarily, it takes three years at least to develop a good speedway rider. The manager of Britain's Wembley Lions says that only 12 out of 1,000 novices qualify for the first team, - and in South Africa out of about 100 who offer themselves for training every year not more than half a dozen remain to ride for a club. In 1946 there were 19 novice members of the association in South Africa. This year there are 60, of whom four, including the New Zealander Trevor Redmond, manager of the Springs track, settled here after riding in Britain. Nothing succeeds like success, however. Speedway is snowballing now that a national league has started, - and at centres from Pretoria to Cape Town fans and riders are clamouring for tracks.

In the wake of speedway have come the "skid kids", - youngsters hurtling round home-made tracks on bicycles. From their numbers have been recruited some of the present and future stars of speedway. Fred Wills, 1950 champion, and Roy Bester, tipped as a future champion, are former "skid kids." So also are the Lang brothers, Fred and Doug, - youngsters whose performances grow more spectacular with each meeting. Already both are riding for South Africa.

As indicative of the enthusiasm of riders in the face of physical misfortune is the fact that all of them are out of pocket. The initial outlay, for this sport is about £280 for a machine and £50 for equipment. This he has to find himself, (Fred Wills sold his car to buy his first bike.) Maintenance costs are correspondingly high. An engine replacement costs about £100. (An interesting point is that every speedway machine in the world has the same engine, - a JAP, made by the J. A.Prestwich company. Rated at 5 h.p. and delivering 46 b.h.p. at 6,000 r.p.m., it is the fastest unsupercharged, single-cylinder engine in the World). The fuel used is wood alcohol costing 15s. a gallon, - and the engine uses about half a gallon in two races. Oil costs 22s. 8d. a gallon, - and a tyre, with its special large tread, about £5.



The Lang brothers, Fred (left) and Doug, are the two most promising of the younger riders. Both were in the South African team this year for the first Test against a British side.

In South Africa, speedway is an amateur sport and there are no monetary rewards for riders. Nevertheless, to make it financially possible, a machine allowance is paid by the Speedway Riders' Association according to the rider's rating. The leading riders may race five or six times a night, - and this is about the limit of physical endurance. The allowance, particularly for junior riders, scarcely covers expenses, - and from it, for each race, is deducted a premium of 9s. for an insurance policy which pays out £1,500 in the event of death and varying amounts for injury.

Speedway is a "popular" sport. This means that at Wembley the atmosphere is supercharged, with all the trimmings of blaring music, ice cream, peanuts and bottles of cold drinks, - plus hysterical "bobby soxers." But unless you are the most jaded of cynics you cannot go to Wembley on a Friday night and fail to be infected by the tension. An interesting study in psychology, it is, in fact, "some religion."

E.R.Bridge, 15.1.1954.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~



The "dive" at the first bend where a lead may be vital to winning the race. Jostling for position in a 30 m.p.h. skid are A. Blankfield, Bob Raw, Fred Williams (the British rider and world champion) and, "eating cinders" in the rear, Fred Wills. Face masks and goggles are necessary for protection against flying cinders.



Buddy Fuller—"Mr Speedway"—has a word of advice for Fred Williams, the world champion now riding in South Africa for the touring British team. Three times South African champion, Fuller has done more than any other man to build up the sport in South Africa.