

NEW MOTOR-CYCLE SPEEDWAY FOR PRETORIA

JOHNNY BUNTON, WELL-KNOWN SPEEDWAY RIDER AND ENTHUSIAST TELLS THE HISTORY OF SPEEDWAY RACING AND CONCLUDES WITH A NOTE ABOUT PRETORIA'S NEW TRACK.

MOTOR-CYCLE racing on large, loose-surfaced fairgrounds and horse race-courses was a popular form of entertainment in Australia in the middle '20s. Standard machines, stripped of mudguards lights, number plates and other accessories were used by the riders and sheer speed on the long straights was all important as, owing to the looseness and sandy nature of the circuits, bends had to be rounded with extreme care.

One day a competitor, whose name has unfortunately not been recorded for posterity, discovered that if he closed the throttle smartly on entering a corner, leaned the model over at an acute angle, extended a steady leg and then snapped the throttle wide open again, the sudden surge of power at the rear wheel caused it to slide outwards while the front wheel maintained its original course.

By adopting this method of cornering, bends could be negotiated with practically no loss of momentum and the art of dirt-track racing, or to give it its modern name, speedway racing was born.

In due course shorter tracks of a quarter of a mile and even less became the vogue and speedway racing matured into a major sport of world-wide proportions with the Aussies' "Cyclone" Billy Lamont and "Broadside" Vic Huxley the brightest stars in the dirt-track racing firmament.

In 1928 this thrilling new type of motor cycle sport was introduced to Britain and the Continent and met with an unprecedented reception. In fact, the British public went crazy over speedway racing and attendance figures soared until 1952-53 when over 10 million fans in Britain alone attended the league and international matches while 100,000 excited enthusiasts cheered Jack Young on to victory in the World Championship final at London's swagger Wembley Stadium. South Africa's Henry Long finished joint eighth in this meeting—a proud performance indeed.

When first introduced into South Africa, speedway racing caused a sensation but after an enthusiastic debut the sport had a rather checkered career. Stan Collins and the late Alan Reeve, both of Pretoria, were fast to master the tricky cinder game while road racers, Joe Sarkis and Baby Scott likewise attained stardom in this new sphere. The outbreak of war finally sounded the death-knell of dirt-track racing and few mourned its passing.

In 1946 speedway racing was revived at

the Old Barn on the Johannesburg-Heidelberg road by Buddy Fuller whose organizing genius and burning enthusiasm ensured the success of the new venture. Tracks sprang up in several centres and Pretoria boasted the first post-war cinder circuit but Johannesburg's Wembley Stadium became the show-place of the sport with night racing, overseas touring teams and first-rate publicity.

Speedway racing under floodlights has a glamour and excitement all its own as anyone who has been to Wembley Stadium or Olympia Park at Springs will readily agree. The shrill cries of the peanut and hotdog vendors, the pungent reek of castor oil and racing "dope", the staccato crackle of highly-tuned engines, the anxious screams of women fans and the deeper cheering of the men, the sight of leather-clad riders hurtling into cinder-covered bends at close on a mile a minute, the thrills and spills, provide, without a doubt, the supreme sporting spectacle.

League racing on a national basis has proved a great success in South Africa and the names of speedway stars have become household words. In almost every home. Riders of the calibre of Henry Long, Roy Bester, Freddy Wills, 18-year-old Doug Davies, the Serrurier, Blankfield and Lang brothers, to mention just a few, have become so proficient at the game that Springbok sides have raced against teams from Britain, Holland, Scandinavia and New Zealand with great success.

A new arena to be known as the Pretoria Speedway Stadium is at present under construction in Paul Kruger Street and the promise of a test match in the capital as part of the city's centenary celebrations next year should certainly place speedway racing high on the popularity poll of spectator sports in 1955.

J. BUNTON.

