

“BULAWAYO SPEEDWAY and CYCLE SPEEDWAY in the 1950's”

by Graham Radue

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Reading through Frances Grant's interesting account of motorcycle Speedway in Rhodesia in 1970 brought back many happy memories of the sport which was originally introduced to Bulawayo in 1953. Bulawayo was always famous for its road racing motorcycle stars such as Mick Gammon, Ken Robes, Charlie Harrison, Bertie Hall, Gary Hocking, Jim Redman, Alan ("Buddy") Harris and Bruce Beale to name a few, so it was not surprising then that Speedway would also find a firm foothold in the city.

The Rhodesian Speedway Association (a non-profit making organization under the chairmanship of prominent Bulawayo eye specialist, Dr. J. C. (Jack) Greenwood) was formed and they organized the first cinder track meeting for the Bulawayo Agricultural Society and the South African Speedway Riders Association - it was held under floodlights at the Bulawayo Showgrounds and some 12,000 spectators turned up to watch the inaugural meeting which was billed as "the World's most thrilling sport." The meeting was opened by Lt. Col. N.B. Everard, General Manager of Rhodesia Railways, and there was a ceremonial entry to the arena of the specially constructed JAP speedway machines, riders and track officials, plus renderings by the Bulawayo Caledonian Society. Thrills and spills aplenty and flying cinders were enjoyed by the crowd and the smell of "Castro' R" filled the air.

That first meeting saw a test match arranged between riders from the Union of South Africa and Rhodesia. The South African team was captained by Doug Serrurier and the Rhodesian team was captained by Bob Raw.

Local Bulawayo riders who had excelled in road racing at Umgusa and Heany were invited to also try their hands at the new sport in supporting races. Those who later rode for a newly formed Bulawayo speedway team were Bertie Hall, Derek Manford, Tommy Lemon and Bill ("Bundu") Bovett. Of the quartet, Bertie Hall succeeded in making more progress in three months than normally took top Union riders almost two years to achieve.

Around this time, a touring British Speedway team captained by reigning World Speedway Champion, Freddie Williams of Wales, was visiting the Union and, in December, 1953, were brought up to Bulawayo by the legendary speedway promoter Buddy Fuller (known universally as "Mr. Speedway) to ride against 'The Dominions', a team which included Henry Long of South Africa who was 8th in the World Speedway Final at Wembley Stadium, London, in 1952, and Trevor Redmond of New Zealand who was later destined to become a leading speedway promoter at Bulawayo's Showground Stadium. In 1953 /1954, eight tracks existed in Southern Africa - at Wembley Stadium (in Johannesburg), Springs, Randfontein, Durban (at Hoy Park Stadium), Bloemfontein, Port Elizabeth, Bulawayo and Pretoria. A track at Klerksdorp was later added to the list. League racing was in vogue at the time and it was not long before Bulawayo was included in the roster. Each of the visiting British riders was allocated to a team in the Union and certain South African riders were allocated to the new Bulawayo Lions speedway team who now sported the same colours as the World famous Wembley Lions team in London - a red lion on a white race jacket. That first Bulawayo team comprised: Fred Wills (captain), Dave Collins, Toby Boshoff, Doug Serrurier, Neil Neilson, Bev Bird and Bundu Bovett, but later included the likes of Sonny James, Bertie Hall, Dick Campbell and Arthur MacDougall (MacDougall at the time was a 22 year old plumber who had already made his mark at speedboat and stock car racing). Their first meeting was against Wembley Lions (Johannesburg) captained by Henry Long.

Later on the Bulawayo team was captained by Peter Dykes, the New Zealander, who settled in Bulawayo and who, together with Bobby Page, organised Stock Car Racing at Khami Stadium, four miles outside of Bulawayo.

The other teams the Bulawayo Lions rode against were The Rest of Southern Africa (S.A. Aces) captained by Henry Long - at this meeting, Bev Bird of the Bulawayo Lions won the Golden Helmet Handicap Trophy; Springs Stars captained by Roy Bester - Ernie Reid and his Death-Defying Crash Cars were an attraction during interval at this meeting; Pretoria Eagles captained by Doug Davies (also a World Speedway Finalist) - Doug Lang won the Golden Helmet at this meeting

, and Durban Hornets who also featured Roy Browning (the Ghost Rider) in their line-up - he rode in all-white leathers and white boots, unusual as all other riders wore black leathers and boots at the time!

In addition to these league meetings, several internationals were staged such as a test between The Commonwealth (Captain: Ken McKinlay of Scotland) against Southern Africa (Captained by Bertie Hall). A Commonwealth Best Pairs event was also staged and, in December, 1955, there was a test at the Showground Stadium between Scandinavia (captained by Olle Nygren, another World Finalist) and The Commonwealth (captained by Fred Wills).

1956 saw the Southern Rhodesian Open Speedway Championships which attracted the best riders from Britain, South Africa and Rhodesia, and, in 1957, Bulawayo fans saw the clash between England (captained by Alan Hunt) and South Africa (captained by Henry Long) in a test match. Tragically, some time later, Alan Hunt (who was a World Finalist in 1956) was killed at a track meeting in the Union when his machine stopped dead and he fractured his skull.

The Rhodesian Open Speedway Championship held at a later date was won by Fred Wills from Roy Bester with Peter Dykes /Arthur Duncan 4th

Crowds of between 15,000 and 20,000 were the norm on Friday nights at the Showground Stadium and the sport became so popular, a Speedway Supporters' Club was formed in 1956, presided over by Ernie Bernell. When a local rider, Peter Crisp, broke his arm during a practice ride, he received a cheque for ninety pounds collected by the Club and presented to him by the president at a gathering at the Old Miltonians Club.

At one stage in October, 1955, it was proposed to shift Speedway to Hartsfield and the Matabeleland Rugby Football Board was willing to extend the field, double the number of floodlights and erect permanent seating, but councillors opposed this move and Speedway remained at the Showground Stadium.

When the Rhodesian Speedway Association was eventually wound up, they gave one thousand, seven hundred pounds to charities including distribution of funds to organizations such as Coronation Cottages, St. Joseph's Home, Queen Mary Home and St. Gabriels. Speedway was from then on run by the Bulawayo Agricultural Society with the Speedway Riders Association of South Africa.

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CYCLE SPEEDWAY (commonly known as : "SKID KIDS), gained support amongst local Bulawayo youngsters after the impact made by the Bulawayo Lions speedway team at the Showground Stadium and proved that Speedway was immensely popular.

Alick Stuart (Pvt.) Ltd., the local bicycle shop in Bradlows Buildings in Abercorn Street, in 1954 encouraged youngsters to buy special Speedway bicycles fitted out with knobbly tyres, handlebars, etc. and "Skid Kids` gained in strength.

Brian Sudding together with his brother, Rory, and a band of other schoolboy supporters, built the first Cycle Speedway track in Bulawayo on a piece of vacant land which at the time was just bush alongside the Hillside Post Office in Stafford Avenue, Hillcrest. They formed the first "Skid Kid" team, aptly named the Hillcrest Sables and meetings were held on Saturday afternoons at this track and also at other tracks which had later sprung up such as the Hillcrest Eagles track further into the suburb and the Park Vue Lions track nearer to the city. In addition to the Sudding brothers, other prominent riders of the day were Derek Mitchell, Henry, Gavin and Clive Peatt, Brian Donnelly (Mafindela Marlins), Alan "Buddy." Harris (Park Vue Lions and later of road racing and Speedway fame), Kenny Brown and John Jenkinson (Hillcrest Eagles).

Mr.J.F. (Jimmy) Davison was the schoolboys' greatest ally in organising the sport and, with his help, they staged a Skid Kids Title Meeting which was won by the Hillcrest Sables, as well as a Rhodesian Skid Kids' Championship meeting which was held in the centre arena in front of the main grandstand at the Showground Stadium. At this time Skid Kids were also in demand in other ways and were asked to give demonstrations such as at the Old Miltonians' fete.

Speedway and Cycle Speedway happened in Bulawayo all those years ago but were enjoyed by young and old.