

75 YEARS OF SPEEDWAY IN SOUTH AFRICA

A History from 1928 to 2003
compiled by Christian Weber

Part 1: HOW IT ALL BEGAN

IT happened to be an Australian adventurer by the name of A.W.Grady, who brought speedway, then known as dirt-track racing, to South Africa some 75 years ago. It was in the October of 1928 that the very first meeting was staged at the ground of the Old Wanderers Sports Club in Johannesburg. And an instant success it certainly was. Within a few months speedway racing made rapid progress in South Africa. In fact, the sport swept through the province of Transvaal like wildfire, and it gave every indication of becoming as popular as it was in England or Australia.

The Transvaal's principal speedway in those initial boom years was situated at the famous old Wanderers Club in Johannesburg. The club with all its grounds was originally located near the centre of Johannesburg, next to the railway station. In the early 50's a massive redevelopment of Jo'burg Railway Station took place, for which the government took over all the land of the Wanderers Club, and gave them new land about 10km north, between Johannesburg and Sandton. This includes the current Wanderers Stadium, where international cricket matches are played.

There were other tracks too, with speedway racing being held at no lesser place than Ellis Park, which had only been built and opened as a sports ground in 1927. Pretoria had its quarter-mile cinder circuit at the Caledonian Ground, which today is used as a soccer stadium, but the star riders were few and were always booked for "The Wanderers".

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The Wanderers track in Johannesburg was controlled by A.W.Grady, a fellow who became quite famous on account of his motorcycle ride round Australia. It was on October 1, 1924, that this tall, good-looking youngster with the auburn hair started from Fremantle, near Perth in Western Australia, on what was generally considered as the longest and most difficult journey ever attempted on a motorcycle.

On March 14 of the following year, Grady arrived home in his native town of Fremantle, and his machine registered the last beat, after billions of beats, in front of the Town Hall, which he had left five months and 14 days before. His fantastic journey was finished ... and the Australian was quietly satisfied with the honour of being the first rider to do it.

Few could fully appreciate the magnitude of such a great achievement, or the dangers encountered and the difficulties that were overcome, for it was hard to realise that parts of the Australian island continent remained unexplored and were so out-of-touch with civilisation, that failure of the explorer's mount would mean certain death.

The magnificent success spoke volumes for the courage of the 23-year-old motor-cyclist, who goes down in posterity as the first ever man to encircle Australia on a mechanically propelled vehicle, and as the man who brought speedway, or dirt-track racing as it was then called, to South Africa.

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Johnny S. Hoskins

The history of speedway began in Australia, when the godfather of the sport, Johnny S. Hoskins, organised the first motorcycle races on a dirt oval track at West Maitland, near Sydney, in December 1923. This event has generally been accepted as the very first speedway meeting, even though it's a proven fact, that the Americans had pioneered motorcycle races on oval tracks as early as in 1902.

Five years later, in the spring of 1907, historians record the earliest report of a motorcycle dirt-track race being held in South Africa. This event took place at Pietermaritzburg, but certainly that wasn't speedway racing. In those days, the riders competed in all kind of events and on any kind of track, be it road or track racing, hill climbs, trials, endurance or anything else.

By the time the 1914-18 war was over, the sport began to evolve. American riders Eddie Brinck and Maldwyn Jones were regarded as the earliest exponents of the art of sliding a motorcycle in a controlled movement. But the story of our sport really began at the time Johnnie Hoskins came upon the scene in New

South Wales on that December day in 1923. From there it spread to other parts of Australia, and soon even other parts of the world.

The British (who usually reckon to be in on the beginning of almost everything) did not start to build their speedway traditions until 1928. In that year, Johnny Hoskins and a good number of Australian riders went over to the 'old country' and started the game there.

Over in Western Australia, A.W.Grady had learned a lot about the new sport from the grand master himself. Johnny Hoskins had established the Claremont speedway in Perth, and Grady was there among the crowd of 15,000 who witnessed the opening night meeting on September 15, 1927.

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When Hoskins went to England to spread the speedway gospel, Grady choose South Africa. He came to Johannesburg, got in touch with the leading sports club and obtained the managership of the Wanderers Dirt Track. It turned out to be a marvellous success, the ground being filled to capacity on every speedway evening.

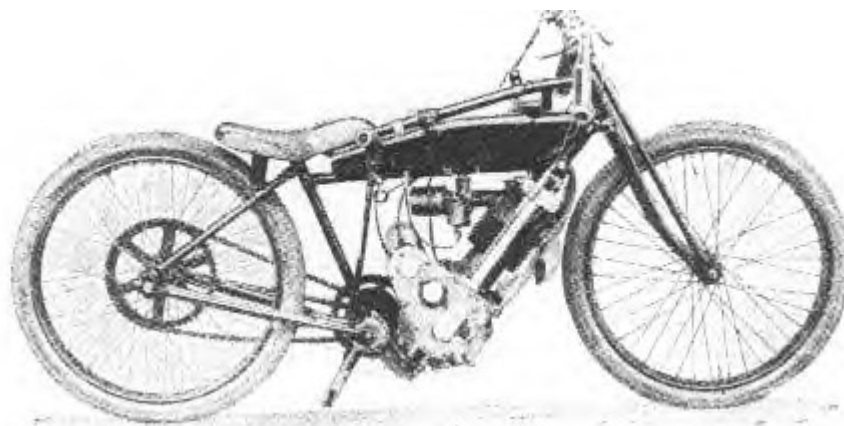
The circuit itself was about the same size as the Claremont track in his native Perth, there being only three laps to the mile, which of course was larger than the average British quarter-mile tracks in London. Therefore the speed of a machine was an even bigger factor for success at "The Wanderers".

Over the Christmas period and New Year holidays (1928-29), when seven meetings were scheduled to take place in 11 days, it was thought that the enthusiasts would tire of the new sport. But not so! Enthusiasm for the dirt track racing continued unabated, and a crowd of 10,000 was not unusual at Johannesburg.

Racing at "The Wanderers" continually improved and so the crowds increased. Some of the most spectacular racing was being seen in the Transvaal, with a variety of machines, including an HRD, Ariel, AJS, Levis and a Calthorpe, not forgetting the most successful Douglas.

Star riders included Gus Colloras, Jimmy Lind, Stan Collins, Ted Spencer, Ginger Bower, Alf Long, Ted Murray and the International road racing star Joe Sarkis, who shone with great brilliance on the dirt.

Sarkis was an exceptional figure in those early days of the sport. An accomplished motorcyclist, who between 1929 and 1932 rode in the famous TT races on the Isle of Man. In 1928 he decided to order a special dirt track bike, "The Panther" made by Phelon & Moore Ltd. in Yorkshire England.



This is a Phelon & Moore „Panther“, the first dirt track special that made its way to South Africa and was ridden by Joe Sarkis in 1928

Quite a few eyebrows were raised when this very special machine arrived in South Africa early in 1928 for Sarkis to ride it in track and sprint racing. When the dirt-track racing really took off with the opening of the Wanderers track, however, the British Douglas machines proved to be the most successful dirt racers.

At one particular Johannesburg meeting, apart from the brilliant riding of Stan Collins, who shattered all the existing records on his Douglas, and was generally accepted as the hero of the evening, the outstanding riders were Bower, Colloras and Eric Powell. The special dirt track 'Duggies' were one of the big attractions, and a record crowd turned out to see them on their initial appearance.

And so the influx of dirt track specials commenced, for in addition to the Douglases now in the city, a model Triumph and a new Calthorpe had also arrived.

No rider as yet had succeeded in winning the Golden Helmet at "The Wanderers" more than once. Ginger Bower, Joe Sarkis and Gus Colloras – all Douglas riders – had won the "Golden Topper" just once only, but it underlined the dominance of the 'Duggies' in the early history of speedway in South Africa.

For five years the sport flourished and many English riders visited the Union. Eva Asquith and Fay Tylour, the girl riders, both of which rode the popular Douglas machines; Wally Lloyd, Phil Bishop, Harry 'Shep' Shepherd, Nobby Key and several others added their quota of thrills and daring to the South African scene, but more on that in the next part of the series.

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Part 2 "THE FIRST TEST MATCH"

It was in the **1930/31** season when the very first touring team of riders from England arrived in South Africa. At that time, speedway in the UK had already made the transition from its original form of individual racing, to become even more popular as a team sport. Club teams had been established all over the British Isles and the 1929 season had seen the formation of the very first official leagues. In the Southern League, London's glamour club Stamford Bridge (whose stadium today is the home of Premier League football club Chelsea), won the championship, while in a slightly less shiny Northern League, the team from Leeds took the top of the table position.

As with any other major team sport, it was soon discovered that international test matches could provide an extra excitement for the followers of the sport. At a time when football was preparing for its first World Cup tournament and Test cricket was considerably expanding, Speedway was quick to join in. Officialdom, however, was slow to take advantage of what the speedway fans demanded, not least because all of the club owners were reluctant to release any of their star riders to appear for an other promotion in an International match. It wasn't until the 30th of June, 1930, that the very first officially A.C.U. sanctioned Speedway Test match went ahead. Australia beat England 35-17 at Wimbledon in front of a sell-out 30,000 crowd.

There had been pre-runners, though. In September of 1929, the promoter of the Brandon Speedway in Coventry had put on the very first international match, which attracted a mammoth crowd of 25,000 who somehow crammed into a stadium that was reckoned to have a capacity of only 10,000.

England won this four-a-side contest against the Australian quartet, and the incredible success of this meeting eventually led to the sanctioning of an official Test match series between England and Australia in the following year. This "Ashes" series between the Lions and the Kangaroos became the annual highlight of the speedway season throughout the 1930's. As a measure of the public appeal of the Tests, the 1932 match at Wembley (London) attracted 84,000 – the biggest crowd at any meeting up to that time.

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THE AUSTRALIAN TEAM AT THE FIRST OFFICIAL TEST MATCH AT WIMBLEDON ON MONDAY, JUNE 30, 1930.

left to right: Billy Lamont, Max Grosskreutz, Ron Johnson, Frank Arthur, Dicky Case and Vic Huxley

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No wonder, the South African promoters wanted to participate in this incredible success story. Negotiations were made with some of the best British riders to come to South Africa during the 1930/31 season. The England team was of course not sanctioned as "official" by the A.C.U. and therefore any matches would have been of an unofficial character, yet this didn't deter from the excitement and anticipation of the South African speedway public.

The tourist included some quality riders in Nobby Key, Ivor Hill and Wally Lloyd, who was known as "the boy

wonder of Perry Barr (Birmingham)". On arrival, the visitors had problems with the tuning of the bikes. Because Johannesburg is so far above sea level, the atmosphere becomes a bit rare and it completely upset the carburation. The solution was to run the bikes on 'dope' (in those days a lot of machines were still on petrol or benzole). It was quite legal in those days to mix up Your own fuel, and one of the English riders, Ivor Hill, went to a firm of manufacturing chemists, who agreed to make up a fuel on which he could run the engine on high compression. The formula was later revealed, it was 75% methylated spirit, 20% benzene, 3% acetone and 2% ether. Run on about a 9:1 compression ratio the bike got going pretty quickly, so much so that at one particular meeting at Krugersdorp, Wally Lloyd loaned it and broke the track record.

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The English team was booked to race a series of Test matches against the home country. On the evening of the First Test at Ellis Park, just before the racing was due to start, and with the stadium filled, the home riders went on strike, demanding more money for their services. There was near riot going on and for some reason, the SA public blamed the English boys and the situation looked decidedly sticky. Ultimately, the promoters acceded to the South African riders' request and the meeting went on. By this time, the Englishmen were so incensed that they decided to do 'em in no uncertain manner – the result was a win for England by 37 points to 17, and Ivor Hill finished the evening with the track record.

The promoters were so upset by this, that they refused to run any more meetings, and the rest of the Test series was cancelled. What a start for the Springboks on the international scene!

Just for the record, here are the scorers of this historic 1930 Test Match at the Ellis Park Cindrena:

SOUTH AFRICA - 17

Joe Sarkis (Cpt.) 5, Baby Scott 4, Stan Collins 3, Alan Reeve 3, Fred Neill 2.

ENGLAND - 37

Nobby Key 9, John Deeley 9, Ivor Hill 7, Wally Lloyd (Cpt.) 5, Bunny Wilcox 4, Chris Hornby 2, Arthur Tims 1.



TEST MATCH SPEEDWAY ACTION OF THE 1930'S – ENGLAND v AUSTRALIA

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The first South African speedway rider to appear in England was Keith Harvey, who was living in London and became a regular Stamford Bridge rider in the late 1920's. He went on to ride for West Ham and in 1938 joined Crystal Palace, where he became very consistent. Harvey owned a large motor cycle shop at Stockwell. He continued riding after the war at New Cross and was still riding when well past the age of fifty!

Two South Africans, Alan Reeve and Will Nicholas, came to England in 1930, travelling with Wally Lloyd, who returned home after the first South African tour of English speedway riders in the 1929/30 season. Another South African riding in England in 1930 was Stan Collins, who appeared for Northern League team Warrington. Reeve and Nicholas signed for the Crystal Palace team in London. Wally Lloyd was transferred from Birmingham to Crystal Palace, and another member of the 1930/31 English touring team, Nobby Key, actually a Welshman, who was capped for England on their South African tour, also joined Crystal Palace for the 1930 season. For the record, Crystal Palace finished seventh out of thirteen teams in the 1930 Southern

League, with 11 wins, one draw and 12 losses. The (London) Wembley Lions succeeded Stamford Bridge as the new league champions that year.

Will Nicholas was tragically killed in 1933 in a motoring accident on Salisbury Plain in England.

Another South African rider of the 1930's, Godfrey Rabie, came over to England to ride at West Ham just before the war. Known as 'Scarface' he had some second-half rides at the Custom House track and at the end of an extremely short career, had torn down the fencing, broken both ankles, fractured his jaw, broken his nose and sustained a host of minor injuries!

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Over the years, several British riders came to race in South Africa, and in 1932 Phil Bishop became the first foreign rider to win the South African championship.

It was about at that time, in the years of the great recession, that interest for speedway racing in South Africa began to wane. The sport had been extremely popular for about five years, but suddenly it died utterly and completely, forgotten by a very fickle public.

For the 1935/36 season, an attempt was made to rekindle the speedway fever and a number of English riders again visited the Union, among them old favourites Wally Lloyd and Phil Bishop.

Bishop won the South African championship for the second time, and after the tourists had returned home, the British press reported that: "... English speedway riders Walter 'Wally' Lloyd and Phil Bishop have joined the board of a big syndicate to establish the sport in South Africa on a scale never before attempted."

"The brilliant riding of the two hectic Englishmen has aroused a frenzy of enthusiasm for speedway racing and the syndicate which includes a millionaire broker from the Rand and a well known figure from the Kimberley diamond fields will have several tracks under their control."

"Next season speedway racing will be run on British lines at Johannesburg, Pretoria and Kimberley and plans are in hand to extend the scheme to Cape Town, Durban and other centres in South Africa. I am able to say that the English Control Board will be asked to send a touring team to race international matches and that first class riders from England and Australia will be booked by the various tracks."

"The Johannesburg track is situated 4 miles from the city and on land belonging to a gold mine. In fact the gold workings run right below the track itself. It is similar in shape to Wembley (London) and has a unique foundation of tarmac, which has proved very successful. Pretoria is very much the same in size and shape as the old Stamford Bridge track in London."

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Interviewed on landing at Southampton on his return from South Africa, Lloyd told the *press*: "*Though I shall be racing in England this season, it is quite possible it will be my last. Speedway should go over with such a bang in South Africa next winter that promoting out there may take all my time.*"

"*I took out six machines and lent them to the local riders on a sharing basis, and did pretty well, too. The most promising of the younger lights at Jo'burg is Cecil de la Porte who had one or two rides at Wembley last season and may join West Ham this year. In action, de la Porte is a second Frank Charles and will soon be worth a place in any league side. Bishop and I certainly had a great time for we made and broke track records every week.*"

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Cecil de la Porte indeed made his way on to England. The promising youngster in fact became the very first South African to compete in the qualifying rounds of the World Championship, which was inaugurated in 1936. He was eliminated at an early stage, though, and didn't qualify for the historic first ever World Final at Wembley. First ever world champion, by the way, was Wembley's Australian star Lionel Van Praag.

Unfortunately, nothing of the high-flying plans to develop the sport in South Africa was realized, since the supposed wealthy partners in the syndicate were either not willing or not able to finance such a big venture. Speedway in South Africa once again went into oblivion and was only kept going by a band of enthusiasts. One of them, whose name appears in the record books for the first time as the winner of the South African championship in 1939, and again for winning the last of the pre-war championships held in 1940, was destined to become the most influential personality in South African speedway history. A man who decided the fortunes of the sport in this country for nearly half a century, first as a rider (five-times SA champion), later on as a promoter and administrator of the sport.

That man, of course, is Buddy Fuller, but more about him in the next part of the series.

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Part 3: "THE POST-WAR BOOM"

The **1940's** were of course totally influenced by the war that put a halt to nearly all major sporting activities in Europe. Speedway more or less came to a stand-still during World War II. The end of the war in 1945 signalled the dawn of an unprecedented boom-time for the sport of speedway racing in England. Tracks were opening up again and the people, after six years of abstinence, were hungry for some top notch racing action again. Within a year, the speedway leagues were re-established. Enormous crowds, especially at the four glamorous London tracks (Wembley, Wimbledon, New Cross and West Ham) rivalled those who attended first division football matches. In fact, spectator wise, among all sports in the UK in the late 1940's, Speedway was the most popular, next to Association Football. To give You an idea of the attendances in those days, more than 80,000 fans flocked to London's Wembley Stadium to watch the British Riders' Championship, which had replaced the World Championship in 1946 and the following two seasons.

If 1946 was a boom year in every way, it was obvious that the sport was in for a vast expansion. For the 1947 season, the National League was extended to three divisions, with seven clubs in D1 and eight each in D2 and D3. The crowds were packing the stadiums and there was a tremendous amount of money to be earned by the star riders in speedway. The average gates for league matches that year were 8,000 in the Third Division, 25,000 in Div.2 and 40,000 in the top grade!

Though training schools for novices were set up all over the country, to stock all the teams of the three divisions of 1947 with a sufficient number of riders, the search for star rider material extended into the overseas dominions of the British Empire. The Australians were invited and returned to this country for the first time since 1939 and Test Matches were revived. The Aussies once more were much sought after by the league clubs, as were to a lesser extent riders from New Zealand, Canada and inevitably activities in the Union of South Africa, too, came under scrutiny of the British track bosses.

London club New Cross were the first to sign a South African rider for their team. It was veteran Keith Harvey, a pre-war star for Crystal Palace, who rode for the Rangers in both the 1946 and 1947 season. Harvey was 51 years old when he last rode in the National League.

Programme cover of an S.R.A. Anniversary Meeting at The Old Barn on May 27, 1947



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AWAY from the battle fields of Europe, speedway racing in South Africa had survived the war at a country track called "The Old Barn". This was located about 15 km south-east of Johannesburg. For some time during the 1940's this was the only track in operation in SA, and Buddy Fuller won a couple of SA championships there. This man 'Buddy' – his real name is Arthur John Fuller – became the driving force behind the South African speedway boom of the late 40's and early 1950's, first as a rider, then as organiser and promoter of the sport. He was also the initiator of the Speedway Riders' Association in South Africa, and as chairman of that organisation, Fuller was instrumental for arranging touring teams to visit South Africa.

Back in the 40's, Fuller was South Africa's top rider. He had won the SA championship five times in a row – in 1939, 1940 and intercepted by the war, again in 1946, 1947 and 1948. He then went on to ride in the northern hemisphere summer season of 1948 in Britain. Fuller rode for the Hastings team for two seasons in division three, but had a terrible crash during 1949, suffering a fractured skull. He was sidelined for quite some time and was not able to play any part in the 1949-50 South African season, except for a couple of comeback rides at the end. But he was back for the 1950 British season, and scored 36 points in a limited number of matches for Liverpool. From the beginning of the 1950-51 season he was back in full action in South Africa. He led the Wembley Lions of Johannesburg in the league and captained the Springboks in the test series against Holland. For about three more seasons, Fuller rode against touring teams, before settling for an administrative role in the running of the sport.

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BRITISH riders resumed the tradition of the pre-war days to go on overseas racing tours during the European off-season. The ACU in London had given the green light to resume with the highly popular 'Ashes' series between England and Australia in 1947, followed by a return visit of the English team in Australia in the winter of 1947-48.

For the 1948 season, the Motor-Cycle Union of South Africa put up a formal offer to the Auto-Cycle-Union in London, to send a touring South African speedway team to England, but the Pall Mall headquarters had to reluctantly turn down the offer, owing to the glut of fixtures. As individuals, however, some South African riders appeared in England that year, and Fuller established himself very well at Hastings.

With the good contacts made by Fuller in 1948, it was he, more than anyone else, who was responsible for bringing over an unofficial England team to ride against South Africa in a Test series. The England team was made up mainly of third division riders, and the British ACU would thus not sanction the series as official. In fact, the English riders who toured the Union that winter were warned by the control board not to be booked as being representative of this country while in the Union. They defied the ban, and proceeded to defeat the South Africans by four matches to one in the first ever series. Moreover, they helped to establish the sport on a permanent basis. Called before the board upon their return to the UK, the riders were rebuked, but no further action was taken against them.

At that time, several speedway tracks were again in operation in South Africa. The Wembley Stadium in Johannesburg was the most successful and soon became the country's leading speedway track. A series of five test matches against England were staged in the 1948-49 season, three of those at Wembley, the other two at the Dunswart track in Benoni.

The statistical details of the series reveal that while England won four out of five matches, the South Africans had the most prolific points scorer in 18-year old Henry Long, who even outscored the 'old master' Buddy Fuller. Long was sensational, scoring double figures in all but one match, and gave a good indication that he was indeed world class potential. He had been over to England with Fuller in 1948, but his talent obviously went unnoticed, then, as he rode just briefly for the Sheffield team in Division Two, contributing a meagre season total of just four points. Now, British scouts cabled home the discovery of this gem of a rider and it was the famous Belle Vue club of Manchester, that got the signature of the South African teenager. Long made his first appearance for the Belle Vue 'Aces' in a tentative visit in 1949, scoring just six points, but was back in 1950, when he rattled up a massive season total of 111 points, helping the Aces to runner-up position behind the almighty Wembley Lions of London in Britain's National League Division One. He stayed loyal with the Belle Vue club for many years, and in 1952 had his most successful overseas season culminating in the World Final appearance at Wembley – thus becoming the first of only two South Africans ever to reach that most coveted speedway event of the year.

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FOR the record, here is a statistical run-down of the 1948-49 South Africa v England test series:

England wins series by four matches to one.

1 st Test (<i>Johannesburg</i>):	South Africa 31, England 53.
2 nd Test (<i>Benoni</i>):	South Africa 42, England 41.
3 rd Test (<i>Johannesburg</i>):	South Africa 39, England 45.
4 th Test (<i>Johannesburg</i>):	South Africa 40, England 44.

5th Test (*Benoni*): South Africa 40, England 44.

All matches were raced over 14 heats. (For riders scores, see over.)

South Africa	1 st Test	2 nd Test	3 rd Test	4 th Test	5 th Test	Total
Henry Long	11	10	9	11	10	51
Buddy Fuller	5	10	11	8	7	41
Fred Wills	3	6	5	3	5	22
Toby Boshof	5	3	-	4	4	16
Doug Serrurier	2	6	4	2	2	16
Bob Quick	2	3	4	4	-	13
Syd van der Vyfer	-	-	3	4	5	12
Harry du Toit	-	-	2	3	6	11
Joe Blankfield	3	1	-	-	1	5
Oscar Wessman	-	3	1	-	-	4
Bob Serrurier	0	-	-	-	-	0

England	1 st Test	2 nd Test	3 rd Test	4 th Test	5 th Test	Total
Alan Chambers (<i>Poole</i>)	8	12	10	7	10	47
Peter Robinson (<i>Plymouth</i>)	11	7	9	8	9	44
Wilf Plant (<i>Fleetwood</i>)	5	9	11	8	8	41
Ken Middleditch (<i>Hastings</i>)	7	8	8	3	6	32
Ted Gibson (<i>Plymouth</i>)	9	0	3	9	5	26
Ken Tidbury (<i>Hastings</i>)	7	2	2	2	2	15
Jeff Bishop (<i>Wombwell</i>)	3	3	2	6	0	14
Jimmy Dunn (<i>Hastings</i>)	3	0	0	1	4	8

INTERESTING notes about this test series:

- South African International Syd van der Vyfer was capped for the Springboks as a 'natural' only four weeks after starting his speedway career. Before that he was working as a mechanic. He scored three points in his test match debut and was included in the fourth and fifth tests as well.
- Ted Gibson, who rode for England in the series, used to ride with specially made goggles fitted with spectacle lenses.
- Before taking up speedway, Harry Du Toit was a top class South African soccer player. Several English football teams were interested in him one time.
- Alan Chambers raced for England in 1948-49 and South Africa in 1949-50. He had become a naturalized South African.

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For the 1949 season the doors of the British Leagues were further opened for South African riders and many of them began their annual pilgrimage to the Mecca of Speedway that year. Some failed, but others soon established themselves among the best in the world.

Henry Long was the first to appear in Division one with the Belle Vue Aces. Others held down regular team places in Division Three – Buddy Fuller scored 181 points for Hastings, Syd van der Vyfer 15 for Leicester, Doug Serrurier a massive 241 for Liverpool, Fred Wills 179 also for Liverpool, Toby Boshoff 10 for Plymouth and a further 7 points after being transferred to Raleigh.

Not surprisingly, league speedway was soon to be introduced in South Africa, too. There were some problems to overcome, though, as after the 1948-49 season, the home track of the Benoni Lions, which was situated on the grounds of the big Dunswart Iron and Steel Works in Benoni, was closed, and at the same time a couple of other speedway venues at Randfontein and Pretoria also folded.

At the beginning of the 1949-50 SA season, Wembley was the only track in operation and all four teams of the Transvaal Speedway League had to ride their matches at Wembley.

In that year, teams included everyone from star rider to raw novice that was ready and willing to race. To even out the different class of the riders, a handicap system was in operation, at least until the overseas

riders came and were shared between the league teams, to replace the lesser lights of the locals. Captains started 90 yards (81 metres) back. Other heat leaders 60 yards (54m), second strings 30 yards (27m) and reserves started at the tapes. This was the only season when league racing was on a handicap basis – in subsequent seasons all riders started from the tapes.

Teams were six riders taking four rides each, plus two reserves taking two rides each, using the traditional old 14 heat match formula, that was also used in British speedway at the time.

The four teams were: Johannesburg Pirates, Pretoria Tigers, East Rand Eagles and West Rand Dakotas. The unusual "Dakota" nickname arises from the fact that there was a drive-in cafe, which had an old Dakota plane fixed into the roof, which was quite a landmark just west of Johannesburg.

West Rand Dakotas were captained by Fred Wills. Bob Quick and Digger Filer were heat leaders. The Johannesburg Pirates were captained by Henry Long, heat leaders were Syd van der Vyfer and Joe Blankfield.

Pretoria Tigers were captained by Alan Chambers. Toby Boshof and Oscar Wessman were heat leaders. Second strings included Alec Gould and Dirk Schoombie. The Tigers also had pre-war rider Len Rees at reserve, He was one of the last who rode in the spectacular leg-trailing style.

The East Rand Eagles were very much a family affair with no less than five brothers Serrurier in the team. Doug was the captain, Bob was one of the heat leaders, Harry and Jack rode as second strings and Alan was a reserve. The other heat leader was Harry du Toit, while another of the pre-war riders, Godfrey Rabie was the other second string.

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Part 4: "THE EARLY 1950's"

SPEEDWAY racing in South Africa got off to a slow start in the 1949-50 season, with several of the stars away racing in Britain and tracks folding up at Pretoria, Randfontein and Dunswart. With the return of the riders from Overseas, however, things began to improve at Wembley, Johannesburg. The visit of another British team again proved the needed tonic.

Crowds improved as the season went on. Then injuries began to take a toll. Bob Quick was out with a broken collar bone at a very early date, while the most promising boy in speedway, ex-soccer star Harry du Toit, hit the fence and fractured his right leg in six places. Toby Boshof received facial injuries and sprains and strains were commonplace.

As in the previous season, Henry Long was head and shoulders above the others, including the tourists. True, both Alan Chambers and Ken Middleditch beat him in the first half of the season, but his victories over each of them, and the manner of his doing it, stamped him as the brightest star.

Fred Wills benefited considerably from his trip to Britain and Doug Serrurier, too, came back to the Rand a far more polished performer. His young brother Bob, with a good motor, would probably have gone far.

A shrewd tactician, Alan Chambers ranked high with the fans and of the English, Ken Middleditch struck the best form throughout, with Derek Tailby a dashing tryer from gate to flag. Jack Hodgson was good, but the rest of the tourists fell below the form expected of them – or had the locals improved so vastly in the twelve months since the first England team on tour had recorded a 4-1 win in the inaugural test series between the two nations. Could well be that the latter theory is the right explanation! Henry Long was well on the way to become a world class rider, Fred Wills was not far behind and Harry du Toit and Bob Serrurier were hot prospects for the future.

Other than at Wembley, speedway was staged at the 450 yard track at Prince George Park in Boksburg and also at the Bloemfontein Railway Ground, where England's Ken Middleditch established a 4-laps record of 79.60 seconds. There was also some activity on country tracks, such as Klerksdorp. At the beginning of the 50's, speedway was held about once a month there, and it was completely independent and unconnected with any speedway that was carried out anywhere else. They had their own local heroes such as Bob Maddern, Marty Prinsloo and Trigger Dixon. However, when the Klerksdorp riders were invited for some 2nd half racing at Wembley, they were outclassed.

ENGLAND RETURNS

The South Africa v England test series was again won by the tourists, but it was a very close decision, with the Lions gaining a 43-41 win in the fifth match at Wembley to clinch the series by 3 wins to 2.

England, captained by Jack Hodgson, had won the first test 51-33, South Africa drew level by winning the 2nd match 45-39, before the tourists again went one up, winning the third encounter 47-36. The first three tests were all held at the Wembley Stadium. The Springboks then gained their second victory of the series by a score of 49 points to 35 in the one match held at Boksburg, before England clinched the series in the decider at Wembley.

There was a particularly sad ending to the series, as in a crash during the fifth and final Test, young South African international Oscar Wessman sustained severe injuries from which he would die a few days later. In that fateful race Wessman tangled with Ron Clark at the third bend. Though some of the crowd were booing Clark, it wasn't anyone's fault – just a racing accident, with tragic consequences.

Leading scorers of the 1949/50 South Africa v England Test Series:

South Africa – Henry Long (11 10 12 12 12) 57; Fred Wills (7 10 5 10 11) 45; Alan Chambers (7 9 6 9 7) 38; Syd van der Vyver (2 6 3 6 3) 20; Doug Serrurier (- 3 7 2 -) 12; Oscar Wessman (3 3 – 5 0) 11; Bob Serrurier (0 3 2 4 2) 11;

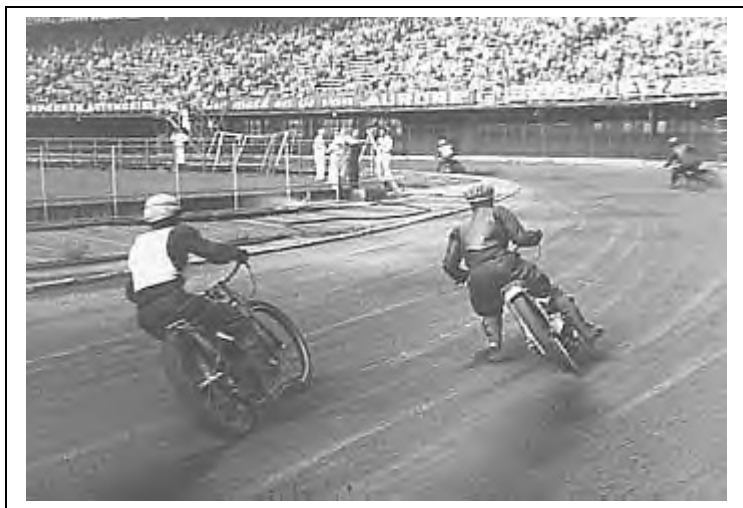
England – Ken Middleditch (9 9 10 8 6) 42; Derrick Tailby (4 8 10 5 10) 37; Jack Hodgson (7 5 8 9 5) 34; Ron Clark (10 7 8 4 5) 34; Peter Robinson (7 5 5 5 9) 31;

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During the following years, the visits of International teams, meeting the Springboks in Test Match combat, provided the highlights of the South African speedway season.

In 1950/51 the visiting team was Holland, then a nation with a professional league set up in their own country, with the famous Feyenoord Stadium in Rotterdam as the centre of speedway activities in the Netherlands. At that point, however, the standard of speedway in South Africa had already arrived at a superior level and Holland, under the captaincy of Jan Bosman, and including top international riders Thei Bischops, Tinus Metzelaar and Ge Jonker, were thrashed out of sight. One of the Dutch team, Joop Nolten, who was also an amateur boxer, wrestler and weightlifter, suffered a broken pelvis and was replaced in mid-tour by Henk Steman.

Steman was a world class rider and immediately strengthened the team. Till then SA had won the first two tests by a wide margin, but Holland made much more of a fight of it when Steman came in, although South Africa still won the series 5-0. The Springboks' star Henry Long remained unbeaten throughout the complete series.



Speedway action from the Olympic Stadium in Amsterdam, Holland 1951

SOUTH AFRICA ON TOUR

In 1951 South Africa went on a return visit to Holland. This was the first time ever that a South African speedway team went to race overseas. The tour was organised by Buddy Fuller, who was also the captain of the team, as well as coach, tour co-ordinator and team manager. The Springboks of '51 rode in Holland, Scandinavia and Germany, and their tour attracted terrific attention in the Union, in spite of the fact, that this wasn't the best

team that we could possibly have sent (for example Henry Long was missing). Still, Newspapers were lavish with their coverage and, just as important, the scribes began to understand the ins-and-outs of the game.

For the 1951/52 season in South Africa, the return of the tourists plus the arrival of a mixed Overseas Select team, including British, New Zealand and Scandinavian riders of above average ability, finally set the seal on a season unequalled in the somewhat stormy annals of cinder shifting in sunny South Africa.

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DURBAN SUCCESS STORY

League racing, a match race championship, lap record attempts and of course the S.A. v Overseas Internationals went over big, and apart from the Transvaal, where at that time all forms of motor sport were

firmly entrenched, the province of Natal, long antagonistic to speedway, was won over. At Durban's Hoy Park Stadium, just off the swagger Marine Parade the "house full" boards went up night after night. With likeable Trevor Redmond on the "mike" and the organising genius of Buddy Fuller at the helm, the Durban public, large numbers of whom were post-war English settlers and educated to speedway racing, thronged the arena.

The atmosphere was tight. Whistles, rattles, hooters and war-cries were evident for the first time in South African speedway. And racing, too, was good. England's Bill Dalton, free-lancing in the Union, confined his activities to Hoy Park and became No.1 with the fans. Riders were drawn from the Transvaal league sides and the overseas tourists, and for most competitors it meant a 400 miles road dash after riding at Jo'burg on Friday evening to be on the spot for the Durban Saturday night shows.

So successful was the Hoy Park venture, that in February 1952 it was decided to continue through the year. Durban winters are mild and furthermore the city is the mecca during June, July and August for tens of thousands of holiday makers from the Transvaal. For Wills, Long, Fuller and all the other top-notchers the option of wintering in Durban ruled out a return visit to Scandinavia.

Boksburg, another track to operate during the 1951/52 season, failed to draw the fans consistently, although Godfrey Rabie, ex-rider turned promoter, made tremendous efforts. The big stuff at Boksburg had magnetic appeal, but too few major meetings were allotted to this fine East Rand circuit.

Unfortunately the flow of recruits of real ability and experience did not keep up with the demand and apart from Fred van Zyl, a real flyer, the names which had graced the programmes over the years still held pride of place in the meets that mattered.

Top man with the fiercely partisan Jo'burg crowd was Henry Long. After a not-as-good-as-usual start he suddenly struck form and proceeded to annihilate opposition and records alike. Fred Wills also had his moments but the Serrurier brothers found the going harder. Doug was still the fastest of the bunch while Bob came on form late in the campaign.

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BENEFITED FROM EUROPEAN WANDERINGS

Bob Raw, Maurice Fenton, Toby Boshof, Harry du Toit, Joe and Alex Blankfield showed lots of dash on occasions and obviously benefited considerably from their wanderings round Europe. Fuller started the 1951/52 season like a bomb and in spite of a hundred and one other speedway duties kept well in the upper bracket.

Of the visitors, the New Zealanders Geoff Mardon and Trevor Redmond captured the imagination of the fans, and always received a fine hand, as did Englishmen Ken Middleditch, Reg Duval, Jock Grierson and Tony Lewis. The rest of the overseas team consisted of a Scandinavian trio, Henry Andersen (Norway), Sune Karlsson and Einar Lindqvist (Sweden).

All round, South African machine preparation was much superior to that of the visitors, who, it must be said, made up in technique for what they lacked in sheer speed. And only when Mardon dropped out with badly torn shoulder muscles did South Africa win a test against Overseas – the third.

Back to the local angle. In the second half of the season newcomers began to make their mark thanks to perseverance with the Transvaal league racing and Roy Bester turned in a creditable performance by capturing the S.A. junior title on New Year's day of 1952 with a 15pt. maximum.

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LONG IS S.A. NUMBER ONE

The senior S.A. championship title was won by Henry Long. The South African number one continued his successful run into his European season, where he rode for the Belle Vue Aces club in Manchester. Long's finest hour came on Thursday, September 18, 1952, when he was the first ever South African rider to appear in the final of the World Speedway Championship.

In those days the World Final was traditionally staged at the Empire Stadium in London (Wembley), after a season long series of qualifying rounds held all over Britain and continental Europe. From his five rides, Long scored 7 points from three second places, one third and one last. This gave him joint 8th place in the sixteen strong field, to this day, the highest ever position achieved by a South African rider in the world speedway championships.

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BRIGHT FUTURE IN AFRICA

Everyone in South Africa expected to see speedway on a national basis within the next couple of years - the only conclusion possible in view of the 1951/52 success when the sport drew bigger than ever crowds at Wembley, Johannesburg, and hit the jack-pot immediately on being tried at Hoy Park, Durban.

The Wembley promotion were due to break new ground at Cape Town having received permission to run three meetings there during the Tercentenary celebrations of the colonisation of South Africa by Jan Riebeeck. Activity was also likely at Port Elizabeth, where a local boxing promoter was seeking sanction from the local council to lay down a course at one of the main football stadiums.

Furthermore it was not just the Union of South Africa, where the sport grew. The Rhodesians were on their way to introduce British style short-track racing. Planning began in April 1951, and in July a demonstration was held at Bulawayo. The local city council agreed that the practise cricket ground could be developed as a quarter-mile speedway. At the end of the year, Buddy Fuller came up from Jo'burg and inspected the site, in view to take South African riders to race there in future.

The Rhodesians were already used to big-track stuff on circuits a mile to a mile and a quarter, which was popular in the copperbelt region of Northern Rhodesia. And they had already had a crack at 440yards racing on a course at Luanshya (N.R.), that attracted as many as 5,000 Africans to a Sunday meet.

In the early 50's speedway was also getting popular in East Africa, where more than 18,000 people assembled in August of 1951 in the African Stadium of Nairobi, Kenya, to see the first real attempt at speedway racing there. Meetings were staged on a monthly basis. Top racers were Mohamed Shaffi, Pat Dale and Mohamed Ashan, with riders coming from as far away as Mombasa (on the coast) and Kampala (Uganda).

One unusual fact about Speedway in East Africa concerns some riders' head gear. There had been a special amendment in A.C.U. rules to allow the many Sikhs to wear turbans without crash helmets, providing they are securely fixed! Most of the riding fraternity in Kenya were Sikhs, who, for religious reasons, are never without their flamboyant turbans.

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Part 5: "WORLD STARS RACE IN THE UNION"

THE success of the 1951/52 season had given South African speedway a tremendous boost, which with the opening of the Hoy Park venue in Durban led to an expansion of the Transvaal league to become the National League in **1952/53**. Initially there were still only three regular speedway tracks in operation at Wembley, Boksburg and Durban, where all the league matches were raced. But soon other venues opened up for the sport at Randfontein and Springs. However, the track at Prince George Park in Boksburg closed down.

A NIGHT OUT AT WEMBLEY

Wembley certainly remained the main track in South Africa. It was a quarter mile circuit (400m) and from the days of its opening meeting until its closure about 10 years later, the track was covered with a cinder surface. Racing was always on Friday nights, and the ritual was that at 8pm the track marshals would march out of the pits (at the first bend) towards the tapes, followed by the riders, always to the tune of "March of the Gladiators"!

The bikes would be waiting near the start line and all the riders would do a couple of slow laps for the crowd. How big a crowd? The capacity of Wembley was something like 10,000 to 12,000. And most Friday nights there would be at least 5,000 to 6,000 in those days – and a full house for Internationals.

The name of the Wembley promoter was Gilbert Brown. In the years between 1948 and 1958 he tried a number of "gimmicks" as well. First, there was handicap racing, used in the first season of League racing. Then there were attempts on the one lap flying lap record. There were the popular match race championships, and eventually came the introduction of midget cars. In 1953 two of these car races were staged at Wembley. The first of these was in the second half of an ordinary speedway meeting.

The second was a special meeting devoted to midget cars. The list of hot rod drivers included Les Cooper, Billy Dunlop, Norman Kent, Stan and Curley Johnson – AND the star pilot of the second meeting was former

pre-war lady speedway rider Fay Tylour, who had come across from Australia for the occasion.

In the Sixties, it would be the cars to take over the sole reign at Wembley. There was no more speedway at the famous Wembley track when the surface was changed from cinder to tarmac.

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THE 1952/53 SEASON

In the early fifties, touring teams from overseas regularly visited South Africa, and in the 1952/53 season not just one but even two such teams arrived in the Union to face the Springboks in Test matches.

The campaign opened with the visit of a combined European team, headed by the flying Norwegian Basse Hveem. And flying was certainly the operative word, for during his stay Basse had the edge on South African number one Henry Long, who at that time was regarded as nearly unbeatable in his homeland, and on rising New Zealand star Ronnie Moore, a future twice world champion in 1954 and 1959. Only bad luck in the shape of an engine blow-up after defeating both Long and Moore, stopped the Norwegian in the Wembley Championship, won by Long on 14 points, from Moore, 13, and Hveem, 12. Among the Europeans the fair-haired Hveem stood out like a colossus. No records seemed beyond his grasp, no rider his master (except the brilliant Fred Wills, who retained the S. A. Match Race title against the Norwegian early in the season) and certainly no visitor had ever had such a fast motor or received such an ovation from the hard-bitten Rand spectators.

The rest of the squad were poorly mounted. Tinus Metzelaar (Holland) broke a leg after starting well, and deputy Bill Dalton (England), a sound performer at Durban, substituted for Europe in the Tests. Once or twice Karl Killmeyer (Austria) turned in smart performances. Killmeyer was quite a personality, and he had a singing voice. In order to publicise speedway more, he wrote, sang and recorded a pop song called "Speedway Fox" which became quite popular in Austria, and as he took the record with him on his South African tour, it was played over the loudspeakers at Wembley.

The rest of the Europe team showed occasional flashes. Josef Hofmeister (Germany) and Reidar Kristoffersen (Norway) failed to impress, though the two Swedes Evert Andersson and Bertil Carlsson gave a fair account of themselves in the Tests, won 3-2 by the Springboks.

Big Union find in this series was Roy Bester, the 1952 SA Junior champion. Other homesters in the limelight apart from Long, Wills and Bester, were Harry du Toit, on a new machine, the spirited Joe and Alec Blankfield and a more dashing Bob Raw. While the youthful Lang brothers Fred and Doug improved with each outing, the established Bob and Doug Serrurier, triers every yard, found the ball running against them.

All Test Matches were staged at Wembley, except for the fourth test, which took place in Durban.

South Africa v Europe (1952) Leading scorers:

South Africa – Roy Bester (15, 15, 12, 7, 10) 59; Fred Wills (6, -, 12, 15, 14) 47;
Henry Long (-, -, 16, 8, 16) 40; Bob Raw 8, 14, 3, -, 14) 39; Joe Blankfield (13, 5, 7, - 9) 34;
Europe – Basse Hveem (17, 14, 18, 15, 18) 82; Karl Killmeyer (1, 9, 9, 16, 3) 38;
Bertil Carlsson (5, 11, 8, 3, 5) 32; Evert Andersson (6, 11, 7, 5, 3) 32;

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SOUTH AFRICA V NEW ZEALAND (1953)

Due to Jack Cunningham breaking his leg, New Zealand were down to six men in the Tests. They lost the first 53-55 in a terrific finish at Wembley. Long, who brought the 4-lap record down to 73.40, scored 15 points and was well backed up by Raw (11) and Bester (9).

Ronnie Moore (16), Dick Campbell (12) and Trevor Redmond (11) topped for the visitors, as they did with totals of 13, 13 and 12 respectively in the next match, which went to the Kiwis by 58-50, in spite of 17 each from Long and Bester plus a solid 8 from Wills. A very young Barry Briggs, later to become a 4-times world champion, also had a good meeting scoring 9 points.

South Africa clinched the series 2-1 with a convincing 60-41 triumph over the Kiwis in the third and final Test. Top scorers for S.A. were Long (15), Bester (13) and Wills (11), with Moore scoring 13 for N.Z.

n.b. *The SA v NZ Tests were in fact a 5 match series. The results of the last two Tests were as follows:*

4th Test - 57-49 to NZ, top scorers for NZ were Briggs 16 and Moore 13, for SA Henry Long with an 18 point maximum;

5th Test - 55-53 to SA, top scorers for SA were Long 14, Bob Serrurier 12 and Harry du Toit 11, for NZ Ronnie Moore 13, Trevor Redmond 11 and Briggs 10.

The series, therefore, went to SA by 3-2. All matches were held at Wembley Stadium, Johannesburg.

An unofficial 6th match was held at Prince George Park, Boksburg and was won by SA 55-53. Top scorers were, Henry Long and Roy Bester for SA with 17 points each and Redmond and Moore with 13 points apiece for NZ.

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MATCH RACES

The monthly contested S.A. match race championship was very popular. Fred Wills had been the holder of the title in late 1952, defeating Bester 2 – 0, Hveem 2 – 0 and even Long 2 – 0, before losing out to Ronnie Moore, again by a 2 – 0 score. In February's match race event at Boksburg, Moore beat Bester in an incredible three race series by the highly unusual score of 1 win to nil, after dead heats in their first and third race!

Moore was dethroned by Long at the end of the season. After losing the first run narrowly, Long was masterly coming from behind in the remaining races, on the outside then the inside, to triumph 2 – 1.

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LEAGUE RACING

The former Transvaal League became a true National League when Durban Hornets joined in 1952/53. In their inaugural season, the Hornets had no lesser light than Basse Hveem as their team captain.

Overseas riders had played a big part in the successful launching of a league programme in the Transvaal. For the highly successful 1951/52 Transvaal League season the "honourable South African" Trevor Redmond (a New Zealander) and Reg Duval rode for the Germiston Stars, Geoff Mardon and Tony Lewis were allocated to the Boksburg Bees, Sweden's Sune Carlsson joined the Pretoria Tigers, who were captained by Henry Long, while the league winning Wembley Lions were led by that evergreen of a rider Buddy Fuller and boosted the services of Englishmen Ken Middleditch and Jock Grierson.

It is interesting to note that in 1951/52 there were only two tracks (Boksburg and Wembley) and the „homeless“ teams from Pretoria and Germiston had to ride all their matches on either one of those two tracks. This policy continued in subsequent years and ensured that a league competition was at all possible, when there were simply not enough tracks around to give a sufficient number of league clubs a home of their own. Likewise, the foreign riders were needed to bolster all the teams since there were not enough South African riders around.

In 1953 Boksburg had been lost as a venue for the sport, but on the East Rand there was a new track at Springs, operated by Trevor Redmond, who rapidly earned himself a reputation of becoming a second "Buddy Fuller" acting as rider, promoter, track announcer, tour organiser and so on.

The team formerly known as the Germiston Stars made Springs their home, while another new venue for the sport was found in Randfontein, which became the home of a new team, the Rockets!

With Durban Hornets being based at their tiny Hoy Park track and the Wembley Lions already well established in Johannesburg, the only team still 'homeless' at this time was Pretoria.

It may be of interest to recollect for which clubs the touring British riders rode in the 1953/54 season. Bill Kitchen and Reg Duval joined rider/promoter Trevor Redmond at Springs, Brian Crutcher and Bill Griffiths went to Randfontein. Durban had the services of freelance New Zealanders Peter Dykes and Dick Campbell as well as English immigrant Roy Browning. World champion Fred Williams, along with his brother Ian and the Irishman Dom Perry rode for Pretoria. The lone overseas rider allocated to the mighty Wembley Lions was Howdy Byford, though Ian Williams would have joined him there, but was a late switch to ride for Pretoria, to replace the injured Bob Raw.

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SOUTH AFRICA V ENGLAND (1953/54)

The visiting England team of 1953/54 was one of the most high profile touring troupes ever to have visited

South Africa. Captained by the then reigning world champion Freddie Williams (actually a Welshman), the team included several star names of the highest calibre, such as fellow world finalists Bill Kitchen and Brian Crutcher. It is an indication of the high standard of South African speedway at that time, that the Springboks were able to match themselves against this England team, eventually losing the five match series 3 to 1, with one match drawn.

The First Test ended with an exciting 54-54 draw at Wembley. England led by 52-50 after 17 heats and had their star riders Brian Crutcher and Bill Kitchen in the final race of this 18-heat match. For South Africa, brothers Fred and Doug Lang were out there, hoping for a rather unlikely 5-1 to win the match for SA . Fred indeed took first place, but Doug was beaten into third, so the heat result was a 4-2 to South Africa, which levelled the overall scores at 54-all, and so, for the first time ever in South African speedway, a Test Match ended in a draw.

The second Test, held at Springs, and the third at Randfontein, were both won by England. There was a dead heat finish between Fred Lang and England's Dom Perry (actually an Irishman capped for England, since Ireland did not have a national team of their own). The result of that Second Test thus was a bit unusual with half points coming into the game, England won 61.5 to 44.5.

No such complications at Randfontein, where the result was a clear 62-45 win for the English. Yet the Springboks came back with a 56-51 win at Wembley in Johannesburg, when once again Henry Long top scored with 16 points, before the tourists made sure to take the series win with a 57-51 triumph at Hoy Park in Durban. For this final match, England were weakened by the absence of both Fred Williams and Bill Kitchen.

And it was in that Durban meeting that a youngster by the name of Doug Davies made his Test Match debut for the Springboks, scoring a highly credible 8 points. Davies, like many other talented young riders of that time, had been a product of cycle speedway, which was quite popular among teenagers before they were old enough to ride a 500cc motorbike. It was obvious right then, that Davies was a bright new discovery for South African speedway.

Leading Scorers:

South Africa – Henry Long (12,11, 12, 16, 9) 60; Fred Lang (13, 10.5, 12, 12, 12) 59.5; Harry du Toit (13, 6, 7, 3, 12) 40; Fred Wills (2, 5, 0, 3, 5) 18; Roy Bester (1, 4, -, 6, 4) 15;

England – Brian Crutcher (17, 18, 18, 16, 15) 84; Fred Williams (13, 17, 18, 15, -) 63; Dom Perry (2, 10.5, 8, 5, 13) 38.5; Bill Kitchen (13, 11, 8, 5, -) 37; Ian Williams (1, 3, 8, 5, 2) 19;

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Cont'd: Part VI