

“The Blossoming Jacaranda Tree”

by Dick Barrie

A chapter from the book “Ivan Mauger's World Speedway Book”, published in 1973.

The bright track lighting contrasts the inky black sky over the stadium and picks out the four riders moving away from the pits area to the starting gate. The shirt-sleeved crowd murmurs in anticipation and officials on the trim, lush centre green prepare for the start of the race. The scene is a familiar one to any speedway enthusiast, but the constant chirruping of the crickets in the long grass behind the pits and the heavy aroma of the purple jacaranda blossoms that drip from every branch of the trees around the arena tell the onlooker that this is not Coventry, Poole or Wimbledon he has strayed into - here speedway is staged seven thousand miles to the south of the English Channel. This is Glamis Stadium, Salisbury, Rhodesia!

Although speedway as it has developed has been raced in Australasia and Europe for close on fifty years, outside these two continents there have been only spasmodic bursts of action over the years. Following the 1939-45 war there was a general rise in interest in the sport in both America and South Africa, but these areas seemed to lose interest by the early 'fifties and activity had tailed off completely by the latter years of that decade.

Just about everyone holding an interest in speedway will know that there has been a rapid and exciting re-emergence of Californian interest in the past five years or so, but down in Africa - the fabled Dark Continent - there has been an equally encouraging re-development of speedway interest in both South Africa and Rhodesia in the 'seventies, all the more surprising perhaps when one remembers that this is a part of the world that has been steeped in political turmoil for a number of years now. Why then has this complex and addictive business of two-wheeled shale-shifting come roaring back into African popularity of late? Settle a little deeper into your armchair, put your feet on the cat, and read on...

The parts of Africa that had been in the main colonised by emigrants of British stock, together with many other nations, enjoyed speedway in a first wild splash of interest in 1928 or even earlier, but the bubble quickly burst at that time and it was not until the immediate post-war years that the sport was again seen by African spectators. Renewed interest in the period from 1947-49 saw speedway gaining a foothold in Johannesburg, at the city's Wembley Stadium, but in outer regions and further north in Nyasaland and the two Rhodesias there was at this time no sign of life on the speedway front.

By 1950 there was league racing spread throughout South Africa, and riders from Britain and other Commonwealth nations were flocking to winter in the dazzling sunshine of Johannesburg and Durban, while further up country, in Southern Rhodesia, there were spasmodic meetings being staged at Bulawayo Showgrounds. Many of the riders who sailed out from Southampton (no Boeing 747 comfort for travellers in those days!) at this time were, or would go on to become, household names on the British scene, and some - such as Barry Briggs, Ronnie Moore and Freddie Williams - would later don the World Championship crown, doubtless aided by their all-year-round racing schedule. Many young riders were to thank a winter season of sunshine speedway for the little boost their careers required to lift them above the pack in later years, but it must also be remembered that Alan Hunt and Terry Courtneil were to lose their lives while on tour, Alan as the result of a track accident and Terry in a car smash.

Sad to say however, by 1955 the sport had ebbed away in Southern Rhodesia for the time being, while squabbles between rival promotions and a worldwide depression in speedway affairs generally brought the tours to South Africa to an end the following year, leaving the Springboks only a few semi-professional meetings each year to keep a faint spark of interest flickering. One man who refused to allow the sport to die completely was veteran promoter Bob Madden who had opened up for business at his Klerksdorp (Transvaal) circuit away back in 1947 and who is still plugging away, running regular meetings for the local enthusiasts and riders, to this day!

By the time the late 'sixties happened along, speedway in Southern Africa had been virtually dead and buried for over ten years however, and when a young Scottish speedway rider named Alex Hughson took himself off on a winter's trip to Africa in a battered and tattered old van, there had been no speedway of any kind in Rhodesia for twelve or thirteen years at least. As the country had been in the world's eyes

during this period of time only as a result of Prime Minister Ian Smith's dramatic declaration of independence some years before Alex's safari brought him south of the Zambezi, it is perhaps more than a little surprising that the young Hughson ever pitched up in this little-visited, if idyllic, republic set deep in the heart of the Dark Continent!

Arrive he did though, and so much did he like the country - and even then there was perhaps a dream forming at the back of his mind - that although he was to return to his native Scotland some months later to resume his business of riding speedway as a member of the Coatbridge team, it was often that his conversation would touch on matters Rhodesian and it came as little surprise to either his team-mates or his friends at home in Edinburgh when, shortly after his marriage in the closing months of 1969 to the charming Miss Sandi Vyse, Alex announced that the newly-wed Hughsons were to make a return to the land that Alex had chosen for their future - leaving Edinburgh early in 1970, again by road, in a specially-converted VW unit that was to carry them triumphantly to their destination.

On arriving in Salisbury, Alex returned to his former trade as a printer, an occupation that had supported him during his off-track moments in Scotland, but even in these early days he was already looking, asking, probing and evaluating just about every aspect of the local sporting and entertainment scene, examining the possibility of his dream - by now foremost in his mind - of bringing speedway racing, the sport he loved and so much enjoyed being part of, to his adopted country. If Alex's emigration was little surprise, his next moves most certainly raised many an eyebrow, both in Britain and in Salisbury, when his name popped up on the agendas of local planning department courts, of Council meetings and in the columns



Rhodesian Stock Car Champion Eddy McNamara (left) and exiled Scot Roni Ferguson—one of the country's top speedway stars—visit a Salisbury Children's Home

of local press features, when the personable young Scot calmly announced his firm intention of single-handedly reviving the sport of speedway racing, not just in Salisbury - where the sport had never even been seen before - but in Bulawayo and Gwelo as well! When Alex would casually add that 'South Africa would come later' there were even more looks of amazement, but at this stage it is doubtful if the full import of his intentions was being grasped by many of his listeners.

To open a speedway track in Great Britain is obviously a costly and very difficult task which calls for meticulous research and planning, but at least there are certain advantages for the potential promoter in the United Kingdom. For a start, there are ready supplies of willing and experienced riders with speedway equipment who can form the basis of his team, and there are established leagues for his team to apply to for membership. Not so, of course, in the Rhodesia of 1970, where Alex Hughson was quite possibly just about the only person in sight who had even HEARD of the sport, let alone envisage it running at three centres in the land within three months of the general disclosure of his plans!

Never a man to be deterred by doubters - and there were many at this time who probably were doubting his sanity, let alone his business acumen - the Edinburgh lad decided that he may as well take the bull by the horns and set up, not only his own three tracks but his own league, import the required number of riders from British League circles to staff his three teams, and - in his own words - produce 'instant speedway' from the word go! If Rhodesia was stunned, so was the British speedway scene. Advertisements soon appeared in the British press covering the sport, to offer positions on the tour to interested riders, and although there were few replies from established English riders, the younger school of British and Commonwealth men were quick to apply and on Christmas Eve of 1970, still perhaps a little unsure of exactly what they were heading into, a dozen British League riders of vastly varying experience flew out of London's Heathrow Airport into the startlingly bright sunshine of Salisbury.

While these riders were preparing for their journey, and despatching as many machines and spares as they could lay their hands on to Port Elizabeth in South Africa by boat, from there to be trucked overland to Salisbury, the promotional company set up by Alex Hughson and now embracing his two

partners Andy Whyte and Ginger Grant, had won their fight with the planners and gained the blessing of Salisbury's city fathers to present the sport at the magnificent Glamis Stadium, set in the heart of the city's General Showgrounds. Options to present speedway at Bulawayo Showgrounds - scene of many a meeting in the 'fifties, but now without a trace of the original track - and at an almost derelict site in Gwelo, charmingly named the Old Newmarket Stadium, had also been taken up and construction work was in progress as tracks were laid down at all three centres in less than three weeks!

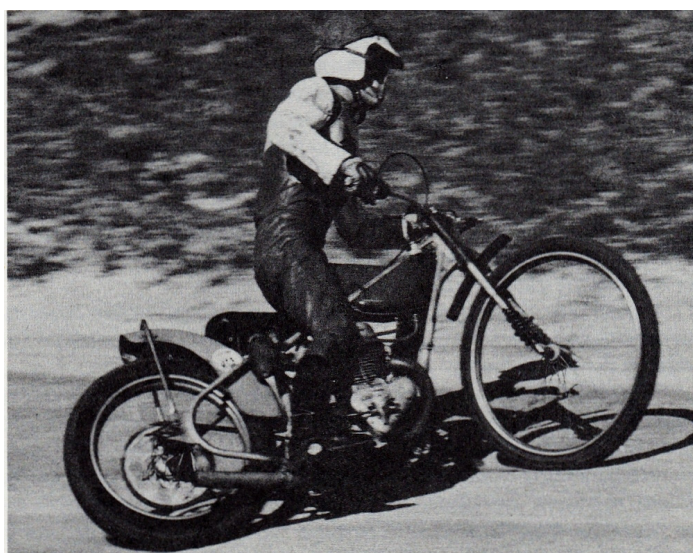


An historic picture: the field for the 1972 Rhodesian Championship, the first time a multi-national line-up has fought out the title

This high-speed laying of the race strips had in itself caused crisis upon crisis, as only Alex had any real idea of what a speedway track really comprised, and the enormous importance of size, shape and surface that can make or break the spectacle of the sport for both riders and spectators. Various types of local minerals had to be tested for suitability and graded for consistency, and the construction of the three tracks proceeded in smart order to ensure readiness for the scheduled openings nights in the first week of January, 1971. At times Alex Hughson was driving almost constantly from one town or city to the next, coaxing and cajoling his workers to the highest efforts possible in that hazy, crazy December, and there were times near the completion dates that saw him almost completely at a standstill, having worked for days and nights on end without sleep, being interviewed on Rhodesian Television at noon, driving to Bulawayo (three hundred miles to the south!) immediately after the transmission to check on track details and by early the next morning speaking to newspapermen in Gwelo, over a hundred miles from Bulawayo!

It fell to the Salisbury centre to witness the first meeting, and although pre-match curiosity had indicated that Alex's hope for a 'gate' in excess of five thousand paying customers was not beyond the realms of possibility, the days immediately before the meeting must have been testing times for the promotion. The fateful day - January 6th of 1971 - dawned at last, and an attendance of no less than 16,564 good people of Salisbury flooded into Glamis Stadium to see what this speedway caper was all about, and after the start of the meeting had been held up for fully forty-five minutes at the request of the police to allow as many spectators as possible into the ground, two Australian riders, Geoff Curtis and Bob Young, and Englishmen Graham Plant and Barry Duke roared away from the tapes in the first-ever race in the city of Salisbury! Plant raced past the chequered flag just 81.8 seconds later to win the heat, and a curious silence hung-over the stadium, slowly giving way to an ever-rising buzz of excited conversation in the big crowd - they liked it

They liked it at Bulawayo when Laurie Etheridge of Hackney won the trophy in their 'revival' meeting as well, and even little Gwelo - a township of less than eight thousand people - was sending over half its citizens to the Sunday afternoon meetings at Old Newmarket, where Norwegian favourite Oyvind Berg was king of the castle, in these wild, impossible days of that opening season, when Alex Hughson turned 'instant speedway' into instant success, when he and his partners ran twenty-five meetings in only fifty-nine days with only twelve riders who had previously seen speedway racing let alone ridden it, when three tracks spaced out on a three hundred mile line were brought to life from nothing, and when a grand total of over 200,000 people came into these three arenas to see what it was all about!



An unusual shot of Norway's Oyvind Berg at Gwelo

For the riders too, the short but so sweet trip was the making of more than a few of the young men who had been forward-thinking enough to grasp the opportunity of making the trip, and riders such as Curtis, Plant, Englishman Dave Jessup and little Bobby Beaton from Scotland - all of who had been at best only reserves or second-strings with their British outfits when they set out - came romping back to start their 1971 campaigns as fully-fledged heat leaders! Scottish novice Jim Gallacher had his first real taste of team racing on this trip as well, and Bob Young was another rider to benefit hugely from wintering in the hot sunshine of Africa at this time.

Understandably flushed with his successes, Alex Hughson refused to rest on his laurels in any way and planned a bigger and better season for the following British close season, even making a short trip home to cast his eyes over the latest crop of young riders and the newer methods of speedway presentation at the more go-ahead B.L. centres. In spite of his careful background preparation and the engagement of a vastly more experienced squad of riders to re-staff the three sides, little good was to come of this second season of sunshine speedway however, despite the careful groundwork by the promotion.

Shortly before his season opened, Alex Hughson sat down and explained to me that, as he had carefully selected the most competent riders for his purpose to set up the teams alongside the rising crop of young Rhodesians who had flocked into the sport after the opening series of meetings (one of whom, Peter Prinsloo, had even gone so far as to travel to Britain that summer and had shown remarkable progress in a short spell while riding in the colours of both Wembley and Ipswich) and as he had carefully blended into his promotion every proven ingredient that appeared to have found success in Britain that year, only what he termed an 'unforeseen disaster' could prevent Rhodesian speedway from blossoming even more brightly in this second season of its rebirth.

Disaster was right! The earlier Hughson jest about 'instant speedway' backfired on him with a vengeance when Alex discovered the one thing that one could not do with his 'instant' product - add water! The heaviest, most unexpected and most frequent rains in over seventy years swept Rhodesia - nearly always on speedway nights - that season, cancelling eight meetings from the schedule and affecting an amazing twenty-three out of the remaining thirty meetings on the fixture lists, although these meetings could at least be staged. Attendances plummeted, for the average Rhodesian will just not budge from his home if he feels that rain is even threatening, and the second season ended with an air of gloom - although not of despondency - hanging over the promotion, who were punctilious about the settlement of every commitment made to each of the touring riders, despite their heavy operating losses over the term.

For the riders on this tour, the weather must have been about the only disappointment however, as once again the trip proved that Rhodesia was the place for a rider to 'find himself' and return to Britain an improved young man. Jessup took another huge leap forward on this trip, and Scottish youngster Brian Collins was another who was a much improved shale-shifter on his taking to track in Poole's colours in 1972. The red-haired Australian Bluey Valentine was able to clinch a full team place at Sheffield by

courtesy of his Gwelo rides on this trip, and scrambler Tom Leadbitter almost set the Midlands aflame by his immediate success in Wolverhampton on flying home.

Alex Hughson faced problems at this stage of course, but few Scots are defeatists and Alex merely sat down and thought hard on the subject of the future - and paid the first of several visits over the Limpopo to South Africa to check up on the state of closed-circuit motor sport in the former dominion. Although speedway had of course long since faded from South Africa's big-city arenas, stock-car racing was still hauling in impressive crowds, and Alex decided that he could perhaps afford to re-examine his policies in the light of this information.

Why not, argued Alex to himself, rethink our programmes along the lines that have proved successful in Australia and New Zealand for so many years and combine the interests of our regular speedway supporter and his stock-car cousin, with perhaps some midget-car racing and sidecar events thrown in? Although it was a blow to abandon his bikes-only meetings at this stage - and he himself admits that, with the better weather that was experienced the following season, there may well have still been a full market for solo speedway without the addition of the cars - Alex has always tried to remember that a promoter's first concern should be for his public, not his pocket, and if the average Rhodesian spectator has now become accustomed to watching both cars and bikes in one meeting, that is quite all right with Mr Hughson!

Following the close of that second, rain soaked, season that squelched to a halt in the (British) spring of 1972, Alex and his long-time buddy Roni Ferguson (a former Edinburgh junior rider who had emigrated to Rhodesia in 1971 and has since then carved himself quite a reputation on track as a rider with a tremendous will to win under Rhodesian conditions), set about the long and difficult business of converting first the Salisbury track and fittings, then those at Bulawayo, to dual-purpose arenas that could cater equally for cars and bikes.

To build a safety fence that is strong enough to halt a two-ton car in full flight, yet that is still within the stringent and very necessary safety regulations that are required for the full protection of solo speedway riders, is not without its problems and the twosome expounded the various requirements time and again to their workforces at the two circuits to ensure that all was in order. Finally all the work was completed, and Alex was once again rewarded by five-figured attendances at both the tracks when he reopened his programmes with the mixed car and bike events, although by this time it was clear that, with the passing of the speedway league that had been one of the prime reasons for its inception in the first place, the Gwelo track must fall by the wayside.

Once again, all was well on the Rhodesian speedway front, and since that time the sport has continued to flourish as the main two-wheeled nation in Africa, with Prinsloo now receiving challenges for his twice-won National Championship title from such rapidly-improving youngsters as 21-year-old Pip Harris, both of whose brothers are also experienced riders, and 17-year-old Mike Ferreira. The British League boys still come a-calling each close-season, and the place must definitely hold some attraction, for the lanky Bob Young and Scotsman Jimmy Gallacher have now made the trip no less than three times!

If the reintroduction of speedway to Rhodesia was of an immediate nature, the sport's more recent - and to date more modest - comeback further south in South Africa has been a more gradual process. The solid perseverance of Bob Madden at Klerksdorp had kept just a spark alive since the 'fifties of course, and a team of sorts had even been recruited at Klerksdorp by the former English star Dennis Newton (who had emigrated to Johannesburg a decade earlier), and had made a short tour of the Rhodesian tracks early in 1971. Although they suffered huge defeats each time out the potential of at least one young man - named Ettienne Olivier - had stood out clearly.



Malcolm Brown at Matopas village near Bulawayo.

In the cities the former circuits had all been tarmac-covered to cater for the cars however, and this seemed to be the greatest drawback to the Hughson inspired African revival spreading south. Alex Hughson is one determined young man however, and following several trips over the border to discuss matters with various organisations in South Africa, he won over an important ally late in 1972 when he finally persuaded the doyen of South African promoters, veteran Buddy Fuller, of the viability of the running of speedway again, and Buddy - never a man to do things by halves, it seems - promptly ripped up the tar at his three main venues, at Johannesburg's Wembley Stadium, the Alan Ford Stadium at Durban's Hoy Park and the Dunswart Arena at Benoni, relaying all three with shale to give speedway a fair run, albeit in mixed meetings alongside the proven attraction of cars.

Fuller had several advantages that had been denied to his Rhodesian counterparts when they had commenced operations, in that he already had a nucleus of local riders from the Klerksdorp venue from which he could build up a programme of events, and he had 'in Rhodesia a neighbouring country from which he could 'borrow' visiting star men to make relatively inexpensive 'one-night-stands' at his tracks, and it was in this manner that the re-establishment of big-city speedway in South Africa was undertaken.

Following the obvious delight of his patrons at the presentation of two-wheeled racing again, Fuller contacted Alex Hughson and set up a series of unofficial Test matches at his circuits between South Africa and Rhodesia, a series which saw the home side heavily defeated by a visiting squad that was just a little too experienced and fresh from regular, hard racing, but it was this series - which incidentally saw the return to the saddle of promoter Hughson - that really proved the viability of top-grade speedway on the Springbok tracks.

The South African authorities were anxious to consolidate the position that speedway had gained in the public eye through the Tests with Rhodesia, but every effort to engage a touring side with British connections was to prove in vain, despite numerous rumours having done their annual rounds in England that 'this year a SA trip was on at last', and promoter Fuller, tiring perhaps of the lack of British action over such a tour possibility, pulled the very boldest of strokes by coolly inviting over the best four-man American side he could engage on a four- week tour!

The Yanks, led by their National Champion Rick Woods and with young Mike Curuso being backed up by Sumner McKnight and the blond-haired Scott Autrey, both of whom joined Woods in British League racing in 1973, were far too strong for the South Africans but the tour was a wild success. Ground records were broken at both Wembley and Durban, and when near the end of their stay the Americans were matched in an individual competition with several of the British League riders that had been imported by Alex Hughson for action on the Rhodesian tracks, the Springbok spectators were at last able to realise just how good speedway could be.

All the American youngsters proved to be excellent and superb showmen as well as skilful riders, with Woods the standout on both counts. The fact that they were all able to collect such good results in competition with British-based riders of fair quality could well have influenced Autrey, McKnight and Woods in the decision they later undertook to do the British season instead of their domestic one the following summer, while the progress shown by a couple of South Africans in the series has also prompted

Ettienne Olivier and Danie Fourie to seek further experience in Europe since that time.

Following the departure of the U.S. riders, the Dunswart circuit was again surfaced with tarmac, but with both Hoy Park and Wembley going from strength to strength on the solo side, and with enthusiasm also building up for the solo sections at some of the other up-country circuits such as Klerksdorp, it seems that - like their Rhodesian neighbours - the South Africans can look forward to a



American Champion Rick Woods in action at Johannesburg's Wembley Stadium

further lease of life for the sport in their country, and with careful management and promotion, and an absence of exploitation, there is little reason why speedway cannot at this point in time look forward to a much longer lifespan in both South Africa and Rhodesia than it has previously been allowed to enjoy in previous instances. Certainly the complete sell out in attendance at Durban for the Final of the 1973 South African Championship, eventually won by the experience of the veteran Dennis Newton from Scot Jimmy Gallacher and Rhodesia's Peter Prinsloo, must give the Springbok speedfans every confidence that the sport is now back in their land to stay!

Having thus surveyed the scene in both African countries in which speedway is currently staged - and with the possible exception of Angola, it seems likely these are the only two in which the sport is ever likely to be staged in the foreseeable future - we can thus look forward to the future of the game in Southern Africa. The continuing absence from all forms of motor sport of the political issues that have clouded African sport for some time now is of course a blessing, and one which we can only hope will remain in speedway's favour. The sport is flourishing in Southern Africa, and the continuing emergence of further local talent to join the men who have already shown natural ability within a short space of time, will no doubt assist local interest yet further.

Young riders such as the truly remarkable Prinsloo in Rhodesia, as well as his previously-mentioned rivals Harris and Ferreira, and the younger set of South Africans led by Olivier and backed up by the Fourie brothers and Tommy Fox - all of whom have benefited hugely from the visits to their tracks of Alex Hughson's riders from British circuits each year - are now taking over the mantles worn for so long in South Africa by the ageing, although still effective, Newton, Neil Mortimer and Des Haswell, and the experiences in Europe of Olivier and Danie Fourie in the summer of 1973 can only accelerate the progress of this duo still further.

The British-based visitors have continued to use their holidays in the African sun to advantage as well, and all the riders who have so far wintered in Rhodesia can confirm that neither republic is a strife-torn battlefield or a dictator-repressed peasant colony. More likely that they will tell of a pleasant, sun-soaked paradise, where the strain of the constant hurly-burly of British League racing can be washed away, and riding techniques improved upon under less pressure than they might normally expect to find while racing at home, or even in Australia or New Zealand, where again the all-round standards are higher, and the pressures greater.

When Alex Hughson had his dream, there were many doubters as I have said. Today one can point to the success of the reintroduction of speedway to two large countries, both many thousands of miles from their nearest speedway-racing neighbours, in which it is virtually as a direct result of that doubted dream that the sport flourishes today - for although Alex is not directly involved in the promotion of the sport in South Africa, the revival there would and could never have taken place other than as a direct result of the Hughson 'instant' miracle over the Limpopo a couple of years earlier. It would indeed be pleasant to think that at some point in the future, the ruling bodies of the sport in one or other country might find it possible in some way to reward Hughson for the part he has played - a starring role, to be sure - in the phoenix-like rise of speedway from the grave into which it had been flung in the mid-fifties.

A final thought on the African revival is, that although so far it has been British-based riders who have benefited most - both financially and in experience - from their Rhodesian winters, in the past South Africa provided two World Finalists in Henry Long, who ran 8th in 1952 while attached to Belle Vue, and Birmingham clubman Doug Davies (13th in 1956), and if the standard of racing and competition in Africa can continue to rise in the manner that has already been experienced in three or so years, then there can be no earthly reason why Prinsloo, Ferreira or Olivier, given sufficient encouragement and overseas competition, cannot rise to emulate the achievements of their famous predecessors - all have the natural ability, all that has so far been lacking is the prolonged experience and opportunity of tackling top-class opposition abroad.

Dick Barrie is Scotland's foremost speedway journalist, and a regular visitor to the African continent.

.....