

AERICAN SPEEDWAY Racing is one giant exclamation point following the word EMOTION. As a motor race, it is a phenomenon; like the classic *affaire d'honneur* with all the color and brilliance of a prism. The riders are different, the tracks distinct, the motorcycles unique, the fans special. Even the officials and announcer offer a diversion from the lackluster norm. And when one takes these ingredients and pours them into a bowl formed by fairground grandstands with a starry night sky as a lid, the spectacle is like nothing ever tasted before.

But Speedway is not new to America. It only seems like it is. In fact, our history in this form of motor racing

dates back to about 1931, when we picked up on the idea from Australia and England.

In its prime (1934-35) Speedway drew thousands, and the better riders like the Milne Brothers and "Lammy" Lamoreaux earned money like it was going out of style. But the War put a stop to such goings on and the ferocious, sliding machines were set aside to gather dust in garages around the country; Speedway took a breather. After V-J Day, the bikes again headed for the small, oval tracks, but the crowds headed for the midget auto races instead. Speedway in the United States was laid to rest.

Twenty years passed before Speed-

way was tried again; all the while it was going strong in New Zealand, Australia, England and around Europe. Somehow, thanks to a few enterprising people, a Speedway revival took place. Now, some five years later, this exciting form of racing is only a short way from National prominence, and one Speedway track at Costa Mesa, Calif., has the largest crowd of any weekly motorcycle race in the country.

Surprisingly, the sport has not changed all that much. Riders still run machines with basically the same chassis configuration and engine displacement as they did during the depression years when the sport thrived with racing up and down both Coasts...racing that was



Speedway: Once Is Not Enough

By D. Randy Riggs/Color Photo By Joe Rusz/B&W Photos By Staff

successful then for the same reason it is successful now. Simply put, Speedway is an inexpensive way for a family to have an evening's worth of pure excitement and thrills; a couple of hours of stomping and yelling and hooting and screaming, a beautiful escape from the doldrums and worries of everyday life. And, there is a definite reason for all of this. One does not have to be involved with, know about, or even *like* motorcycles to go away from a Speedway race wild with excitement. The riders are performers and the motorcycles tools with which they put on a show. And the Speedway show has the fans on the edge of their seats from the playing of the National Anthem to the moment the

last bike crosses the finish line in the final race of the program. But why? What makes Speedway motorcycle racing different than a bike race at, say, a typical 1/2-mile flat track event? The answer is easy...everything.

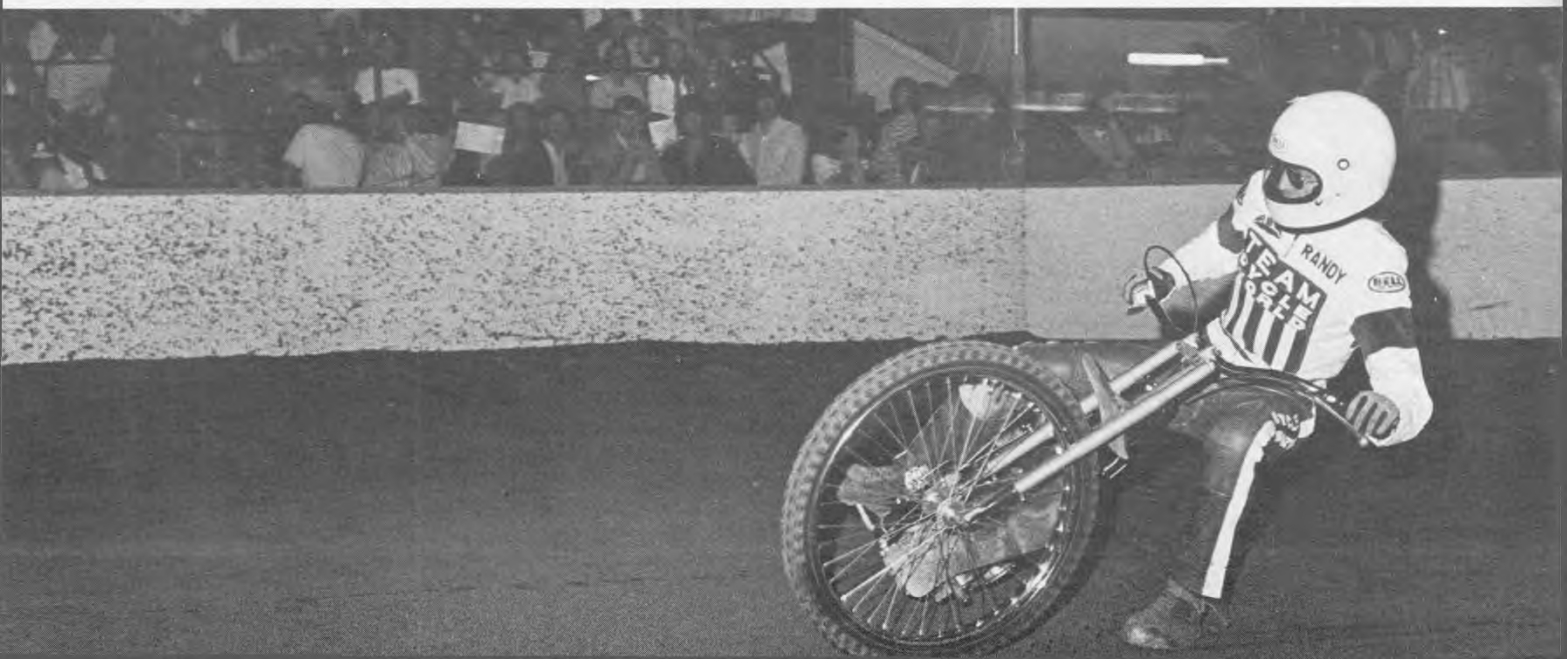
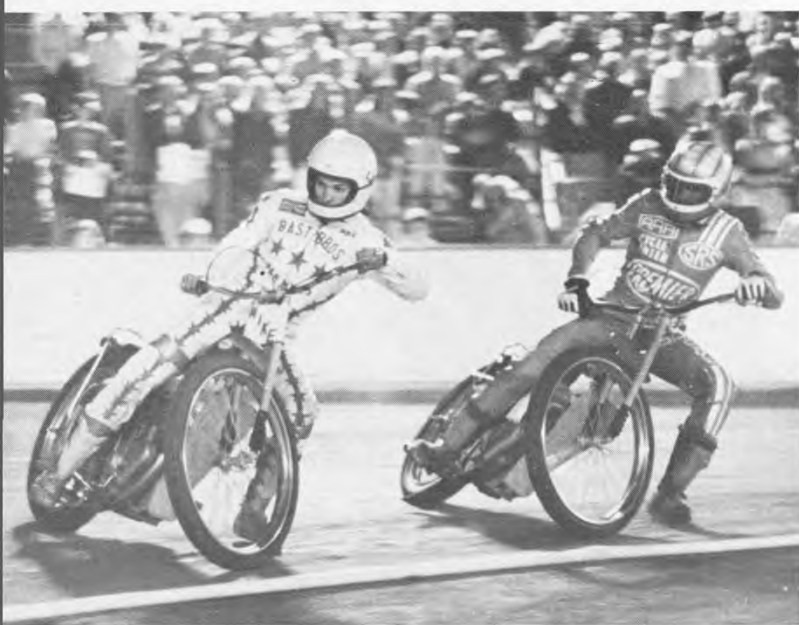
SPECTATING SPEEDWAY

There are actually less than a half-dozen *official* Speedway tracks operating on a regular basis in the United States, all of which are in California. So when one talks about American Speedway, they're really talking about California Speedway, although the situation is on the threshold of change. The SRA (Speedway Racing Association) is the organ-

izing group, and one of the tightest knit sanctioning bodies in motor racing today. Changing them is like trying to repeal sex laws invoked in the 1700s. But of late, there have been talks with the AMA, which is like Nixon inviting Jane Fonda to the White House for dinner.

But the SRA really doesn't need changes, because its racing runs off smoother than any on the AMA circuit. But the AMA can offer the SRA an FIM >







affiliation, which would mean that our top riders could compete in the World Finals, something that they cannot do at present. It's too early to tell exactly what will occur just yet, but something big is brewing for American Speedway; part of which is racing on a National level. The days of California Only Speedway are fading fast, but it still can't be beat for pure spectator appeal.

The most successful venture so far has been Harry Oxley's Costa Mesa Track, which somehow has a magic all its own. A night at Costa Mesa might go something like this:

After parking your car for *free*, one marches up to the ticket window and discovers a paltry \$2.75 admission charge, which diminishes as the age drops away from adult status. An average guy with his family discovers he can go to Speedway with a ten dollar bill and come home with change...*after* he's bought tickets, hot dogs and drinks for his whole crew. Programs are free, like the parking, and are necessary to follow the goings on. The only real worry initially is where to sit. But then one discovers that, hey, it doesn't matter *where* you sit, because every seat in the house is a good one. The close proximity to the tiny oval's dirt surface makes you feel like you're about to watch a race in your living room. No need for the binoculars here, Virginia.

Usually, by the time one is comfortably settled in his seat, announcer Larry Huffman has come on the microphone. Larry's style and voice and performance is like electricity...and he is as much part of the show as the riders themselves.

"Good evening, ladies and gentleman. Before I get started here, I'd like to make sure you can all hear me. If you can, let me know. How about the people on my left...can you hear me okay?" Yaaaaaa, goes the crowd. "How about the people across the way?" Yaaaaaa, goes the crowd across the way. And suddenly, Huffman has this Speedway crowd yelling and screaming to outdo each other and they haven't even yet seen a motorcycle *near* the track, much less *racing* on it!

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Now that I know you can hear me I'd like to tell you that I'm your announcer, Larry Huffman, and I'd like to welcome you back to SPEEEEEED-WAAAY!" Then, bam! All of a sudden these *crazy* looking motorcycles get pushed out of a crashwall that doubles as a gate and Huffman is introducing the colorful looking riders.

"Okay guys, I'm not hearing you. On the 20 yard line, number 20, Little Les CHANKEY! And back from England, ready to go at Costa Mesa once again, let's hear it for Sensuous Sumner McNight! And here he is, back on the 50, you've been waiting for him...num-

ber 22...Beserko Dannnnny Becker!"

The introductions alone nearly bring the house down and, still, the crowd has not seen a race. The intros are quick, however, the machines get push started and Huffman keeps the crowd going. The bikes position themselves at the start line behind tapes stretched across the track. When the starter pushes a button the tapes spring up and the riders explode from the line, whipping their bikes viciously to the left, with the rear tire swinging wildly to the right. The alcohol-burning 50 brake horsepower motorcycles are completely crossed up and the riders have the throttles twisted to the stops. Rear tires are throwing a rooster tail of dirt clear past the crashwall, clawing for traction.

The small oval has virtually no straightaway, and what there is of it is as narrow as a big city alley. No matter. The throttles are still wide open, along with everyone's eyes, because they can't believe what they see. There is a furious dicing for position, and instantly it's time to turn again, only it's not really a turn...it's just pointing the machines in another direction.

Only inches apart, sometimes touching...riders three abreast are sliding feet up, with the bars in the full right lock position. No one has a clear cut lead in a Speedway race and there is rarely a one-by-one procession or parade, as in motocross.

Fortunately, the races are short. A lap takes about ten seconds with five and four lap events the normal fare. One could not endure much longer than that. Hearts are just not that durable. But a fan has hardly caught his breath and another race is lined up. And Huffman still hasn't stopped...and won't, until the last race on the program. Huffman says that he is not the one that excites the people, but the riders. He is merely the catalyst between the two groups. Maybe so, but you've never heard a catalyst like this one.

RIDING SPEEDWAY

I had long ago decided that someday I would ride a Speedway machine; it was just a question of when. Short track type racing has always appealed to me, even more so than half-mile, but Speedway looked like it would have them all beat from a rider's viewpoint.

Naturally, I was met with lots of "Are you crazy?" and the like, but I got the go-ahead. A machine was arranged for through Joe Kubichek of South Bay Motorcycles in Redondo Beach, who chuckled about the prospects of the venture. Kubichek is the sole distributor of the Jawa Speedway machines in this country, and was one of the key people involved with the rebirth of American Speedway back in 1968.

Joe knew of my previous flat track
(Continued on page 110)



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Speedway.

Continued from page 57

experiences and gave just one bit of advice, "Speedway is completely different. Forget everything you know about flat tracking and good luck."

The Jawa we picked up was fresh out of the crate and had never been run. We toted it over to Ed Shafer at Speedway Research & Specialties and he gave us a hand with the basic preparation. Nothing to it, almost, at least at this stage of the game.

One thing about a Speedway machine, however. You just don't truck it anywhere, jump on and ride. A smooth track must be available. Lots of the Speedway guys head for El Mirage Dry Lake in the Southern California desert, but it's a long trip and we didn't have that much time. Harry Oxley was willing to let us on his Costa Mesa oval, but the week we needed to practice saw the arrival of the Orange County Fair. With it came a rodeo and with that, the track was unavailable. I was panicky. Harry Oxley had me on the Costa Mesa Speedway program that Friday night, and I wasn't so sure I wanted to go out on that track without ever having ridden the machine.

This is what makes Speedway so different from any other form of racing. There is no practice at the track before any program, so beginning riders must learn and make their mistakes during a race, in front of about 9000 people. And since a Speedway bike is unlike any other, previous motorcycle experience doesn't count.

All was not lost, though. A new Speedway track had just been completed at Orange County International Raceway, and the operator, Gary Densford, was kind enough to let us on it. We used his facility to conduct both our CYCLE WORLD Road Test and practice for the Costa Mesa event.

My Speedway Racing Association professional license application was mailed on Wednesday, the same day I first climbed on the Jawa. The Jawa Speedway machine is like nothing else in all of motorcycling, and quite frankly I began to have reservations about the project.

Everyone had told me that the only way to ride one of these things was with the throttle wide open. They were right. Only my right hand didn't believe them. And trying to unlearn the Class "C" riding style that I was used to was like trying to talk a Ferrari dealer into a demonstration ride...without a salesman along.

Eventually it started coming to me. But it wasn't easy. After powering down the straight in a sit-down position, the bike must be thrown sideways and the

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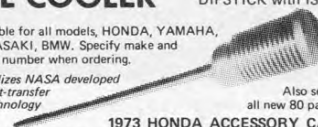
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power applied. If the transition is made properly, the rider finds himself in the standup Class "A" riding position. The mistake I was making at first was trying to stand at the end of the straight before I pitched the machine sideways. Forcing yourself to stand doesn't work.

With practice I was able to concentrate on obtaining the best traction when powering out of a corner, picking up my skid shoe down the chute and little things that I was too busy to think about in the beginning.

Though my practice was limited, I was ready for my debut, as ready as any beginner could be.

Most impressive is the camaraderie among the riders and everyone involved with Speedway; it's like nothing I've ever experienced in any other type of racing. People are eager to help and the officials go out of their way to straighten out any problems.

Riders are classified in three divisions: first, second and third, similar to the AMA's Expert, Junior and Novice system. In the SRA, however, moving up through the divisions is a decision of the promoter, not because the rider tabulated so many points, but because he was impressive. And, by the same token, if you don't impress the man with the money, you may find yourself in a lower division the following week.

Shortly before my third division race, it was time to warm the machine. Only...Miss Jawa refused to start. When we pushed out around the track it was obvious the bike wasn't about to run, and it was nearly inconceivable that something like this could happen. Pushing back to the pits I was dejected, but then one of the officials ran up and told me to try and get the bike running, because I could run the hooligan event. Hot damn. I was going to get to ride after all!

Miss Jawa was merely loaded up and with a little effort to clear out the cylinder and a new plug installed...she fired.

At that point I was captivated by the very special smells and sounds of Speedway...the enthusiastic crowd...the nighttime atmosphere. And when I got pushed out into that center arena, Speedway magic got to my head. Then, before I realized, the start tapes sprung from before my very eyes, and the pace quickened to a point where remembering was all but impossible. Apparently I got into one of the turns a bit hot while in 2nd place...the rider ahead of me had already exceeded his thin line...and the two of us had the satisfaction of taking one more *suspect* rider with us when we fell.

Cramming that much fun and excitement into 20 seconds of space is simply inconceivable. Riding or spectating, it's easy to understand why once is not enough....

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