

# SPEEDWAY – THE CLASSIC ERA

Philip Dalling

Britain went crazy for speed in the first half of the twentieth century. On land, at sea and in the air; the exploits of the daring gripped the nation.

Speedway arrived from Australia in 1928, at just the right moment to exploit an insatiable demand for motorsport thrills. Early amateur events soon gave way to a fully-professional sport, with a strong emphasis on entertainment. Crowds flocked to major stadia, including the Crystal Palace, Chelsea's Stamford Bridge, Manchester's Belle Vue and Wembley's Empire Stadium. Written off by sceptics on many occasions, speedway has weathered many ups and downs during its eighty-plus years.

*SPEEDWAY The Classic Era* covers the sport's first four decades, starting with its early mushroom growth and the subsequent development of league racing, a World Championship, and test matches pitting England against Australia.

It chronicles the sport's almost miraculous survival during World War Two, and its astonishing impact in the immediate post-war era, when eleven million people watched racing at its UK peak in 1949.

Punitive entertainment tax and the arrival of television, brought a mid-1950s slump, but speedway fought back, first to stability and then to renewed popularity in the 1960s, the final years covered by this book. With a lively and informative text and more than 200 evocative and nostalgic photographs, *SPEEDWAY The Classic Era* is a fascinating guide to the days when for many the sport was at the height of its interest and appeal.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Philip Dalling is a journalist and author who has covered speedway racing for more than 40 years, meeting and interviewing most of its great names.

He is an associate member of the World Speedway Riders Association (WVRS) and in addition to two published books on the sport, has contributed articles to magazines and websites including *Speedway Star*, *Backtrack*, *Classic Speedway*, *Speedway Plus*, and to many regional newspapers.

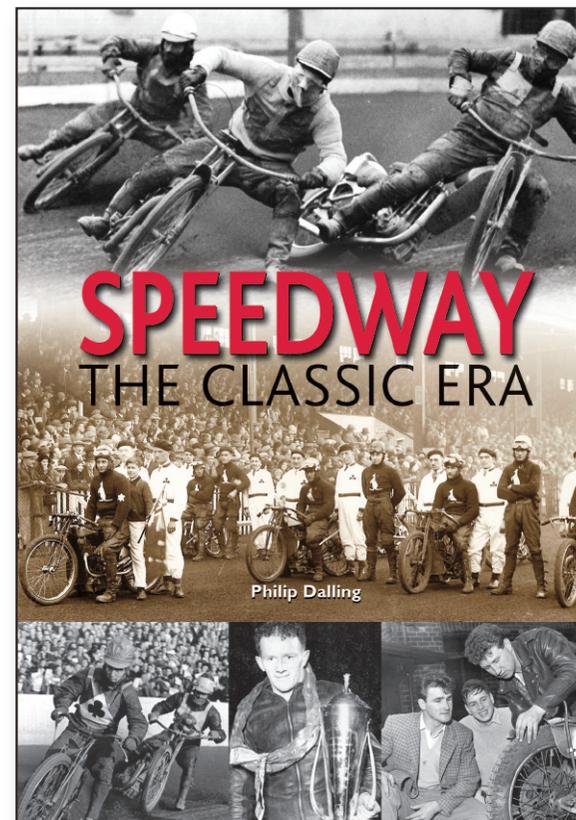
Although his published work concentrates on the first four decades or so of speedway, from the late 1920s to the end of the 1960s, he enjoys modern day racing, attending meetings whenever possible.

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Above: Tony Robinson (right), Jack Kitchen (left) and Robinson's 'dope and oil boy' Kev Meehan have a technical discussion on the subject of tyre cutting.

Left: Brian Crutcher, who joined Wembley from Poole for the 1953 season was speedway's golden boy of the era.



Above: A classic action shot of Vic Huxley from the 1930s.

Below: That sinking feeling ... Happily, as is the case in a great many speedway crashes, both riders walked away with nothing more than bruising.



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Speedway legends 1. Australian star Vic Huxley (left) takes an outside line against England's Jack Parker. Huxley's score in Brisbane was an instant superstar upon arrival in Britain in 1928. His UK league career was based entirely in London, first with Harringay and then with Wimbledon. He captained Australia in 26 out of his 34 test appearances. Parker, who with brother Norman was initially attached to hometown team Coventry, became a true giant of the sport, racing from its birth in Britain until 1954.



Many venues which later saw bona fide speedway at the highest level began by staging grass-track racing on oval circuits. This is Nottingham, known as the Olympic speedway venue before a cinder surface was laid to replace the grass, with the pushers in action at the start of a race.



Most sports have reached a consensus about their histories. Not speedway. With rival claims to be the birthplace of short circuit motorcycle racing on a loose surface (not a bad definition of what speedway is all about) from the United States, South Africa, the Republic of Ireland and Britain, the sport is fertile soil for continuing argument.

In contrast to the unassailable status of Webb and Lord, the name and reputation of John S Hoskins, a man involved with the promotion of the sport for sixty years, while precious to perhaps a majority of speedway people (including the author) is reviled by others. In recent times there has been a systematic attempt to denigrate the man as an individual and to downgrade his role and contribution to speedway's development.

It is clearly wrong to say that Hoskins, or indeed any one individual 'invented' speedway. Men (and women) have raced motorcycles ever since two machines first found themselves going in the same direction, on the same stretch of road, at the same time.

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CONTRVERSIAL TO ITS CORE



Motorcycle racing branched off into many directions, including road racing, on actual public roads, in the Isle of Man style, or on private circuits with a hard surface, scrambling and trials riding over rough countryside, hill climbing and, closest in spirit and style to speedway, grass-track racing. All these branches proliferated in the early part of the twentieth century.

In the United States men raced on steeply-banked circuits constructed from timber boards, a particularly dangerous form of motorcycle sport, which produced frequent



Nottingham, primitive in the previous picture, developed swiftly; the large crowds pictured behind the riders on the cinder banks (note also the frameless-type fighting standard!) were watching a representative match (although not an official test) between England and Australia. This is the English team, i.e. Billy Elmore, Cyril 'Squid' Burton, Willy Humphrey, Frank Vacey, Gus Stricker and Hal Herbert.

Spencer 'Smoky' Stratton was a pioneer New Zealand rider who became involved with promoting the sport in Britain. He was a member of the group who ran the sport at Shiffield in the late 1920s and is pictured in the pits at Oulton Stadium in the next city.

Example of a double-page spread.