



The semi-final struggle for the National Amateur Cup on a Bermondsey ex-bomb site. Gem Pirates (Dorset), complete with skull and crossbones on their jerseys, made Stratford Hammers 'walk the plank,' and so meet Chorlton Aces in the Final



Photos: News Chronicle

It's tough and it's rough! Roy Garnham, Captain of Stratford Hammers, takes quite a dive on the track. Fascinated spectators watch with varying expressions. Some crane heads closer the better to see how he does it, others adopt I've-seen-it-all-before looks.

CYCLE SPEEDWAY WINS THROUGH

A new British sport was started by 'Dead End Kids' on London bomb sites. As a result, on October 26 up to seven thousand people will pack the Empress Hall, London.

By
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off the streets, managed to scrape together uniforms and other equipment, and matches began to attract crowds of 500 and more. Municipal authorities became interested. So did organisations such as the National Playing Fields Association, which has now drawn up plans for the standardisation of tracks all over the country.

Problem Of Finances

Lack of finance, however, was the bugbear. By July, 1949, the sport had reached the stage when it was planned to hold an international meeting in Holland. A dozen British 'aces' stood by to make the ambitious trip. Alas, it never came off. There simply wasn't enough money in the 'kitty,' and the fixture had to be scratched.

Nevertheless, the new sport marched on, new tracks continued to spring up. It was typical when, less than three months after the cancellation of that proposed visit

meeting in London last January, the National Amateur Cycle Speedway Association was inaugurated. Rules and regulations were drawn up, and a National Team Championship, with the final at the Empress Hall, was planned. The dream of the 'Dead End Kids' had come true, and to those same working-class youngsters goes every ounce of the credit.

Who, of those 'founder' youngsters, could have dreamt that within four years the working-class sport would pack London's vast Empress Hall? Even more fantastic, in a way, is the fact that last August it was staged on Eton College's exclusive playing field.

The occasion was the Windsor, Slough and District Carnival Week. The local cycle speedway team, Slough Fliers, optimistically asked the Eton College authorities if, as one of the carnival attractions, they could put on their 'show' at the Eton playing field. The College smiled benevolent assent. A track was built in double-quick time, and every day for a week matches were contested between the Fliers and teams of working-class lads from London and the Home Counties. From bomb-site to Eton!

Calls For Courage

However that may be, the sport reaches new heights on Thursday at the Empress Hall, with the first-ever 'international' between England and Holland, and the first-ever Cup Final between Chorlton Aces (Lancashire) and Gem Pirates (Dorset).

Some idea of the strength and scope of the new sport may be gathered from the fact that, since the formation of the National Amateur Cycle Speedway Association in January, 27 counties have become affiliated to the parent body. Each county has its own league and affiliated local associations; the 27 counties entered 277 clubs for the National Team Championship.

This new sport is rough, tough, and it needs courage; it demands judgment and skill; it is no selfish play-for-yourself game. Success depends on teamwork and co-operation.

There are eight men to a team. Two ride in each race against an opposition pair. It doesn't matter who wins individually. The object from the team viewpoint is to get one man home first and the other man second. Never mind which

one is in front so long as that object is achieved. It gives the team a four-point advantage.

The four lads—bodies and limbs bulging with padding, feet shod with heavy boots, and heads crash-helmeted—line up at the elastic-operated starting gate. As the elastic is whipped away, legs strain on pedals, shoulders crouch over down-curving handlebars, dust spurts from the wheels—and "they're off!" Riders jockey for position, skid round the bends with legs trailing, cut in and overtake in bewildering fashion.

Crashes occur, and broken wrists, arms or legs are not uncommon. Here is a sport that calls for high-speed thinking. Every one of those thirty-odd seconds in each race is packed with complicated strategy. A single faulty manoeuvre on a slippery surface can spell disaster.

Few games are so unselfish, while its enthusiasts are all in it for the love of the sport alone. They neither expect nor receive any personal glory; their only reward may be cuts, bruises or worse.

More important, perhaps, is the effect it has had on juvenile crime. The views of an 18-year-old are of interest. Roy Garnham, an apprentice engineer, is captain of Stratford Hammers, a team which reached the national championship semi-finals, and whose London East End headquarters are in the heart of an area where petty crime was once rampant.

Says Roy: "Chaps who take up cycle speedway don't hang around the streets. Why, we spend five evenings a week training or attending to our bikes and equipment. The sport has brought us other interests, too. We've taken over a clubroom at Leyton, and there at nights you'll find us playing table tennis, darts or billiards. Crime? We've no time for it."

Local Teams Formed

That a new sport has now been born is largely due to Hitler. It was the Luftwaffe who saw to it that the amount of 'waste ground' in London and our other big industrial cities was considerably increased. And it was on the bomb sites left by Goering's raiders that cycle speedway came into its own.

Round about 1946, boys of 16 and 17 in the most heavily blitzed areas of London's East End found themselves with time on their hands. It was a problem how to keep them off the streets, or, for that matter, from making nuisances of themselves in the home. The alarming increase in juvenile crime was put down partly to the enforced idleness of these youngsters.

Most of them, however, possessed bicycles, and some nameless genius had a brainwave. He looked at the bomb sites. . . . The lads got together, and on the bomb sites constructed rough-and-ready dirt tracks. Local teams were formed.

Other boys caught the craze and formed the 'crowds' that cheered on their pals. The idea caught on. It spread to Liverpool, Plymouth, Bristol, Cardiff, to all the blitzed cities where makeshift tracks could be made on recreation grounds, car parks, bomb sites, or any kind of waste ground.

Leagues were formed in various parts of the country. The boys, most of them encouraged by parents only too glad to see them

to Holland, more than 3,000 people attended the opening of a new track, home of the 'Cray Tigers,' at St. Mary Cray, Kent. Only a few weeks earlier, the speedway had been the rhubarb plot at the back of Farmer Hackett-Jones's barn.

By opening night it had a track measuring 97 yards on the inside, soft sand to fall on, a starting gate, judge's box, loudspeakers and floodlighting.

The Cray Tigers, aged 15 to 18, had built it themselves, and it cost them £100. They raised the money by running dances, outings and whist drives. A very different proposition, this, from idling about the streets. Opening the speedway, Sir Waldron Smithers, M.P. for Orpington, said: "Good, clean sport—that's what we want to see." The 3,000 onlookers saw just that.

Non-Profit Making

The Tigers are typical of the hundreds of cycle speedway clubs now in existence. Their chairman, company director Mick Slater, says: "Nobody makes a profit. We help the boys to buy their kit, and they pay 1s. 6d. a week towards expenses. There are no cash prizes and no admission fees. But we have a collection, and supporters pay sixpence a year. We have several hundred registered supporters, and we often take five coaches of local people to our away matches."

It had become obvious that the sport must be properly organised on a national basis, and at a

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