

1946 – A snapshot review first published in '50 Years of Cycle Speedway' by The British Cycle Speedway Council in 1996.

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In The Beginning

Like so many sport's the true origins of cycle speedway have been lost in the mists of time. Researching through archives and reference books there are endless claims and counter claims to the exact date when the sport started. In many instances birth has been confused with conception, but there can be little doubt that cycle speedway as an organised sport was spawned in 1946.

Earlier documented claims as to the origins of the species makes fascinating reading. Browsing through Graham Payne's 1951-52 Cycle Speedway Annual, the following press cutting appeared:

"Cycle speedway is a new post war sport. Yet it was known long before 1945. Mr Spencer of Radford says he took part in this form of racing 25 years ago (that would have been 1926), outside a children's home in Coventry. He recalls having as many as thirty punctures in one meeting!"

In the same article a Mr Walsh of Stockton Heath, Lancashire states:

"Warrington had three tracks operating in 1927-28 and competitors raced for the Golden Helmet, an old top hat suitably decorated; the Silver Gauntlet, an old glove silvered over and other trophies."

No doubt that cutting was very true. However, it is equally certain that the sport was nowhere such a highly organised recreation then and in the words of editor Graham Payne: "I doubt if it was ever termed cycle speedway".

Former Rayleigh speedway rider Ron Howes claims to have ridden a stripped down cycle on a track at Earlsfield, South London in 1928. Apparently Ron had photographs to support his claim but like so much cycle speedway memorabilia, this has been misplaced or simply discarded. Similarly Norman Pike of Southampton Turfs contented that the sport really began in Hampshire in March 1946 while in 1949 Wimbledon Wildcat Ken Major claimed to be a real cycle speedway veteran, insisting that he first started racing with Headington Hammers in 1938.

The real and most convincing clues as to the sport's true origin as an organised, competitive pastime comes from the Cycle Speedway Gazette No.76, dated March 1956. It contained part one of the first attempt to document the complete history of cycle speedway written by journalist Jack Tracey, an authority as the sport's leading historian. Tracey recalls the old personalities, riders, events and happenings is a lively series of articles unashamedly acclaimed as "The greatest literary feature ever produced on the sport". In the opening paragraph Tracey confirms that the beginnings of cycle

speedway have never been clearly or accurately ascertained. In his own words:

"Some will tell you the sport started in Glasgow in 1945, others tell of meetings in Manchester in 1935, Brighton in 1933 or Earlsfield, London as far back as 1929. Discard all those stories. We shall never know exactly when the sport began. Like you and me it just began to grow."

Then in a crucial statement on the origins of cycle speedway Tracey sums it up nicely:

"The true birth of the sport came with the post war boom in the motorcycle sport around 1945-6. Evidence has been produced to show that once again Manchester or rather Stockport, led the way. A team known as the Stockport Flyers was formed in May 1945 but it was not until 1947 that they had any opposition.

"I prefer to think, and I deny anyone to prove otherwise, that cycle speedway was born on the bomb sites of post-war London. The first league to be formed was the East London League which gave birth to the most famous team of the time, Stratford Hammers. They were the first winners of the league and from that small beginning was to grow the team that went on to win the national championship."

Whether Tracey was historically correct cannot be formally confirmed. Despite considerable research, there appears no documentary evidence that Stratford won the East London League in 1946 but that's not to say there wasn't a case. However, there is printed evidence to confirm that Glasgow pioneered league racing in the same year. The 1957 Cycle Speedway Handbook confirms that a team called Craigton Eagles won the 1946 Glasgow League from Pennilee Lions and that a very formal sounding gent by the name of Mr P Bell from Craigton was the first league riders' champion.

So this would support a number of theories. The Guinness Book of Records, for example, states that the sport first started in 1945. In order for league racing to develop a year later, this entry must be true. But equally correct is the now universal acceptance that cycle speedway as an organised sport was born in 1946.

1946 is regarded as the year in which cycle speedway started officially. Full strength teams raced against one another in challenge matches. Later in the year the first organised competitions were born with the East London League and the Glasgow League the two earliest.

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The East London League was the brain-child of Len Silver, who later achieved fame in motor speedway first as a rider and later as a promoter, and his pal Terry Brown. The first committee meeting took place in the upstairs room of the Warwick Arms pub. Len Silver was detailed to do the fixtures and to quote Len "Every match was raced and every rider turned up". The season didn't get under way until September and although the first league table was lost in the mist of time it is known that the following teams competed - Forest Gate Tigers, Warwick Lions and Beckton Aces.

The sport was at a similar stage of development North of the Border. While it is widely believed that the East London League was the first, there is growing support to the theory that the Glasgow League was operating in the Summer of '46 which would make that the first organised league in Britain. There is no doubt that Craighton Eagles were the first winners of the Glasgow League.

But getting back to the capital, the East London area was a natural breeding ground for cycle speedway due to the ravages of the second World War. The Blitz had left many areas reduced to rubble and these became natural track sites. Motor speedway was re-established that year and every aspiring young speedway rider who possessed a pedal cycle was soon skidding round the makeshift tracks.

Rules in these formative days were virtually non-existent - the tracks at best were Spartan and machines often broke down. However enthusiastic riders beavered away making body colours from whatever was available. Some resourceful teams even resorted to using parachute silks to make fine-looking breast plates. With war-surplus material readily available at knockdown prices, many riders used Army despatch rider clothing. A helmet cost six shillings and sixpence (32.5 pence), calf-length studded leather boots around a pound, a pair of gauntlets would set you back a cool ten shillings and goggles half a crown! (12.5p)

Machinery was absolutely basic. Most of the bikes being pre-war origin. Brakes were not uncommon and many bikes featured lamp-brackets on the outside fork leg. Knobbly tyres as we know them today were non-existent but some road tyres had plenty of tread. Remember racing styles were very different in those days. The main point of the game was to emulate speedway riders. Track surfaces were deep and the object was to broadside round the corners as opposed to finding the fastest line. Lady's frames were particularly popular as riders were able to get a lower riding position.



Action from the late Forties at Longbridge Leopards track in London