

Handout Mentality – Grass track racing, the natural grown velodrome

A few weeks back, Central Vets put on a great day to celebrate Lloyd Paterson's 50 years in bike racing. The day culminated with a few words from Lloyd in which he tried to convey a sense of what had changed since 1958. One of the things he touched on was grass track racing which used to take place at Maryborough. Lloyd talked of it as something way out of the mainstream. Co-incidentally 1958 was the year I had my first grass track race. I rode my bike about 20 miles from my home in Cambridge, England, to a little town called Soham, now infamous for the murder of two little girls in Manchester United shirts by the local school caretaker. In my first race, a handicap heat, was a man named Neville Tong, who had just won the gold medal for the kilo TT at the Commonwealth Games. He literally flew past me. The track was bumpy and I recall his wheels were barely touching the ground at the time. My first racing on grass finished with a fall and a painful ride home. In time, grass track became my preferred branch of the sport.

Britain after the war was not overburdened with sporting resources. Even the national pastime, football – that's the one that's played mostly with the feet – was conducted in sub par facilities and was to be for another 20 years. Cricket, a gentleman's game, had some pretty grounds. Cycling, a blue collar sport had very little in the way of permanent facilities. London, a city of some eight million souls at that time, had just two shallow outdoor tracks. There were two tracks within a reasonable drive of my home town Cambridge. One was well banked and surfaced in the prosperous part of North Hertfordshire, home nowadays to such celebrities as Victoria Pendleton and Lewis Hamilton. The other was an old shallow narrow thing at Wicksteed Park in Kettering. Its main claim to fame was its fence which consisted of wire strung between star pickets. It claimed me the first time I rode there. I didn't bother to go back

Compared with Britons, Australians enjoyed good access to surfaced bike tracks. So many small towns had a bike track. They might not have been built to the highest standards and racing at top speeds was often dangerous but for kids they offered a great introduction. Britain had none of this. The majority of the few hard tracks in existence had serious design faults or were simply well past use by. Besides the dreaded Wicksteed Park, Halesowen had a water jump, Coventry had no bends but a series of straights, like the old three penny bit (if only they'd had a nice footy oval to provide the inside line), Gateshead was flat as a tack, and another track I remember seemed to be surfaced with coal dust. There wasn't much to get excited about. But then why put resources into an outdoor bike track in a country with high rainfall? Look how much things have improved since they built a good indoor velodrome in Manchester.

But if Britain lacked the proper facilities it didn't seem to bother the committees who ran the annual small town carnivals on the local football paddock, or if this was not available, in open grassland recently vacated by its regular bovine inhabitants. The 440 yards more or less oval was marked out and wooden pegs hammered in at an angle inside the line to prevent short cuts. The bike program was usually a short and long handicap, an elimination – known in Britain as "Devil take the Hindmost" and a five mile scratch race. These would be contested between various running and walking events and often a tug o' war whose participants looked like they'd just fallen out of the local pub.

When I started grass track racing at 14, there were no racing licences issued to under 16s. Although entry forms asked for more details than a Centrelink application, the national governing body did not have the means to check that entrants were licenced – this was in the days when only armies and banks had computers. Many riders put "licence applied for" in place of their licence number. I only did it until I was old enough to qualify. Some folks did it all the time.

Track racing is not like road racing on a different bike. It has its own sense of time and space. Every few seconds you turn through 180 degrees. You need to have the power on all the time. This is where grass track racing can be quite exciting because even with a high centre bracket, 6 1/2 inch or 165mm cranks and every bit of surplus metal taken off the left pedal, the normal expectation is for contact between pedal and ground on every bend. In fact you can learn to knock the peg markers out at will. The great advantage of grass and soil (and cowpat) is that it will tend to give way on contact. Asphalt or concrete is less forgiving.

The trick, which took me a long time to learn, is to oversteer into the bend – flick the front wheel in hard then straighten it up unsticking the back wheel which will then bump and slither around. It's the same technique that is used in motorcycle speedway but less obvious because there is far less power going onto the back wheel and the pedal cyclist does not have the luxury of sticking one foot down on the ground to maintain balance. Once I learnt to race with my inside pedal clipping the ground and my back wheel on the edge of traction, I started to move backwards through the marks and stay around longer in elimination races. The other trick was never to overtake on the outside of a bend. There was always a way through on the inside of a slower rider. Otherwise wait for the straights.

I managed to become moderately successful at grass track racing and came to enjoy regular prizes. As an amateur competitor I was never rewarded with cash. Occasionally there would be vouchers which a friendly bike shop might redeem for real money but most of the time it was the stuff local stores could not unload even at their January sales. I built up a wonderful collection of useless items of sentimental value – vile looking mirrors, clocks and coffee tables. I added up the theoretical value in my head and was happy if I covered my petrol costs. I never seemed to have much actual cash in my pocket. Just as well it was a lot of fun.

