

# A QUICK HISTORY OF THE SINGAPORE SPEEDWAY

The history of the Singapore Speedway was as fast and furious as the races it hosted.  
By Yap Jo Lin

Before the bright lights, glitz, glamour and celebrity of the Formula One Singapore night race, there was the Singapore Grand Prix (which started in 1961). But 30 years before that, speedsters and curious locals alike were privy to the thrills and spills of motorcycle racing at a specially constructed dirt track called the Singapore Speedway.

The Speedway had a very short life. It hosted just six races from April to June 1930 before its closure, but it marks an interesting chapter in Singapore's motor-racing history. It was located at Alkaff Avenue, near the junction of MacPherson and Upper Serangoon roads, roughly where Sennett Estate is today,<sup>1</sup> and next to Alkaff Lake Gardens, which had opened a year earlier in 1929.

News of the Speedway first broke on 3 December 1928, when the *Straits Times* reported that Australian promoter F. Heron Pitcher was in town to set up a company, Singapore Speedway Limited, and that efforts were underway to identify a site.<sup>2</sup> Pitcher claimed to have "ample evidence" that dirt track racing would



Sketch of Speedway managing director A.J. Reynolds. Image reproduced from "Career of the Man Behind Successes in Car Racing," *Malaya Tribune*, 14 April 1930, 19. (From NewspaperSG).

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have wide and universal appeal in Singapore. "I have no doubt that once the people see the races they will want more," he said. "Besides having some of the greatest experts of the dirt track in the world performing on the Singapore track, opportunities will be given for local amateurs and professionals to race, for which trophies and cash prizes will be given."<sup>3</sup>

In the months leading up to the Speedway's debut, another Australian came on board as managing director – a Mr A.J. Reynolds, whose last stint was as an advertising manager for Western Australia Speedways Ltd.<sup>4</sup> Reynolds came to Singapore with almost three decades of experience in the entertainment and sports industries under his belt. He had a colourful past. When he was 15, Reynolds joined a troupe of acrobats touring Australia. He eventually left the troupe and received some technical training on the applications of electricity in commerce. He managed a few cinemas and several racetracks in Australia before turning his attention to racing in Singapore.<sup>5</sup>

## Speedway Construction

Construction of the Speedway started in February 1930 and was reported to have cost \$40,000. It was spread out over 11.5 acres (about seven soccer fields) with an initial planned capacity of 5,000 spectators. The racetrack was 440 yards (402 m) long and 8 inches (20 cm) thick. According to the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, the track comprised "a mixture of sand, cinders, decomposed granite, loam soil and screen [granite powder] and saturated with water, rendering it completely dustless".<sup>6</sup>

The Speedway was designed by Keys and Dowdeswell, a well-known architectural firm in Singapore that had worked on Capitol Building and Capitol Theatre (both circa 1930). Founding partners Percy Hubert Keys and Frank Dowdeswell had been in government service when they designed the Fullerton Building in the late 1920s (now known as the Fullerton Hotel).

The buildings at the Speedway included three octagonal ticket kiosks, a rectangular shed with seating for spectators, an enclosure for motorcyclists adjacent to the track, and men's and women's lavatories. There were two updates to the plans submitted for approval. The first was for the removal of a refreshment room with a bar counter, a "crush hall" or a foyer/reception area, and a manager's office from the design. The changes might have been made to lower costs and/or accelerate the project's completion. The second update was for additional seating along the racetrack.



Original plans drafted by Keys & Dowdeswell in 1930 for the proposed Speedway. Building Control Division Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

## Run-up to the Opening

As the inaugural race drew near, riders began arriving in Singapore, some of whom had travelled by ship.<sup>7</sup> The star rider was Charles Datson. At the time, Datson had held the world two-mile record for three years and broken his own world record for the mile two years earlier in 1928.<sup>8</sup>

Each race day had two main events, each with a trophy – the Vernon Cup for amateur local riders and the Castrol Silver Gauntlet for professionals from further afield like England and Australia. While the Vernon Cup was meant for local racers, it also included riders from beyond Singapore and Malaya such as Sob Prasong from Thailand and Beppo Wahid from the Cocos Islands.

The Castrol Silver Gauntlet was designed by local jewellers B.P. De Silva and sponsored by motor oil company Castrol.<sup>9</sup> The Vernon Cup was sponsored by Francis Vernon, a member of the Speedway's Riders' Club that had been formed to bring together dirt bike enthusiasts who would serve as officials during the races.<sup>10</sup>

To raise the profile of dirt track racing in Singapore, Speedway organisers displayed the trophies and bikes of Datson and three other riders at the Borneo Motors showroom on Orchard Road (around Plaza Singapura today).<sup>11</sup> The public was also invited to watch the riders practise at the Speedway for free.<sup>12</sup>

## Media Coverage

Five days before the grand opening, the *Malaya Tribune* carried a three-page story about the Speedway. Besides running profiles of the races and race organiser A.J. Reynolds, they also featured articles about the companies and brands involved in the event. These included beverages produced by Phoenix Aerated Water Works Factory, and Osram lights installed by General Electric. There was even an entire article devoted to the Speedway's lavatory arrangements (organisers had apparently been wondering how to cater for the huge numbers expected until prominent Eurasian contractor G.R. Oehlers stepped in with some sanitary solutions).<sup>13</sup>

## Race Highlights

The inaugural race day was on the eve of Easter Sunday, 19 April 1930. Ticket prices ranged from 20 cents to \$2.50 (the *Straits Times* cost 10 cents a copy at the time). The \$2.50 seats were in a special section with reserved seating. Grandstand tickets were priced at \$2, followed by first-class tickets at \$1, second-class at 50 cents and third-class at 20 cents. A large crowd turned up that day, including a number of cars from “up-country”, indicating that people had driven all the way from the Malay Peninsula to watch the races.<sup>14</sup> Encouraged by the turn out, organisers added another 5,000 seats in the \$1 and 50-cent sections ahead of the second race on 26 April.

Inclement weather saw the postponement of the third race from Saturday 3 May 1930 to Wednesday 7 May 1930. Besides the main events, there was a novelty 400-metre rickshaw race that took the winner 1 minute 44 seconds to complete.<sup>15</sup>

As exciting as it was, there was more drama off the track than on it. During the race, Reynolds was arrested on gambling charges. Each race programme had a unique number printed on it and it was declared that the holder of a randomly selected programme number would receive a \$20 Robinson's voucher. This was, in essence, a lottery. Reynolds pled guilty but his lawyer said Reynolds had only been trying to “encourage patrons” rather than promote gambling. Reynolds eventually received a nominal fine of \$1.<sup>16</sup>

The Singapore Speedway advertising the match between Charles Datson, Singapore's champion, and Sig Schlam, Western Australia's “most fearless” rider. The men will compete in a special four-lap match. Image reproduced from “To-Night at Singapore Speedway,” *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 24 May 1930, 9. (From NewspaperSG).

Rain once again saw the postponement of the fourth and fifth races. The highlight of the fifth race (held on 31 May 1930) was a hotly anticipated matchup between racing stars Charles Datson and Sig Schlam. Datson was going into the match holding the world two-mile record, while Schlam held the four- and five-mile records at Claremont Speedway in Western Australia. The race was advertised as a personal challenge from Schlam with a bold promise that “both are confident of victory”.

Unfortunately for Schlam, his motorcycle chain snapped in the very first lap. This meant he was out of the race as the rules stated that once the race had begun, whoever finished the four-lap course first would take the prize. Race organisers decided not to call for a rematch and declared Datson the winner. Datson finished the course at his leisure and spectators made known their disappointment at the anticlimactic race by “heckling” and “doing their utmost to create a stir.”<sup>17</sup>

## The End of Racing

On 14 June 1930, the day of the seventh race, the *Malayan Saturday Post* ran an article noting that “[s]ome mischievous person has been spreading a rumour in town that the racing season stopped last Saturday night [7 June 1930, the sixth race] – but this is emphatically denied by the Speedways Limited. There will be the usual racing tonight.”<sup>18</sup>

It was more than a mischievous rumour though. By this time, the Speedway management had been trying to increase revenue. They had raised grandstand ticket prices from \$2 to \$3 and done away with 50-cent tickets. They had introduced more entertainment, such as a musical programme, novelty slot machines and additional refreshment stands.<sup>19</sup> But it was not enough.

On 17 June 1930, the *Malaya Tribune* noted that “reorganisation is taking place” and that the paper had been “asked definitely to state that there is no truth in the rumour that a receiver has been appointed to wind up Singapore Speedways”. More telling, however, was the *Tribune's* report that Reynolds – the erstwhile public face of the business venture – was “visiting Colombo”, and no further race dates were advertised.<sup>20</sup>

What followed was a string of bad news for the Speedway. In an open letter published in the *Malaya Tribune*, rider Cho Jolly asked, “Is the Dirt-Track Club still in existence?” He also revealed that he was writing on behalf of his fellow riders “as we have not received what is due to us in the shape of prizes [for the final Speedway race]”. Meanwhile, most of the “star” racers from Australia and England had left for home.<sup>21</sup>

On 21 June 1930, the *Singapore Free Press* revealed that the Speedway had \$9,000 in liabilities and almost no assets.<sup>22</sup> In a letter to the Western Australian newspaper, *The Daily News*, on 31 July 1930, promoter F. Heron Pitcher said that Reynolds had delivered the bad news to shareholders at a meeting on 11 June 1930. Pitcher also claimed that Reynolds was facing



Charles Datson in an undated photo. He was declared the winner of the match against Sig Schlam held on 31 May 1930. Schlam's motorcycle chain had snapped in the very first lap. Courtesy of *Australian Motorcycle News*.

several High Court lawsuits and had booked passages to Australia for his family and some of his riders.

According to Pitcher, two days before the group was scheduled to set sail for Australia, news had already leaked out that Reynolds had booked his own ticket to Colombo on the P&O liner *Khiva*, which eventually left Singapore on 13 June 1930. Pitcher ruefully remarked that “[u]p to the present only echo answers to our question, ‘Where is Reynolds?’”<sup>23</sup>

By 22 July 1930, the company was wound up, and on 6 August 1930 an auction was held to sell any Speedway assets of worth – from the much-vaunted electric lights right down to changkols (gardening hoes), buckets and brooms.<sup>24</sup>

## Downfall of the Speedway

Speedway's demise was likely due to a combination of factors. The public's interest in the races – and willingness to pay for tickets – might have waned due to the lack of headlining star racers and disinterest in watching amateur riders. In his diatribe against Reynolds, Pitcher complained that too many races had been crammed into each session and that the initial turnout of 16,000 on opening night had never been repeated – the next best being closer to 4,000.<sup>25</sup> Another reason could be the numerous times the races had to be postponed due to wet weather, which might have frustrated punters and caused inconvenience when races originally scheduled for a Saturday were held on a Wednesday instead.

The closure of the Speedway marked the end of dirt track bike racing in Singapore. In 1935, the *Malayan Tribune* described the track as “disused and weed-grown”. The Speedway was demolished and eventually became part of Sennett Estate after construction began in 1951.<sup>26</sup>

There was one attempt to revive dirt track racing in Singapore. This time, an Australian group applied to the Singapore City Council in 1953 to hold dirt track midget car racing at Jalan Besar Stadium. However,

**YOU MUST NOT MISS THIS SENSATIONAL CHALLENGE PROGRAMME**

**First race 9 p.m. To-Night AT SINGAPORE Musical programme from 7.30 p.m.**

**SPEEDWAY**

Director, Singapore Speedways, Ltd., A. J. Reynolds, Managing Director

**SIG SCHLAM, Western Australia's most fearless rider, HAS CHALLENGED Singapore's champion, CHAS. DATSON, to a special four lap match race to-night.**

**CHAS. DATSON HAS ACCEPTED SIG SCHLAM'S CHALLENGE.**

Chas. Datson says: “Yes, Schlam is a great rider and never shuts his motor. If he defeats me he will undoubtedly shatter every record in the world and create a new world record, but to-night we will know.”

Sig Schlam writes: “I, the undersigned, Sig Schlam, herewith challenge Chas. Datson to a match race of four laps at Singapore Speedways on Saturday next, May 24th, for the sum of fifteen pounds, this amount to be won straight out by winner, plus the five pounds deposited by Mr. Datson and the five pounds I have deposited with Singapore Speedways. The challenge is made on the understanding that previous to the race I am given one trial lap.”

(SIGNED) SIG SCHLAM.

**BOTH ARE CONFIDENT OF VICTORY.**

**THIS SENSATIONAL MATCH RACE IN ADDITION TO Chas. Datson's attack on Jack Sharp's record. Jack Sharp's attack on Chas. Datson's record.**

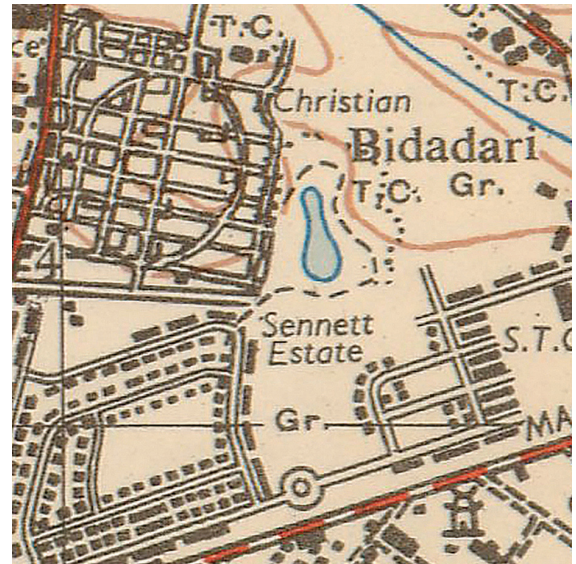
<b>ALL THE AUSTRALIANS IN A SPECIAL BORNEO HANDICAP.</b>	<b>THE \$500 VERNON CUP HANDICAP.</b>
Chas. Datson (Scratch)	Sob Prasong, Cho Jolly,
Jack Sharp (One Second)	Jack Holliman, Harry
Tiger Lewis (Two Seconds)	Riches, Ong Chin Beng,
Ted Yates (Three Seconds)	J. Milne, Bobby Waters,
<b>IS IT POSSIBLE FOR THE SCRATCH MAN TO WIN?</b>	Beppo Wahid, Syd Edlin and Lee Seng Soon.
	<b>OVER SIX EVENTS.</b>

**LOCAL MATCH RACE: SYD. EDLIN vs. BEPPO WAHID.**

**THE BIG FOUR IN THE CASTROL SILVER GAUNTLET rolling start scratch race WHAT A SENSATIONAL PROGRAMME, SO MAKE TO-NIGHT YOUR SPEEDWAY NIGHT**

**USUAL PRICES OF ADMITTANCE: Grandstand \$2, First Class \$1, Second class 20c., Car with syce 50c.**

A map of the area between Upper Serangoon Road and MacPherson Road shows the former Singapore Speedway – labelled “Old Speedway” in the 1938 map (left) – being replaced by the Sennett Estate in the 1953 map (right). Survey Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



the application was rejected on the grounds that dirt track racing would damage the football pitch.<sup>27</sup>

The next major motorcycle event held in Singapore was the Grand Prix, running from 1961 to 1973, which featured both car and motorcycle races.

## A Digital Return

Although dirt bike racing is history, the Singapore Speedway name has been resurrected in Nintendo’s Mario Kart game. In Mario Kart Tour, the new digital Singapore Speedway has three courses, showcasing the

best of downtown Singapore. The first course focuses on the Marina Bay Sands area – including an exciting drive up to the hotel’s infinity pool. The second course goes along the Helix Bridge and Gardens by the Bay, and the third passes by the Esplanade, ArtScience Museum and Chinatown.

In Mario Kart 8 Deluxe, elements of all three Singapore Speedway courses are combined into a single thrilling ride.<sup>28</sup> So while the physical Speedway might be no more, it now lives on in the public consciousness of a new generation of Mario Kart fans around the world. ♦

### NOTES

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