

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Kick Ass, Bast!

Between 1969 and 1978, two southern California brothers named Mike and Steve Bast won eight U.S., 10 state, and three-long track championships of Speedway racing, plus so many individual track titles that it was impossible for the Basts or anybody else to say how many for sure. Such excellence almost compared with that of another pair of remarkable Speedway-racing brothers, Jack and Cordy Milne who, half a century earlier, collected Speedway championships not only in the south and north of California but across the planet: Mexico, Australia, and climactically, in England, at London's Wembley Stadium, in 1937, before a crowd of 90,000, where Jack Milne, after winning a staggering 615 scratch and handicap heats; and getting run over and breaking his back in San Diego; and losing a thumb to a wall in England; became the first American ever to win Speedway's world championship.



Had the Second World War only broken out a few weeks later than it did, and the 1939 runoffs at Wembley not been unavoidably cancelled, it was generally agreed that Cordy Milne, who was in terrific form all that summer before the war, and was the pre-championship favorite, would have duplicated his older brother's exploit of two Speedway seasons earlier. But Cordy didn't, and the two Milnes were remembered accordingly. When for example, the U.S. Speedway championship's 1978 running was held as usual at southern California's freak Orange County Speedway, a claustrophobic clown of a Speedway track roughly half an hour's drive from Los Angeles, almost everyone in the unruly nighttime audience of 10,000 either knew or had been told that Jack Milne was America's first and only world champion of Speedway. But Cordy Milne, who was gravely ill, and would pass the following morning, perhaps was best known for having been the most famous spouse of much-married Lili St. Cyr, stripper and nude dancer.



Young Lili and husband number one, motorcyclist Cordy Milne.

As ever, the attention of the Orange County Speedway crowd was riveted on Mike Bast, and his hugely unpopular try at winning a seventh consecutive U.S. Speedway crown. Anti-Bast feeling used to run so strongly that the 25-year-old champion had to dodge empty and full cans of beer getting hurled from the grandstands; had been hit on the chest by a grapefruit; been slobbered from a seltzer bottle; and even doused with wine. A couple of seasons earlier one deranged and over-excited rube tried coming at him, forcing Bast to begin arriving at Orange County bearing bodyguards. Later he dropped the bodyguards and began packing a Derringer pistol.

Orange County is close to the Pacific and it is alleged that the reason Bast was so unpopular was because he didn't live at the beach like everybody else. This was untrue. The real reason nobody but his loving wife, Dee Ann, seemed to like Mike was because he won too much, too easily. The hatred of Bast reminded me of what used to happen at Knoxville, host city for the winged sprint car eliminations, where Steve Kinser, the only driver worth watching in the 100-driver field, also won too much, too easily; one year a fanatic paid to rent a plane flying above Knoxville towing the antagonistic message "Anybody but Kinser, Anybody!"

The absence of Bruce Penhall, who was as popular as Bast was unpopular; and who was Mike's most talented and tenacious opponent; who had been a teammate of Bast on the old Irwindale Sprockets, but who was visiting England, trying for a world championship of his

own; meant that 1978's was apt to be the most lackluster Speedway tournament yet. Only one lonely spectator seemed to be on Bast's side. "Kick ass, Bast!" an unfurled banner implored, defiantly.

For somebody who raced Speedway five nights of the week for six months of the year; had supported himself and Dee Ann with his racing for a decade; had won at least 80 percent of his 200-plus starts; and had carried almost a quarter-million dollars out of Orange County, Bast, by the 1978 evening of Orange County Speedway's U.S. championship, was coming off a long string of self-destruction.

It all started at Orange County in the spring when he went over the handlebars and damaged his groin; it continued in San Bernardino in the summer, when he crashed and dislocated his shoulder badly enough to require an operation, which he postponed, knowing that bum shoulder and all he still could win; and on a bad and bumpy northern California oval he bounced off a crashwall with enough velocity to afterwards have splintered bone-ends protruding from his torn leathers.

Only 11 days later, Bast, though heavily bandaged, won San Berdoo's track title. And his winning yet another U.S. championship at Orange County in spite of all his wounds had seemed assured until most of the other 15 finalists voted to exclude Bast because he'd been enterprising enough to import from Italy superior tires nobody else had.



A conciliatory meeting between Bast and those who wanted him blackballed was arranged by Harry Oxley, promoter of Orange County Speedway. Oxley happened to be almost as feared and disliked as Bast, and the previous blow-ups between the all-powerful promoter and his all-winning champion rider were notorious. This time, however, Bast had ignored Oxley, and instead taken to task the blackballers, his opponent riders.

Bast's eyes, which were slanted, gave him an alert expression, which was deserved, and, when he was angry, as he was at this meeting, a menacing one, which was also deserved. Steve, his older, taller, brother had had to retire from Speedway racing because of high blood pressure and Mike, years later, suffered a stroke. Mike "had arms" on him. His tattooed wrists and biceps were swollen from weight-lifting, and, of course, racing Speedway. The meeting, had a dangerous moment or two, but Bast simultaneously realized that he was not going to be permitted to race on his new rubber and that he no longer gave a damn.

“Hail to the new champion,” he muttered, while hobbling out of the meeting with his damaged groin, dislocated shoulder, and splintered kneecap. “And I’d fully intended not to ride,” he’d recalled later. “Those clowns.. They made me drive two hours to get there and then put me through a kangaroo court!” And, as a matter of principle and pride, Bast had continued insisting he wouldn’t race. But after a second conciliatory meeting was arranged for, this time between Bast and Harry Oxley. Bast dressed up in his best suit and went.



“It was at a Mexican restaurant near the beach, another long two-hour drive from where I live,” he explained, “and I ate no food, must have had a couple of drinks, and then spent three or four hours arguing with Harry. But we weren’t getting anywhere, and I still couldn’t use my tires. So I lost my temper, banged the table with my fist, and shouted ‘Goddammit. Harry!’”

“Something felt funny in my elbow, and the fingers in my right arm went numb. Harry looked at my right elbow and went, ‘Oh, God.’ My elbow had come down on top of a glass, broken it, and cut it all the way to the bone, tendons and all. “ Harry picked me up and practically carried me bodily to the closest hospital. I bet I lost a quart of blood on the way. The broken glass had done damage to my elbow – the nerves as well as the tendons – that the hospital wasn’t equipped to handle.”

There was only one thing to do, and that was for Oxley to transport Bast 100 miles up the sea coast to Oxnard, where a surgeon known to be a Speedway fanatic was in residence. Roused from sleep at four in the morning, he put 100 stitches on the inside and outside of Bast’s badly ripped elbow. During the interminable journey home from the surgeon Bast had decided that, because Oxley was going out of his way helping him, he would race in Orange County’s championship of Speedway after all, and even without his disputed rubber.

But while recuperating, Bast had changed his mind, and, using his one good arm, telephoned Oxley to tell him he was reneging on their agreement and still wasn’t going to race.. Promoter and star rider continued going back and forth. Knowing that not having Bast to root against would send his Orange County audience into open revolt. Oxley continued falsely advertising in the newspapers that Bast would be there; Bast, in turn, was calling the same newspapers saying that he wouldn’t be.

“It was the tire deal, not the injuries that broke my spirit,” Bast maintained. But this statement was doubtful. Mike gave it to me three days after Orange County’s championship was over and I noticed his inability to speak without grimacing, And, better than two months later, feeling had yet to return to his right hand’s two outside fingers.

On the Friday afternoon before Saturday night’s championship, Oxley, remonstrating, telephoned again, and, according to Bast, the desperate promoter conceded that “The championship won’t be anything without you, Mike.” Which, of course, was true. So Bast changed his mind for the third time agreeing to compete. Giving up his usual first place \$5.000 prize seemed insane.

Ordinarily Bast was his own mechanic, but, owing to his debilitated state, he enlisted his father-in law, and a few volunteers to help rebuild his matching set of Speedway bikes which hadn’t been raced in two weeks. Single-cylinder and brakeless Speedway Jawas and Weslakes are so lightweight and austere they are among the world’s easiest motorcycles to overhaul, which was why Bast and his helpers had been able to compress several days work into one evening, with Bast personally adjusting his clutch mechanism for crucial fast starts - a Bast specialty.

Still drowsy from the pain killer he’d taken the evening before, Bast arose. loaded up the bikes, then proceeded with Dee Ann for Orange County Speedway to confront all his clown enemies, the strokers who rarely exceeded 45 mph. It was the first time he had suited up since injuring his groin, dislocating his shoulder, splintering his kneecap, and, particularly, mutilating his right elbow, whose 100 stitches he’d taped over so heavily he had feeling in nothing but two fingers and his thumb. This last was a terrific handicap. A Speedway rider’s right hand not only modulates his bike’s 55 horsepower but also provides almost all the steering and also the muscle for heaving the handlebars to lock all around a track – it’s no coincidence that Bast and all the rest of the world’s really fast Speedway champions had substantially larger right than left, forearms.

Bast dug the tea cup track’s tacky surface. With what seemed like no effort at all, he overcame all his handicaps; won his first pair of four-lap heats; took runner-up in the third; then went into his last heat knowing that to be assured a seventh Orange County championship all he needed was a third ; but, just to make sure, he took another runner-up instead. The reception he received afterward from the night’s clown riders was a predictable cool one, and not even Harry Oxley bothered to congratulate him. “But what the hell,” Bast had shrugged. “I didn’t expect anybody to.”

Speedway, born on the cinder tracks of England and the convict island of Australia, was perhaps the most enduring and gladiatorial form of racing ever invented. Probably the reason

was its irresistible sideways racing, a weekly activity built into warm Friday nights at Orange County Speedway. Yet by international standards, Orange County Speedway's being only 180 yards per lap – less than a tenth of a mile –made it a clown race track, raced on by clowns (Bast and Bruce Penhall were the only exceptions) with clown names whom a clown announcer screamed out over the P.A.; and a clown promoter, Harry Oxley, who once persuaded everybody to remove their leathers and take a slow clown's lap around Orange County naked. Mike Bast had refused to participate in this insult; but Bruce Penhall had.

“When you beat Mike Bast, you beat the best,” Penhall had said, and he could have written a book about beating Mike, or rather about not beating him. After bursting upon the Orange County scene in a minimal amount of time - moving from the third to the second to the first rider division in one season – it became his ambition to become the first rider to defeat Mike Bast.



“Mike is not so much a fast rider,” Penhall had continued. “but the things he does – like making fast starts -- he does so well.” Yet after listening to Penhall discuss his Speedway duels with Bast in 1976 and 1977 it was my impression that Bast won most of them off, rather than on, Orange County. “We’d be lining up in the pits, sitting on our bikes,” Penhall had explained, “and Mike would glance at my bike, do a sudden double-take, then glance again as if something was wrong. Which would get to me. Or before a race he’d shake my hand and say, ‘Whatever happens, Bruce, I still love you. That would get to me, because if I happened to beat him, he’d never shake my hand.’”

Penhall had given a lot to Speedway, perhaps too much. The right ankle he snapped following a sliding and over-the-high side crash hadn't completely healed after four years; and this despite \$7,000 in doctor and X-ray bills from 15 different medics. Already a jumpy and admittedly nervous rider who seldom could sleep the night before a race, and was constantly in and out of the bathroom, Penhall's most reliable pain remedy had been Bufferin. Keeping a glass of water and a bottle of tablets by his bed, every morning he awoke, slugged down two, yet was never without pain.

Still more Speedway-related pain, Penhall told me, came from his ulcers –he only turned 21 in 1978 but, thanks to Mike Bast, he had ulcers – which manifested their presence on race mornings with a burning sensation.

Penhall had burst onto the Orange County scene by moving from the third to the second to the first division in the same season. His father, the late Leroy Penhall, who with Bruce's mother died in the crash of a private airplane, had been a crack boat and plane racer with his own F-86 Saber Jet – he once won a 60-mile desert race across the Mojave averaging 532 mph. He was a wholly self made man, and the obscure construction and equipment rental business he started in the 1950s became the largest of its type in the world, meaning that Bruce stood to inherit a trust worth almost \$20 million, and which at compound interest rates was nearly doubling every year.

Since there was no heavier burden for anybody who raced than to be defamed as a “rich kid” who instead of using sweat and hard work used his dollars to “buy” success, it wasn't surprising that a weary expression appeared on Penhall's face at the mention of money, The facts seemed to be that he and his brother and sister sold their father's company shortly after the air tragedy, and whatever amount they received Bruce could not touch until turning 35. So, in the meantime, he had to work like everybody else.

In 1977, full of patriotic fervor, Penhall and Bast had traveled together to the world capitol of Speedway racing, England, for two weeks, hoping to emulate the Milne brothers by winning another global title for America. Foolishly expecting carpet treatment because they were American, and to be provided with plenty of pre-race practice on all the different, difficult cinder tracks, they instead were regarded as Orange County clowns whose presence was an irritant to British riders and promoters. After spending hours commuting to a distant track where they'd been promised plenty of time for practice, somebody jerked the plug instead and everything was plunged into darkness.

Being in such let-down moods, Penhall and Bast both did terribly in the Inter-continental final, Penhall scoring three points and Bast one. Because of his idiosyncratic fear of flying, Bast and Dee Ann traveled home by sea which added \$1,000 to all the money the fruitless trip had already cost. “It was just a total farce,” Bast remembered.

Penhall had felt the same way and, upon returning to the U.S., had decided that the only way to salvage 1977 was to defeat Bast for the Orange County championship. But he failed as usual. Afterward he was so let down that he took the most punishing jobs he could think of, which were sawing concrete and working a pneumatic jackhammer for his late father's Penhall Corporation. Penhall was certain his Speedway racing days were over.

But then he received a totally unexpected visit at his Balboa Island digs from Peter Collins (not the old Formula 1 star) who'd been on his way to some match races in Australia. Collins, world champion of Speedway, had met Penhall in England, liked him, been impressed with his racing, and convinced him he must race full-time in the British Speedway League; he even got

him a ride with Cradley Heath, who paid him a five-figure signup fee and agreed to pay all his expenses, including his laundry bill.

So Penhall had changed his mind and decided to make Speedway's world championship his terminus after all: in the next couple of seasons he was made captain of the Cradley Heath Heathens and became one of the fastest Speedway riders on the island; had his contract extended for three years; and was forced to remain exiled for at least that long, but didn't mind.



“In my first couple of season of English racing,” Penhall once told me. “I saw nothing but dirt because I was dead last out of the starting gate. I had to change motorcycles, engines, and my whole style of riding, English Speedway racing,” he added with what I considered inexplicable relish, “is as serious as a heart attack.”

What was hardest for him was adjusting to life in the gloomy UK midlands – biting cold and rains almost daily - which was radically different from the sunny climes found in the balmy south of California. Penhall and his girlfriend Lisa Crane lived in a beat-up apartment without indoor plumbing, and Cradley Heath was out in the back 40 – so remote that to get to the next race they often faced 1,000-kilometer-a-week drives, usually on secondary roads. Then there was all that tasteless food and lukewarm beer.

Over the next five seasons Penhall won more races than Jack Milne, including two Speedway world championships, entry into the hall of fame, and so many individual and pairs honors that, just like Milne, he lost track of them all, Because he was so bronzed and good-looking TV re-named him "Officer Bruce Nelson" and starred him in the successful long-running Cops 'n Robbers serial "CHIPs".

Bruce Penhall, then, accomplished everything except what he wanted to do most - to beat Mike Bast.

