

## Cobble Street Speedway Star

track they had witnessed the previous Monday.

‘Saw you having a go around the Albion the other night,’ James shouted to him as they began to shovel the loose coal.

‘Wasn’t much good, was I?’ Ed grinned, his face and chest already blackened by coal dust sticking to the sweat.

‘You were all right. Where did you learn to broadside?’

‘Oh, I’ve been doing a bit of practice on the trotting track at Droylsden. Fell off a few times but it’s not as hard as people tell you. The difficult thing is doing it while you’re trying to concentrate on racing as well.’

James drank from his water bottle. The heat and the work made him perpetually thirsty. Someone had told him the average miner drank half a gallon of water in a shift and it wasn’t hard to see why.

‘How did you get to know about the meeting at the Albion – I mean, getting entered into a race?’

Ed leaned on his shovel. ‘I talked my way into the trials they had the week before. I know some people who do the greyhounds up there,’ he grinned and his smile made a white gash across the grime of his face, ‘but I had to tell a bit of a white lie about having ridden before – in a race, like.’

‘What’s white about a lie like that?’ James laughed.

‘Well, how else was I going to get in?’

‘Not by going to see old man Percival, anyway.’

‘You did that?’ Ed stopped shovelling again and stared across. ‘Blimey, you were brave. He’s a miserable old sod if ever there was one... Turned you down, did he?’

‘Are you two thinking of doing any work today?’ It was the deputy’s voice as he toured along the coalface.

‘Sorry, Walt,’ Ed replied, shovelling more vigourously.

‘And don’t be so familiar,’ came Webb’s voice as he followed the conveyor belt away from the face.

‘I didn’t know you were keen to have a go yourself, Jimmy. I’ll let you know if I hear of anything coming up –

## Cobble Street Speedway Star

event, the talented Australian Frank Headley had ridden fast into turn one of the second lap, attempting to overtake Brad Newton, one of two Americans in the meeting. Headley lost control of his machine, was thrown headfirst into the safety fence and lay motionless on the track.

He was attended to by the Red Cross and the crowd watched in silence as he was stretchered off to the medical room. Two heats later, the announcer informed them that Headley had recovered and, although he would take no further part in the racing, he was largely unscathed. The happy outcome was attributed to the Albion's four-foot high, sprung wire safety fence and the news was greeted with generous applause from the spectators.

At the interval, Harry and Emma went off to get a cup of tea but James remained behind to watch the goings-on in the paddock. Some riders relaxed with mugs of coffee and cigarettes while others took the opportunity to make adjustments to their machines. A few, James noticed, were happy to chat with spectators over the fence or to sign programme covers so he took the opportunity of talking with Brad Newton, who was sitting on the grass beside his bike, eating a sandwich with oil-blackened hands.

'That's a nice-looking machine,' he began. 'It's a Peashooter, isn't it?'

'Sure is,' came back the Californian drawl. 'A Harley dirt bike. You like motorbikes, do you?'

'Yes. I've got a Rudge, 500 cc.'

The American nodded. 'That's a heavy instrument. The Peashooter's a much lighter machine. It may have less power but it's so manoeuvrable, it can show those bigger bikes a thing or two.'

'You've certainly got that Australian broadsiding off to a fine art. Did it take you long to learn it?'

Newton swallowed the mouthful he was chewing. 'Did you say *Australian* broadsiding? Buddy, I think you've been

## Cobble Street Speedway Star

‘Novices!’ Cavanagh yelled. ‘Do you think people are going to pay hard-earned cash to watch a bunch of amateurs floundering around on the bikes they ride to work?’

‘I’m bound to say, I’ve seen some quite exciting apprentice races over at—’

‘Now look, Mr Taft,’ Cavanagh was in no mood to be appeased, ‘I have sunk a large amount of money into this venture and I need to start earning some back – and quickly. That stadium needs to be filled on Saturday and, to do that, I need established dirt track stars. Well-known names – not novices.’

‘I appreciate your difficulty but that is hardly the concern of my Association...’

Cavanagh stared at the man, breathing heavily through flared nostrils. There was an uncomfortable silence before he uttered his next words, quietly and with as much menace as he could muster.

‘I could run a black meeting.’

Taft looked up but his face betrayed no emotion. ‘I should strongly advise against that,’ he said, coldly. ‘Any rider belonging to an NADTO track who participated in a meeting at an unrecognized circuit would find himself no longer eligible to race in any of *our* meetings. Furthermore, any unlicensed or unattached riders who took part would render themselves ineligible for any meetings arranged under our auspices.’

‘Not all riders belong to NADTO tracks,’ Cavanagh said.

‘True,’ came the response, ‘but almost all of them find themselves involved in our meetings at some point or another.’

Cavanagh’s face broke into a thin, humourless smile and he strode towards the door. ‘I think we’ve said everything we need to, Mr Taft.’

Seizing the handle, he wrenched the door open and Alfred Swallow fell inside, landing at his feet.

## Cobble Street Speedway Star

were arranged the E, F, G and H28s, all 596cc. In front of one machine, a young man flicked idly through a catalogue while, further down the shop, a salesman explained technical points to a customer who was crouched down, examining the engine of a G28.

‘May I be of assistance?’ A middle-aged man with wire-rimmed glasses had appeared as if from nowhere. His voice had a West Country lilt about it.

‘Well, er... we’ve come to pick up a DT,’ James told him.

‘Is it an order, sir?’ The man looked sceptical.

‘Yes. It’s for Sir Gerald Hardwick.’

‘Oh, of course. Will you follow me?’ The senior salesman led the way towards the back of the shop. ‘We did get a telephone call from the office. I’m sorry there’s been some confusion,’ he said over his shoulder.

Pushing open the door, he entered another large room lined with shelves containing motorcycle parts of every conceivable kind. There, in a stand on the floor, another motorbike gleamed at them under the bright electric light. James could only stare. This was a model every bit as beautiful as anything in the showroom but so completely different.

Harry touched his brother’s arm. ‘Jimmy,’ he said in almost a whisper, ‘she’s magnificent.’

James made no reply. It was true what they said, he was thinking: it looks fast even when it’s standing still. So, this was it: the Dirt Track Douglas. All 500 cc of her. He doubted whether he had ever seen such a purposeful-looking machine. The wheels had a huge twenty-eight-inch diameter but the bike still looked lower than most because of its swan neck. His gaze moved over the essential controls, grouped on the handlebars: a lever throttle, an air and magneto advance and retard lever, and the vital ignition cut-out button. James knew that if the throttle lever was opened too rapidly, the engine would hesitate so it was better to keep the throttle at a fixed opening

## Cobble Street Speedway Star

James was nonplussed. ‘Jeff! Wait!’ He shouted again, racing across the road and following him into the alley.

Instinctively, Giles sprinted behind him. ‘Jimmy! What the hell’s going on?!’

The alley came out onto Boulaq Street and, casting his eyes right and left, James just caught sight of Jafari’s back disappearing into the entrance of the Ezbekiya Garden, the park which occupied the area next to the Opera House and beside which they had caught the tram for Giza.

‘Want to tell me what’s going on?’ Giles gasped, arriving alongside him but James made no reply and raced off towards the park. Once inside the entrance, however, he quickly realized the chase was futile. With the cover of trees and bushes, not to mention the choice of four or five different paths he could have taken, Jafari would have made his escape from one of the other exits while his pursuers were still deciding which way to go.

Again, Giles panted to a halt beside him. ‘Okay, enough is enough, Jim. Tell me what’s going on or I’m going to drop dead right at your feet.’

They walked as far as the end of the small, ornamental lake and sat down on the grass. In a short time, when they had their breaths back, Giles looked across at his new friend.

‘Well, Jim,’ he said, ‘are you going to explain now?’

James nodded. ‘That was Jafari, the boy who was with me in the pyramid when we were attacked. He’s a bellboy at *Shepherd’s* but he hasn’t been back to work since it happened. I feel very badly that he got injured because of me and I’ve been wanting to speak to him all week.’

‘Well, I’d say it’s pretty clear he doesn’t want to speak to *you*. Maybe he doesn’t like getting his head bashed in with stones – they can be funny that way, these Egyptians.’

‘But the manager says he hasn’t been in touch with the hotel. Why isn’t he back at work? I mean, if he can run that fast he can’t be feeling too poorly. And why take off like that?’

## Cobble Street Speedway Star

and barging was going on, Sid Hughes had slipped through on the inside, leaving James at the back of the field.

He cursed silently as he chased the others down the back straight. For the first lap, the order remained the same but, coming out of turn two for the second time, Hughes was passed first by Patterson then by O'Keefe, both of whom screamed around the outside, perilously close to the fence.

This was all wrong. What were they doing, riding like maniacs? Were they having their own personal grudge race? James had no idea but his plan lay in ruins already and he felt sick at the thought of how much money Giles and Jafari were about to lose at the tote. Focusing his attention on Hughes, he chased the Australian into turn three, pushed him hard on the inside and when he went wide coming onto the home straight, James sneaked up the middle of the track and the extra speed of the factory-tuned Douglas took him into third place.

By then, the front pair had stretched their lead considerably, with O'Keefe close up on Paterson's rear wheel. The spectators yelled and cheered the most intense duel of the evening so far. At the pari-mutuel office, by far the bulk of the betting had been on Bob Patterson who held the current Zamalek track record. In all, 900 Egyptian pounds had been gambled on the New Zealander with a further 400 pounds wagered on O'Keefe. A total of 80 pounds had been placed on Hughes while an embarrassing 14 pounds was the sum total of the bets on James and ten of those had been placed by Giles and Jafari.

Had James known that, it would only have increased his feeling of dejection as he kept the throttle wide open but failed to make up any ground on the riders in front. All he could do was to stay in the race and hope that his friends had kept back enough of their kitty to make a worthwhile bet on his second and final heat.

Almost a quarter of a lap behind, James watched Patterson and O'Keefe take the flag for the start of the final lap