

# **Brief History of Southern 500 Speedway**

The speedway at Heathmere commenced operation during 1955 on land owned by Hurtle Finck and was built and operated by his son, Alan Finck. Its original name was "Hi Pine" derived from the large pine trees that surrounded the perimeter of the paddock in which the speedway was built. The site was a disused gravel pit, which the local shire had taken large quantities of gravel from and many years before gravel was removed, the paddock was an apple orchard with a number of trees still bearing fruit when the speedway was operating. It has been revealed that on one particular night a car went over the spectator bank and continued around on the outside of the track, back to the pits. On completion of the race apples were found rolling around the inside of the car – these were knocked off the apple trees as the car drove past the trees on the outside of the track.

With assistance from Cliff Harmer and their bulldozers, Allan levelled the gravel pit to form a quarter mile track in the centre and pushed the surplus gravel up to form the spectator banks. These banks on the north and south straights had a timber crash fence against the outside edge of the track. However it was necessary to have a spectator security fence that would be paramount today for spectator safety. The highway or eastern end of the track was left open and this corner was the site of the original pits.

The track was originally built for the TQ Midget class of speedway car and a short time later was modified to also cater for Hot Rods. Hot Rods were basically street vehicles from the 1930's onwards that had seen better days and were usually reinforced on the outside of the vehicle with railway iron. Hot Rod racing was generally "anything goes" style of racing. The surface of the track was constructed with screening dust, which proved costly to maintain with several truckloads required on the track before each meeting.

The original track lighting consisted of 42 x 1500wat globes connected to cabling strung across the track with poles on both the inside and outside edges of the track (similar to the early lighting on trotting tracks). A 55kva generator driven by a 100hp-diesel motor powered these.

It is claimed that on completion of the track, the lights were turned on and Cliff and Alan started racing in their street vehicles – a new 1956 Customline and a Jaguar.

In the early 1960's the interest in the speedway began to decline, so Alan built a concrete skating rink in the centre of the speedway track, which began operating in 1962. The rink operated every Saturday night throughout the year, weather permitting which required the Finck family to load up the 50 pairs of roller skates into the trailer at home before heading to the speedway come skating rink.

The rink operated until 1966 when its operation was removed to an inside venue in Portland giving it the opportunity to operate without interference from the weather.

The speedway remained vacant except for a one meeting each year for a 4-5 year period that involved Victoria verses South Australia Sprintcar titles. The speedway was ideally situated to run this yearly meeting due to its location being close to the border between the two states.

In the early seventies The Portland Hot Rod Club came up with a proposal to resurrect the speedway, bought it from the Finck family and renamed it the Southern 500 Speedway. After investigating

Asphalting techniques used for speedway tracks in the United States, the club set about laying the first asphalt speedway track in Australia.

Local gravel was screened and with equipment and asphalt material donated by Portland businesses, the asphalt track became a reality in 1972 at a fraction of the cost quoted to asphalt one of Sydney's tracks - \$35,000 at the time. About this time, the pits were moved from the eastern or highway end of the track to the other end.

Although racing on Asphalt was spectacular to watch from a spectator point of view, it was harder on the car with the increased likelihood of damaging diffs and gearboxes and it became necessary to set the car up differently for this type of racing to that on dirt tracks. This limited the opportunities of local drivers to race on asphalt with the only other asphalt tracks about at the time being Sydney and Canberra.

It is for these reasons that the track was converted back to dirt in the early 1980's, with local clay being carted in. The track was also made wider and longer.

One major event offered attractive prize money and enticed cars from throughout Victoria as well as interstate including NSW, South Australia and Tasmania.

In more recent times, apart from the normal speedway racing, events that have provided spectacular spectator viewing have been the Caravan Racing and Demolition Derby's. Caravan racing involves old plywood caravan being towed behind cars as they race around the track. By the end of the race, it is quite common that the only the caravan chassis and the wheels remain intact with the rest of the caravans strewn around the track as debris. In the demolition derby, the objective is to put all the other cars out of action by ramming into them (drivers door is out of bounds) while maintaining your vehicle in going order. The last car that is still able to move is declared the winner.

The existing club usually conducts 7 meetings each season from November through to April, catering for a wide variety of classes in speedway cars and normally run the Victorian State Title in at least one car class during the season. Season (2004-2005) the Super Rod State Title was conducted bringing cars from all parts of Victoria and interstate. This season (2005-2006) the Mini Modified Sprinter State Title will be run on Feb. 11<sup>th</sup> 06 bringing cars again from all of Victoria and interstate.

The Major challenge for the current committee is to meet the large insurance commitment or Public Liability before the start of each meeting (in excess of \$3,000 per meeting).

The pleasing aspect for the current committee is that the club is in a strong position with a total of 58 registered members and is striving to keep speedway racing at Southern 500 a success into the future.