

## MOTOR SPORT IN BULAWAYO

Cars and motorcycles played a big part in Rhodesia's wide-open spaces, so it was not surprising that motorsport was popular. The drive between distant centres always seemed a bit like a time trial. The sight of a car boot ahead, or a car bonnet approaching in the rear-view mirror, spurred many drivers. Speeding on the open road was not safe, but common, even in the pre-seatbelt days. Of course, it led to a sad road toll, particularly on weekends.

The earliest motor races I can remember were the stock car races under lights on the dirt track oval out on the Khami Road. The cars were all similar in appearance, being popular American models from the 1940s. Everyone's favourite was the unbeatable Bugs Bunny, an azure-blue model carrying an enormous image of the grey and white cartoon character. I don't know whether the car or the driver's skill kept it winning, but it never disappointed me.

### THE TRACK:

More formal motor racing took place at the old Kumalo Airport site, renamed the James McNeillie Circuit. The 1959 extensions to the old airport runway created the new motor racetrack after Bulawayo Airport moved from Kumalo to its present location fifteen kilometres from the city.

Seven years later, in 1966, I trained with the Rhodesian Corps of Signals at Brady Barracks, next to the old Kumalo Airport. We'd practise Morse code within the confines of our Land Rovers dotted along the overgrown racetrack. Motor racing transferred to the new Breedon Everard Raceway only in 1970. I suspect the condition of the Kumalo track in 1966 was because of international sanctions and petrol rationing post-UDI, which likely cancelled or at least limited the number of events.

### THE CARS:

Despite this, for a decade in the 1960s, the Kumalo track hosted the Rhodesian Grand Prix and other lesser races. A rivalry existed between drivers of the Austin-Healeys, MGAs, and the Triumph TR2s and 3s. I recall a driver with the surname Stewart, who raced a peppermint-green MGA with reasonable success. More famous names taking part in the races included John Love and Eric Glasby.

John Love dominated Southern African motor racing in the 1960s. He was the South African Formula One Champion six times and won the Rhodesian Grand Prix on six occasions. In 1967, I saw him lead the South African Grand Prix at Kyalami for several laps in his modified silver Cooper Climax. He finished second because of a misfire and an unscheduled fuel stop; a wonderful achievement when he was racing against international works teams. Despite his success, he remained an unassuming, approachable individual.

I got my white Ford Cortina serviced at his garage in Bulawayo. When I'd go to John Love Motors to pick up my car in the evening after work, he'd run me through the service details himself, which I found most reassuring. The difference in the car's performance before and after the service was remarkable.

### THE MOTORCYCLES:

After the car races at the Kumalo track, came the motorcycles, with up-and-coming hopefuls competing. One rider suffered from kyphosis, a hunched back. Someone standing nearby commented, 'Whoever gave that man a motorbike should be shot.' But why? He performed well in the races, had a job, and most likely bought the motorcycle himself. Awareness of disability issues wasn't commonplace in those days.

Grey Street in Bulawayo was notorious for its humps at the intersections with the avenues. The open stormwater drains crossing Grey Street channelled the water from Bulawayo's torrential summer downpours along each side of the avenues, towards the Matsheumhlope Stream. The stormwater drains were deep enough to call for pedestrian bridges, four at each intersection, for anyone walking along Grey Street. It meant that at each intersection, Grey Street traffic faced a dip, a hump, and another dip. The Grey Street Cowboys, as they were known, loved racing their motorbikes over those humps, which many credited with producing world motorcycle racing champions Gary Hocking and Jim Redman.

One evening at the Grand Hotel on Main Street, Bulawayo, I went to see a film featuring Gary Hocking and his MV Augusta motorcycle at a Grand Prix in Europe. There were about fifty people gathered in the hotel's ballroom. It was an informal occasion, with scattered chairs facing a large screen. After the film, Gary Hocking spoke about his racing experiences and chatted with the attendees.

Soon after, he switched over to motor car racing, and his prospects looked bright. Four days before Christmas in 1962, the sad news of his untimely death practising for the Natal Grand Prix came as a shock to his Rhodesian fans. He was a national hero, and his demise had a chastening effect on the country.

#### LESSONS LEARNED AT THE TRACK:

It was not just motor sport that was dangerous. One Sunday at the Kumalo motor races led to my worst ever case of sunburn. The spectators parked their cars side by side with their noses facing the track. To get the best views, experience the roar of the engines, and smell the fuel, we'd all stand by our cars or sit on the car bonnets or roofs. At the treeless venue, the only shade was inside the cars. That night, my blistered lips, ears, and face stung as if a swarm of bees had attacked me.

The consequences of sun damage may take years to manifest. But another lesson I learnt on that hot day was instant. Absorbed in the motor race, I rested my hand on the fender of a neighbouring black car, scalding it. Someone said white cars didn't absorb the heat and wouldn't burn, but I was at first hesitant to test the theory. When I tried it, I couldn't believe the difference it made. Later, I returned to the black car to check if it had cooled during the late afternoon. It hadn't. Back at home, feeling hot, pink, and tired, took the edge off an otherwise enjoyable day.