

75th Anniversary of Nutley Velodrome

By Michael C. Gabriele



Nutley Velodrome, Nutley, NJ. Nutley Historical Society Archives

Seventy-five years ago the world came to the Nutley Velodrome as a premier venue for the grand sport of international bicycle racing. The greatest bike riders from around the world traveled to Nutley during the 1930s to compete at the wooden "saucer" built by businessman and cycling enthusiast Joseph Miele.

The velodrome represents a colorful, turbulent period in Nutley's history. It also carries the sad distinction as being the final chapter in the golden age of velodrome racing-a lost era when professional cycling was a major spectator sport in the United States. The Nutley track was hoping to rekindle interest in the bike game, following the closing of the Newark Velodrome three years earlier.

On Tuesday, April 18, 1933, the Nutley Town Commission, led by Mayor Walter F. Reinheimer, granted Miele permission to build a cycling track on a 12-acre lot along the northern side of Park Avenue near River Road; a site known as the Joyce Quarry. Today the property is the site of Little League fields and Nutley's Department of Parks and Public Property building. Ground-breaking ceremonies for the Nutley Velodrome were held on April 19, 1933. Grandstand seating for the velodrome was built to accommodate 12,000 spectators. The oval saucer was built to a dimension one-seventh of a mile.

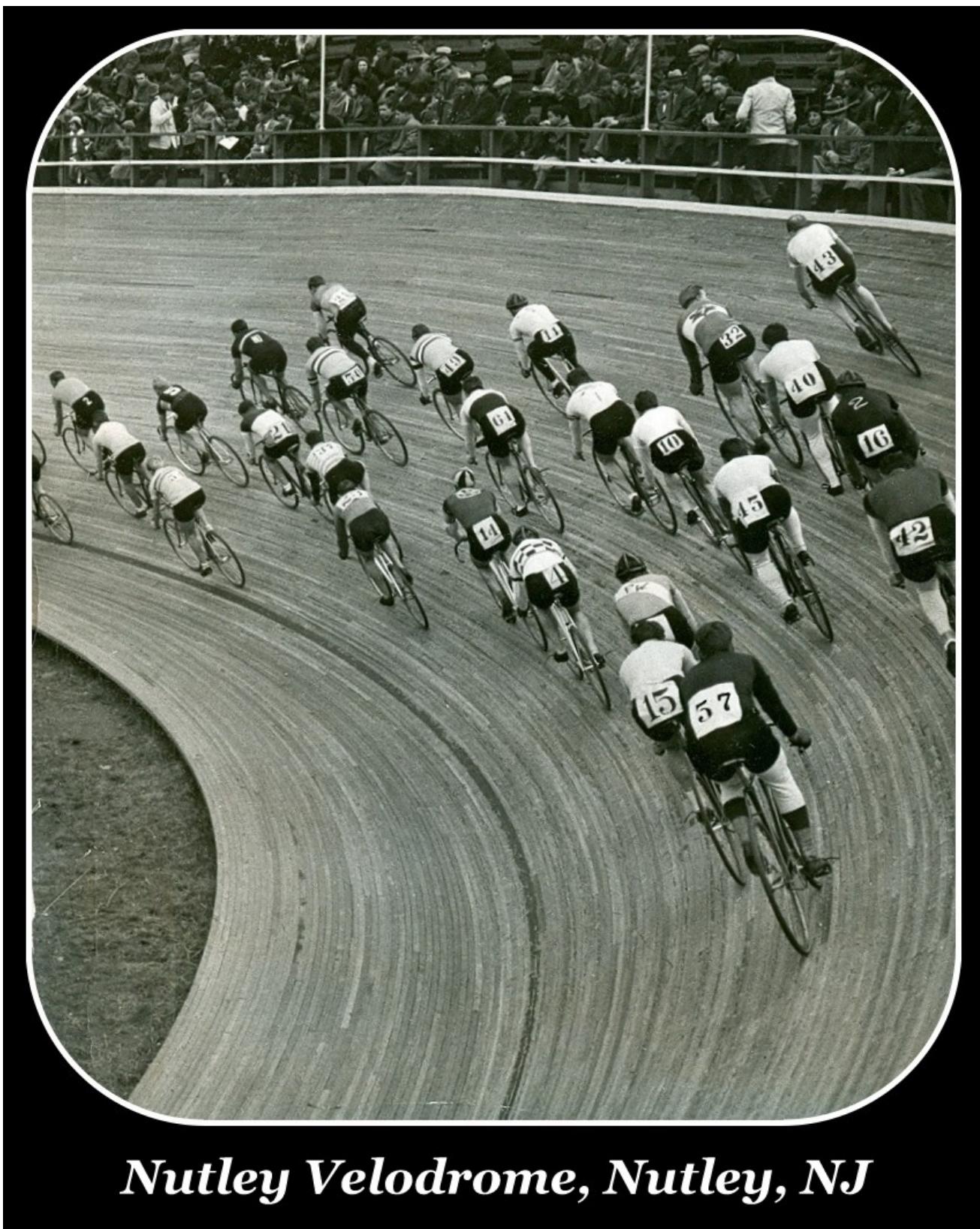
June 4, 1933: Opening Day For The Nutley Velodrome

Golden Anniversary—This Saturday marks the 50th anniversary of the Nutley Velodrome's opening day. Over 12,000 fans turned out on June 4, 1933 to watch the cycling exploits of Tino Reboli, Alf Letourner, Gerard Debates, Paul Croley, Martin Journey and Reggie McNamara. The Velodrome was built by local contractor and cycling promoter Joe Miele. Last Sunday, prior to the start of the 12th annual Tour of Nutley cycling classic, a breakfast was held in the Nutley Elks Lodge to honor riders who competed at the Velodrome. Cycling, boxing and midget auto racing was held in the legendary stadium until its closing in 1940. The track was torn down during the winter months of 1942. This photo, with the inset of the cyclists, was taken on the Sunday afternoon opening day in 1933. It appeared in the June 11, 1933 edition of the Newark Call. — Photo courtesy of Parks Commissioner Frank Cocchiola.

Opening Day, Nutley Velodrome, Nutley, NJ. Nutley Historical Society Archives

The Nutley Velodrome opened Sunday, June 4, 1933 before a standing-room-only crowd. Racing at the Nutley Velodrome was slated for Sunday afternoons and Wednesday evenings. The first night race was held June 7, 1933, drawing 7,500 fans.

The first two seasons-1933 and 1934-were successful as the saucer appeared to fill the void left by the old Newark Velodrome. World-class cycling stars like Cecil Walker, Alf Letourner, Gerard Debates, Tino Reboli, Torchy Peden and Franco Georgetti drew a steady stream of fans.



Nutley Velodrome, Nutley, NJ

But while all seemed well, trouble was brewing. The partnership of Miele and Mendel broke up prior to the start of the 1935 season. Thought they made peace midway through that season, there were clear signs the cycling game was losing its loyal fan base-a trend similar to the decline seen during the final years at the Newark Velodrome.

On July 16, 1936, Miele removed himself from the cycling game and leased the velodrome's operations to sports

promoter Edward J. Malone and legendary Australian cycling champion Alf Goulet. However, two months later there were serious financial problems at the Nutley track.

Attendance declined, prize money began to dry up and investors became scarce. Near the end of the season there was a confrontation between the riders and management. The riders walked out, refusing to compete at the track as prize money could not be guaranteed.

The Nutley Velodrome suspended operations on Oct. 26, 1936. Goulet and Malone made another attempt to hold races in the 1937 season, but by Aug. 5 of that year operations again were halted due to lackluster fan support.

There were four boxing matches held at the Nutley Velodrome in an attempt to attract fans. The first bout was held on June 10, 1935.

MIDGET CAR AUTO RACES

- - A KOCHMAN PROMOTION - -



HENRY BANKS — ROYAL OAK, MICH.

NUTLEY VELODROME

NUTLEY, N. J.



Meet No. 20

Price 10 Cents

Nutley Velodrome, Nutley, NJ

On Dec. 17, 1937, town commissioners granted Jack Kochman of Eastern Speedway Inc. a license to run "Midget" auto races at the wooden saucer. Midget auto racing evolved in California and New York during the early 1930s. Called "doodlebugs" due to their compact, beetle-like shape, these cars were designed with powerful, eight-cylinder engines.

The Nutley Velodrome would be one stop for Midget car racing on the eastern circuit. Races on the banked, wooden saucer would be unique, as most Midget car races were held on flat dirt tracks.

The American Automobile Association (AAA) sanctioned the Midget car races, which debuted at the Nutley Velodrome on Sunday, April 3, 1938.

Over 8,000 fans filled the grandstands. Immediately there were numerous complaints over Midget racing regarding the noise the cars created as well as concerns over track safety. Near the end of the first season, the worst fears were realized when Charlie Helliker, a racer from Long Branch, N.J., was killed on Oct. 9, 1938. Helliker hit another car and crashed into the track's guard rail. His vehicle burst into flames, flipped over and crushed him.

Despite the fatality, Midget car races were a financial success that first season, attracting an estimated nearly 300,000 fans. Even though there was growing public opposition to the high-octane spectacle, Midget car racing opened for its second season Sunday, March 19, 1939.

Henry Guerand, considered a big-name driver on the East Coast circuit, was competing at the saucer on April 2, 1939. Guerand, while driving in the 21st lap of the 35-lap main event that Sunday afternoon, struck the guard rail and his car began to fishtail out of control. He hit the guard rail a second time and the impact bumped him out of his car. While in this exposed position, he struck an overhanging steel fence support, which decapitated him.

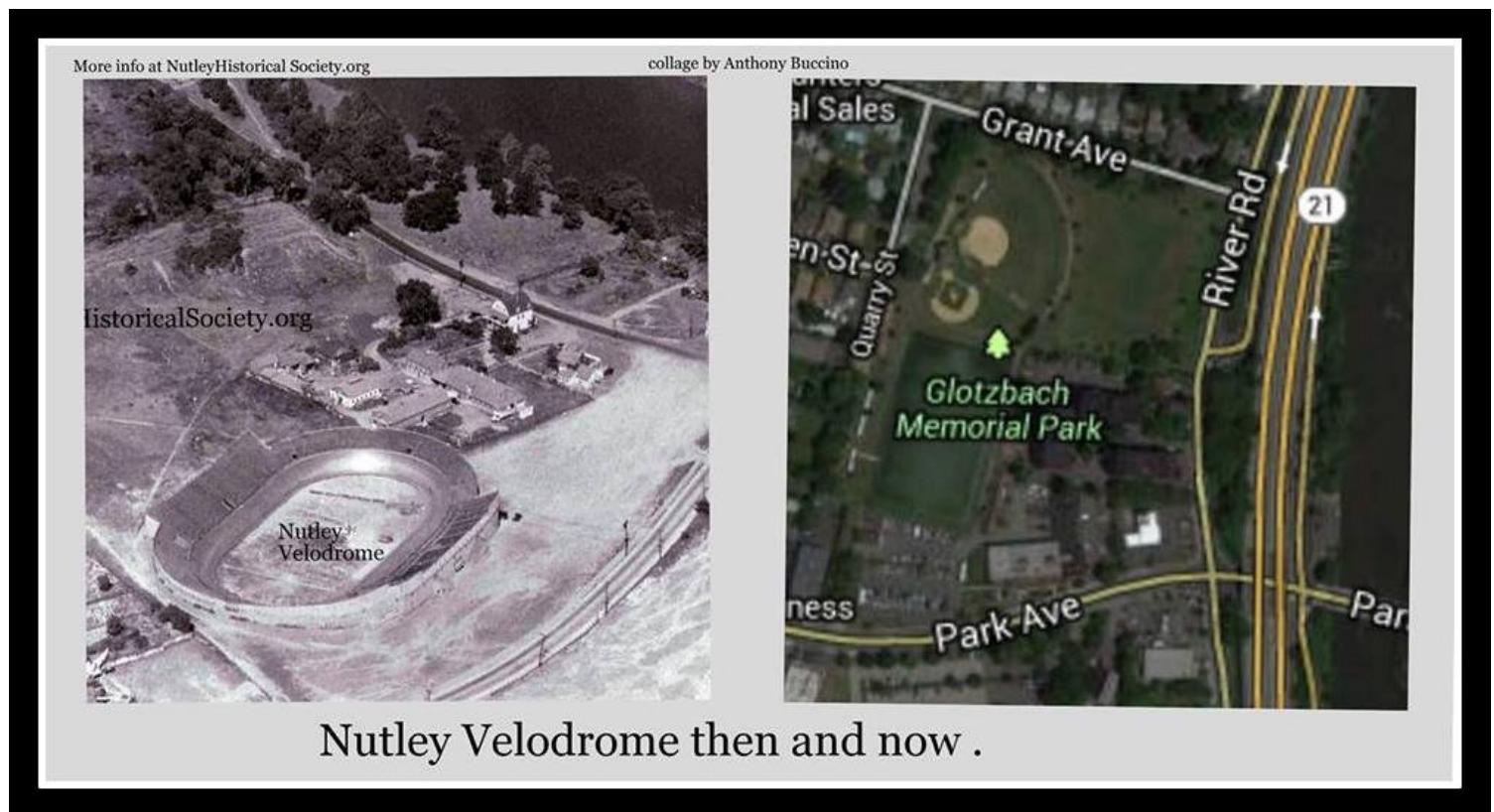
Tragedy struck again on Aug. 26, 1939 as Karl Hattel crashed into the upper railing of the track's east bank during the final heat of a five-mile race, which fractured his skull. He died hours later in the emergency room of St. Mary's Hospital in Passaic.

Essex County suspended Midget races following the death of Hattel.

Nutley commissioners, on Sept. 8, 1939, announced that a town referendum would be held to let citizens decide the fate of Midget car races at the velodrome. Nutley voters struck down Midget auto racing at the velodrome on Nov. 10, 1939.

There were two ill-fated attempts to reinstall bike races at the velodrome. Carmine Bilotto organized several races late in 1939 and 1940, but those efforts failed. The track was torn down in 1942 and eventually Nutley established a public park on the site: Father Glotzbach Park, named after a popular priest from nearby Saint Mary's Parish.

All but forgotten, the legacy of the Nutley Velodrome was rediscovered in a three-part series of page-one articles that appeared in the Jan. 22, 29 and Feb. 5, 1981 editions of The Nutley Sun. June 4 marks the 75th anniversary of the track.



Gabriele was the editor of The Nutley Sun from 1983 to 1985 and has researched the Nutley Velodrome's history for more than 25 years.

85th Anniversary of the Velodrome - June 4, 2018

The Nutley Velodrome represents an important chapter in Nutley's history and New Jersey's grand cycling legacy. The Garden State is acknowledged as America's "cradle of cycling." New Jersey was the epicenter for the international professional cycling circuit, from the 1890's to the 1930's.

Groundbreaking ceremonies for the Nutley Velodrome were held April 19, 1933. Joseph Miele, an entrepreneur and sportsman from East Orange, led the effort and owned the track - a one-seventh of a mile wooden saucer. Nutley resident Pat Mulvey supervised the construction project, which included a work crew of 30 carpenters. Grandstand seating was built to accommodate 12,000 spectators. The track, at its highest point, stood as tall as a three story building. Seventy-six 1,000-watt lights illuminated the facility. The Velodrome's parking lot could accommodate more than 3,000 cars.

The Nutley Velodrome opened on Sunday, June 4, 1933 at 3 p.m. before a standing-room-only crowd. A field of top international cycling stars-Gerard Debaets of Belgium; Alfred Letourner of France; Franz Deulberg of Germany; Giovanni Manera of Italy; Charlie Jaeger and Tino Reboli of Newark; Paul Croley of Brooklyn; Norman Hill from San Jose, CA; and Australians Cecil Walker and Reggie McNamara-were featured in opening day racing events. Nutley Mayor Walter F. Reinheimer fired the gun to start the featured 25-mile "Inaugural Stakes" race, which was won by Paul Croley. During its first season, the track had overall attendance of 297,000 fans for 35 cycling meets, with \$60,000 paid out in prizes and salaries. Grandstand tickets were 75 cents, while boxed and reserved seats were \$1.

As witnessed during the 1920's, professional track cycling began to decline due to a variety of factors. The Nutley track was built with the hope of reviving the sport and reversing the downward trend. Though it was successful enterprise during the 1933 and 1934 seasons, the Nutley Velodrome experienced a dramatic drop in fan attendance, beginning in the 1935 season.

Along with cycling events, the Nutley Velodrome also hosted several boxing matches and midget car races. Tragically, three midget-car drivers- Charlie Helliker, Henry Guerand and Karl Hattel-were killed in accidents on the Nutley track during the 1938 and 1939 seasons.

Even though the cycling game had faded, there was one final attempt to stage bicycle races during the summer of 1940, but the grandstands remained empty. When the Nutley Velodrome closed its gates for the final time Sunday, September 15, 1940, it marked the end of the golden age of professional bicycle racing in the United States. However, the same year, the first Tour of Somerville was held and the sport took off in a new direction.

The Nutley track was demolished during the winter of 1942. In subsequent years, Nutley commissioners acquired the Velodrome property and developed a public park and a Little League baseball field for the township's Avondale neighborhood.

80th Anniversary of the Nutley Velodrome Dedication Ceremony - June 4, 2013 - 4:00 p.m.

**Introduction/Welcome - Commissioner Mauro G. Tucci
of the Nutley Department of Parks & Public Property**

MC - Domenick Tibaldo, Nutley Museum

God Bless America - Sarah Cetrullo

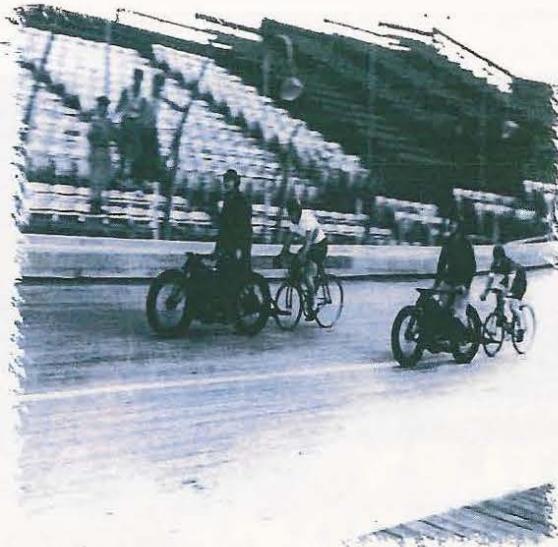
Blessing of the Monument - Father Ernie of St. Mary's Church

Nutley High School Band Performance

A special thanks to John J. Maiello, Director

Keynote Speaker - Michael C. Gabriele

Closing Remarks and Dedication

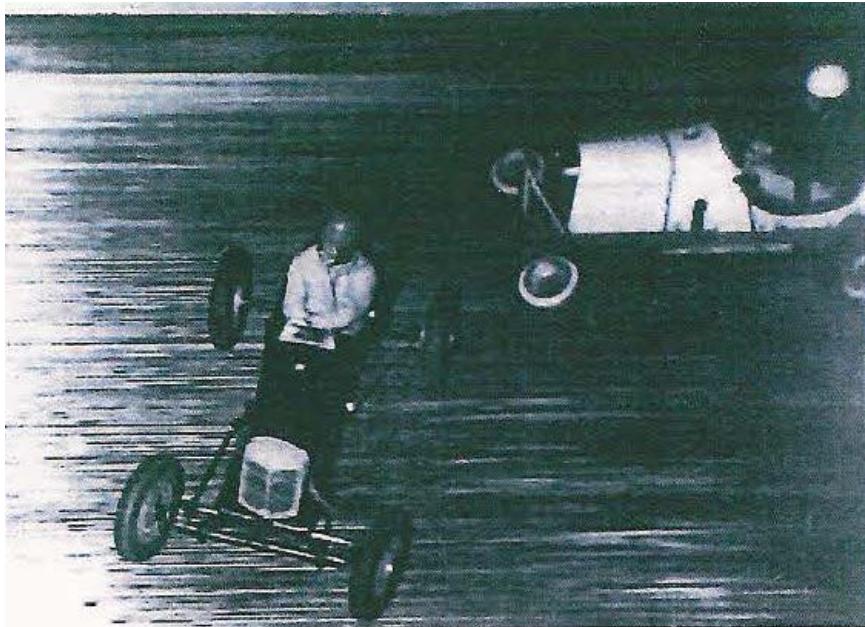


Midget Racing Was A Big Hit At Jersey's Nutley Velodrome

By Keith Waltz

"Paul Russo, sensational Chicago race driver, captured the main event of the initial program of midget car races at the Nutley Velodrome board track Sunday afternoon, April 3. Performing before a capacity crowd, with spectators lining the standing room at the top of the grandstand and sitting in the aisles, he flashed across the finish line to lead six others to Al Stewart's checkered flag." Those words, written by Nat Kleinfield, appeared in the April 7, 1938, issue of National Auto Racing News and were the opening paragraph of a story detailing a milestone moment in auto-racing history.

The Nutley (N.J.) Velodrome was built as a showplace for bicycle racing. The one-sixth mile board track featured 45 degrees of banking in the turns and had seating for 12,000 spectators.



BOARD BURNER: Art Naprstek spins his midget during competition at New Jersey's famed Nutley Velodrome. (NSSN Archives Photo)

It opened June 4, 1933, and attracted top professional cyclists from around the world. But with the popularity of automobiles on the rise, interest in bicycle racing quickly faded and the track closed following the 1937 season.

Auto-racing promoter Jack Kochman convinced track owners Joe and Anthony Miele to replace pedal power with horsepower and the Nutley Velodrome roared back to life with its first AAA-sanctioned midget race April 3, 1938. Russo started from the pole as seven of the scheduled eight starters answered the call for the 35-lap feature. The Chicago racer jumped to an early lead with Bob Sall settling into second while Ernie Gessell charged forward from the fifth starting spot. Gessell eventually drove around both Sall and Russo, but was slowed by lapped traffic late in the race and Russo roared back by to take the victory. Russo completed the distance in 4 minutes and 49.58 seconds with Gessell, Sall, Tommy Hinershitz and Ed Staneck following. Mike Josephs, Russo, Morris Bower and Gessell won the 12-lap heat races with Sall and Russo posting victories in the 15-lap semi-finals. Vern Orenduff was fastest among the 17 cars with a qualifying lap of 8.91 seconds. The most serious accident occurred in the first semi-final when Ken Fowler hit the first-turn wall and flipped. His midget landed on the cables at the top of the track, "half in and half out of the stands." The NARN report said Fowler suffered a broken arm, but that there were no serious injuries among the spectators. This was the first of 60 midget races on the legendary Nutley Velodrome boards before the track's final checkered flag was waved on Aug. 26, 1939.

85th Anniversary of the Velodrome - June 4, 2018

OFFICIAL
10¢
PROGRAM

OFFICIAL
10¢
PROGRAM

NUTLEY VELODROME

Park Avenue Between Washington Ave., and River Rd.

SUNDAY, JUNE 9, 1935—8:15 P. M.

OFFICIALS

REFEREE — FRANK L. KRAMER

Judges—Herman Hillenbach, Dan Caprio, Chester Fischer J. R. Abell, George J. Stanford, Andy Graef, F. A. Wolfert.

Scorers and Timers—Leo Callman, William Goss, Herbert A. Gries, Robert Benwell, Robert Allen.

Starter—Gabriel J. Abieneste.

Clerk of Course—Joe Fogler.

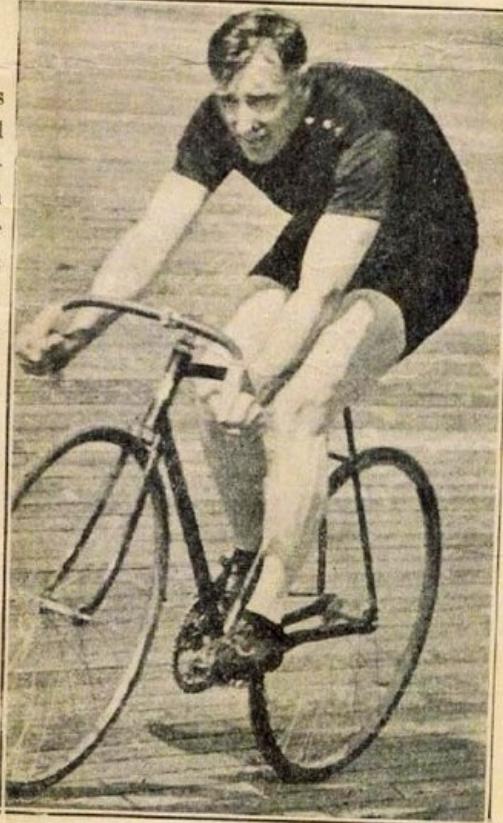
Track Doctor—Rush C. Bauman, M.D.

Announcer—William Sullivan.

NOTICE: To Reserve Tickets Call NUTLEY 2-0752 or NUTLEY 2-0753
When in doubt about the weather call Nutley Velodrome, Nutley 2-0752, 2-0753
or 2-3995, Newark, Paterson or Passaic Newspapers, or Public Service.

EVER POPULAR

Youngsters attending races regularly at this track could find no better rider to pattern their careers on than Cecil Walker, the great star who proves in each meet that condition will always tell. This native of Australia, who has become an American citizen, has held the American all-around championship nine times and has been runner-up twice. He has held the sprint title three times. Since coming to America Cecil has been on scratch in every handicap event he has ridden. He is a stickler for training and appears to be headed for several more years of successful competition.



Races Conducted Under Permit of National Cycling Association

The Management requests its patrons to kindly step on all matches, cigars and cigarettes after discarding them.

with a program at the Nutley Museum on June 4, 2018.

Eighty-five years ago, the world's top professional bike riders came to Nutley to compete at the legendary Nutley Velodrome. The cycling track opened on Sunday, June 4, 1933, before a standing-room-only crowd of 12,000 cycling fans. The velodrome was located on Park Avenue, occupying an area where the present-day Little League field and the township's Parks and Public Properties building sits.

Joseph Miele, an entrepreneur from East Orange, stepped forward to fill the void left by the Newark Velodrome, which closed on Sept. 21, 1930. Professional cycling, a popular spectator sport in Newark for more than 40 years, saw its fan base sharply decline during the late 1920s. Miele thought a new velodrome in Nutley could rejuvenate the bike game. U.S. Olympian Victor Hopkins made his debut at the track on June 7, 1933—the first Wednesday night race at the velodrome, which drew over 7,000 fans. International sprint champion and Newark native Bill Honeman, wearing his eye-catching "Stars and Stripes" racing outfit, made his first appearance at the Nutley track on June 14, 1933, winning the one-mile pro race.

The velodrome enjoyed success during its first two seasons, but by 1935 the fan base declined, much like it did at the Newark track. On Sept. 15, 1940 the Nutley Velodrome closed its gates for the last time. The golden era of U.S. velodrome cycling came to an end and the track was demolished in February 1942.

Gabriele is a member of the executive board of the Nutley Historical Society. In 2011, he wrote a book titled "The Golden Age of Bicycle Racing in New Jersey," published by The History Press, which detailed the history of professional bicycle racing in the Garden State.

The Story of the Nutley Velodrome



Tags

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