



When Bicycling and Auto Races Were Popular

FROM THE NUTLEY REVIEW

“The wheel has come to stay” editorialized *The Nutley Review* in its edition of October 5, 1895.

“Wheels! Wheels! Nothing but wheels Not in our heads, but under ourheels.”

SO MUCH had the bicycle come to mean to Nutley, back in 1895, that *The Review* reported from Paris that the divine Sarah Bernhardt frowned on Knickers for women cyclists, contending that the masculine attire donned by women for bicycle riding was immoral. That coming from Sarah was something, because she had long affected white flannel suits, frock coats, trousers and all when she received visitors in her Paris mansion.

The grandmother of today’s “gun moll” was the “knickerbocker girl thief” who, *The Review* reported, was stealing bicycles from renting stores throughout the Essex suburban area, replacing the name plates with different trademarks and selling them.

Forty-seven members of the British Parliament, *The Review* reported, take daily bicycle rides and a Chicago dispatch reported that an enterprising manufacturer was hooking up a bicycle with a baby carriage to provide mechanical pushers.

In that happy pre-automobile and pre-aeroplane era, when Sunday afternoon

trotting races on a mile straightaway in elmshaded Washington Avenue were the town's favorite diversion, bicycles captured Nutley's favor to such an extent that under a heading "Wheeling Notes" The *Review* printed a half column of the following news items.

Story of Scorchers

"The Bicycle has struck Nutley with full force and on the streets of the town they can be seen at any time.

"Dr. and Mrs. G. B. Philhower have joined the fraternity and are frequently seen enjoying the pleasures.

"Rev. W. J. Keatley is an old patron of the wheel and uses it in attending to his many duties.

"Mr. and Mrs. A. H. Larkin are popular riders and enjoy many a spin.

"The distance to school is shortened considerably by the use of the wheel. At noon time they can be seen by the dozen, bearing the youngsters to distant dinners.

"Principal Wright uses one and finds it a very convenient companion.

"S. S. Davis is an expert and enjoys scorching. He makes good time.

"S. H. Door is an expert rider and enters the Yantacaw races. He makes them hustle to beat him.

"Frank R. Rusby, president of Nutley wheelmen, is an ardent admirer of the exercise and is somewhat of a scorcher.

"Nutley wheelmen's quarters in the Park Hall have been secured for another year.

"Sydney Wassal, member of the Nutley wheelmen is a promoter of its popularity.

"Alpheus Geer is an advocate of the wheel as a conditioner and uses it in training. He is an example of its efficacy.

"W. H. Page of the Yantacaws is an expert and his son Dick, a bright little fellow, is very quick and adept.

"Possibly the fastest youngster in town on the wheel is Clarence Faith. He keeps his father, Ernest E. Faith, hustling to keep up with him.

"Halstead Baker of Walnut Street is another fast youngster. He rides a Crescent and makes good time on it.

"A hint to wheelmen. Why not negotiate with N.A.C. and construct a track on their grounds'? This would mean a lot to them and the wheelmen.

“The wheel has come to stay. Its usefulness is more than evident every day and is the secret of its popularity.”

That love of the bicycle carried over into modern times when until as recently as 1939 Nutley enjoyed professional bicycle racing in the velodrome, since destroyed, which was built on the filled in quarries between Park and Grant Avenues. In fact, it took a referendum in November, 1939, when the voters cast a three-to-one ballot, 2,161 to 770, against renewing the velodrome's license after two drivers had been killed in accidents in a single season of midget automobile racing that shared the pine saucer with the bicycle.

The velodrome itself was built just 30 years ago, a wooden banked track with fenced in bleacher seats. Motor-paced races were popular enough to fill the stands every Sunday afternoon in fair weather. It was only a step farther from motor-paced races to midget automobiles, and Eastern Speedways, Inc. took that step in April, 1938.

Bike racing had finally given up after a disastrous summer at the gate in 1937. The opening of the Coney Island velodrome had attracted most of the best riders, and with only second quality racers left the local saucer was unable to hold the crowds. The owners were having trouble with sinking quarries and as the fill sank deeper and deeper it became necessary to shore up the pine track and the bleachers with two-by-fours.

The midget races won instant favor with everyone but the neighbors and the noise of the tuning up and racing “doodlebugs” shattered the Sundays until Nutley grew very angry.

Electric sound recorders were brought in to register the noise decibels. Recordings were made in residential sections and even as far away as Four Corners. They showed that not only the tiny motors roared, but so did Promoter Jack Kochman who used a public address system to boom out commercials. They showed also that as far away as Highfield Lane the noise was bothersome.

The upshot of the decibel recording was that the promoter agreed to tone down his amplifiers, but that merely gave free rein to the “doodlebugs” so the growing list of protestants took their problem to the town hall, along with tell-tale records of the calibrated sound.

Mrs. Eleazer Barth, head of the League of Women Voters, was one of the most active advocates of bringing back silent Sundays. Ex-mayor Emil Diebitsch joined the fight against the “doodle-bugs” but Mayor Fred Young, who had been a lifelong sportsman, was taking his time to make a personal inquiry when the first of the two fatal accidents occurred which in the end, shut down the races.

The first of the two deaths occurred during the races of Sunday, April 2, 1939.

Henry Guerand, 26, of Paterson, was riding in fifth position on the 35th lap of the day's final race when he lost control of his midget car on a curve. The car hit a guard rail and Guerand was catapulted. He hit a steel protection cable and was decapitated. To the horror of the hundreds of spectators his head rolled down the steep incline of the wooden saucer.

That accident set off a storm of criticism of the Town Commission as well as Promoter Kochman and the town meetings for the next months were stormy affairs as one delegation followed another to protest. An Essex County Grand Jury, charged with investigating the accident, accused the races of being "a public nuisance."

On the strength of the grand jury's decision, the Town Commission, under severe pressure, revoked the Eastern Speedways license, but Promoter Kochman was insistent and obtained a writ which permitted him to resume the races in July pending a court decision, in August, which over-ruled the Town Commission on the revocation of the license.

An open battle between the town and the out-of-town promoter then developed and shortly after he had won his court victory Kochman was served with a summons on complaint of Health Officer Richard V. Fellers, charging him with violating the town's anti-noise ordinance. Recorder Charles Young fined the promoter \$25.

The commissioners then decided to submit the whole problem to the voters in the coming November elections in a referendum to decide the future of midget car racing.

Fate stepped in, however, before the elections took place and in a second fatal accident another out-of-town driver, Carl Hattel, a Californian, was killed on an August Sunday afternoon. A broken axle sent him piling into the guard rail of the tiny Nutley saucer on the unlucky 13th lap. With his car out of control, he failed to take a sharp turn and his car crashed, pinning him in. It took so long to extricate him from the debris that he died before reaching St. Mary's Hospital.

That second fatality within four months whipped Kochman and he voluntarily halted the races, announcing his intention of resuming in the following summer. In November, however, the town settled the problem by voting down "doodlebug" racing 2,161 to 770 in a referendum which did not see a dozen votes cast until the close of the Nutley - East Orange High School football game. That was one of the big years for the Maroon and Nutley was football mad, even though that unhappy afternoon East Orange held Nutley to a 6-6 tie and spoiled chances of a state championship.

The velodrome had a fling, too, at boxing, but, strangely enough, Joe Louis, the world's champion, figured in a "stinko" which ruined the fight game here and caused promoter Lew Diamond to fold his tent and steal back to Jersey City.

A first trial of boxing ended in a riot in 1937 when Tony Fisher lost a decision to Lou Halpern, but the next year another promoter took over, Harry Mendel. He staged one good fight between Two-Ton Tony Galento and Al Ettore which put Tony on his way up. In another fight here that year Bob Pastor took a decision from Freddie Fiducia.

The fiasco in which Joe Louis figured took place in June 1939, when Joe interrupted his training at Pompton Lakes for his fight with Tony Galento long enough to come to Nutley to second one of his sparring partners, Dave Clark, a dusky Detroit punch absorber. Gus Lesnevich, the North Bergen blond, smacked Clark cold in the first round and while Joe Louis sat with his famous dead pan in Clark's corner, 2,000 Nutley fans rioted. That ended boxing here.

Had the green center of the stadium been 10 yards longer it might have survived the wartime need for metals and might still be standing. Joseph Reilly toyed with the idea of leasing it as a football stadium for the Iron Dukes, but when it was measured it was found to be ten feet short of the required 100 yards between goal posts. That doomed the velodrome and when World War II needs of scrap metal were highest, Joseph Michie, the Newark contractor who built and owned the structure, dismantled it at the top of the market.