

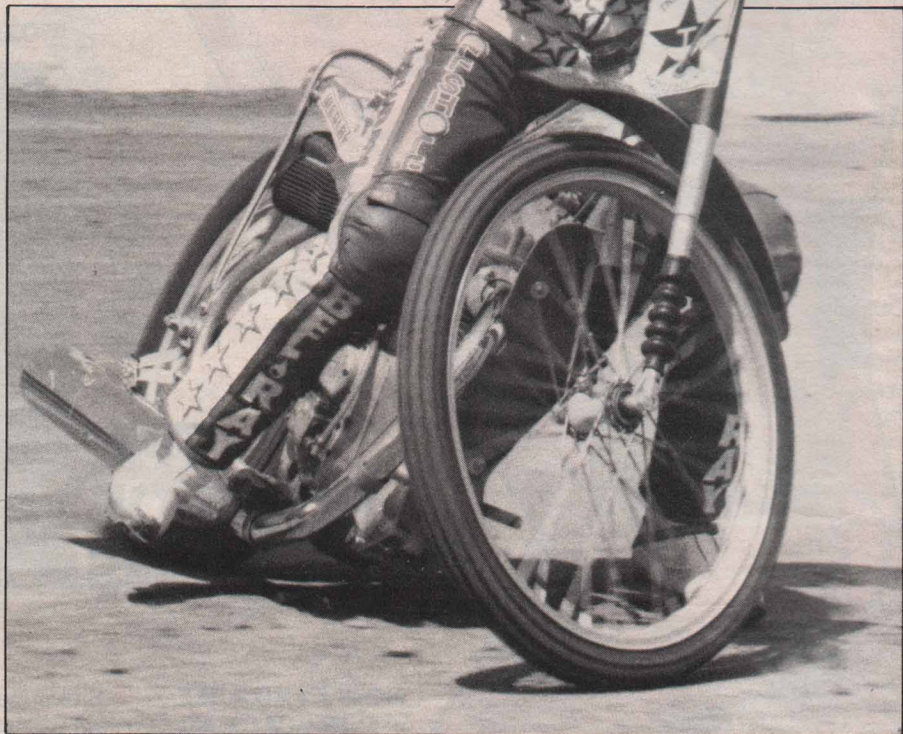
# "COUNT TO TWO & TURN LEFT"

*If it was as easy as that, Bruce, we'd all be world champions*

By Paul Clipper

I'm sure Bruce Penhall was getting impatient. I mean, here's this world champion speedway racer holding an old Jawa up on its footpeg, blipping the throttle, while some magazine geek fumbles with his helmet strap with both gloves on. He had to be standing there thinking, "Come on, Clipper, you've got to be smarter than the helmet," while we both knew that what I was trying to do was impossible.

I pulled off my right glove and managed to get the helmet strapped on, only to have to find the glove I had just dropped on the ground. I finally got everything together, threw a leg over the



*"Speedway? It's EASY once you get the hang of it!" An oversimplified view from the 1981 World Speedway Champion, Bruce Penhall.*



*Bruce points out the difference between the front and the back, while a few magazine people get ready to make fools of themselves.*

bike, and listened to a few last words of advice from the champ. *Tried* to listen, that is. Actually, I was a nervous wreck. Here I was, wrapped up in my gaudiest leathers, squatting on a speedway bike in front of a hooting crowd of competing magazine editors, wholly expecting to make a fool of myself. Also, I had spent the last 12 weeks with my left arm in a

cast, waiting for a bone in my left hand to heal, and this was the first bike I'd ridden in nearly three months. Webb was waiting in the far turn, ready to get a shot of the inevitable crash.

This is the kind of scene that fills you with confidence, for sure. I just barely heard what Bruce was saying above the growl of the ancient speedway bike, and



*DIRT BIKE staffer gets last-minute instructions before he's bump-started to life . . . And what does he do in the first turn? Lesson Number One: Speedway tracks are as slippery as marbles on a roller-skating rink.*





## DB RIDES SPEEDWAY!

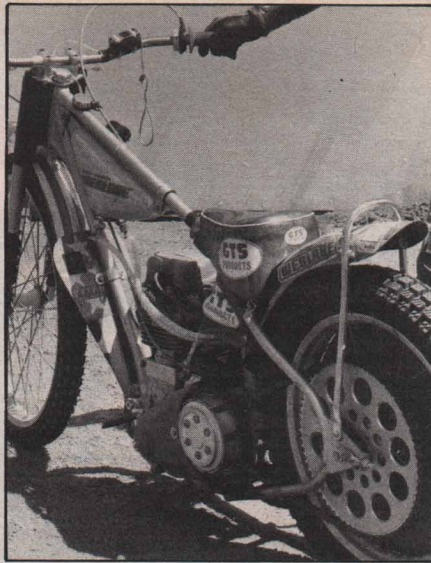
then he waved me off with the last words, "Give it a try!"

No sweat. Unbeknownst to most of the crowd, I had done this before — not fast, and not very stylish — but this wasn't the first time, which helped to ease some of the nervousness. I putted through the first turn, remembering the feel of the unusual bike, gassed it up a little down the straight, and then went into the far turn.

And promptly fell down.

\* \* \* \* \*  
"What is this thing 'speedway,' and why are all these people excited about it?" The question came up in the plush, sanitary *Dirt Bike* staff room, and after we ran around in a frenzy for a few minutes looking for an obvious answer (and not finding it), we vowed to look into the matter. In the past, speedway has gone from a cult ritual to a popular sport and back again a number of times; right at the moment it is enjoying excited popularity again. Why is that?

Well, for one thing, we have an American World Champion in speedway this year. Bruce Penhall romped all over the Europeans in 1981, capping the season off with a convincing win in front of 93,000 people at Wembley Stadium in England. We were overdue for the championship — it's been 44 years since Jack



*Speedway bikes haven't changed much in the past 40 years. No suspension, hardly any seat; just raw, open horsepower in a 170-pound package.*

Milne first brought the title home to America (1937), and it hasn't been repeated since . . . not until last year, that is.

That's the way to bring in a crowd of spectators, but what about all the new people riding speedway? After all, there's not a whole lot you can do with a speedway bike, aside from race roundy-round. Our local speedway convert, Ricky Miller, claims he was tired of spending a

fortune on a motocross bike, just to go out and tear it to shreds every Sunday. Now he spends a fortune on a speedway bike, and tears it up three times a week.

Actually, there's more to it than just that. Speedway is far from a boring form of racing to be involved in. The bikes — mostly old Jawas and not-so-old Westlakes — are capable of accelerating from zero to 60 mph in about three seconds, and will go far faster than any sane person needs to go. They have no suspension to speak of, the average weight is somewhere in the neighborhood of 160 pounds, and they run on alcohol. Each race consists of four riders, with four laps total to run, and the first rider across the finish line is the winner. It's not at all uncommon for a speedway race to finish in under two minutes, and in that short amount of time there's not much room for mistakes.

Interesting, huh? Not at all surprising that we wanted to try it out.

\* \* \* \* \*  
Ordinarily, getting together with Bruce Penhall for a day of riding wouldn't be a simple task. This man hops oceans more than we hop on test bikes. But, by a stroke of luck, World Class Inc. invited us to a Press Day to promote the World Championship Finals to be held this year at the L.A. Coliseum. Along with filling us in on the race details, they also promised to have Bruce there along with a couple of bikes we could ride, if we wanted to see what speedway was all

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about. We couldn't have asked for a better deal.

So we met at Costa Mesa fairgrounds, picked up some press kits, ate a couple of sandwiches, jabbered about business, and waited patiently until Bruce trooped us all off for our first real speedway lesson. We had a short "riders' meeting" before we suited up, and the world champ told us everything we needed to know about speedway riding.

"First thing you need to know is that these bikes are very light, and they can go from zero to 60 in about three seconds — just as long as you can get the rear wheel to hook up. Your right foot sits on the footpeg, and your left leg is not much more than an outrigger. Keep all your weight on your right leg, and don't let your left foot bounce behind the engine cases. I do it all the time, but I really shouldn't.

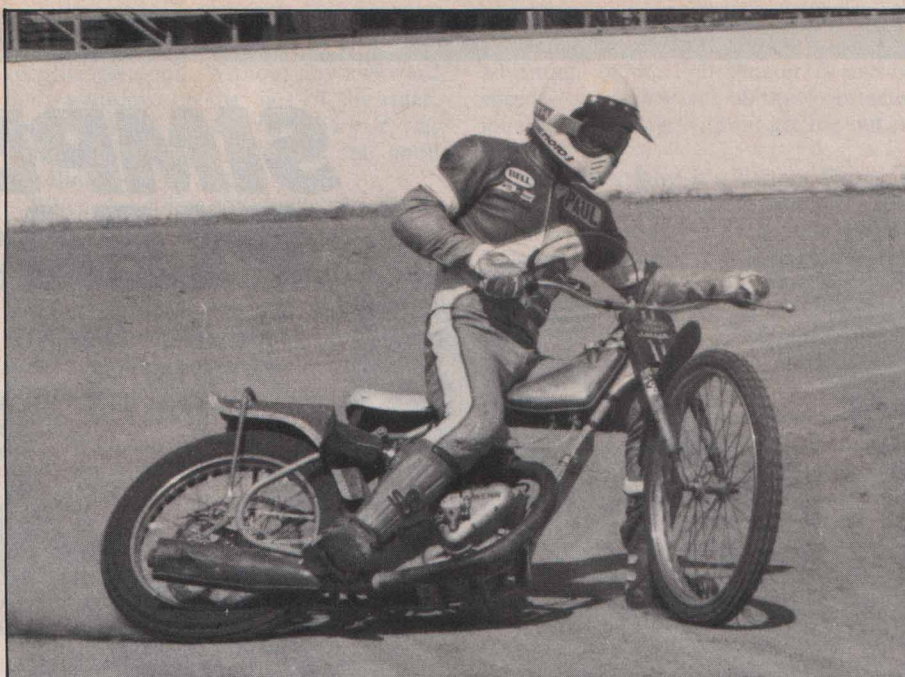
"When you open the throttle the back wheel will spin, and that should make it real easy for you guys to get sideways in the turns. Keep in mind that the bike will want to hook up and go faster when you back off, so don't do it unless you have plenty of room in front of you." He says this fully believing we're all about to crank that bike wide open the first chance we get. *Right.* "The best thing to do is take the throttle and turn it wide open, lock it there by wrapping a little piece of tape right around *here*, and just go for it. Count to two and turn left. If you have any more questions, we can work them out on the track."

I had a question — whether or not the whole deal was worth it, as I painfully tried to stuff my size-ten foot into a size-eight boot and steel shoe. Bruce wouldn't let any of us out on the track without a steel shoe on our left foot. Not owning one personally, I had to borrow one from Rick Miller, who had the biggest shoe there . . . and size eight ain't very big. For the first time ever, I had an up-close and personal taste of the ancient Chinese art of footbinding. The pain made me cross-eyed, and should have given me a good excuse for that first crash.

Of course I was sitting down and leaning back like a geek at the time, but there's no need to go into details.

All in all, I took about 12 laps on the tiny Costa Mesa track, and I actually managed to get stylish once or twice. The bike had a tendency to scare me to death — no brakes, instant acceleration — but if I did everything right, and managed to screw the throttle on a little bit, I would get comfortably sideways in the turns.

It would take many tanks of fuel and a bigger boot before I could get dialed into the fine art of speedway, and when the pain in my foot became unbearable, I handed the bike back to Bruce and sat right down on the track to pull off the bear trap crippling my foot. Twelve laps, and my leathers were soaked with sweat, I was completely out of breath, my right leg was cramped and wobbly, and I could tell it'd



*In time, even an old enduro rider can be taught a few tricks.*



*Recent motocross-to-speedway convert Ricky Miller hasn't regretted his switch to smooth-track racing. "It took me about a year to feel confident on the bike; now I'm just riding and having fun." And winning too, we might add.*

be that way for a few more days. I felt like a fool and a clubfooted geek as I reeled back toward the stands, when Rick Miller came up and told me how good I looked out there.

"What? You're crazy!" I told him, handing back his well-stretched boot. "I rode like a geek. Couldn't even get sideways!"

"Yes you did! You knew what to do out there, you just need a little more practice. I was watching you, I know what I saw!"

A little more practice, eh? Ricky may just be right about that. Maybe there's a future in speedway for an old magazine geek . . .

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*Penhall makes it look so easy, you'd think he slid feet up into the championship. Actually, this is the first time an American has won it in 37 years.*

The moral of the story is this: If you ever have a chance to ride a speedway bike — swallow your fear and do it. It'll give you more cramps than a jug of Mexican water, but you'll get more sideways than you ever dreamed about. If you ever get a chance to ride with Bruce Penhall . . . well, sell your sister if you have to, but do it. Just don't let him near your throttle with a roll of duct tape.

If watching is more your style, don't forget the World Finals at the Coliseum on August 28. Penhall will be there to defend his title against the best in the world, and it should be the wildest show of the year. For more information, get in touch with World Class Inc. P.O. Box 3334, San Clemente, California 92672. □