

## Tracks and Velodromes, then and now.

Even before the first half of the last century there was a Velodrome in Detroit. It was located near Harper and Morang close to where Kavan's, Colony East is or was. Likely by 1933 the Velodrome came down and Kavan's went up. Whereas prohibition went out in August of 1933 there were more people willing to buy beer than to pay to watch a bike race on a Velodrome. Fred Cappy had come to Detroit in the 20's specifically to compete on the Velodrome that has long since disappeared from the landscape.

For me my first track experience occurred on the U of D 1/4 mile cinder running track. This was the early 50's. Each year there was a Fireman's Field Day celebration that was held at U of D. Mike made arrangements with the organizers for a series of bike races to be run on the track. We used very low gears so as to look like we were going fast and still be able to negotiate the turns at speed. The race winner would be agreed on before the start so that we didn't get carried away with the competition and crash. Our starting arrangement was decided on prior to the, so-called, race. At some point Mike decided that I should move to a different position. My holder/pusher was a member of the Detroit tug of war team. When Mike indicated the move my pusher picked up, me and bike, and moved to the position Mike indicated.

There had been much talk with the City of Detroit in getting a Velodrome built. For a time when Detroit was in the thick of the bidding for the 1952 Olympic Games it seemed possible that this might come to pass. Detroit lost out to Helsinki Finland and the impetus for the city to erect a Velodrome disappeared. Fred Cappy then took up the challenge and built a Velodrome that was located outside the city at 11 Mile Road and Ryan. At that time that location was the boondocks, as at that time Detroit had not expanded much north of 8 Mile Road. The Velodrome was small, 11 laps to the mile. The surface was what we called beaverboard. The framework was mainly angle iron. The turns were banked 68 degrees.

For me the most memorable event was when I took a ride on a road tandem on the track with Gene Diggs as my stoker. We hadn't gone many laps when the chain derailed. We were in the straight when the chain came off. I went down onto the flat boards then tried to stay there as we went into the turn. Our speed was to great so I made a right turn and went straight up the track until our momentum ran out. We then flipped onto our right side and slid to the bottom.

Jim smith had a much more harrowing experience when he was riding the track before the top rail had been erected. He must have been watching the rider below him oblivious to the fact that he was at the top of the track. He went over the top and landed on the ground between various foundation pieces that could have ended his career as well as his life. Well Jim survived that incident and we had the pleasure of his company for another 50 years or so.

After that track passed into history we sometimes raced on various car tracks. Motor City Speedway on 8 Mile near Schoenherr as well as the Flat Rock Speedway. A Velodrome still existed in Delhi Ontario and Karl Wettberg often competed at that facility and often teamed with Francois Mertens in Madison Racing.

In 1967 or '68 Mike began the project that would become the Dorais Velodrome located on Outer Drive and Mound Roads. The facility was finished just in time for the '69 Nationals to be held.

In the same time frame when Neil Armstrong stepped onto the Moon, Mike stepped out on the infield of the Dorais Velodrome to return track racing to Detroit, another monumental feat by a determined individual. The Dorais Track had a useful life of approximately 20 years during which time Mike honed the talents of the many National and World Champions who gleaned the benefits of his cycling knowledge.

By the 90's that track surface had deteriorated to the point it was good only for BMX trick riding. Once again Detroit was without a Velodrome.

Back in the mid 70's there were two six day races put on at velodromes that were erected for that purpose. In '72 the track was in the State Fair Coliseum. The race had three men teams and the racing was for three hours each night. The winning team was the team of Roger Young, Dale Vergauan and Ron Skarin, two Detroiters and a Californian. In '74 there was a Velodrome erected in Cobo arena. The race was administered by the Van Laken and DeVos families, that were associated with the Cadieux Café.

About that time Dale Hughes emerged onto the cycling scene and along with three partners built a 125-Meter portable board track that would fit inside most ice arenas. For a short time it was in Warren on Chicago Road and then in Southfield in their arena. A six-day was held in that location. I don't recall if Roger Young won that particular event but he was certainly prominent in all the action.

Dale took that track to various locations around the country including California where a movie was filmed that starred Julie Andrews and Walter Matheau and was titled, "Little Miss Marker." The movie was a flop but important to the cycling community was that a 17-year old Greg LeMond was one of the participants.

Around 1995 Dale was contacted by the U.S. Olympic organizing committee and given the contract to build the Velodrome for the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta. The Velodrome was erected in Stone Mountain Park east of Atlanta. Once the games actually began, the track was a complete success, with World or Olympic records set all across the spectrum of the racing. When the games were over the Velodrome was dismantled and was purchased by Disney who then stored it in a warehouse in the Orlando area. There it stayed for many years unassembled until Montreal managed to buy it a year or so ago.

And now we arrive at the current era when the Velodrome at Bloomer Park began its life. It certainly seemed farfetched that a Velodrome could be built with donations from the cycling community and volunteer labor. Dale Hughes was the designer and chief of construction as well. Seldom has anyone put in as much labor physical as well as mental to keep the project on track. In May 2001 the track opened for racing, or was that 2002?

Anyway it is a dream realized and I'm sure that Mike Walden must be resting easy with a smile as wide as a mile to see this facility become a reality.

From the memory of TJ Hill, all dates are subject to correction by those in the know.