

January 2006

Dear Donny,

Thank you for choosing not to race in New Zealand....

Your decision to go to Warrnambool instead was most appreciated.

Signed

Jason Solwold

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The big Air New Zealand Airbus touched the tarmac in Auckland amidst grey and overcast skies. Rain was falling and more was forecast, but our hopes lay in the fact that Baypark was some 200kms southeast in Tauranga. Maybe things would be different down there and the speedway gods would be smiling? But as I sat out on the balcony at breakfast on Thursday morning in Mount Maunganui, the rain drops were still dancing on the outdoor table that otherwise should have had half naked Kiwis sitting around it enjoying the sun and a few Lion Red ales.

At midday we ventured to the track to pick up our media passes only to find two strangely contrasting items in the sky. One was sunshine and the other was a helicopter brought in by the promotion to dry the brownny orange Terracotta clay which would soon be ripped asunder by 53 snarling 410 ci sprintcars. *"After all"* said Willie Kay, *"We have brought 19 international race teams in by jumbo jet what's the harm in spending a few more dollars to make sure they can race"*.

How can one describe the Baypark complex? Probably by saying it would rank as the second best in the world with only Knoxville as its superior. 451 metres long, with 18 metre wide straights and turns, it is the widest in NZ but amongst the narrowest compared to what the Yanks are used to. Completely ringed with 18,000 individual seats and corporate boxes galore, Danny Lasoski was heard to say that *"Come Saturday night and it's a full house, I'll feel like a gladiator out there"*. Home to Super 14's Rugby matches this season, Baypark has now been blessed with stadium lighting to give extraordinary illumination.

Owner Bob Clarkson can well be described as the Kiwi version of Earl Baltes, the legendary Eldora promoter. Clarkson is a former stock car racer and is a very humble man with significant wealth. He is the track curator and it appears that no one else is allowed out there as Bob circled the track hundreds of times in the big Cat grader and the rather unique (and very heavy) roller. Like Baltes, with his signature trademark baseball cap with peak turned skywards, Clarkson wouldn't be seen without his Aussie Akubra hat tied up under his chin as he goes about his business from morning till night. From what I could see he leaves the operational side of racing totally to the super efficient Willie Kaye.

But Baypark is 'Bob's baby' have no doubt about that. Once he has completed the roofing of the entire spectator area, he says his investment (poor choice of word) will be \$20.5 million dollars. Bob isn't concerned, as he says *"New Zealanders don't have enough discretionary spending money, so someone has to provide their entertainment options. I want to be able to provide a cost effective outlet for them."* Adult admission prices by the way were \$40 night one, \$50 night two and \$55 night three. And that was for any seat in the house. Seat reservations were available, but why you would is beyond me.

Beneath the main grandstands the ordinary fan can get a meal fit for a king. (Corporate entertaining was three levels above.) Can you imagine feasting on a buffet roast dinner in air-conditioned comfort wearing your **Kinser** T Shirt? Well you can here, overlooking the frenzied activity in the pits whilst enjoying a spectacular Mt Maunganui sunset.

The pits!! How good are they? In size they measure 210 x 120 metres, which is a massive 25,200 square metres of total concrete. Fully powered to every site, with even water and air supplied. Three monstrous garages at the rear could just about cater for a Chili Bowl size indoor midget track should Bob choose to remove the adjoining walls. (I wonder if he has thought of that?)

So, what of the racing surface itself? Visiting drivers were mesmerised by the complex but no one knew how the track would hold up. It is quite clear that if you want to run a speedway with a clay surface, then the vagaries of the weather will dictate the terms no matter what country you may be in. Some good judges showed concern, particularly for night one after 36 hours of rain.

Their apprehension proved true, as a one lane race track emerged and cars ran single file like Waikato cows lining up to be milked. However, this was the biggest show New Zealand had ever put on and there were lessons to be learned from the first night.

For example, the farcical situation they found themselves in at the curfew imposed 10.00pm when they had to throw the chequered flag after only 10 laps of the A Main, meant **Steve Kinser** won what he later described as his shortest ever feature race victory! Night 2 was greatly improved by a more streamlined qualifying procedure and greater cooperation from the drivers.

Willie Kay put it quite succinctly in the drivers' meeting when after apologising for the previous night, he announced *"if I didn't do that, we wouldn't be back here now and if I have to do it again tonight I will, otherwise we won't be here Saturday night"*. Everyone got the message and the night went without incident.

Except for the dust ... those people who have been critical of Parramatta's problems with the dreaded dust needed to experience Friday night. Fine terracotta clay particles enveloped the stadium to the extent that from turn one spectators could not see the fourth turn. Kerry Madsen summed it up later. *"When I have trouble seeing the car in front of me, then I know the fans in the stands are in trouble."* But the promotion was still in the learning curve and huge attention was given to the track overnight.

So much so, that on the final night they produced a gumbo that could suck the shoes off your feet. Not a track to the drivers' liking, but the punters in the bleachers loved it. Not an ounce of dust but plenty of ruts, particularly through turns 3 & 4. One of these took out Sammy Swindell who was on a barnstorming run to be on Madsen's tail for third and was a man on a mission to be sure. He bicycled and rolled and in the ensuing chaos Craig Dollansky and Joey Saldana also went over. But perhaps the biggest cheer from the fans was for the yellow Corvette in the Super Saloon feature when he ended through turn 1. With the curfew looming and the 40 lap sprintcar A Main still to come, Willie had his heart in his mouth so the Supers, not surprisingly, weren't seen again.

The race everyone had come to see was high quality, no doubt about it. After changing motors in a last minute decision, **Steve Kinser** and a hugely impressive Jason Solwold were on the front row. At about the seventh go round and well in front, Kinser uncharacteristically looped it all on his own going into two. He accepted the push car and then to everyone's amazement steered it to the infield and stayed there. This left Solwold with his big chance and it was really only Madsen, who had climbed into second, that was a threat to him. Swindell, however, would have given it a huge shake if he had kept it on all fours.

Solwold was particularly unimpressive at Parramatta but his performances here this weekend have opened many eyes indeed. When Johnny Gibson announced him as the winner, I'm sure I saw some tears, or perhaps it was Madsen's supercharged bottle of champagne which he sprayed all over a very deserving and unassuming young man.

The weather held, the people were outstanding, the complex was superb and the weekend was certainly not in vain. Thanks to Baypark and the good folks of the delightful Mt Maunganui, we were welcomed with open arms and although there was plenty of speculation about whether it would happen again next year, if it does you really should schedule your vacation to visit a city that is remarkably similar to Warrnambool. Both are coastal based and are essentially tourist orientated with the residents well aware why you are in their neighbourhood for their speedway.

Now if we could only fix that clash of dates with the Classic