

Australia v the USA. What's the difference in 2008?

As the editor of SRN, **Rod Colquhoun** comes up with the assignments for us to write about. His brief this time was to compare the speedway scenes of Australia and the USA and as an aficionado of open wheel dirt track racing in both countries, it was a task that I was delighted to accept. In fact I also took the opportunity of securing additional input from two of America's more famous racing names, both of whom have watched 'em go round down here in Oz.

Dave Argabright, arguably his country's foremost speedway journalist, willingly offered his views on the sport that he grew up with and now spends so much of his time at, notebook in hand. As did **Andrew Quinn**, known to many in Australia as perhaps the most hard core sprintcar 'n midget fan in America. So much so that from his Speedway, Indiana home, ASQ now gets to around 110 races a season, which makes him pretty well qualified to pass comment about where he spends every Friday, Saturday & Sunday. **Andrew** visited Australia in 94/95 and 98/99, while **Dave's** first trip was for the inaugural Outlaws Downunder event in 2004.

So what's different about a race track in South Dakota compared to one in South Australia? Not a lot to be honest. They both need owners, drivers and fans to survive, plus an enterprising promoter to get the aforementioned people inside their stadium. But therein lie some major differences. The sheer number of North American tracks is awe inspiring.

The bible of short track racing "*The 2008 National Speedway Directory*" lists 1,110 active short track oval speedways in the US of A be they dirt, clay or asphalt. It also shows drag strips, NASCAR and road racing courses, but I have excluded them from the equation.

Of course not all of these accommodate just sprints and midgets. Late models are hugely popular - witness the 235 cars that turn up at Eldora for the World 100 each year. Or the hundreds of big block modifieds who gather at Syracuse for their Super DIRT Week. Like their open wheel cousins, these racers have to run weekly somewhere and all over this vast country are quaint old fairground tracks, or purpose built speedways ready to unbolt their pit gates to let in the boys with their toys.

The activity of dirt track racing, both here and across the Pacific have eerily similar origins. The famous names we so fondly remember of Claremont, the Exhibition Grounds in Brisbane and the grand daddy of them all, the Sydney Showgrounds became speedways in the 1930's because they already existed, complete with a trotting track that could wonderfully accommodate horsepower of a different kind. Not a lot of capital outlay was needed by those pioneer promoters.

Similarly, although the US at first dabbled in building high banked board tracks, their unreliability soon forced the racers to seek out the local fairgrounds to satisfy their need for speed. Now let me tell you that nearly every town across the width and breadth of America has a fairground, although to be fair, not all have a speedway. Most are smack bang in the middle of the township, just as our Showgrounds are. But the major difference being that in many cases the weekly races at the local fairgrounds pay the wages of many of the townsfolk. Hence, noise is not an issue and racing, in many cases totally unmuffled, continues as the main attraction in town.

Now of course I haven't seen every example of a fairgrounds speedway, but easily the most "old world" for mine is Port Royal in Pennsylvania. We'll talk later about track size, with Port a massive ½ mile around where speeds are immense. But it is the complex itself that exudes so much charm, from the campground within, to the private houses that totally extend around from turn 1, through 2 and then right down the back straight to turn 3. It's here that Grandpa can sit on his porch on his own cushion watching the sprints do battle with theirs, just six inches out from the fence.

When you take your racing holiday to the States, you'll need your Speedway Directory for the glove box of course, but don't worry; you'll never not be able to find the fairgrounds in any given city as they are signposted off every freeway and major arterial road.

Now just why are all these tracks a different size? Pennsylvania (PA) has the massive half milers for their beloved winged sprintcars, with Williams Grove being a standout in my view. Friday night weekly 410 racing has endured here for decades and continues to thrive on the oddly shaped paperclip ribbon of clay.

Andrew Quinn adds, *"Williams Grove opened in 1939 and contrary to most, was purpose built for sprintcars. It's super hard on motors. Would you believe cars have been radar clocked at 129 mph (206 kph) entering the first turn."* says Quinn.

The strength of PA sprintcar racing is based around the massive population of Pennsylvania, something which we sadly can't replicate here. Consider this. If the Grove is Parramatta (for example) then Lincoln, which runs Saturday, is just 30 minutes away in Penrith. Port Royal and Selinsgrove are 50 miles away in the other direction and they also run Saturdays in direct opposition to Lincoln with full fields at every track.

The last time I was at Lincoln there were 105 winged sprintcars in the pits.

Unless USAC comes into PA to play, non winged sprintcars are non existent in that state. As **Dave Argabright** says, *"PA fans are so rabid they only like what's in their backyard – winged cars on big tracks."* However a little further west into Indiana with its ¼ mile bullrings and tight 3/8th miles, it's a completely different story. Living in Indianapolis is a bonus for Argabright.

"I'm fortunate to be located in the mid west where I can get a steady diet of both traditional and winged sprintcar racing. The fans need both." says the veteran journo. *"You can get way too stale by seeing too much of any one thing. On ½ mile tracks winged cars are certainly racier and faster, but the non winged cars are way better on the tighter circuits. Why not have a little bit of both?"*

I told **Dave** about the growing interest in Australia of non winged sprints. He responded with *"If you like your racing rim to rim with plenty of passing, then by all means introduce them. But also give them some decent power to race with. Can't you use up all those now defunct 372's?"* **Argabright** also had definite views on the safety aspect of these cars.

"There was a time when it just became accepted that the winged cars had to be safer. That was before helmets had improved, seats had improved, restraints had improved and medical crews at the racetrack had improved. It's a completely different world now and my argument is that if someone says we cannot have non winged racing because it's too dangerous, my thought would be that if you are looking for a safe race car, then go on home. There's no such thing!!"

And what does **ASQ** think of them? *“Well I now drive all the way to Iowa in August for the USAC Oskaloosa Ultimate Challenge for non winged cars on the Tuesday before the Knoxville Nationals and then go straight back home for Indiana midget week. Knoxville’s not for me any more I’m afraid.”* The mighty midgets are hugely popular in the Midwest.

I must confess to a lifelong love affair with the speedcars (please don’t call ‘em that in the US though) since my Rowley Park days. These twitchy little cars are growing in stature like they are here, but sadly prize money just can’t keep pace with their price.

Speaking of racecars. Before we move on, just like here in Australia, sprintcars, midgets, late models, modifieds and sedans are all competing for space on the promoter’s program. There are 410, 360, 358, 305 and micro sprintcar divisions, fully fledged midgets, Kenyon midgets, Ford Focus midgets, TQ’s, there are big block Modifieds and IMCA Modifieds, late models with widely varying engine sizes, including crate late models where the motor arrives in a box and is fitted with no allowable variation to how it was built.

Then there are the stocks, variously known as hobby, thunder, pure, pro, mini, flying, street, compact, cruiser, bomber, pony, cyclone and the list goes on. You think we have a problem with the number of sedan divisions here!! Oh, and the US also invented figure 8 yellow school bus racing.

It seems that the lot of the beleaguered promoter is no different in either country. **Quinn** says that *“Many promoters nowadays just open the gates and hope they get a crowd. The back gate mentality is alive and well with too many divisions programmed on any given night. Races are being called (cancelled) much earlier now when the threat of rain shows up on the radar.”* In fairness at this point **Andrew** did acknowledge the impact of the rising fuel prices for travelling teams and fans on these crucial decisions. In reality however it’s now simply impossible to make it financially with just one class of race car in the show.

Argabright was a touch more circumspect. *“US promoters are terribly under-capitalised,”* he said. *“They just don’t have the financial resources to invest in the tools that they need to do it right. They could do with full time track prep workers, marketing persons, a full time publicity officer for PR, but no one has the resources. In most cases its one person, or maybe a husband and wife doing everything from cleaning the toilets to mending holes in fences, when they should otherwise be out in the town promoting the up coming Saturday night races. They are so busy with managing the logistics of the track that they don’t have the time to go out and promote a carnival type atmosphere.”*

On the other hand both **Dave** and **Andrew** love the way the Australian promoters conduct their race meetings. **Argabright** noted *“The biggest difference I see is that there is just so much more showmanship in Oz and after my visit in January 04, that was what I took away as being just so important. Your guys there have a greater recognition of the need to entertain the fans. I kind of envy that to be honest with you.”*

*We’ve got many great announcers here in the US that’s for sure, but you know, there is simply no one here as dynamic as **Wade Aunger**. He engages you as a spectator and he could have you sitting on the edge of your seat, even if it is a two car race where they are a half a lap apart. He’s extraordinary. And he’s not the only one. **Dean Neal** and **Stuart McCarthy** are the same. I was definitely struck by their announcing ability and I love the way they work out in front of the fans.”*

(Author’s note: This interview was conducted about a month before the news broke about **Aunger’s** return to Parramatta. Needless to say **Dave** is delighted that **Wade** is returning to his speedway roots.)

After decades of watching qualifying, four heats, a B & an A Main in his native country, **Quinn** was delighted when at PCR in 94/95 he found sprintcars without qualifying and running two heats each for points. *“Not only that, but they started the fastest at the back!!”* he exclaimed. *“Needless to say I was rapt to read that **Steve Green** has brought that back for at least two meetings this year at PCR.”* *“Oh, and if I lived in Australia, I would steal the keys to the grader and the water truck”* he cheekily finished with.

Before we leave facilities, it wouldn't be right to forget about food. The infamous internet message board forums give plenty of curry (pun intended) to the Aussie tracks about the quality of their canteen food. So the question had to be asked about the concessions over there. Personally I can recall going to Ventura Raceway outside Los Angeles 10 years ago and finding a staggering array of fodder, including soup that was as good as Mt Gambier's.

Quinn says, *“Well you know how I love to eat, but most times I eat before I go. However I'll always buy food at Gas City, Bloomington and Williams Grove ... they're my favourites. I'll eat hot dogs, hamburgers and chicken, but geez I miss those meat pies at Warrnambool.”* And **Dave's** opinion? *“Just show me the breaded pork tenderloins at Knoxville.”*

And just what are the spectator facilities like in the US? From a corporate perspective, **Argabright** notes that about 40% of short tracks have sky boxes for the sponsors and others who need to go in these areas. Media however is a different story. *“The tracks treat us like dogs!”* said a very serious **Argabright**. A generous estimate is that fewer than 25% of US tracks have a wireless capability for the media, or a private lighted place to cover the race to meet a deadline. Having said that though, I then asked **Dave** where he prefers to watch the races from. In the media box, or does he roam around?

“Before and after the races I like to walk around and talk to the fans” he said. *“Mid race meeting I'll go into the pits and check out the beefs the drivers have and get some info for next week's column. But for the feature, I like to get to somewhere in the stands where I can see the whole race”.* As all readers will know, Aussie speedways have spectator stands or mounds virtually 360° the whole way round the track. However it is very much the exception in America to ever see the fans anywhere other than in the main straight bleachers.

I know of no track in Australia that uses the infield for other than rescue, crash crews and photographers. Perhaps there is one here, but there are hundreds in the USA. Space restrictions often mean the haulers have to pit on the infield because there is no available real estate outside the track. Others have external pits so they can allow the public to picnic on the infield grass and watch proceedings from there. Williams Grove has acres of space, but chooses deliberately to do both.

As does the legendary Terre Haute in Indiana which this year, under new promotion, has returned to practices of old. **Argabright** tells the story. *“They pitted in the infield for decades where from their seats, the fans could enjoy watching the mechanics at work, the drivers getting out of the cars, just generally milling around watching the activity. The fans felt connected with the day's racing.”*

But as the haulers grew larger they blocked the view of the back stretch for the fans, so the promoter prepared an exterior pit area outside the fourth turn and made everyone go back there again. But the new owners this year have re engaged the fans by making the crews unload the hauler on the infield and then drag it out again to outside the track leaving them to work their magic during the races solely from the infield”.

The racers don't like it, but from the perspective of showmanship it is a positive experience for the fans. *"It's all about the fans"* says **Quinn**. *"They can get access to the Terre Haute infield via a tunnel and they can look through the fence, talk to the drivers and watch the crews at work, plus never miss a race."* Parramatta spectators will get a taste of this innovative thinking next season when on two nights they will see twin sprintcar A Mains with all the pit action between features taking place on the front straightaway.

Just how do the fans differ? *"They are about equal in both countries"* says **Argabright**. *"Each has a fervent core group of fans devoted to speedway who will sit in the rain waiting for it to stop, so they can then spend another two hours watching the track preparation, just so they can see maybe the feature race!! But those same fans are getting long in the tooth and we haven't done anywhere near enough to engage the youth of America to our sport."* he suggests. Knoxville however is cultivating the kids this year by offering a super special Family Fun Pack in 2008. \$44 gets four people through the gate, plus four hotdogs and four soft drinks.

Quinn, who recently quit his job so he could get to more races, has a similar view. *"Hard core fans live in hotbeds of sprintcar racing throughout our country. They are very knowledgeable nationally and if they can go to the races four or five nights a week, they will. Fans in Oz are the same, although sadly they are limited geographically to how many races they can attend in any given week."*

The World Wide Web has played a significant part in making the keen speedway fan a global expert. Back in 1994 when **Quinn** first came to Australia, it was a matter of waiting until the racing papers came out the next fortnight to get all the national results and up to date info. Hence whilst he knew racing was strong here, he had nowhere near the knowledge he does now about the Australian scene. *"Long before the internet days for most, getting the word from the tracks to help knowledge was way slower than today. Hell, if my POS van could cross the Pacific I would be at PCR one night and Archerfield the next for the big shows"* he exclaimed.

(Free drink when next we meet if you know what POS stands for!)

Furthermore **Quinn** continues, *"By comparison today, you can gather truckloads off the net within minutes of the race being over. Let alone listening to it live! Strangely however, many Yank fans don't have much of a clue about racing in Australia. They may have heard of Parramatta, but I guarantee you that they couldn't even pronounce Kwinana. Sad, because it just might be the best speedway facility in the world."* **Quinn** likens sprintcar fans to those devotees of the famous old band, The Grateful Dead. *"People just followed them wherever they played all over the world."* Proof of that I guess is the 500+ Aussies who turned up in Knoxville this August.

I found it interesting when researching this article to compare adult admission prices. To watch the Outlaws at Knoxville (not the Nationals) will set you back \$25, which also gets you a guaranteed seat in their magnificent grandstands. As does the mere \$12 you have to shell out to watch the weekly 410 & 360 races there each Saturday night.

Want to watch the sprints at the exciting Perris speedway in Los Angeles? \$18, but last weekend it was only \$5 for anyone born in the 70's! Gas City and Kokomo are just \$12 for their regular shows, but its \$20 when USAC come to town. Even the Grove is only \$12, but the best of all for me was Chico in California where \$10 got you through the gate! And by the way, it's a fairground

Whilst notwithstanding the current economic climate in the USA, the teams in general still trek extensively across the country, but the fans seem only to travel within their own region. They'll drive many hours to a track in their state, or maybe just outside, to see a race but not often do you find a Hoosier (that's a person born in Indiana) in California for example. Despite the fact that speedway is very much alive and well, up and down the west coast.

Argabright says, *"There is no doubt that the price of fuel it is affecting the racing industry. The concept for us of \$4 / gallon gasoline and company layoffs and cutbacks is way foreign to us."* Hard core **Quinn's** solution however is to simply buy a van with a smaller motor and then widen his circle of yet to be visited tracks. *"I still sleep in the van though."*

Dust got a mention in both conversations with **Dave** and **Andrew**. Suffice to say, like most veteran followers of the sport, they agreed that it is simply a necessary evil. Best if you didn't have it, but impossible to consistently control it. **Andrew** noted that he couldn't ever recall seeing dust at Knoxville and had no real answer as to why, other than perhaps its the black gumbo dredged from a river bed in Iowa somewhere.

Maybe there's a clue here? The Ditch, otherwise known as Riverside Raceway in West Memphis, is built on the banks of the Mississippi. In fact, once upon a time, the site was at the bottom of the great river and the track's clay base is permanently tacky from the moisture continually seeping up just in time for the A Main. Hey, does anyone know of a vacant site adjacent to the Parramatta River? As an aside, **Andrew** mentioned that at Haubstadt, that electric little ¼ miler in Indiana, the promoter mixes wood chips into his clay to keep the dust down!!

Before we finish with some hard hitting comments from **Argabright** about sanctions and regulators, it's worthwhile to consider a few random but unrelated thoughts.

- I find it fascinating that US curators prepare, grade and track pack the surface in the opposite direction to racing. What's the reason for this?
- Never in Australia will we see the A Main decided as the sun is coming up. When there is no curfew, there is no urgency to get the program run and done.
- Legendary US announcer **Jack Miller** has a favourite expression of *"he's landed out in the beanfield"* when describing a gyrating sprintcar that has completely flipped out of the park. Part of the reason why spectators are only allowed to sit on the front straight I guess.
- Roofed stadiums are now reasonably prevalent around the world. The US has the Chili Bowl in Tulsa. Who will be the first to put an indoor track into the Telstra Dome in Melbourne? To firstly run a round of the World Speedway Grand Prix for solos on night 1, then sidecars for their World Gold Cup the next night, followed by two nights of 80 midgets on a quarter mile. Is that feasible I wonder?

Finally, I expect that we've all heard of USAC, WoO, ASCS, URC, All-Stars, SOD etc. And they are just a handful of the numerous sprintcar sanctioning bodies in the USA. On top of these, you can add in as many again for the midgets, the modifieds, the late models and stocks. I asked **Argabright** about how they all work in together, considering that there is no such national governing body in America like the one we know as NASR. This subject fired up our **Dave** somewhat.

“One thing which is very different between us, that I still don’t completely understand is the whole role of NASR in Australia. We don’t have, in short track racing in the United States, for better or worse, any overseeing entity and I’m not sure we’re not the better for it. Sure we have our share of squabbles and beefs and whatever, but almost always the market place resolves them. And somehow people find a way to get through it, work together and whatever it takes they find a way to make it better.”

“Frankly, if you asked me would I trade our structure for yours? No, I wouldn’t in that regard. I think Australian speedway, particularly sprintcars, has far more political bickering than is needed. I admit that I am viewing it from afar, but from someone who has experienced it all before, the sport will never get better when people fight for control and egos get involved. You get that old familiar pissing match going and that is never, ever good for the sport. And I’ve covered this deal for 25 years and I can’t tell you one time where the sport has benefitted from any kind of political bickering and power struggle.”

Having stated his case over the deliberate absence of a national body in the US, I asked Dave just how do all these sanctions co-exist? Is there ever a time when they all get together? *“There is some discussion but no, there is no formal organised round table between any of the groups in terms of discussing rules, procedures, safety or developments. It’s very, very informal. It happens because the people from the Outlaws have casual conversations with USAC or ASCS and they say ‘we tried this and it didn’t work very well, but we tried this and it did work. OK maybe we’ll look at that’. It’s that kind of dialogue.”*

What about promoters? Is there a reasonable spirit of cooperation between them considering there are so many tracks within an hour’s drive of each other? Do they run head to head against each other? *“Not here in Indiana. They try very hard not to. For example, Gas City and Bloomington both run on Friday nights about 100 miles apart. Each track draws some 30 non winged cars. When Bloomington runs their Sprint week night, Gas City runs stocks or midgets and vice versa. They work together for what’s best for the sport and just make it happen. We don’t have a NASR or any such entity that makes that come about. It’s just two promoters who are smart enough to see the big picture.”*

Overall it seems that the collective passion we all have for speedway racing in each country dominates any other influencing factors. Where finances permit we try and make every race possible whether we are an owner, a driver or a fan. And there is always a promoter who is willing to turn on the lights, sell some tickets and pay some prize money. Like anything in life, some are better at it than others. It’s just that the more times you do it - drive, race, promote or sit in the stands - the better you get at it.

I’m satisfied that our American and Australian kids will love the experience of going to their local dirt track in 20 years time. It’s just that we need to get them started now

Author: Peter Physick – August 2008