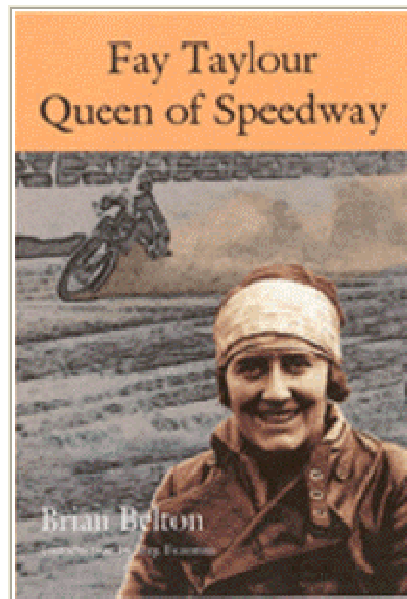


Book Extract:
Fay Taylour - Queen of Speedway
By Brian Belton



Fay v Eva

On her return to Britain on a Friday, close to the start of May 1929, as Taylour came down the gangway at Tilbury, Vic Deal, one of the Wembley Speedway League team, stepped out of the crowd to meet her. He was wearing his leathers and crash helmet, and said "Welcome to England, Fay". Like an ambassador of speed, he handed her a bouquet of red and white roses, the colours of the Speedway league, and also of Alexandra High School, Dublin, where Fay had finished her childhood education. Deal also wore a breastplate of the same colours, and with his helmet similarly bedecked, looked like a crusader.

Before she had left Britain Fay had given her cat to Wills to mind during her absence. Some weeks before Taylour returned to the UK Wills loaned the creature to the Glanfield Lawrence workshop for catching mice. But Wills retrieved the feline and took it along to Tilbury to meet its mistress cradled in his arms. Glanfield Lawrence sent a lorry for Fay, and the Wembley Speedway dispatched a motor coach/charbanc, it seem that both showed foresight – her luggage consisted of a stupendous number of separate packages.

Wembley encounters Johnny Hoskins had taken charge of Wembley speedway, probably the greatest of all speedway venues at that time. Ever the doyen of the main-chance, Hoskins had been the man who had stage managed Taylour's homecoming into a motorcade of riders and spectators from Wembley Stadium, home of the famous international event and eventually the World Championship. According to Fay,

And on the way from Tilbury he told me I was to race at his next two meetings. He'd entered me for the Cinders Trophy at the second meeting...

The 'Cinders Trophy' that took place at the next Wembley meeting. This was a competition held regularly by stadium boss Arthur Elvin for stars of the day to lower the one lap flying start track record. The holders of the title would include American Ray Tauser, Max Grosskreutz, Jack Ormston, 'Smiling' Jim Kempster, and England's first speedway Test captain, George Greenwood. Tauser was the first holder of the record, on 16 May 1929 with a time of 21 seconds for a single flying lap, which represented a speed of 36.82 mph.

Taylor described the contest;

The Cinders Trophy contest was staged once a month. It was an attempt to break the existing lap record, and representatives from England, Scotland, America, Australia and New Zealand would take part. I was to represent Ireland. But I'd protested it must be a joke for I was still too aware of my limitations, and I'd never raced at Wembley which would seem cramped and strange after the bigger Australian tracks. But to Johnnie it was no joke, it was good publicity no matter how I performed. "You'll do splendidly", he said, and I think he believed it.

"At least someone has to come last" was my conclusion.

My first appearance at Wembley fizzled out. The bike, barely unpacked, spat and coughed and indicated that it would have to be thoroughly overhauled before the big meeting two days later.

Here Taylor is probably understating the impact of that first Wembley ride. Although she said she is glad to be back in England, with its wonderful masses of green and flowers, Fay caused a little consternation when she shared her opinion that British tracks were not as good as Australian circuits and there were those who hoped that on a Tuesday evening in early June Eva Askquith, the Yorkshire girl who had only just returned from riding in Denmark, at Wembley would put Taylor in her place. Fay explained that Hoskins had arranged for her,

...to race against Eva Askquith, the girl who had been racing on the tracks up north and whom I had not yet met.

Facing Eva

Taylor described her closest female rival;

She was a butcher's daughter from Yorkshire, a quiet unassuming girl whose riding skill was far superior to the small batch of women riders who raced among themselves...It was important to me to defeat her since I held the internationally bestowed title of Women Champion or Queen of the Speedways, and so the race assumed enormous significance.

Askquith beat Taylor 2-0. Following what seemed to be the removal of Fay's informal title of 'women's world champion dirt-track rider', Taylor pointed to "water on the plugs, owing to the wet of the track, which resulted in her mount running on one cylinder most of the time" and the fact that she had never raced at Wembley and there had been no time to re-acclimatise to the relatively small track, for the fact that

Askquith won more or less how she liked at 34.5 m.p.h. Eva had by that time had added to her experience of Northern tracks with a stint in Copenhagen, where dirt tracking was thought to be booming. Whatever the reasons or excuses, Taylour had been beaten by another woman and this would certainly have been a blow to her credibility. But she put on a brave face;

At least I'd had a feel of the track, and the fans a glimpse of my style, and I spent most of the next two days in the workshop watching the engine being tuned. It had better go well on Thursday!

On the morning, June 6th, the Motor Cycle a glowing report of Fay's abilities but she

...was unsure that I could live up to such fine words, and the report added that I would be pitting my strength that night against top male opposition in the contest for the lap record.

The Cinders Trophy

Taylour recollected what was probably her biggest race to date on a British circuit;

As I drove into the arena and looked up at the stands all round where people were scrambling for seats, I thought of my first visit to Wembley. I had come then to watch the great Rodeo show, and I was so thrilled and impressed that when I went back to Ireland I wanted to ride a wild-looking bull in the fields. Little did I then think that I'd be riding in the same arena on a bucking motorcycle!

Lionel left me at the pit entrance and scurried off to make sure of his usual seats in the grand stand opposite the starting line. "Join us between races", he called. He made Wembley and the Crystal Palace occasions for a large party with a big meal after the racing for which he unpretentiously paid the bill. Speedway promoters, reporters, riders, mechanics and their girl friends were in the party. It made no difference to Lionel whether they were school drop-outs or university folk, they were all his friends. But his gay cousin who had a soft spot for him and access to his disapproving family did not crusade to lessen the dissent. On the contrary she used the parties as an amusing conversation piece, not that a meal in the stadium restaurants could be described as "rough", the adjective used then for a wild get-together.

But the drive to the stadium earlier, in Lionel's long Rolls Royce Tourer of 1907 vintage, had been wild. The open car was packed, and as we rounded Marble Arch and drove down the Edgware Road, Jimmie Taylor, an upcoming speedway rider, stood up in the back and led a lusty male chorus in SHUT THE DOOR THEY'RE COMING THROUGH THE WINDOW. The last line, sung with great emphasis, MY GOD THEY'RE COMING THROUGH THE FLOOR, could indicate bombs today and bring the police running!

"Are you ready to take a few laps"?

The warm-ups laps preceding the programme were already under way. Practice days had been eliminated at most of these tracks where greyhound racing and other events

took place, so I was more than ready to test the bike and feel the track. The surface could differ from night to night according to the weather and the amount of watering it had had. The mechanics pushed me off and I knew at once the bike was going well – too well for those tight turns before I slithered to earth and taught myself a little of what I could or couldn't do. Lionel was back in the pits and had seen the over-slide, so had many of the spectators who came early to watch these laps. But I didn't intend to do it again, not if I could possibly help it though the track was tricky.

"You seem to forget that I'm just as terrified WATCHING", Lionel said as I went out again to beat that over-slide.

Then racing started and I ran in the third event, a heat race, and won it. Next time out I only managed to finish third, but the big event was still to come, the attempts on the lap record, which would take place after the interval. I stayed in the pits instead of going to the stand because as always I had that tense and urgent feeling of having to work myself up for the Pit Marshal's call: YOU'RE ON NEXT. I still felt I hadn't a chance but I was going to do my damndest. Wally Killminster, the New Zealand champion, wished me luck, adding: "if I fail". He was making the attempt too, and he smilingly reminded me that I had defeated him in New Zealand a few months back. But Wally had done a lot of racing since, and he was one of the most popular boys around.

The big rake pulled in having smoothed out some of the ruts, and the contest began. Near the starting line was CINDERS TROPHY, the cup that would be presented to the breaker of the record, if it was broken. It was shining and handsome, but I looked away. If only wishing could make it so!

"You're on next"! The tenseness cracked, and I was suddenly very busy with my helmet, goggles and face mask as my bike was wheeled from the infield. Then I was astride, and the mechanics from Glandfield Lawrene, where so many of us had our racing engines tuned, pushed me off on the starting lap. I would be timed when I crossed the line again so I opened out on the back stretch and took the bottom corner at an angle that would give me greatest speed over the start.

The Cinders Trophy took place just two days after Taylour had been soundly beaten by Askquith, on Thursday 6 June. This competition set involved riders representing their nations with the object of breaking the Wembley lap record, attempts at which had been a feature of the Wembley entertainment. In front of around 25,000 people, Taylour was not feeling physically at her best, but her engine was functioning well. Representing Ireland, Fay's riding was excellent, showing a marked improvement on the previous season, although it might have been expected that after her experience of the big Australian tracks that her style very much cramped on the rather acute bends at Wembley. After one or two attempts at riding close, Fay wisely gave up the white line idea in favour of the outside. Near the end of the straight she would cut out for a few yards only, and then, opening out flat (or nearly so) would go full-bore for the bend round the outside. Although fast and spectacular, Fay never once lost her focus; at all times her riding was well controlled and appeared absolutely safe. Although the manner in which she turned the bends showed that she was fearless, it was obvious, to a close observer, that she was using her brains as well, and dramatically seduced the Wembley crowd by winning the Cinders Trophy, defeating the English, Scottish,

American, New Zealand and Australian riders. According to Taylour she concluded that the competition was a stunt to draw the crowds. She still felt inadequate and inexperienced and the track seemed strange and tricky. She said later: "*Was I scared when I found I had to represent England in international match races against their top men?*" (Notice she wrote almost unselfconsciously about representing England rather than showing affinity to Ireland).

But Fay defeated the Wembley circuit itself, taking the track's flying-lap record with a time of 20.8 seconds, representing a speed of 37.18mph, bettering the great American Ray Tauser's time (he had skidded badly during the event). *The excitement of the crowd knew no bounds when it was announced that for the first time in the history of the sport a woman won the one-lap record.* Taylour was to recall that she was more surprised than pleased when she circled the track with the trophy. The next morning newspapers reported "Woman breaks Wembley Track Record".

According to The Motor Cycle (13 June) "it would have been quite understandable (and even permissible in a woman) if her success had gone to her head (which might have resulted in another 1/2 m.p.h., or, on the other hand, something very much the reverse). But it didn't."

Taylour's record time was to endure longer than Fay's career on two wheels; it took the efforts of the famous Australian international Max Grosskreutz to beat her time, but he managed to shaved off no more than a mere 0.4 of a second.

Fay recollected her feelings after her victory;

The cup was mine! And it could seem that it did go to my head, for after it was presented I was pushed off with it to do a slow lap of honour but was unable with one hand to control my racing steed, which objected to being reined in. Half way round it kicked me off, and there I sat on the track to everyone's amusement with the trophy still in my arms.

Although in an international triangular match race that followed, after beating H. Whitfield (England) at 34.76 mph, Brew McQueen (Scotland) got the better of Taylour in the final heat, defeating her by 40 yards at 35.83 m.p.h., she had returned to the British track scene with a bang.

How to Order 'Fay Taylour - Queen of Speedway'

The book can be purchased from

<http://www.panther-publishing.dsl.pipex.com/FayTaylour.html> for £16.99 (plus p&p).

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