

# **‘Asbaanjaers Rig Oë Op Pretoria’: A Short History of Stock-Car Racing in South Africa’s Capital City**

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*This article outlines the history of stock-car racing in South Africa’s capital city until 1968. By reconstructing the histories of two raceways in Pretoria, it shows how stock-car and oval-track racing helped to (re)inscribe the cityscape. It draws attention to the contentious, at times symbiotic, relationship between the city council and the sport of stock-car racing in the context of shifting ideas around the respectable consumption of automobiles. It also analyses the entwinement of this history with other pastimes/subcultures. Finally, it shows that involvement (whether as participants or spectators) in oval-track racing created the conditions necessary for the production of alternative yet completely viable scripts of how to be white in Pretoria during the 1950s and the 1960s. Evidence is drawn from archival sources, popular print media, and ethnography.*

**Keywords:** South Africa; Pretoria; whites and whiteness; sport and leisure; car cultures; subcultures; masculinities; femininities; oval-track racing; stock-car racing; modernity

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In 2017, veteran motoring journalist Stuart Johnston wrote a piece in which he reminisced about the first time, around 32 years earlier, that he had the opportunity to drive a fabled AC Cobra. It had been lent to him by ‘this dude from Johannesburg’ who had called him up and ‘insisted’ that Johnston ‘spend time with his car, which he’d just imported from America’. The Cobra that had thus come into Johnston’s possession was a ‘rumbling, snorting, rough-and-ready V8 machine’ with ‘a genuine 7.0-litre Ford V8 side-oiler engine’ and ‘not one, but two slurping, guzzling, Holley four-barrel carburettors’. It was painted ‘dark blue with white stripes, just like the ones Carroll Shelby had in his race team’ and sported ‘unsilenced side-winder exhaust pipes’ and ‘the right Halibrand-type wheels like Shelby’s original Cobras from the 1960s’. The experience of driving the car at breakneck speeds along Pretoria’s industrial backroads while it constantly threatened to ‘spit’ him ‘into the scenery’ was etched into Johnston’s memory, partly because it had happened ‘in the bad old Pretoria of those days, where men were likely to drive around in very short shorts and long socks, and women stayed home to make their own dresses and had competitions to see who could make the sweetest lemon meringue pies’.<sup>2</sup>

Johnston clearly thought of 1980s Pretoria as a stifling place, where most of the white population lived according to strict rules of respectability (*ordentlikheid*). These rules were not only strict but also, to his mind, somewhat eccentric, especially those that governed people’s ‘proper’ relationships to cars. It is further evident that Johnston felt that he and his ‘racing mad’ friends did not fit very well in a city where he thought most men did not care

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this article replicates one that that appeared in *Die Transvaler*, Johannesburg, on 24 March 1954; it translates as ‘Asphalt-Track Racers Set Sights on [lit: Turn Eyes to] Pretoria’.

<sup>2</sup> S. Johnston, ‘The Day a Cobra Went Completely Unnoticed’, *AutoTrader*, Johannesburg, 6 November 2017, available at <https://www.autotrader.co.za/cars/reviews/ac/cobra/the-day-a-cobra-went-completely-unnoticed/3617>, retrieved 5 August 2019.

much for American muscle cars and drove around dressed like rugby players,<sup>3</sup> and where women rarely drove, if at all. Yet ‘racing mad’ Pretorians with a penchant for big American V8s by no means always felt unwelcome in the city. On the contrary, groups of oval-track racers influenced by American car cultures had, to various degrees of success, helped to inscribe and re-inscribe the cityscape since the 1920s.

This article aims to shed some light on these processes by drawing attention to a pastime that centred on car culture, and stock-car and oval-track racing in particular, that had enjoyed popularity among significant segments of Pretoria’s white population since the 1950s. It attempts to achieve this by piecing together the histories of two oval-track raceways in the city: the Caledonian Grounds and the Pretoria Speedway or ‘*Asbaan*’ (cinder track), as it was known among Afrikaans-speaking enthusiasts. In telling the stories of these places and of the men and women who made their existence possible, I hope to achieve three things. First, to show how stock-car and oval-track racing helped to (re-)inscribe the cityscape. Second, to show that involvement (whether as participants or spectators) in oval-track racing created conditions necessary for the production of alternative yet completely viable scripts of how to be white in Pretoria during the 1950s and the 1960s. Third, to explore the entwinement of this history with other spectator sports, pastimes and subcultures. Evidence is drawn from archival sources, popular print media and ethnography.<sup>4</sup>

### **Racing at the Caledonian: The Roaring Twenties and Thirties**

The first oval-track raceway in Pretoria was utilised for motorcycle, but not stock-car, racing. It deserves mentioning, as the sport of stock-car racing in the capital city owes its existence in large part to motorcycle, or speedway, racing. Imported to this country from Australia in the 1920s, five different South African locations staged oval-track motorcycle racing by 1929.<sup>5</sup> One of these venues was in Pretoria, where the Pretoria Dirt Track Syndicate (Pty) Ltd hosted races at facilities rented from Pretoria Town Council at the Caledonian Grounds between 1929 and the end of 1932. According to the terms of the rental agreement, the syndicate was

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3 Albert Grundlingh, in his most recent book, *Potent Pastimes* (Pretoria, Protea Boekhuis, 2013), grapples with the question: ‘why does rugby fascinate South Africans, and Afrikaners in particular, so much?’ As part of an answer, he describes how the young men who play the sport came to be regarded as rugged, forceful, determined sons of the soil – qualities closely associated with Afrikaner nationalism – and how the sport itself became symbolic of this particular ideological configuration. Parallel to these processes, Grundlingh outlines how nationalist ideologues and religious leaders worked to eliminate pastimes that they considered to be anathema. Accordingly, the government-imposed ban on dog racing in 1949 paved the way for masculine energies to be channelled into pursuits, such as rugby, that powerful cultural brokers considered to be more productive and respectable (*ordentlik*).

4 To (re)construct a history of stock-car racing in Pretoria, I draw heavily on correspondence between the Pretoria Municipality and the Pretoria Speedway Association stored in the National Archives of South Africa in Pretoria. However, Achille Mbembe warns us that such an ‘archive is primarily the product of a judgement, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded’; see A. Mbembe, ‘The Power of the Archive and its Limits’, in C. Hamilton, V. Harris, J. Taylor, M. Pickover, G. Reid and R. Saleh (eds), *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 20. The use of this kind of archive risks privileging the voices of the main correspondents contained therein – in this case the town clerk and Mr Johnny Bunton (the secretary of the Association). I therefore also use contemporary newspaper sources, most notably the *Rand Daily Mail* but also the *Pretoria News* and *Die Transvaler*, in an attempt to provide balance and nuance. These sources also have shortcomings, however, as they are based on views expressed by a handful of reporters. I therefore also rely on oral testimonies collected during interviews with four people (three men and a woman) who regularly attended racing at the *Asbaan* in the 1950s and the early to mid 1960s. This not only makes the emergent narrative more democratic but also allows for the triangulation of data. All interviews for this article were conducted by the author.

5 C. Jewes, ‘Inventory of South African Speedway Tracks, 1927 to date’ (2016), available at [http://www.speedway-sa.com/resources/other\\_pdfs/Inventory%20of%20SA%20Tracks\\_merged2.pdf](http://www.speedway-sa.com/resources/other_pdfs/Inventory%20of%20SA%20Tracks_merged2.pdf), retrieved 20 September 2018.

‘given the right to hold race meetings from time to time’ in exchange for a fee ‘fixed at £25 per meeting, to be paid within three days after the holding of each race meeting’, with the ‘aggregate amount to be paid’ ‘fixed at £360’ per annum.<sup>6</sup>

The sport proved very popular among the city’s residents. Indeed, Pretoria’s town clerk felt it necessary to write to the Commissioner of Police on 31 October 1930 to ask ‘whether arrangements could be made to divert the traffic in Park Street, between Beatrix and Hamilton Streets, into Pretorius/Schoeman and other streets after the race meetings at the Caledonian Grounds have concluded. The large number of cars, motor cycles, etc. going past the Arcadia Nursing Home after race meetings’, he wrote, ‘is a source of annoyance to the inmates there’.<sup>7</sup> The large numbers of patrons also prompted Maurice C. Brauer of the Hotel Imperial to apply to the town council for permission to open a bar at the venue. On 15 October 1930, the town clerk wrote to Brauer to inform him ‘that the Town Council of Pretoria have no objection to your conducting a Bar at the Caledonian Grounds on the occasion of meetings held by the Pretoria Dirt Track Syndicate (Proprietary) Limited in terms of the lease granted to them by the Council’.<sup>8</sup> For a short while the good times, quite literally, rolled. However, not everyone was equally enchanted.

The residents of the Arcadia Nursing Home never directly complained to the town clerk about the noise during or after race meetings. Rather the head of the Pretoria branch of the National Council of Women of South Africa (NCWSA), Mrs Horak, took up what she considered their cause. In 1930, Horak petitioned the town clerk in a series of letters protesting against the presence of a dirt-track raceway ‘in the middle of town and in proximity to the Arcadia Nursing Home’. The deputy town clerk responded that:

your protest against having the Dirt Track in the centre of the Town, has received the Council’s due consideration but owing to the fact that no direct complaints have been received either from Residents in the vicinity, or the Arcadia Nursing Home, the Council could not see their way clear to refuse the application of the Dirt Track Syndicate for a renewal of their licence.

Unperturbed, she replied saying: ‘the N.C.W. Pretoria Branch represents 31 Societies with a numerical strength of over four thousand Pretoria women, and that our request for the removal of the Dirt Track is backed by every one of these societies’, which she went on to list along with their respective memberships.<sup>9</sup>

At first glance, Mrs Horak’s grievances seem linked only to the noise levels associated with dirt-track racing. However, noise may not have been the only ‘pollutant’ that concerned her. The period following the First World War was marked by intensified transatlantic cultural flows. Some of the most important aspects of these exchanges involved the mass export of American jazz and car culture, both of which caused consternation and created anxieties among conservative elements of the societies that they would reach during the course of the 1920s. ‘Flappers’ – a generation of young women who smoked, drank, listened to jazz, defied sexual norms, competed with men in the workplace and drove automobiles – came to embody these anxieties. Symbolic of female freedom, flappers were seen as a very real threat to existing, ‘respectable’, patriarchal forms of social organisation. Some of the most important elements of this danger – such as the consumption of alcohol and

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6 Public Records of the former Transvaal Province and its predecessors, and magistrates and local authorities (hereafter TAB) MPA 3/3/36 64A Caledonian Grounds Dirt Track Racing. Letter ‘re Caledonian Grounds’ from Town Clerk to Town Treasurer dated 27 September 1929.

7 TAB MPA 3/3/36 64A Caledonian Grounds Dirt Track Racing. Letter re ‘Dirt Track Meetings, Caledonian Grounds’ from Town Clerk to Commissioner of Police dated 31 October 1930.

8 TAB MPA 3/3/36 64A Caledonian Grounds Dirt Track Racing. Letter from Town Clerk to Maurice C. Brauer dated 15 October 1930.

9 TAB MPA 3/3/36 64A Caledonian Grounds Dirt Track Racing. Letters dated 8 March 1930, 7 April 1930, 23 June 1930.

the use of motorised vehicles in ways that could be considered inappropriate or perhaps even scandalous – were features of dirt-track meets. It is important to note here that Mrs Horak claimed to represent organisations such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).<sup>10</sup> It stands to reason that, as an official guardian of women’s interests, she believed it her duty to minimise her constituents’ exposure to these moral pollutants. Yet the eventual demise of dirt-track racing would have very little to do with Mrs Horak’s spirited interventions.

A series of much more menacing events, in the form of the effects of the Wall Street crash and the Great Depression that followed, combined with adverse weather conditions, put paid to dirt-track racing at the Caledonian Grounds. At the end of September 1931, the secretary of the Pretoria Dirt Track Syndicate wrote to the town clerk, stating: ‘[l]ast year’s season has been run at a heavy financial loss to my syndicate, mostly on account of unfavourable weather. The Balance Sheet shows a loss of £445.16.2, with the result that no funds are available’. Moreover, he felt it necessary to ‘beg you to advance this £100.0.0 [the amount originally paid as a deposit] to the Syndicate to enable them to go on with the Sports’. He concluded:

I hope my request will be favourably considered and that I will be advised of the result as soon as possible, as it has been decided, if possible, to open on the 31st of October next, and there is still a great deal of work to be done to the Track before Practicing may be commenced.

By February 1932, the situation had become so dire that he wrote to the town clerk again, this time to try and renegotiate the terms of the rental agreement. On the instruction of his directors, he asked if ‘your Council will now be good enough to reduce the rental for Dirt track Meetings to £12.10.0 per meeting’? Pleading poverty, the letter declared losses of £5.9.9 and £21.13.2 for the last two meetings, respectively, and protested against an ‘Amusement Tax borne by my Syndicate, as it is felt that passing same on [to] the Public will only result in a further falling off of the present average attendance’. The letter concluded: ‘my Directors feel that should your Council not meet them in this matter they will be obliged to close down with the consequent loss of all revenue to your Council from this source’.<sup>11</sup> These words turned out to be prophetic, as the Syndicate’s lease was not renewed at the end of 1932, and the capital would not host oval-track racing for the next two decades.

In a sense, the fluctuating tensions between the Dirt Track Syndicate, the NCWSA, and the Pretoria City Council foreshadowed processes that would transpire at the *Asbaan* during the 1950s and 1960s. They show that automotive vehicles, their role/s in the modernisation of urban areas and the ways in which their usage were perceived to feature in respectable consumerism were already contested during the early 1930s. According to Stephen Sparks, a modernising tradition long predated apartheid. It was ‘initiated by (and strongly associated with) Jan Smuts’,<sup>12</sup> who had been involved in South African politics since the early 1900s. Yet, by the 1930s, there was no clear consensus around just how motorised vehicles were to feature in such a tradition. Debates around this issue still raged during the 1950s and 1960s. But before we see how these played out, a word on the development of stock-car racing.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> TAB MPA 3/3/36 64A Caledonian Grounds Dirt Track Racing. Letter from the Secretary of the Pretoria Dirt Track Syndicate to the Town Clerk dated 5 February 1932; ‘Meeting 14th November, 1931. Expenditure and Revenue a/c’.

<sup>12</sup> S. Sparks, ‘Etienne Rosseau, *Broedertwis* and the Politics of Consumption’, in D. Posel and I. van Wyk (eds), *Conspicuous Consumption in Africa* (Johannesburg, Wits University Press, 2019), p. 66.

## **On the Origins of Stock-Car Racing**

Peter Arnold, who produced the popular paper *Stock Car Racing News*, wrote an introduction to the sport that would be published as part of the official programme to mark the first stock-car race meeting at the famous Brands Hatch circuit in 1966.<sup>13</sup> 'Like so many things', he informs his readers,

Stock Car Racing in this country is an American export. It is the product of post-war 'jalopy' events in the States, when 'hotted up' pre-war road cars were raced, first on short road strips and then on the short 'dirt tracks' of the West Coast, and on the famous Beach at Daytona, in Florida.

The sport arrived in England, he continues, 'in a blaze of publicity, on Good Friday, April 19, 1954, when the first meeting was held at the New Cross stadium in South-East London'. Cars were basically 'the same as in America', with 'V8-engined cars of the 1934–39 era' being fitted with bumpers 'akin to a snow plough, for the purpose of pushing rivals out of the way – or into the fence'.

By 1956 the cars that were raced were no longer 'strictly "stock", but more "specialised."' Whereas a car was once raced as it was built and modified only in suspension and by tuning the engine', stock-cars soon became 'well-prepared, individually-built special designed for the express purpose of short circuit racing'. 'The technique of racing' remained 'basically the same', however, and slower rivals were still 'pushed or spun out of the way – though not deliberately into a fence' in an attempt to navigate around a quarter-mile circuit in the fastest possible time. Grading was introduced in 1958, with 'less experienced, less successful drivers' starting 'from the front', and 'the "stars" at the back, ensuring an interest as they dart through the pack. Roof colours denote the grade: White – C; Yellow – B; Blue – A; and Red – Star, with the reigning World Champion wearing a "Gold Top"'. An annual world championship commenced in 1955. These races were initially hosted at motorcycle speedway venues such as Harringay in north London, Belle Vue in Manchester, and the Brandon stadium near Coventry, where stock-car drivers from the UK competed for the title against drivers invited from the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States.

Arnold concluded his piece by expressing the belief that stock-car racing was no longer regarded 'as something of a circus act', and that the sport had 'grown up over the past 12 seasons. It is now', he stresses,

a fast, skilful and exciting sport with an ardent following and a number of driver-fan clubs. It is staged at over 20 tracks in this country, the majority of which are less than 440 yards per lap and bounded by three-strand wire fences with hard steel railway line type posts and oil drum inside markers, which add to the hazards. But it is a real sport, and a very exciting one, too.

## **Stock-Car Racing in Pretoria: The *Asbaan***

Stock-car racing started in Pretoria around the same time as in England. In 1954, Pretoria Speedway Association entered into a rental agreement with Pretoria town council, according to the terms of which the Association undertook not to erect 'a second rate stadium [that] will be nothing but an eyesore that will ill befit the Capital of the Union'. Rather, 'the aim of the Pretoria Speedway Association' was a 'smart, modern sports arena which will eventually become a showplace'. The land set aside for the purpose was 'a portion of the farm Daspoort No. 192, measuring approximately 200 yards square, situate[d] west of the Navy League Headquarters', 'together with an additional portion of the farm for parking facilities'. The association subsequently built a racetrack and the necessary facilities on the 'north-western

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<sup>13</sup> P. Arnold, 'An Introduction to Stock Car Racing', in pamphlet, Brands Hatch circuit, Kent, UK (1966).

corner of the land at the corner of Boom and Paul Kruger Streets', opposite the National Zoological Gardens. Racing was set to commence on 19 January 1955 at 8 p.m.<sup>14</sup>

On 21 April 1955, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that the 'development of Stock car racing has exceeded all expectations'. The paper quoted an official of the Stock Car Association as saying that '[e]very day we get applications to drive in our meetings'. Established speedway stars such as Buddy Fuller were therefore likely to find themselves classified as novices when they converted from riding motorcycles to driving stock-cars in oval-track races. According to Fuller,

I had grand ideas of showing some of the accepted stars ... that there is plenty of skill as well as a 'Bash-'em-up' approach to this exciting sport. Now I must hope that my colleagues in the Stock car Association will agree to allow the winner of the novices' event to compete in the Grand Final. Then I'm confident that I'll get a chance against the crack drivers.<sup>15</sup>

Having to work their way back up clearly did not deter Fuller and other established speedway riders, such as Nic Dormehl and Frank Grobbelaar, from embracing stock-car racing. Indeed, the sport had gained so much ground by 1959 that even Jimmy Scott, who had been the reigning speedway champion, 'announced his retirement from the cinder track to concentrate on stock-car racing'.<sup>16</sup>

As in England, support for stock-car racing grew rapidly, with some fans becoming quite fanatical. Neville Scott, a retired oval-track racer who grew up watching his father, Jimmy, race at the *Asbaan*, remembers:

if you weren't there by six o'clock, forget it. People used to queue from the Zoo to the ticket offices; straight after work, otherwise you don't get space. They used to pack that stadium out every time – whether rain or sunshine or whatever – they used to pack that stadium out. That was it. So a lot of people, what they would do: the wife goes straight after work, because most people worked in town then, so she'd just walk to the track, then the husband would pick the kids up. The kids had made *boerewors* and rolls and stuff like that and they'd get the families sitting. But if you weren't there at five o'clock there were queues.<sup>17</sup>

He also remembers capacity at the *Asbaan* being about 3,000. Johnny Bunton, 'possibly South Africa's greatest authority on speedway and stock car racing', estimated that 'over a million people' had attended the 400 meetings staged at the Pretoria Speedway (or *Asbaan*) between 1955 and 1966.<sup>18</sup> This means that, on average, more than 2,500 people attended every race meeting for a period of a little over a decade. This figure compares favourably with projected crowds at 'Loftus Versfeld rugby ground or any of the soccer grounds for all but Currie Cup or international matches'.<sup>19</sup> To these attendance figures should be added a substantial number of people who had, over the years, managed to watch the racing without paying for the privilege. Between 1955 and 1960, the Speedway Association wrote a series of letters to the town council complaining about trespassers who gained access to the dumping grounds adjacent to the *Asbaan*, a vantage point from which they had an unobstructed view of the racing. By October 1960, the situation had become so serious that the town clerk

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14 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70, Resolution passed at a meeting of council 7 May 1954; Resolution passed at a meeting of council 2 August 1954.

15 'Fuller Classified as "Novice" Driver', *Rand Daily Mail*, Johannesburg, 21 April 1955.

16 'Stock Cars Guarded Against Sabotage', *Rand Daily Mail*, 27 February 1959.

17 Interview with Neville Scott, Pretoria, 2 August 2018.

18 'Pretoria want Stock Car Ace', *Rand Daily Mail*, 23 September 1966.

19 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70, Resolution passed at a meeting of the Council on 3 June 1954.

'immediately instructed that a suitable fence be erected in order to prevent trespassing on the dumps and the danger of these being set on fire by careless smokers etc'.<sup>20</sup>

Spectators were drawn by the promise of action and excitement. One local reporter felt it necessary to evoke imagery from classical antiquity to capture adequately an especially frenzied evening of racing. Scenes were reminiscent, he told his readers, 'of the days of ancient Rome when Ben Hur and his chariot brought the thrill-hungry masses screaming to their feet but little did Caesar think that 2,000 years later near-hysteria would be the order of the day in this modern capital of South Africa'. Several spectators were 'on the verge of collapse' and 'several women fainted when Quenty "Silent" van der Westhuizen reduced Theunis Nell's monster to a mass of twisted wreckage'. Happily 'Nel[I] leapt unhurt from the smoking ruin and the race proceeded while the fans yelled themselves hoarse in the densely packed stands'. More than an hour after the end of the last race, 'hundreds of spectators were still milling around the cars and only the dousing of the stadium lights enabled harassed officials to get away to a well earned rest'.<sup>21</sup>

Sometimes more than the dousing of floodlights was necessary to keep the crowd from making themselves part of the action. One night in February 1961, a stock-car driver's car

was turned over by the crowd after he had bumped into a competitor's car. Driver Nic Dormehl bumped Johan v den Bergh's car. Dormehl sprang out of his car and remonstrated with the crowd. About 40 spectators jumped on to the track and turned over Dormehl's car. The track manager, Mr. 'Butch' Mader had to turn a fire hose on the crowd to disperse them.<sup>22</sup>

Dormehl had 'the reputation of being the "stormy petrel" of stock car racing in Pretoria', but evidence suggests that his fellow racers could be equally hot-headed. Dormehl, Jimmy Scott, Richard Scott and Frank Grobbelaar were charged with two counts of assault with intent to do grievous bodily harm after a race meeting on 22 September 1961. The charges resulted from a brawl during which they were 'alleged to have punched and kicked Mr P.J. van Rensburg and Mr A.S. du Toit and to have hit Mr Du Toit with a knobkierie'. The presiding magistrate, Mr L. van der R. Luyt, in passing judgement, found that 'Mr Van Rensburg stuck his nose into an argument and got what he was looking for' and that 'Mr Du Toit also intervened'. Mr Luyt did not doubt there had been a 'free for all'. But the evidence was so confused that he could not find the men guilty. 'The Court's time has been wasted', he told the men upon acquitting them, adding: '[y]ou should have been charged with disturbing the peace'.<sup>23</sup>

In this rough-and-tumble world, fans clearly had their favourite drivers. Some fans seemed willing to go to extreme lengths to see their favourites succeed. In February 1959, for example, special precautions had to be taken to ensure the safety of Jimmy Scott's and Quenty van der Westhuizen's cars, because officials feared that 'enthusiasts may carry out threats they have made to sabotage the cars of these two drivers'.<sup>24</sup> For the most part, fans were not quite that fanatical, however, and the majority were happy simply to idolise drivers. Neville Scott remembers fans being fond of buying and collecting memorabilia during race meetings. These items included cakes of soap engraved with the names and faces of drivers

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20 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954-70, Letters from the manager of the Pretoria Speedway Association to the Town Clerk dated 12 February 1955, 21 September 1960; Letter from City Engineer to Town Clerk dated 11 October 1960.

21 'Wild Scenes at Stock Car Race Meeting', *Pretoria News*, Pretoria, 29 September 1962.

22 '3 Hurt at Pretoria Speedway', *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 February 1961. Mader was a Pretoria businessman who owned the Hotel Mader and Mader's Butchery in Mayville, a neighbourhood close to the *Asbaan*.

23 "'Complainant Got What He was looking for": Stock-car Drivers are freed', *Rand Daily Mail*, 29 May 1962.

24 'Stock Cars Guarded Against Sabotage', *Rand Daily Mail*, 27 February 1959.

and riders, which people displayed ‘in showcases and they wouldn’t use’, as well as autograph books.<sup>25</sup>

Participation in the stock-car racing scene allowed enthusiasts to imagine themselves as being part of a modern, urban, exciting world portrayed in films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and embodied in hot-rods, roadhouses and rock and roll sessions. According to William Beinart, post-war American consumer icons and lifestyles held great appeal for South Africans. ‘Sophisticated American advertising provided reference points to what was perceived as an international culture’, and ‘Hollywood releases dominated the cinemas’.<sup>26</sup> Keenly aware of what their customers wanted, local racing promoters ‘Butch’ Mader and Johnny Bunton undertook a ‘European tour’ in 1961 to acquaint themselves with innovations in racing. A *Pretoria News* reporter was convinced that ‘spectators will undoubtedly profit from what has been seen overseas’.<sup>27</sup>

Innovations introduced during the 1962–63 racing season included requiring local competitors to ‘fall into line with British drivers in so far as the numbering of cars is concerned’. This meant that numbers that had previously been ‘painted haphazardly’ in various colours on the sides of cars would henceforth be ‘carried on plates on the roof of each car in white on black’. Drivers’ classes were also introduced, with A, B, C and D classes indicated by differently coloured ‘tops’. A-class drivers would be recognised by a red top, ‘a signal honour’. In ‘accordance with international practice’, grading was also introduced and so too formula racing, ‘the latest craze sweeping Britain’. Accordingly, ‘cow-catchers on the big stock cars or Formula Two cars’ were banned, and only square bumpers ‘permitted both fore and aft’.<sup>28</sup>

Bunton and Mader, at least in part, instituted these changes to be able to entice the reigning British stock-car champion, Freddy Mitchell, to participate in an event in Pretoria that they styled a ‘World Championship’. Mitchell accepted and the Pretoria Speedway Association applied to use Loftus Versfeld for the event, ‘because it was felt that the spectator accommodation at the Pretoria speedway stadium would not be sufficient for the crowds expected’. When the application was denied, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that, as a result, ‘stock car enthusiasts and Rugby fans’ were ‘at loggerheads in the capital city’. It quoted Bunton as saying that the ‘[r]ugby chaps are angry with us and say that we have a nerve to ask for permission to use Loftus. They fear that their precious field will be churned up’. The article continued:

[t]he speedway stadium had been built up through private enterprise and had contributed nearly R30,000 in revenue to the City Council’s coffers, not including revenue earned through water, lights, buses and other services. Loftus Versfeld, however, had been built up mainly by the City Council and was maintained by the Council.

It concluded by again quoting Bunton: ‘[i]t’s a downright shame that we cannot have the use of Loftus. After all stock car drivers and followers are also ratepayers and are entitled to a share of Loftus’.<sup>29</sup>

When the *Asbaan*’s lease came up for renewal at the end of 1963, Bunton reported to the city council that

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25 Interview with Neville Scott, Pretoria, 2 August 2018.

26 W. Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 183.

27 ‘New Plans for Pretoria Stock Car Season’, *Pretoria News*, 14 August 1962.

28 *Ibid.*

29 ‘Speedway and Rugby Feud in Pretoria’, *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 January 1963.



[l]ast season the first World Championship of any sport<sup>30</sup> was staged at the Stadium resulting in a win for a Pretoria driver and exceptional publicity overseas in the Press and over television in Britain and Europe. Radio coverage of this event alone reached an estimated 50 million people at a time when good overseas publicity was invaluable to South Africa.<sup>31</sup> Plans are already far advanced for staging the 1964 South African and World Championships in Pretoria and once again the City Council can look forward with confidence to world-wide publicity and handsome financial returns.<sup>32</sup>

Although Bunton clearly took pride in a South African driver winning the ‘World Championship’, for him international competition not only represented ‘an opportunity to beat the English at their own game’.<sup>33</sup> Of more importance was being part of a global modernity and accruing some of the various forms of capital (cultural, social and financial) that result from being a part of international networks.

Yet the times were changing. The 1950s and 1960s were ‘a time of spectacular [economic] growth, structural change, and modernization’ in South Africa.<sup>34</sup> The period also witnessed ‘shifts in patterns of consumption’, and ‘attendant lifestyle changes and forms of status identification among Afrikaners’<sup>35</sup> and whites more generally. Patterns of car ownership in South Africa are indicative of these trends. There were around 21 people to every motor vehicle in 1951. The people-to-cars ratio nearly halved in the next decade, standing at 12 people per vehicle in 1961.<sup>36</sup> Importantly, car ownership was no longer the preserve of the wealthy. Members of lower-income groups now also started buying cars.<sup>37</sup> As a result, the type of car one drove became a marker of status.<sup>38</sup> Afrikaner businessmen and farmers preferred Mercedes Benz, often in a subdued colour such as white,<sup>39</sup> while members of lower-income groups came to be associated with specific second-hand models such as the Ford Zephyr (from which was derived the term ‘zef’, denoting lower-class).<sup>40</sup> It stands to reason that brightly painted jalopies used in stock-car racing were beginning to lose their appeal to the middle classes.

Literary figures were not blind to shifting patterns of consumption and status, and some of their writing started to grapple with these issues. P.G. du Plessis’ play *Siener in die*

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30 The *Pretoria News* labelled the event Pretoria’s ‘first world championship of any kind’.

31 The event received good local coverage too. According to the narration to an Afrikaans snippet entitled *Stampkar Kampioenskappe* (Stock Car Championships) by newsreel *Ons Nuus* (Our News), produced by the same company responsible for African Mirror and screened in African Consolidated Theatres, Ster Cinemas, and The Metro Cinema chain (the forerunner of NuMetro), ‘This activity took place at the *Asbaan* Stadium of Pretoria where the stock-car championship of 1963 took place. A large group of competitors – some of the best stock-car racers in the world – competed for the crown of world champion Freddy Mitchell of Britain. It is a hazardous sport, but the Pretoria *Asbaan* is known as one of the best tracks in the country. Visitors frequently opinion (sic) that it compares favourably with good overseas tracks that cost ten times as much [to construct] ... The popularity of stock-car races have increased tremendously in recent years. Motorsport in general is experiencing a resurgence in the Republic. Therefore it is heartening that South African Quenty van der Westhuizen won the race’.

32 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70, Resolution passed at a meeting of the Council dated 30 September 1963 re ‘Application for Renewal of Lease: Pretoria Speedway Stadium’.

33 A. Grundlingh, *Potent Pastimes: Sport and Leisure Practices in Modern Afrikaner History* (Pretoria, Protea Boekhuis, 2013), p. 64.

34 C.H. Feinstein, *An Economic History of South Africa: Conquest, Discrimination and Development* (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 172.

35 A. Grundlingh, ‘“Are We Afrikaners Getting too Rich?” Cornucopia and Change in Afrikanerdom in the 1960s’, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 21, 2/3 (2008), p. 143.

36 Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, p. 182.

37 Grundlingh, ‘“Are We Afrikaners Getting too Rich?”’, p. 150.

38 See also P. Bourdieu, ‘Outline of a Sociological Theory of Art Perception’, *International Social Science Journal*, 20, 4 (1968), pp. 589–612.

39 Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, p. 182.

40 Grundlingh, ‘“Are We Afrikaners Getting too Rich?”’, p. 150.

*Suburbs* (Seer in the Suburbs) is a prime example.<sup>41</sup> The play, which would win the Central News Agency (CNA) prize for literature in 1971, was set around an old Buick in the backyard of a 'semi' in the south of Johannesburg and captured the hopelessness and desperation of a group of suburban poor whites. The car, it can be argued, is more than a mere prop. It is symbolic of characters' bleak prospects and thwarted aspirations. American cars such as Buicks had become 'increasingly displaced by German' models by the 1960s.<sup>42</sup> Second-hand American cars were therefore often associated with the lower classes, and were frequently looked down upon. By 1965, the Pretoria police were losing patience with them too. On 26 February 1965, the *Rand Daily Mail* reported that the police 'had threatened to stop stock-car racing in the city unless owners and drivers stopped towing the vehicles through the streets'. The paper quoted Johnny Bunton stating that the 'reason is that the cars do not have third-party insurance because they are not licensed'. The article continued: 'owners have been taken by surprise by the police action and did not have time to have trailers made for the vehicles or arrange garaging at the stadium'.<sup>43</sup> Raymond Rademeyer, whose father used to drive the pace-car at the *Asbaan*, recalls that the municipality had started to 'give them [Bunton and Mader] a lot of drama' by this time.<sup>44</sup>

By 1966, attendance at the *Asbaan* had started to dwindle, and Johnny Bunton wrote a letter to the Pretoria City Council on 5 May, in which he asked for financial assistance so as to be able to pull the crowds back in. In the letter, Bunton asked for assistance with 'the construction of a club house', 'the construction of a wall on the eastern embankment of the stadium', 'the re-building of the main gates and ticket offices', 'the construction of a breeze-brick wall along the southern side of the stadium' and 'the construction of a new and stronger safety fence'. Finally, he requested that 'the present rental in respect of the use of grounds, be reviewed'. The city council denied his requests on the basis that 'only Amateur Sporting Bodies are financially assisted by the Council'. The fact that 'monetary prizes are at stake at competitions held by the Association', and also that 'from time to time professionals are invited to compete', precluded them from such assistance.<sup>45</sup> Operations continued despite many challenges, and Ellis Ford, Britain's 'world stock car champion', defended 'his title against 19 of South Africa's best drivers', including Piet de Klerk, Paul Rossouw, Speedy Kamelos, Piet Venter and 'Hollander, Anne Kroeze' at the *Asbaan* in 1966.<sup>46</sup> But the challenges kept mounting.

A large infrastructural project that involved excavations at the old market square necessitated that the council look for a suitable temporary dumping site. The 'terrain known as Sans Souci' on the corner of Boom and Paul Kruger Streets was chosen for the purpose, and the council came to a decision that it would stop leasing that parcel of land to the Speedway Association 'from 1 October 1966 until further notice'. The result was that the Speedway Association lost a part of its parking lot. On 16 September 1968, Bunton again wrote to the council, stating in no uncertain terms that

the reduction of our parking lot, the darkness of the public roads around the *Asbaan* and the fact that a new track recently opened in Pretoria<sup>47</sup> have resulted in great damages for my Association. In order to improve the appearance of our track, my association has had to borrow a substantial amount of money

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41 P.G. Du Plessis, *Siener in die Suburbs: 'n Spel in Drie Bedrywe* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 1971).

42 Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, p. 182.

43 'Stock Car Ban gets a Job for Arlow', *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 February 1965.

44 Interview with Raymond Rademeyer, Pretoria, 20 September 2019.

45 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70, Letter from City Treasurer to Clerk of the Council dated 26 July 1966.

46 'Tough for Ford', *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 April 1966.

47 Bunton almost certainly referred to the Mahem Raceway on the western, semi-industrial outskirts of Pretoria, although it was officially opened only in 1968.

from private institutions and our debt currently amounts to R5,000, with virtually no funds available. The position is thus dreadful. In a desperate attempt to draw people we have invited two well-known overseas drivers to Pretoria, but if the City Council does not come to our aid soon, we will be obliged to drastically curtail the activities of the association to our mutual detriment.<sup>48</sup>

The city council subsequently agreed to install four new street lights in Boom Street and to replace an existing bulb in the lamp at the entrance to the *Asbaan* with one stronger than 300 watts. The city clerk also committed the council to investigating the possibility of making additional parking available on the corner of Paul Kruger and Boom Streets.<sup>49</sup> But this was too little too late and would prove to be insufficient to save the stadium.

In a last-ditch attempt to stay afloat, the Speedway Association submitted an application to the city council to obtain permission to sublet the *Asbaan* to the Boswell–Wilkie circus group for the week 20–27 December 1969. The conditions of their lease agreement were so restrictive, however, that, even though the council gave the go-ahead, the Speedway Association would have to pay 25 per cent of the moneys received from the circus directly to the council and, at their own expense, take out costly public liability insurance. This did not make economic sense, and on 6 November the city clerk noted that the Speedway Association had withdrawn its application. The *Asbaan* closed down not long thereafter.<sup>50</sup>

According to Sparks, the relationship between people and cars was central as to who were considered respectable moderns during the 1950s and 1960s. As a particular bourgeois vision of car ownership helped to determine ideas around respectable consumerism, local elites were sometimes unconvinced of the ability of whites who had not been urbanites for more than a generation or two to remake themselves ‘into respectable moderns’. The father of Sasolburg, Etienne Rosseau, for instance, feared that ‘the messily improvised shelter erected around a motor car in lieu of a garage ... might express an irredeemable unrespectability’. Minister of Economic Affairs Nic Diederichs echoed these sentiments, stating that the ‘improvised carports and garages erected by residents of the town’s cheaper rental homes to protect their cars had a “disfiguring” effect on the town’. During this period, an emphasis on manners in the *Sasol Nuus* similarly showed the existence of ‘anxiety about the brash component of the local’ car culture.<sup>51</sup>

By the late 1960s, the brightly coloured jalopies that raced around the *Asbaan* had become too brash for Pretoria’s city governors to consider investment in the stadium’s survival a prudent or worthy undertaking. During a period of differentiating tastes, shifting patterns of consumption and attendant lifestyle changes, the city fathers had also come to read the antics of some drivers and racing enthusiasts as anathema to a vision of car ownership that resonated with what they considered respectable consumerism/modernity. Johnny Bunton’s dream of a ‘smart, modern sports arena which will eventually become a showplace’ would therefore almost inevitably give way to larger, more prestigious infrastructural projects in the centre of town, with stock-car racing moving to a predominantly working-class, semi-industrial area on Pretoria’s western outskirts. Yet, for a period of almost 15 years, stock-car racing at the *Asbaan* provided residents of the capital city with a platform on which racers and enthusiasts could imagine and assert alternative ways of

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48 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70, ‘Hernuwing van Huurooreenkoms tussen die Raad en die Pretoriase Asbaanvereniging’, 30 September 1966; Letter from the Secretary of the Pretoria Speedway Association to the City Clerk dated 16 September 1968.

49 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70; Letter from the City Clerk to the Secretary of the Pretoria Speedway Association dated 24 September 1968.

50 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70, ‘Aansoek om Pretoria se Asbaanstadion te Onderverhuur’, 31 October 1969 and 6 November 1969.

51 S. Sparks, ‘Etienne Rosseau, *Broedertwis* and the Politics of Consumption’, pp. 65–7.

being in and relating to (and contesting) a modernity in which car culture/s featured ever more prominently.

### **Stock-Cars, Spectator Sports and Subcultures**

The stock-car racing scene at the *Asbaan* was influenced by, and sometimes mirrored, aspects of other subcultures, pastimes and spectator sports. Like their contemporaries, the Ducktails (a white youth gang subculture), stock-car racers and enthusiasts consumed and took stylistic cues from rock and roll music and American films. They also enjoyed frequenting roadhouses, and they revered boxing stars of the day. These ingredients articulated with a car culture centred around speed and risk to give expression to a collective identity and a particular view of modern urban progress.

One informant, who regularly attended races on Friday nights in the 1960s, when she was in high school, recalled that ‘the spectators ... had their favourites. You were a Piet de Klerk man or a Paul Rossouw supporter etcetera. The cars also had names. I remember Ysterman [Iron Man], Speedy Gonzales, and Ystervrou [Iron Woman]’. Naming practices can be revealing. Grundlingh shows how rugby players’ nicknames worked not only to decrease the psychological distance between spectators and competitors but also (by the 1950s and 1960s) to romanticise an increasingly strongly imagined rural background.<sup>52</sup> Humanising (or anthropomorphising) cars, by contrast, seems to point to something quite different. Giving cars names such as ‘Iron Man’ and ‘Iron Woman’ indicates that stock-car drivers and enthusiasts alike were embracing the fact that ‘the relationship of much of humanity to the world became increasingly mediated in the course of the...’ 20th century by the car, and celebrating the degree to which the car had become an integral part of the cultural environment within which people saw themselves as human.<sup>53</sup> Naming a car ‘Speedy Gonzales’, in turn, was clearly an assertion of its speed and agility and its driver’s skill. But the choice of name is interesting for other reasons too.

Katie Mooney argues that the films and cartoons, watched almost ritually at the bioscope on Saturday mornings, played a part in the ideological construction of masculinity among members of the Ducktail subculture during the 1950s.<sup>54</sup> Western-themed films were especially popular among, and well attended by, Ducktails. The cartoon exploits of Speedy Gonzales debuted in bioscopes in 1955. It is plausible that this bold and transgressive little character would appeal to Ducktails and oval-track enthusiasts for similar reasons: because he embodied some of both subcultures’ ‘quest for adventure, excitement and fun’.<sup>55</sup>

Ducktail styles were borrowed and adapted directly from films such as Westerns (the string tie is a prime example), with the stars of these films (often cowboys) influencing members of the subculture in all manner of ways.<sup>56</sup> This seems to hold true also for at least one very charismatic stock-car racer of the 1950s and 1960s. A sign writer by trade, Speedy Kamelos (also known as Kameel, but whose real name was Frederik Swanepoel) in all likelihood painted the names on the cars discussed earlier. More importantly, though, he occasionally visited the Scott family at their home in Parktown ‘on a horse with a six shooter’, dressed up ‘in his cowboy outfit’. According to the historian William Beinart, Westerns had such a profound impact that white ‘children played cowboys and crooks rather than Boer and Zulu’, and when ‘they bought bows and arrows, the reference point was native American rather than the indigenous San’. Moreover, ‘American country and western styles –

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52 Grundlingh, *Potent Pastimes*, pp. 71–2.

53 D. Miller, *Car Cultures* (Oxford and New York, Berg, 2001), pp. 1, 3.

54 K. Mooney, ‘Ducktails, Flick-Knives and Pugnacity: Subcultural and Hegemonic Masculinities in South Africa, 1948–1960’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 4 (1998), pp. 753–74.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 759.

56 *Ibid.*

drawing on a social experience similar to Afrikaners – seeped into local ballads, a market supplied by the smooth tones of Gé Korsten in “Die Hartseerwals” (Heartache Waltz).<sup>57</sup>

There were, of course, less eccentric parallels between the tastes and styles of Ducktails and those of oval-track racers and enthusiasts. Mooney writes that rock and roll music and the ‘sessions’ or parties at which this genre of music was played were very important to Ducktails.<sup>58</sup> My female informant cited above has fond memories of popular hits being played before and during intermissions at race meetings at the *Asbaan*. With this in mind, it is striking that the only official noise complaint directed at the Pretoria Speedway in all its years of operation was not concerned with the roaring generated by cars’ engines and screaming crowds, but rather the noise created by the loudspeakers used at the *Asbaan*. In 1961, the town clerk informed Mr Bunton that the secretary of the Pretoria Publicity Association complained about excessive noise and requested that ‘you will, in future, reduce the volumes of the loudspeakers to a minimum to eliminate any unnecessary noise’.<sup>59</sup> In reply, Bunton drew the town clerk’s attention to the fact that ‘we have not been operating at the Stadium since the end of April – nearly four months ago’. However, he did concede that the ‘Public Address system can sometimes be heard at some distance depending on the direction and strength of the wind and this will certainly be turned down during the coming season’.<sup>60</sup> Clearly, the stadium did not play music only during race meetings. A document dated 17 December 1957 and titled ‘Use of the Speedway Stadium for Rock and Roll Sessions’ makes it clear that the town council was ‘perturbed by the fact that the Pretoria Speedway Association hired out the Pretoria Speedway Stadium for the purpose of staging a Rock ‘n Roll show’.<sup>61</sup> Upon the renewal of the Speedway Association’s lease the following year, the town council therefore ‘suggested that the Association agree to the inclusion in the lease of a clause to the effect that the Council shall be entitled to prohibit any use which in the opinion of the Council is not in the best interest of the public’.<sup>62</sup>

The similarities did not end at a shared love for a genre of music, the consumption of which made members of the Pretoria Town Council fear for the public good. Sets of both subcultures also routinely frequented roadhouses. Neville Scott recalls that, in Pretoria,

the main place to go after the racing was a place on the corner of Bosman and Pretorius Streets ... it was called Bill and Wally’s ... I’ll never forget as a *laaitie* [young boy] in 1956 the main record there was Rock Around the Clock by Bill Haley and the Comets.<sup>63</sup> That was the song. And that was Bill and Wally’s – a very famous place.

Bill and Wally’s was popular also among Pretoria’s Ducktails. According to Scott, ‘the Ducktails used to get together there. But I know when all the Speedway *ous* [guys] used to come there the Ducktails started their bikes and left, because they knew they’d get *bliksemed* [beaten up]’.<sup>64</sup> Quinton van der Westhuizen, who had regularly accompanied his father, Quenty, to racing at the *Asbaan* since the early 1960s, similarly remembers Bill and Wally’s

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57 Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, p. 183.

58 Mooney, ‘Ducktails, Flick-Knives and Pugnacity’, p. 760.

59 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70, Letter from the Town Clerk to the Secretary of the Pretoria Speedway Association dated 24 July 1961.

60 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70, Letter from the Secretary of the Pretoria Speedway Association to the Town Clerk dated 14 August 1961.

61 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70, Resolution passed at a meeting of the General Purposes and Estates Committee dated 17 December 1957 re ‘Use of Speedway Stadium for Rock and Roll Sessions’.

62 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70, Resolution passed at a meeting of the General Purposes and Estates Committee dated 15 January 1958 re ‘Conditions of Lease: Pretoria Speedway Association’.

63 According to Mooney, this band was also very popular among Ducktails; see Mooney, ‘Ducktails, Flick-Knives and Pugnacity’, p. 760.

64 Interview with Neville Scott, Pretoria, 2 August 2018.

as ‘the after stock-cars get together’ during the 1960s, where ‘*die manne baie bolle gerol [het]* [the guys frequently got into brawls]’.<sup>65</sup> Like Ducktails, stock-car drivers had a reputation of being ‘tough’ men<sup>66</sup> who were quick to anger, with some drivers known for being especially handy with their fists.

Stock-car promoters and enthusiasts alike held accomplished fighters in high regard. As part of a plan to keep children occupied during the 1961 Christmas holidays, Pretoria Speedway staged a ‘special schools holiday programme’. The programme included a ‘Grand Parade’, featuring several ‘boxing stars’ such as ‘the present sensation, Hottie van Heerden, the South African heavyweight champion, Gawie de Klerk, the much publicised Italian boxer with the film star appearance, Alfredo Vogrig and, if he arrives from London in time, the English fighter Jerrie McNally’.<sup>67</sup> According to Raymond Rademeyer, Van Heerden regularly attended races at the *Asbaan* as he was friends with At Swanepoel (Speedy Kamelos’ brother). So did fellow boxer and Pretoria panel beater Mike Holt, ‘when he wasn’t [boxing] somewhere overseas’. After races, this group sometimes congregated in the *Asbaan*’s bar. Regulars included the Rademeyers, the Van der Westhuizens, the Swanepoels, Frank Grobbelaar and Piet de Klerk. Tempers often flared, and Quinton van der Westhuizen, who was too young at the time to enter the bar, remembers hearing ‘doef-doen-doen’ when things got rowdy.<sup>68</sup>

While, for some, the ‘Ducktail era was characterised by knuckle-dusters and bicycle chains’, and ‘confrontations with the police and petty crime’, ‘for the majority of Ducktails it was a fashion movement, a fad’.<sup>69</sup> Members of the latter group were not, for the most part, drawn to the subculture by the promise of violence and lawlessness. Rather, they tried to connect to what they considered a global modernity through the symbolism of dress and style. Much the same can be said for stock-car enthusiasts. Although – to paraphrase Hunter S. Thompson – there existed a ‘hard core’ group of ‘mainly race riders and mechanics’ who would ‘go out of their way to tangle with outlaws’ when their paths crossed at ‘late-night hamburger stands’,<sup>70</sup> the majority of stock-car enthusiasts regarded the sport as a way to emulate and take part in an American-inspired global popular culture.

### **Racing, Race and Gender at the *Asbaan***

Stock-car racing at the *Asbaan* created space for more equitable, progressive gender relations than had been the norm in Pretoria in the 1950s and 1960s. It has already been noted that one popular stock car was named Iron Woman. While that might be symbolically important, it seems far more significant that female drivers, such as Debbie Dyason, ‘owned and raced their own stock cars regularly’.<sup>71</sup> By 1958, Dyason, who ‘did not have a driver’s licence’, had ‘taken part in stock-car races, for which no driver’s licence is required’.<sup>72</sup> Three years later, the *Pretoria News* reported that Evelyn Langley was set to take part in a ‘Future Stars’ race at Pretoria Speedway.<sup>73</sup> Langley would successfully use stock-car racing as a stepping stone and went on to win ‘the 15-lap junior handicap event in her sports car at the opening of the new Swartkop track near Pretoria’. According to the *Rand Daily Mail*, ‘Blonde Mrs Langley does not look like the popular idea of a racing driver – or like a person who combines racing with

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65 Interview with Quinton van der Westhuizen, Pretoria, 20 September 2019.

66 ‘At 76, He’s the Old Man of the River’, *Rand Daily Mail*, 25 May 1963.

67 ‘Stock Car Help for Harassed Parents’, *Pretoria News*, 28 September 1961.

68 Interview with Quinton van der Westhuizen, Pretoria, 20 September 2019.

69 Mooney, ‘Ducktails, Flick-Knives and Pugnacity’, p. 754.

70 H.S. Thompson, *Hell’s Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (New York, Ballantine Books, 1966), pp. 162–3.

71 ‘Women to Drive in Stock Car Event’, *Pretoria News*, 19 October 1961.

72 ‘The Personalities of Lourenço Marques’, *Rand Daily Mail*, 8 September 1958.

73 ‘Women to Drive in Stock Car Event’, *Pretoria News*, 19 October 1961.

holding down a job in a bank and being the mother of two young daughters'.<sup>74</sup> On 29 November 1962, the *Pretoria News* reported that for 'the first time in the history of stock car racing in the Republic a grandmother will drive in a race. She is Mrs Nellie O'Neil, one of Pretoria's staunchest stock car enthusiasts'. When O'Neil's son Pat underwent military training, Nellie stepped in and took the wheel of his car in a race on 30 November.<sup>75</sup> There can be little doubt that figures such as O'Neil, Dyason and Langley provided female stock-car enthusiasts with alternative scripts of femininity that broke with hegemonic ideas that prescribed *ordentlikheid* (respectability).<sup>76</sup>

<PLEASE PLACE FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE>

Men were also, on occasion, given the opportunity to break with stereotypically macho masculine roles. In December 1962, the *Pretoria News* reported that

[f]or only the second time it has been decided to run a men's beauty competition to select 'Mr. Stock Car of 1962'. Post entries will be accepted for this amusing item but apart from this novelty and a short show towards the end of the programme by Butch Mader, the evening will be devoted to good, hard racing.<sup>77</sup>

While the *Pretoria News* reporter might have deemed the event a frivolous amusement, Bunton and Mader seem to have thought differently. In a paid-for advertisement in the same newspaper on 5 December 1962 that promoted the 'first grand Christmas Meeting', 'MR. STOCK CAR OF 1962 MEN'S BEAUTY COMPETITION' was listed at the very top of the programme and might therefore be considered the headlining act.<sup>78</sup> During a period when apartheid laws and policies were still being formulated and had not yet crystallised, the Pretoria Speedway also made for some interesting racial dynamics. It is evident from the newspaper advertisement (see Figure 1) that 'non-Europeans' were welcome at the Speedway well into the 1960s,<sup>79</sup> provided they could pay a 20-cent admission fee.<sup>80</sup> Raymond Rademeyer remembers that 'coloured' spectators used to congregate at the north of the stadium, opposite the grandstand between the 'Pits Bend' and the 'Zoo Bend'. Quinton van der Westhuizen, in turn, recalls, 'I can't remember as a kid any of the public ablution facilities there saying "whites only"'.<sup>81</sup>

This state of affairs extended beyond spectatorship to occupational spheres. Quenty van der Westhuizen, the 1963 'World Champion' and a very prominent racer at the *Asbaan*, always 'had a pit mechanic with him, a mechanic by the name of Bushy, a coloured gentleman who used to work with my dad at Barnett's [a local scrapyard], and this guy knew my dad's stock car front to back'.<sup>82</sup> Neville Scott similarly recalls that Indian vendors from Marabastad sold their wares at race meetings when he was a boy.<sup>83</sup> This is significant because Indian South Africans took part in stock-car racing during the years that the *Asbaan* was

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74 'Racing Mother has Big Dream', *Rand Daily Mail*, 22 November 1961.

75 'Stars of Match Racing Meet Tomorrow', *Pretoria News*, 29 November 1962.

76 See C. van der Westhuizen, *Sitting Pretty: White Afrikaans Women in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. (Pietermaritzburg, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2017).

77 'Festive Spirit in Stock Car Racing', *Pretoria News*, 6 December 1962.

78 Advertisement in *Pretoria News*, 5 December 1962, p. 24.

79 The advertisement is from an undated newspaper clipping, but is probably 1962.

80 It is important to note that 'non-European' spectators were not welcome at the city's rugby stadium, Loftus Versfeld, during this period.

81 Interview with Quinton van der Westhuizen, Pretoria, 20 September 2019.

82 *Ibid.*

83 Interview with Neville Scott, Pretoria, 2 August 2018.

operational, with Kathree's Radio Spares sponsoring the sport in Durban.<sup>84</sup> The Pretoria Speedway Association had also, during this period, applied to the city council to sanction a boxing match that they were planning to host at the *Asbaan*, but this was declined owing to the planned participation of black African boxers.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

Stock-car racing at the *Asbaan*, much like Clifford Geertz's Balinese cockfight, can be read as a 'simulation of the social matrix' and a 'dramatization of status concerns'.<sup>86</sup> Understood this way, the *Asbaan* provided a stage on which racers and spectators could act out something of a 'metasocial commentary' on everyday life in the form of a competition. It provided a way of unifying fragmentary experiences and of pulling together dispersed meanings. Viewed in its totality, it constitutes a story that people told themselves about themselves in the form of a ritual performance that illuminates consciousness about political and economic processes. The 1950s and 1960s were a time of large-scale economic and industrial growth in South Africa. The period witnessed a steadily growing white, urban middle class and concomitant changes in patterns of consumption. Automobile ownership virtually exploded, and cars became ubiquitous features of, and came to physically alter, urban landscapes. Car ownership also became an important marker of status, and so too, for some, did the ways in which they were seen to be used. Within this context, cars became an important aspect of the webs of signification that people spun around themselves. In the midst of increasing state interference in people's lives, stock-car racing at the *Asbaan*, for the best part of a decade, provided residents of the capital city with alternative ways (to those specifically sanctioned and promoted by the state) of embracing what some of them considered a global modernity. It emphasised the advantages of participation in international networks, liberalisation and individual freedom (at times to the point of transgression). What is more, stock-car racing provided participants and enthusiasts with a leisure-time activity around which they could imagine and assert alternative forms of masculinity and femininity that broke in important ways with hegemonic conceptions thereof. It may even have provided a different way of imagining the rapidly solidifying apartheid racial order.

This stands in rather stark contrast to historian Neil Roos's observations around a more recent evening of racing that he had attended in Bloemfontein.<sup>87</sup> Drawing on Victor Turner's analysis of the Rio Carnival,<sup>88</sup> Roos interprets a series of events involving the ill-treatment of two Bangladeshi men by the members of the crowd as a 'lynching' and posits that events of this kind provide elements of the white working class of the city with the opportunity symbolically to lay claim to exclusive, white nationalist identities and spaces; an assertion that international rugby matches since the corporatisation of that sport no longer afforded them. Although Turner describes carnival as 'that denizen of a place where there is no place and a time which is in no time',<sup>89</sup> there are important differences between Bloemfontein in 2017 and Pretoria during the 1950s and 1960s. As we have seen, Pretoria witnessed rapid economic growth during the two decades under discussion, as well as a

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84 U. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *From Cane Fields to Freedom: A Chronicle of Indian South African Life* (Cape Town, Kwela Books, 2000), p. 37.

85 TAB MPA 3/4/1051 Speedway Assoc. 1954–70.

86 C. Geertz, 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight', in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, Basic Books, 1973), pp. 412–53.

87 N. Roos, 'Saturday Night at the Speedway: Class, Race, Gender and a "Lynching"' (unpublished paper, Bloemfontein, 2018).

88 V. Turner, 'Carnival in Rio: Dionysian Drama in an Industrializing Society', in E. Manning, *The Celebration of Society: Perspectives on Contemporary Cultural Performance* (Bowling Green, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1983), pp. 103–24.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 103.



growing white middle class and a tightening grip of white ethno-nationalist power. In the wake of neoliberal reforms, present-day Bloemfontein, by contrast, like many other South African cities, has faced deindustrialisation and rising levels of unemployment. The city's white population has also lost political power, with the municipality being run by the African National Congress (ANC) since South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994. It stands to reason that 'society' in these different places would, during what were also very different times, 'playfully fantasize'<sup>90</sup> about very different things.

The shifting sands of state (re)formation can leave people disoriented and prompt them to attempt to recalibrate their moral compasses. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, residents of the capital city were still coming to terms with the ways in which Unionisation and the effects of the First World War were drawing them into an increasingly modern world system, in which it was becoming difficult to control or contain international cultural flows. The contestations around the Caledonian Stadium and the virtues of having a race track in the centre of town provide one example of how moral recalibration during this period had been taking place. The decade or so of stock-car racing at the *Asbaan* happened, in turn, in the context of rapid economic growth, the consolidation of Afrikaner nationalist political power and the attendant move from Union to Republic. It represents an attempt to renegotiate common beliefs around the moral order by way of ritual performance. However, due to changing patterns of taste and consumption among the middle classes, stock cars and stock-car racing had, by the mid to late 1960s, lost their ability act as a technology of enchantment<sup>91</sup> that could mediate between the rulers and the ruled and, in so doing, help to shape the social order. Ultimately, then, this micro-biography of a place helps us to make sense of large social processes in that it shows how racers, spectators and race organisers attempted to carve out a different way of being moral in the heart of what was fast becoming the seat of Afrikaner power.

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>91</sup> A. Gell, 'The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology', in J. Coote (ed.), *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 40–63.