

American Test Riders of '51

By Cary Cotterman



Action from Irwindale in 1970

I recently read on "Speedway Plus" a request for information on the American riders that made up the 1951 test side that competed against England. I know a few things about what some of them did later in life.

I remember Nick Nicolaides competing in flat-track racing in the early and mid 1960s in southern California, mainly at the Ascot Park 1/2-mile dirt track near Los Angeles. This was before the revival of speedway racing in America that took place in 1968. He may have also dabbled in speedway during the early seasons, but I don't know for sure.

Don Hawley raced dirt track sprint cars, rode flat-track motorcycles, and was a top first-division rider on the speedway ovals during the first few years of the American revival, in the late '60s and early '70s. The one race of his I remember clearly, though, was when he drove a sprint car in a match race with American speedway champion Rick Woods, who rode a 500cc Jawa speedway machine! The race took place at the Ascot 1/2 mile oval, and Hawley won with the car. In the late 1970s and 1980s, his two sons became fairly accomplished speedway riders and rode at all the southern California venues. One was named Shane, and I can't remember the other's name.

Johnnie Roccio had a son who was born around 1954 and competed in third- and second-division speedway racing around 1970-1971. I was also a novice speedway rider at that time and I remember talking to him in the pits and being in races with him. Neither of us was very successful!

Johnny Gibson owned a Triumph dealership in La Habra, California (about 20 miles east of Los Angeles) in the mid to late 1960s. He had a display in one of the front windows with his J.A.P. that he had ridden in the 1951 test series, along with several 8 x 10 photographs. In 1967, my father bought the dealership from him.

Gibson went on to build and promote a speedway venue at Irwindale, an industrial suburb about 15 miles northeast of Los Angeles, in 1970. The track ran on Sunday afternoons and there was plenty of good racing, but he could not make it pay, and it closed after one season. Johnny's son, Mike Gibson, rode at practice sessions and appeared to have potential, but his mother would not consent for him to race, and he never did. I rode there a few times and it was a nice track.

In 1972 another speedway track opened at another location in Irwindale, but Gibson was not involved in that promotion. Johnny would be in his early 80s today, if he's still alive.

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