

Rim, a Lithuanian Legend

By Dave Gifford



Rim Malskaitis

I believe it was that great American pioneer Jeadiah Springfield who once said that there is nothing like travel to embiggen the mind. Of course old Jeb wasn't talking about the poor excuse we call travel these days where you get pushed into an aluminium flying tube, get fed plastic food off a plastic plate served by a plastic robotic stewardess and arrive where you're going before you realize you've left where you were.

No, what Jeb meant was real travel, travel by ship, where the journey was an adventure and more often than not more rewarding than the destination itself. So among other things this is a tale of travel by sea.

Of course if you've never had something you don't miss it but I feel sorry for those who never had the chance to make the sea journey from New Zealand to the Mother Country as thousands of us did back in the sixties and seventies. Ocean travel is just another one of those things like real music and a real World Speedway Championship that have been replaced by something far less desirable. Still, it's not all doom and gloom; the mini skirt is still to be seen so I suppose we ought to be thankful for that at least!!

When I made my first trip to the UK back in 1965 my traveling companion was one Rim Malskaitis, a fellow rider who lived in Auckland and raced mainly at the Western Springs track where he had unintentionally earned himself a bit of a reputation for being a wee bit careless.

His problem was he bumped into other riders on the track, he didn't mean to of course and it was always the other blokes fault. "He must of known I was coming Giff, but he just didn't get out of the way quick enough" would have been a typical explanation.

He assured me I was in no danger. "Oh, I would never run into you Giff, 'cos we're mates", but just to be on the safe side I always went up to him before we got pushed off and said "It's me, I'm in this one" and pointed to myself. Must have worked, he never ran over me!

He actually had a riding style that bore a striking similarity to the great Briggo himself although I think Briggo's arms were a bit shorter and I know his pockets were definitely deeper.

I stayed at Rim's place a few times when I made the two hundred and forty mile trip from my hometown to race at Western Springs around about 1962 or 63 and was always made most welcome. His folks were Lithuanian and I never heard them speak a word of English but his mum could make a dead brill Pizza at a time in NZ when no one had ever heard of them. Thought it would be a nice touch to mention food for my lady readers and if any of you want the recipe I still have it so just write and enclose ten quid and a stamped addressed envelope and I'll send a copy!!

At the start of the 1964-65 season I decided to live in Auckland and race at the Springs for a month or two as their season began earlier than my home track and the competition was quite a bit tougher too. Rim worked in the reception at Whites Motorcycles in Newmarket, Auckland's biggest Triumph dealership, and he fixed up a job for me there in their machine shop where all I did was work on stuff for many of the staff and mechanics who all seemed to be into some form of motor cycle racing.

At that time many of the Traffic Police used Triumph Twins to go out pestering other road users and they would bring their bikes into Whites for servicing and repairs. One such officer came in one day and was sitting on his bike while it chugged away in neutral as he waited for attention. The guy was doing his best to look as mean and menacing as he could, dark glasses, Iron Cross glinting, folded arms and the usual sneer on his lips and he was approached by Rim.

Poor old Rim, the temptation was just too great, he just couldn't help himself and he tapped the Triumph into first gear with his foot, which caused it to bound forward for a yard or so before it stalled, but it went far enough to deposit the cop on his backside in a most undignified heap on the ground. Those that witnessed it enjoyed the result immensely and that little escapade ensured Rim of a sort of folk hero status around the place.

Rim and I made plans to go to Britain towards the end of our 64-65 season here in New Zealand and booked our passage on the Greek ship Ellinis, one of the Sitmar fleet that plied the UK to Australasia run in those days. We sailed early March from memory and settled back for five weeks of sheer luxury, cigarettes were so cheap I could smoke three at once and the beer cost less than water but it was Australian Fosters which made it taste about the same.

Once on board we quickly found a small bar where a group of us soon established our headquarters. It was run by a Greek guy called Theo, which was short for Theodopabopolis, which is what all Greeks seemed to be called, I think, anyway, he had been a resistance fighter in his homeland during Big Kill 2 and had fought

alongside Kiwi troops whom he had the highest regard for and he couldn't do enough for us.

On board there was always all the food you could ever wish for and an abundance of female talent. True, a lot of them were Aussie girls with their scritch voices which reminded me of my schooldays when the teacher would drag a fingernail down the blackboard, but enough of the aforementioned Fosters and they all sounded like Charlotte Church. I made the most of the opportunity to add another string to my bow and by the time we reached Southampton I had become an authority on how to cope with rejection.

The voyage was fairly uneventful apart from a massive storm we struck in the Atlantic, seas as big as mountains and it lasted for several days. The ship's bow (that's the pointy end for non nautical readers) would crash into the waves with such force that the whole vessel would shudder and then as it rose a huge wave would sweep the length of the deck. A few brave souls made the most of it and practiced their surfing technique using modified deckchairs and had become pretty good by the time the storm abated.

And then it was over, we had reached Southampton and another chapter was about to begin. While we were waiting to disembark I noticed what my mum would call a "spiv" trying to blend in with a large potted aspidistra nearby. He caught Rim's attention by dangling a bag of sweets and beckoned him over and after a short conversation Rim came back to inform me that the "spiv" was actually a speedway promoter named Reg Fearman and that he was off to ride for Long Eaton "Archers" and did I want to come too? I declined the offer as Graham Coombes had come down from Manchester to meet me and so Rim and I parted company.

It was some months later when I met up with him again, I had signed with Newcastle but I was doing the odd second half ride at Wolverhampton and on this particular wet and soggy night the "Archers" were the visitors. I had travelled down with Paul Sharples who was scratching around for odd rides like myself, and the two of us were chatting to Rim before the meeting started at Monmore. "Giff, does your front wheel flex when you're racing?" inquired our intrepid Lithuanian.

Now, that's not the sort of thing you get asked very often and to make sure I'd heard it right I got him to repeat it. Paul and I glanced at each other with mirrored looks of disbelief as Rim repeated the question and I struggled to think of a reply. "Um, I'm not sure, but why do you ask" was the best I could come up with. "Well I always watch mine and it's flexing all the time" was the answer. "Well" I said carefully "I'm more of a traditionalist and I actually feel a little more secure if I'm looking where I'm going." It was his turn to look surprised; it was obvious my method had never occurred to him and we both agreed to stick with what suited us. I had a feeling that a few of the guys back at Western Springs would be interested when I told them about the conversation!

The rain continued to fall as Rim went out for his first ride and being just a bunny he had gate four, not an ideal position in the conditions that prevailed. When the riders hit the first turn Rim made a valiant, if rather optimistic, attempt to go round the outside of everyone which resulted in him getting totally filled in but he hung in there

gamely and had another go on the outside at the next turn with the same results as his earlier effort. From then on he was just riding blind and going wider and wider with each passing lap until he ran out of track and ploughed through the safety fence on the pits bend bringing the race to a premature conclusion.

Paul and I debated whether we should go out into the rain to see if he was OK and as it has eased off a bit we thought we had better have a look. There on the dog track was a big heap of tangled netting, tons of mud, a battered speedway bike and one sorry looking rider. "You all right mate?" I asked when we had established where his head was. "I think I've broken my leg, Giff, it bloody hurts" was his reply. I was tempted to ask if his front wheel had been flexing but thought it was perhaps not the best time to find out. He probably couldn't have seen it anyway!

He was duly taken away in the ambulance and at the end of the meeting I took his van round to the hospital to check out the situation. I had expected some of his Long Eaton mates to turn up or the co promoter Ron Wilson but Paul and I were the only ones there. Have we got time for a couple of Ron Wilson stories?

They won't take a minute.

Back around 67 a Kiwi Select side was invited to ride against the Archers on a free date they had. It wasn't a bad looking team, Sprouts was there of course, Billy Andrew, spooky Goog Allen and Graham Coombes and others that I can't recall. Anyway it had been a close match all the way through and going into the final heat they needed a four two or a five one to win and Billy and I were out for the Kiwis. Billy told me Ron Wilson was going to pay him for a win but he had to come last so that they could win the match so I could have the choice at the gate.

"What about me Bill, is he going to pay me to come last as well, is he Bill, is he?" I enquired hopefully. Billy laughed "Nah, I think he's been watching you mate, besides, he was in tears when he offered to pay me".

Well that was enough to the blood running a bit quicker and for one of the very few times in my life I rolled the dice at the gate. Fortunately the ref was paying attention and let the tapes go as soon as he saw me drop the clutch and I was able to wobble round for the win, which gave us the match. The look on Ron Wilson's face was priceless, I actually thought he was going to explode but it served him right for being so bloody cheap!

The other occasion involving Ron that I remember was at some place called Milton Keynes that he was promoting when I was riding for Berwick. During one of the heats fellow Kiwi Mike Fullerton had been following one of the home riders who had hit a rut and completely lost control and fallen. Well, that's not quite true. I remember his bike was almost upside down; one foot was pointing towards Birmingham the other was tucked inside his race jacket and he had both hands over his eyes but by some piece of amazing divine intervention he managed to fall back on the bike and keep going. Mike, in the meantime had lain his bike down to stop running into the guy and the race was stopped. The ref judged Mike to be the cause of the stoppage and excluded him, which did not go down well with the Berwick boys who promptly refused to ride anymore.

By this time in my career I was long past tilting at windmills and was quite content to let others make fools of themselves so I was just standing in the infield being an innocent spectator when Ron sidled up to me. "Look Dave" he whispered out the side of his mouth, "I'm having an open meeting here in a couple of weeks and if you were able to get your lot back on the track there just might be a booking in the mail for you" I thought about it for a millisecond and whispered back at him "Tell you what Ron, if you promise not to send me a booking I'll see what I can do" I don't think he saw the funny side of that.

Sorry about that, where were we? Oh yes, at the hospital.

Well, we hung around outside for a couple of hours and Rim was eventually brought to the door in a wheelchair by a nurse in a crisp uniform and a bloke in a white coat who could have been a doctor or he could have been a hospital porter. Probably not a lot of difference.

One lower leg was resplendent with a covering of shiny new plaster but our hero was looking decidedly glum. "Well, he's all yours," said the doctor/porter grandly. "Can he drive?" I asked. "Of course he can't drive, he's got a broken leg and it's in plaster" snapped the upholder of the Hippocratic oath. "Well then" I asked "would it be alright if he stayed here then?"

The medical man was starting to lose patience now and started to raise his voice. "Look," he said, "he can't take up a hospital bed for something this trivial!" I decided to try the nurse, turn on the old charm a bit, you know. "I don't suppose you have a crutch we could use, my dear?" I asked with a dazzling smile and twinkling eyes. "No we don't," she snapped, "we've stopped lending them to people like you because you never return them!" So much for the old charm.

Now while all this had been going on Rim had been sitting in a wheelchair, his eyes moving from one speaker to next, his expression was getting sadder and sadder as it started to dawn on him that nobody really wanted him. He looked like a very morose Beagle hound that has just found out that it lives in Reading. Suddenly, he leapt out of the wheelchair and started hopping down the steps towards his van. "Stuff the lot of you" were his parting words "I'll take myself home." We took pity and drove him back to his flat in the Potteries but the accident meant his season was not a great success.

We returned to New Zealand at the end of that season and boarded our old ship the *Ellinis* at Southampton, pleased to be heading for the sunshine. This time we went via Suez, which meant a stop at Port Said. I don't think Port Said would be one of those places that would rank very highly on anyone's list of must go to places, it's a bit like Sunderland with camels.

The moment we got off the ship we were surrounded by Arab traders who wanted sell us anything from their mothers to a life size reproduction of the Sphinx, they were a real pain. Rim came up with a cunning plan to get rid of them. It must be said that some of Rim's schemes left a bit to be desired, like the time he suggested we rob a bank in Auckland as a quick way to raise funds. He had gone to a lot of trouble and

worked out which bank to rob and the best day to do it and everything but there were a couple of issues that bothered me.

The job would require a fast getaway car for the twenty odd mile dash to Ardmore Aerodrome where we were to steal a Harvard trainer and fly it to the big brown wilderness to the west of New Zealand. Now my transport at the time was a '32 Chevy truck, which had a badly cracked cylinder head, which called for a special starting procedure. First I would remove the spark plugs and crank the motor over by hand to pump the water out of the cylinders then replace the plugs and crank it again and hope that it would fire. If it didn't I just repeated the process until I got lucky.

Rim's pride and joy was an old Hudson Terraplane and to start that required waiting till you could stop enough passers by to push start it. Not really the ideal vehicles for a fast getaway I'm sure you will agree.

The other misgiving I had was the bit about flying the Harvard trainer and I thought it best to express my doubts. "Look Giff, flying is dead simple, I've read a book and anyone could do it" was the answer I got "But if you're going to keep being negative about the job we might as well forget it," he added, which thankfully we did.

But the plan he came up with to deter the Arab traders was a little beauty and had all the ingredients that a good plan should have. It was simple, it was cheap, it would achieve the required result and it was idiot proof, well almost! Rim explained "Right, you give me your lighter and when the next one starts to bother us you keep him talking and I'll sneak behind him and set fire to the bottom of his frock" The man was a genius!

We were soon approached by a bloke selling two foot long stuffed baby Nile crocodiles. He wanted ten quid for one but I brought all my haggling skills to bear and offered him two and three pence and we were soon engaged in a heated financial struggle. Rim quietly slipped round behind him and I watched for traces of tell tale smoke to start rising from the flowing robes that he wore. Click, @#!. Click, @#!. Click @#!. I should have known, even the complexities of a simple non child proof cigarette lighter were too great for Rim and the plan was starting to go a bit pear shaped.

I was starting to stress because I was about to pay fifteen quid for two stuffed crocodiles when suddenly one of the guy's mates shouted a warning. The guy spun round to see Rim still clicking away quite unconcerned but he quickly realized we were in trouble and we took to our heels and made it back to the safety of the ship pursued by a very large and angry mob. We stayed on the ship for half an hour before we ventured ashore again but we figured if they all looked the same to us then the reverse must apply and we didn't have any more confrontations.

Our stay in the canal was soon over and once more we were out in the open sea where Rim invented the most spine chilling party trick I've ever seen. I'd heard stories of what the old time riders got up to on the boat trips back in the forties and early fifties and was never sure if they were true or not.

There were tales of riders forming human chains over the side of the ship to get down to portholes and of climbing out of portholes and climbing up the side of the ship when roll was favourable. Stories too of raids on the galley stores to steal bags of flour, which were dumped into the air intake pipes and which ended up giving all the cabins a real look of Christmas. Much loved Kiwi ace Bruce Abernethy was usually the ringleader but at the time there were nearly thirty New Zealanders riders going to the UK each season plus the British riders who wintered here each year it must have been absolute mayhem at times. I believe Abo's British career was cut short because no shipping company or airline would carry him!

But back to the story. When Rim boarded the ship I think his entire worldly wealth amounted to fifteen quid, which meant limited drinking, so he had to amuse himself in other ways. One of the tricks he came up with worked as follows. He would stand beside the ship's railings, put one hand on the top rail and then swing his legs up and vault over the ship's side. As he began his downward plummet he would casually stretch an arm out and grab one of the railings from the outside to check his fall and then proceed to haul himself back on board. The deck would have been sixty or so feet above the water and if he had missed the railing it would have been all over, especially when he did it at night. The first time he did it I swear my heart stopped beating for about twenty seconds but he thought it was a great joke.

The Theos invited us to a private party one night up, some special occasion but I can't remember what, and after the bar closed we all went up to their deck which was normally off limits for passengers. The head Theo was an ace on the bouzouki, a sort of Greek guitar, and the ouzo was soon flowing at a rapid rate as the party got warmed up.

Rim suggested that the Greeks might like to see him do his leap over the side of the ship. "I'm sure they would mate" I said, "You go for it, I'm sure they'll be impressed." And I might end up with a spare bike, I thought. We got their attention and like a real trouper Rim launched himself over the side. The result was electrifying; their normal dark skinned faces turned a whiter shade of pale and they were totally speechless which was understandable I suppose. After all, how often do you see someone throw themselves off a perfectly good ship in the middle of the ocean? Rim climbed back over the railings but the Greeks were quite upset over the whole incident and appointed a young steward to follow Rim about to make sure he didn't do it again. Well I think that's why he was following Rim.

We arrived safely back in Godzone in time to practice at Western Springs before the first meeting and were confronted by the ACU Steward, Ian Fullerton, Mike's dad. "You two aren't going on the track until I see your licenses" he said. "But we're riding on British licences" we chorused, "They haven't expired yet!" "Oh" he said, "so you've been to Britain have you?" And we thought we would be famous, still a long way to go it would seem.

Rim never returned to British speedway which was a shame but he did ride at Western Springs for a number of seasons. He also learnt to fly, and also to crash. Once he ditched a plane in Auckland's Manukau harbour when the tide was out. Old habits die hard I guess, I wonder if the prop was flexing?

Make time to smell the flowers.

Peace, giffy

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