

# The History of Flat Track Racing

American style dirt track or “Flat Track” racing is a peculiar American phenomenon. Our type of dirt track racing is done only in North America, and strangely enough, Australia. This primarily is because of our climate. The world’s other great continents have not the predictable weather and rainfall that allows our races to be run in the dry. Dirt flat track only flourishes here as a result of our moderate summer weather; no where else does that exist! Any dirt “Flat Track” competition is dependent (more so than any other form of racing) on weather. High-speed dirt track racing literally can’t be done in the rain, period, nor on a muddy track either. In order to produce a good ‘show’ the track must be smooth, dust free, and have just the right amount of moisture to hold the dirt surface together. Moisture gives it acceptable traction, keeps it dust free, and allows for great wheel to wheel racing that no other dirt racing allows. Motorcycle racing is the second most difficult of all the mechanized disciplines, second only to flying a helicopter, as our men in Viet Nam flew then. Motorcycles (like helicopters) have no natural or normal attitude and can not even stand up unassisted! Racing a motorcycle is much harder than even driving “Formula One”! If you even slightly doubt any of the forgoing, consider, that going back into history, many, many auto racing champions were first motorcycle champions – never the other way around.

Many of America’s dirt tracks have been paved over because of the tremendously high maintenance cost to properly groom and keep up to par a “dirt track”. Nothing, however, produces the excitement of dirt! Nothing! And shame on us for taking the easy way out and giving up the great dirt tracks.

Now as to why we call it “flat track” racing...In America, horse racing was originally either “quarter pole” racing (i.e., racing in a straight line for a quarter of a mile, between surveyors stakes, as the country was surveyed and laid out into townships, for easier legal and geographical descriptions of the location of real estate) or on a closed oval grass or dirt racing track. These circuits were of course flat. In the old days it was not necessary to say flat track, because of course it was flat! They all were.

However, shortly after the coming of motor vehicles, special (high-speed oval motor race) tracks were constructed usually of wooden surfaces “banked” or tilted up to about 45 degrees. This was done to allow the primitive machines with their even more primitive tires to attain even higher speeds than on a flat(er) track. **The quest for speed is eternal, for like freedom, speed is in the soul of mankind.** Normally no tracks are flat anymore (because of drainage, not just to make them faster) but compared to banked “speedways” or motordomes they are flat!

One additional fact! Great dirt tracks are never just local “farmer dirt”. Good, professionally made dirt ovals for horses or motor races are made of a number of elements, comprised of (but not limited to) clay, sand and usually “decomposed” granite. Clay gives the track body and glues it together, but clay is waterproof! Remember ancient tombs were sealed with clay. Sand and decomposed granite are mixed with clay along with local elements. These makes the clay porous enough that water can soak in and/or evaporate, which allows a skilled, experienced track maintenance man to get a good water depth while keeping it smooth and most important of all, dust free! Motorcycle speed racers can’t stand bumps, dust or mud! If you ever see any of these, you would see a better race if you had not! Preparing a fine dirt flat track is as difficult as farming, i.e., you use all your skills and experience and do everything right but you are absolutely still at the mercy of the wind, sun and rain!

The machines used in NFTRA flat track racing are, as are stock cars, not stock, but are based on production engines or sometimes whole machines that are, under the rules of the sanctioning body, allowed (only) certain modifications. Flat track racers use special purpose made Goodyear racing tires, almost exclusively! Traction is more important than horsepower. All flat track racing is done going around the corners and not on the straight of ways. If you see passing on the straights it is usually the result of “getting up speed” in the middle of the previous corner. You may see today, the future National champions of either motorcycle or auto racing as well, or even the road-racing champion of the world. Today’s riders start out at earlier and earlier ages and are clearly better and more skilled than any generation in history!

On behalf of NFTRA and Kennedy Racing, we wish you a great time and come back to see us!

Neil Keen, Author

*Neil Keen*: Raced for 21 years starting in 1954, cutting his teeth as the man to beat at Ascot. He was a National number for 20 of his 21 years. Neil won 1 National Championship in 1961 and has over the years totaled over 354 First Place wins in Expert feature races.