

## JOHN SHILLINGTON "JACK" PRINCE

by Larry L. Ball, Jr.

John Shillington "Jack" Prince was born in the industrial city of Coventry, England, in 1859. As a young man, one of Coventry's new industries would change Jack's life. The industry was the manufacturing of bicycles. In the 1870's, James Starley became known in England as the father of the bicycle industry. In 1870, he began manufacturing the "Penny-farthing" bicycle, so named because it resembled the two British coins in proportion. Around 1880, Singer & Company of Coventry would manufacture the Penny-farthing, then known as the "Singer Ordinary". Many today would know these bicycles as a "high-wheel". A young Jack Prince had found his calling: he began racing the awkward contraptions known for their 54-inch diameter front wheel. Success came quickly for young Jack, and in 1880, at the age of 21, he was recognized as a world champion.

By 1883, the American public's new infatuation with the bicycle led to Jack leaving England to represent English bicycle manufacturers in what was becoming a thriving new market. Unable to rest on his laurels from Europe, Jack continued racing. More often than not, many of the events were exhibitions. That is not to say, however, that Jack was no longer racing competitively. In August of 1883 he was being billed as the 'Champion of America' at races throughout the United States. Jack would become part of a five-man traveling race team in 1886 sponsored by the Gormully & Jeffery Company of Chicago. Jack would be one of two indoor track experts on the team composed of the best professional riders then in the United States. In fact, in Omaha, Nebraska, Jack would win a match race billed as the high-wheel championship of the world. This win would firmly establish his reputation in the United States. Perhaps recognizing a personal opportunity, Jack would stop racing bicycles shortly after his win in Omaha and enter into an area that would ultimately change the face of auto racing in the United States.

Jack's new venture was the promotion of bicycle velodromes. These high-banked wooden speedways were usually one-sixth-mile (outdoors) to one-tenth-mile (indoors) in length. Surrounding each velodrome was seating for thousands of spectators. That seating was necessary as, by the latter part of the 19th century, bicycle racing had become as popular as baseball, boxing and horse racing. As the twentieth century dawned, however, a change was coming. Jack Prince's life would be changed by two new inventions: the motorcycle and the automobile.

The motorcycle would be the first of these new inventions to be embraced by Jack. It seemed natural to him to utilize his velodrome design for the purpose of building what would be called the motordrome. By 1909, Jack



John Shillington "Jack" Prince

Larry Ball, Jr., Collection

had built tracks ranging from quarter-mile to third-mile for the sole purpose of racing motorcycles. By simply enlarging his velodromes, Jack had expanded his opportunities in the area of racetrack construction.

In 1910, Jack was contacted by mechanical engineer Fred Moscovics. Together, they would carry out a plan that would change racing forever. Moscovics had spent time in Europe as a young man where he developed an interest in bicycle racing. In Europe and the States he came to know the prominent people of the sport, including Jack Prince. In 1910, Moscovics was sent by his then employer, Remy Electric, to Los Angeles. By this time, Moscovics' interest in racing had expanded to include the automobile. Upon arriving in Los Angeles, Moscovics involved himself in the racing community. When Moscovics learned of Carl Fisher's speedway being built in Indianapolis, he thought that southern California would be the

perfect place for a speedway. The potential investors were shocked to learn that Moscovics wanted to build a large wooden saucer. Moscovics told them, "Nothing can be as cheap, as fast, or as safe. And I know just the man (Jack Prince) who can build it for us."

The world's first board track built for the purpose of racing automobiles was built at Playa Del Ray, California, in the spring of 1910 at a cost of \$75,000. The one-mile perfect circle would be banked 20-degrees and known officially as the Los Angeles Motordrome. The speedway was unofficially known as the "pie pan". The first race was held on April 8, 1910, and was a complete success. On opening day, a crowd of 4000 saw Barney Oldfield turn a lap in 36.22 seconds for a speed of 99.39 miles per hour. There would be no going back, the board track era had begun.

With the success of Playa Del Ray, Jack Prince looked for a location for another speedway. In the fall of 1910, Jack built the Oakland Motordrome in the Oakland suburb of Elmhurst, California. Like Playa Del Ray, the speedway would be a perfect circle. This track, however, was actually quite different in that it was a half-mile with forty-degree banking. The reason for the shorter distance was the fact that he wanted to build a speedway that would be utilized by both automobiles and motorcycles. During this time Jack was already looking for other locations. In 1911, Jack built a third-mile motordrome in Chicago specifically for motorcycle racing. The dangerously fast track at Playa Del Ray would burn to the ground in 1913 with, according to sports writer Damon Runyon, "a great savings of lives." Jack would not be heard from again until 1915.

Like the phoenix, Jack Prince rose from the ashes of Playa Del Ray to become one of the world's busiest men. In 1915, Jack would travel the United States spreading the gospel of the board track. Fortunately for Jack, many were listening. With his English mannerisms, impeccable dress, and trademark derby hat, Jack would bring the dream of auto racing greatness to communities ranging from the rural

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## JOHN SHILLINGTON "JACK" PRINCE, cont.

(Omaha and Des Moines) to the cosmopolitan (Baltimore and Beverly Hills). Each of the tracks he would construct would be billed as the best of its kind.

Much was made of the way in which Jack constructed many of these speedways. Most of the early speedways didn't utilize drawn plans. Rather, Jack would walk off the distance and drive stakes marking out the proposed speedway. This was always done with much pomp and circumstance (regardless of the existence of plans) and always in full view of the press who would be shuttled to the location for the event. This is not to say, however, that Jack's early speedways were void of engineering principles. In 1915, Jack utilized the triple radius corner in the construction of the Des Moines Speedway. In other words, instead of carrying out the two turns on a common half circle as had been done on other tracks, and as was always done on dirt tracks, he used three radius points in running out the corners. The result was sweeping corners and higher speeds. In 1915, Barney Oldfield said of Prince, "From the time I was a kid and first got into the racing game as a bicycle rider, I have watched Jack Prince, the pioneer among speedway builders erect board tracks, each one a marvel to racers."

In 1919, Jack would team up with Art Pillsbury to build the 1.25-mile board track at Beverly Hills. His association with Pillsbury would bring another major engineering principle to board track construction. This would be the first use of Pillsbury's "Searles Spiral Easement Curve".

This principle expanded on the 'triple radius corner' to allow the cars to enter the banked turn with less strain on man and machine due to a less severe transition from the straights to the banked corners. This partnership would continue for the next seven years, which would be the extent of Prince's board track construction career, ending with the speedway in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Between 1910 and 1928, twenty-four board tracks were opened. Of the 24 built, Jack Prince was responsible for 17 of them. Living up to his standard of each track built being the best of its kind, his last was the fastest. In 1926, the 1.5-mile speedway with 45-degree banked corners opened in Atlantic City. On May 1, 1926, Harry Hartz won the 300-mile event at an average speed of 134.091 mph. On May 7, 1927, Frank Lockhart made the fastest lap ever on a board track. His speed over the 1.5-miles was 147.229 mph. To put this

into perspective, Frank Lockhart's pole speed for the Indianapolis 500 in 1927 was 120.100 mph. It would be 34 years (1961) before the 147 mph qualifying speed could be reached at Indianapolis. In fact, Lockhart's 147.229 mph was the fastest lap turned in race qualifying until April 4, 1959, at Daytona when every qualifier passed Lockhart's mark.

Jack Prince's involvement in auto racing was not limited to board tracks. In 1924, he designed and built the grandstand at the famed Legion Ascot Speedway, which seated 12,000 people. One year after building his last board track, he would return to Legion Ascot in 1927 to build the stands off the first turn of the famed speedway. By 1931, the last of the board tracks was gone and all that remained of Jack Prince's contribution to auto racing was the Legion Ascot Speedway grandstand. Sadly, in 1936, Legion Ascot Speedway claimed its 21st victim and the track was closed under public pressure. Mysteriously, the grandstand burned down one week later. Some thought the blaze was set by tramps, who slept under the grandstand's wooden tiers, in vengeance for the loss of race driver friends. It didn't take long for flames to spread through the old grandstand. Firefighters worked fast to prevent total destruction. It didn't matter. The last standing Jack Prince contribution to auto racing soon yielded to wrecking crews.

Not only did Jack Prince build incredibly fast speedways, he changed the way in which the paying fan saw the races. Barney Oldfield summed up Jack's contribution by saying, "The board speedway will always be the big thrill provider. The speed is terrific and every second every driver is in front of the spectators. They do not go out of sight behind trees or buildings. There are no distances so great as to dwarf cars and drivers below the power of vision to distinguish between them, there is no blinding dust to hamper drivers and obscure them from the spectators. Every second the battle between nerve, wits, mechanical genius is in plain view. The very shape of the track is for speed. The 40-percent bank in the turns acts as a propeller which will force cars to exceed their engine capacity."

After surgery in late June of 1927, Jack never seemed to recover. Jack passed away at his home in Los Angeles on October 7, 1927. He is buried at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles, California.