

Changi Landing – Singapore’s First Circuit Race

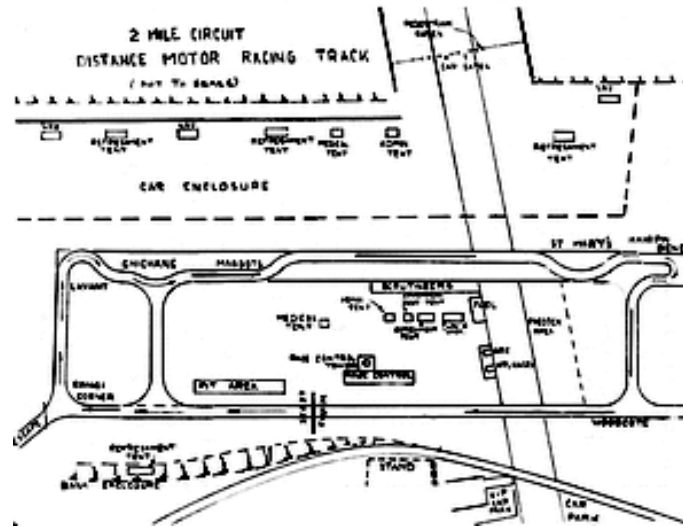
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It was really quite simple, brilliant even. Follow the Silverstone Grand Prix circuit and look for a similar flat plot of land in Singapore. Most airfields are flat; therefore look for an airfield, preferable an ex-military airfield. The reason why Silverstone was chosen as the venue for the 1948 British Grand Prix is that it was the disused airfield closest to the centre of England. About 120,000 people turned up, mainly by train and coach.

For a small island Singapore had an abundance of military airfields around the island, none disused however. Sure there was Tengah and Seletar and Changi and Sembawang but these were operational and controlled by the colonial forces (then). But then someone in the Forces Motor Club of Singapore came up with a brilliant idea and suggested seeking the support of Air Commodore Geoffrey Nicholas Ernest Tindal-Carill-Worsley, CB, CBE (‘TCW’ for short, thank God), President of the Club. Fence the perimeter, pipe in some water, scaffold some grandstands, preferably by the control tower, get some *sepoys* or *jagas* and close the airfield for a weekend. Oh, and get the support and assistance of the nice people in the Singapore Motor Club. They pulled it off in June of 1957 with a 2.86km long circuit at the Changi airfield.



The Changi Airfield was an ideal setting for Singapore’s first circuit race and consisted of six corners, including a hairpin bend, most named after Goodwood or Silverstone.

Paul Gibbs-Pancheri, racing enthusiast and once a PoW at Changi recalled, “Whilst still in the village [Changi as PoW] I was fortunately involved in hauling trailers of rice sacks into the POW area...I dreamed of creating a racing circuit using some of these excellent roads, but never guessed that after the Japanese had built an airfield (with our labour) in this area, I would in 1957 drive my Bentley in races on the roads that had been built as Changi Airfield.”



The Program cover for the event

That Changi Circuit Race of 1957 was the first circuit race held in Singapore. The spectator had little idea what he might see. It was a long time before most were privileged to arrive in their own cars. “Usually”, said author and motoring historian Dr. Mike Lawrence, “someone got up a coach trip, a day out, with a sing-song, but every spectator dreamed of the day when they would own a car and would not have to join in the bloody sing-song”. He was, of course, referring to the formative years of motor racing in post World War Two Britain. It could not have been very different in Singapore then.

Grassroots motor racing happens not when you have new cars, but when you have small advertisements and scrap yards. That’s how Singapore came to have around eighty Malayan-built racing specials, race cars built locally, often cobbled together with a leftover chassis and an appropriate engine (Fiat, Ford V8, MG or Jaguar units being popular) and clad in attractive bodywork. A local motor club and an enthusiastic bunch of members meeting in a pub helped. A base had already formed with club racing throughout the Peninsula so it wasn’t a case of starting with a

Grand Prix and then saying that the track was a white elephant and that it would be converted into a Disney World.

When 1957 arrived, only remnants of the communist insurgency still remained in Southeast Asia and it was, by then, a lost cause. The only Grand Prix in that part of the world was in Macao and it had now been four years since a circuit race had been held in Malaya (the last Johore Grand Prix was held in 1953). Granted there were very regular hill climbs and sprints in Malaysia and Singapore but until the Singapore Motor Club and the Forces Motor Club cuddled up there had never been a circuit race of any kind on the island.

Every Grand Prix needs a main event. The main event on the programme for Changi was a race for Formula Libre racing cars and sports cars, run over 10 laps. Considering the lack of any sort of proper circuit in Southeast Asia, there was still a plethora of sports and racing cars available, cars that were used for the sprints and hill climbs, plus a number that had been entered in the first post-war Johore Grand Prix of 1949. Naturally there were new arrivals; names such as Aston Martin and Warrior Bristol conjured up images of projectiles capable of indecent speed. Those cars that were capable of cutting through the hot (or wet) and salty tropical Changi air at over 130mph included a plantation-based V12 Lincoln Zephyr Special, an Aston Martin DB3S, and a Cooper Bristol (nee Warrior Bristol). Even Lim Peng Han's Austral aircraft-chassied "lawnmower" (which in an earlier life looked very much like a Kieft Mk1-A and probably was) was entered, even though its supercharged JAP engine could hardly have been expected to endure 29 km on full throttle. Contraptions that ran on a cocktail of methanol, acetone, benzene and Castrol R were not excluded.

The spectators couldn't have cared a less. They were just glad there was a six-event race weekend on the island, even if grandstand tickets were priced at \$10 per head and parking at \$1 per vehicle (motorcycles had a discount). It must have been a long bus ride to Changi in 1957.



Chan Lye Choon's Aston Martin DB3S on its way to winning the first and only Changi Circuit Race in June 1957. The names of the corners included St. Mary's (after the Goodwood circuit), Woodcote (after the Goodwood circuit), Lavant (after the Goodwood circuit), Maggots (after the Silverstone circuit), and Changi Corner just to give it local flavour.



The winner of the Changi Circuit Race – an Aston Martin DB3S. The car would go on to win the Macao Grand Prix in 1958 in the hands of Chan Lye Choon. It was sold to Ian Boughton who used it to good effect, winning the very first Singapore Grand Prix of 1961.

The crowds came and history was made. Chan Lye Choon in his cream-coloured Aston Martin DB3S won the main event in a time of 19 minutes

10.1 seconds, an average of 90 kmh. Chan went on to win the Macao Grand Prix the following year, in the same car, the only time a Singaporean has won the event (Anne Wong won the Touring Car race in 1970 while Sonny Rajah came close in 1971 but got it very wrong, his Lotus 59/69 disintegrating twice - the second time as they winced the wreckage up at the Naval Dockyard in Macao). Lim Peng Han, that doyen of Singapore motorsport from the 1930s until the 1960s, coaxed his Lim Special to second, a further 43 seconds in arrears of Chan, the JAP engine on the brink. Malacca based Bernard Arnold, no doubt wringing the neck of his Cooper Bristol, was a further 14 seconds behind with Chia Eng Quee fourth in his locally-built Rover-engined Eng Quee hot rod.



Lim Peng Han's Lim Special finished second at Changi. This was the most successful of the sprint and hill climb specials in Malaya throughout the 1950s and early 1960s. Originally a Kieft Mk1-A, Lim modified it until all that remained of the original were the wheels and a very modified and supercharged JAP engine.



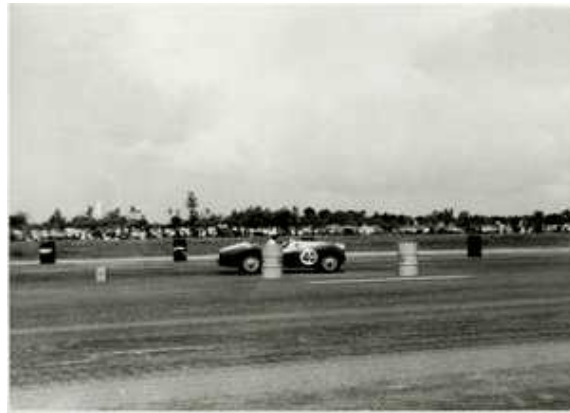
Another one of locally built racing cars was the Eng Quee Special, originally built before WWII as the first single-seater built in Singapore. The car finished fourth in the main event.



This “indecently fast” car was the Cooper Bristol, one of the favourites to win the Changi Circuit race. It began life as a Formula 2 car in Britain and was later rebodied into what became the Warrior Bristol. It spent most of its early life in Malaya and was extensively campaigned in Macao and at most of the circuit races, sprint and hill climbs in the region.

Permanent race tracks tend to be looked at as land consuming white elephants after the interest has waned, yet many of the tracks that are not associated with Formula 1 tend to have survived and are still actively in use. A street circuit has different issues to contend with. But 35 years of depravation from any form of proper racing has meant that several generations of enthusiasts in Singapore have been brought up on transmission breaking, pavement hammering car park racing. Singapore has never had a permanent circuit, and until very recently, even the very subject was taboo.

When you have a local base, you work up to the big event, very much like the Changi Circuit race of 1957. It took a few more years before Singapore was able to hold its first Grand Prix (in 1961). Formula 1 is merely a public relations contract for the country. A permanent circuit addresses the needs of industry and local participation far deeper than what a street race held once a year will do for anyone. It will always be a question of priorities. Will there be a second coming for Changi?



Bill Wyllie's Triumph TR3 in action at Changi, Wyllie competing in both the Sports Car support race held at 3.30pm as well as the Formula Libre event held at 4.30pm



The start of one of the supporting events at Circuit. The photo shows a brace of MGAs. Car number 28, local registration SB 2050, was a MGA "Le Mans" that a local entrant had purchased directly from Marcus Chambers at the MG factory in Abingdon. This car went on to win the 5-lap Sports Car support race for cars up to 1500cc.



Captain C.O. “Mick” Jennings, better known for having owned a K3 MG in Singapore before the war and a pair of TCs he called the Black Draught I & II after the war, started the Sport Car race in pole position but was beaten by Stanley Leong’s Works prepared MGA.



This very MGA, winner of the 5-lap Sports Car support race for cars up to 1500cc, was eventually transformed into what became known as the S.L. Ferrari, complete with 2-litre Ferrari Mondial engine mated to the MGA gearbox.

About the writer:

Eli Solomon is a motorsport historian and author working on his second book on the motor industry and motor racing in Southeast Asia. He operates Singapore Rare Books LLP, specialising in Southeast Asian material as well as motoring and motor racing.