

Columbia Speedway is bicyclists' field of dreams

Past the manufactured housing outlet on S.C. 321 in Cayce, over the gravel-covered lot, through the grove of pines stands a unique field of dreams.

Only this field of dreams is paved. The uniformed athletes don't emerge from a corn field carrying bats and gloves like in the 1989 Kevin Costner movie. They filter through a gap in the pines carrying sleek racing bikes.

The old Columbia Speedway, where the roar of racecars faded into the night three decades ago, has undergone a most unlikely transformation. It's now a training ground for cyclists. The rumble of racers zipping past has been replaced by a whoosh.

The half-mile, asphalt track isn't immaculate like Ray Kinsella's movie baseball field. Cracks and holes dot the surface, and the pines are so thick in the infield that spectators can't see the other side of the track. But cycling buffs look at the track and see great things.

"It's not perfect, but it's very acceptable," said Derek Everling, a former national caliber racer who works for the Cycle Center stores in the area. "In the future, I can see it with a wall-to-wall nice track surface."

It's three times longer than the traditional Olympic cycling velodrome. The surface is banked 12 degrees on the corners and 6 degrees in the straightaways, about a third as steep as most competitive velodromes.

But many road cyclists don't like to train on steep, short tracks, Everling said. The banking and length of Columbia Speedway offer an ideal compromise. Both road racers and track racers can train there.

Everling and Scott Galloway, president of Carolina Velo, a local cycling club, have lofty plans for the track. They want to turn it into a safe place for cyclists to work out and, especially, a training ground for young athletes.



Doug Graul (front), Tyler Crabtree, Scott Galloway, Brandon McKeever and Charles Ballowe - members of Carolina Velo - work out on Columbia Speedway.



left to right, Scott Galloway, Charles Ballowe, Tyler Crabtree and Brandon McKeever work out on the Columbia Speedway where NASCAR races were run as late as 1971.

"We could have something for bicycles that's similar to a soccer field," Everling said. "It would be a place where parents could drop off their kids for practice, and when they come back two hours later, the kids have bicycled."

Old-timers in the area might have a hard time believing the track is still there, much less could become a cycling haven. The last full racing season on the track was 1977.

Through the years, trees grew up to hide the oval from the view of cars driving past on Charleston Highway. The name Columbia Speedway was transferred to a dirt track in nearby Gaston. When Galloway checked out the old track last year, he found waist-high grass sprouting from the cracks.

"The first time I walked around the track I was honored and humbled to have an opportunity to bring back to life a track that played such an important role in starting one of America's most popular sports, all the while excited, knowing that just maybe a future star of cycling will be born on that same track," Galloway said.

A NASCAR buff, Galloway knew the track's history. Racing legends Fireball Roberts, Ned Jarrett, Ralph Earnhardt and Lee Petty raced on the track starting in 1940s. Richard Petty won his first race in a convertible at Columbia Speedway. The last of 43 Grand National races - then the top level of NASCAR - run on the track was in 1971. The big-time events moved to larger venues.

Jack Derrick, a former auto racing marketer who works for Hancock BMW, remembers attending a race at the track as a 7-year-old in 1951. A Studebaker driven by Frank Mundy won the 200-lap race. Derrick was hooked and returned time and again, along with 3,000-4,000 fans on a good night for the weekly Thursday races, maybe twice that when the Grand National boys came to town. "I think it's great that something is going to be done there," Derrick said. "It has a colorful, interesting history." Derrick helped link the cycling group with the Sellers family, which ran the track for decades and still owns the land. Bobby Sellers said organized baseball leagues have used other portions of the land for years. He had never considered that cyclists could make use of the track until approached by Carolina Velo.

The family had no immediate plans to develop the land and liked the idea of young athletes benefiting from using the track. "Our biggest concern is liability, and (Carolina Velo) has insurance to cover that," Sellers said.

The track is far from a finished project. Basic repairs of holes high on the banked track and cracks in the surface would cost about \$18,000, Everling said. A complete resurfacing would run many times that price.

The club could lose whatever it sinks into track repairs if the owners decide to sell the land. Galloway is searching for grants and other funds to help pay for improvements and a possible lease on the land. In the meantime, he's appreciative of what the club has. "With the history of this track and the need for a safe place for cyclists to ride, this is an ideal place," Galloway said. About 40 club members cleaned up the track one Saturday in January, killing grass in the cracks, trimming tree limbs away from the corners and painting lines.

For the past month, a group of junior racers has trained each Thursday afternoon at the track. Galloway and Everling envision the track being used for training rides several times each week, with special emphasis on young riders. They admit they have selfish reasons for wanting the track to succeed. "Derek and I both have young kids," Galloway said. "We want to make sure the infrastructure is here for them."



COLUMBIA SPEEDWAY

Year built: 1932 **Length:** Half mile

Surface: Hard-packed clay until paved in 1971

First NASCAR Grand National race: June 16, 1951, won by Frank Mundy.

Total Grand National events: 43.

Driver with most Grand National wins at track: Richard Petty, 7.

Last Grand National event at track: May 2, 1963, won by Richard Petty.

Last full season of racing: 1977.

Historical notes on the old speedway, from "The Stock Car Racing Encyclopedia" by Peter Golenbeck and Greg Fielden.

Where: Old Columbia Speedway in the 2000 block of Charleston Highway (S.C. 321) in Cayce, at the back of the lot between Congaree Homes and SAIA Motor Freight Lines.

Equipment: Bring your bike, and helmets are required.

For information: Call (803) 256-0557.