

OUR 1930s MOTORING SCENE

DAVE MCKNIGHT,

HIS YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

For Dave McKnight, 1936 proved to be a memorable year.

Born in 1905 in Northern Ireland, he graduated as a civil engineer and migrated to Cape Town where he joined the City Engineer's Department at Muizenberg. McKnight was a tall, energetic young man and in the late 1920s took on the responsibility for the design and construction of the final stages of Boyes Drive. By the age of 30 he had been appointed District Superintendent.

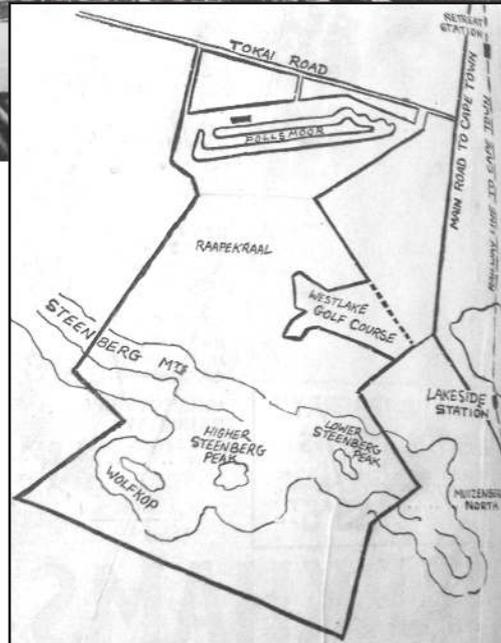
He joined the Mets and jumped at the chance to participate in the club's ambitious plans for Easter 1935, the first inter-city rally from Cape Town to Johannesburg and back. Construction of South Africa's national roads had barely commenced and the gravel inter-city routes were appalling. But conditions were reasonable and McKnight, coming in fifth behind racing drivers like Buller Meyer and Mario Mazzacurati, was hooked.

In total contrast, the weather conditions for the Easter 1936 Cape-Rand-Cape trial were horrific. 18 cars entered, seven in the light car and eleven in the heavy car categories. Braving epic cloud-bursts, flooded dongas and swollen rivers, only thirteen cars made it back to the Cape, but Dave McKnight had triumphed, winning the Heavy Car class in his 6-cylinder Chevrolet.

At the time an extraordinary man, A.O. (Arthur Octavus) Edwards, was making an impact in the Cape business and sporting scene. As the youngest of eight brothers and a civil engineer, Edwards had built 200 miles of railway through the dense jungles of northern Ceylon (Sri Lanka). On leave in London he had watched with interest as an American construction company rebuilt the Savoy Hotel. Setting up on his own he developed the Mayfair Hotel, then designed and built the luxurious



The Grosvenor Circuit at Pollsmoor



◀ *The Pollsmoor and Raapekraal farms incorporated the north slope of the Steenberg Mountain*

travelled to Melbourne to the finish-line of the MacRobertson air-race from England to Australia. His plane, *Grosvenor House*, a De Havilland DH 88 Comet piloted by Charles Scott and Tom Campbell

Opels, Pontiacs and Diamond T trucks, was set up as a subsidiary.

Both the 1st and 2nd South African Grand Prix, held at East London in December 1934 and New Year's Day 1936, had been major successes. Cape Town and Johannesburg realized that the additional prize money from Grands Prix in their cities would attract even more interest from international racing drivers during the northern hemisphere winter. A.O. Edwards agreed to sponsor

494-room Grosvenor House Hotel in Park Lane, on the site of the former London residence of the Grosvenor family, the Dukes of Westminster. The hotel opened in 1929 but with A.O. Edwards acting as MD and Chairman, it shrugged off the impact of the Great Depression and soon gained a reputation as the best-run hotel in Europe. Edwards had a passion for sports sponsorship and convened the first Canadian ice-hockey team in London, building a popular ice-hockey rink in Grosvenor House. In 1934 he

Black, won the race.

Edwards stopped off in Cape Town on his way back to London, and, impressed with its tourist potential, made plans to spend eight months of the year in the Cape. He bought a home, Quendon, in the Hen and Chickens (Trovato) Estate in Upper Wynberg and had it completely rebuilt. He established the Union Dominion Trust Ltd in Cape Town and appointed Frank Robb, the assistant secretary of the RAC of SA as manager.

Grosvenor Motors, agents for



Dave McKnight in 1936



McKnight, right, and his Chevrolet, winners of the 1936 Cape-Rand-Cape Trial



The winning team in the 1936 Oudtshoorn Double 12. McKnight, centre, first in his Hillman Hawk, flanked by Dick Slabber, left, second, and Harold Weaver, third in their Hillman Minxes

the construction of a circuit in Cape Town and asked McKnight to search for a suitable site. After rejecting the Noordhoek Pan, McKnight recommended a purchase of the Pollsmoor and Raapekraal farms in Tokai from Nicolaas Louw, the owner of the adjoining wine estate, Steenberg. The deal was done and in June 1936 Edwards, before leaving for London, persuaded McKnight to take six weeks leave to design and start building the track. McKnight was given a budget of £70 000 and six months to complete the task. That did not deter him from hosting a 400-guest CPMCC dinner dance that month at the Grand Hotel, Muizenberg to honour the winners of the Cape-Rand-Cape.

On 3rd July McKnight flew to East London to confer with the SAGP organizers. It was agreed that the 3rd SAGP would be held on 1st January 1937, followed by the 1st Grosvenor GP on the 16th of that month and the 1st Rand GP on 30th January.

Incredibly, McKnight found the time to compete in the Oudtshoorn Double 12, organized by the Mets over the long weekend of the 1-3 August. Driving a Hillman Hawk, he won the competition, ahead of fellow members Dick Slabber and Harold Weaver who came in second and third in their Hillman Minxes. The Rootes agents, British Cape Motors at 74 Strand Street, were ecstatic.

By this time the building contractor on the Grosvenor Circuit, Owen Jones, was making considerable progress. McKnight had designed a 4.75-mile layout consisting of four parallel lanes that would form the main streets of a housing estate should the race circuit prove unprofitable.

500 men, 30 trucks and a massive



The De Havilland Comet Grosvenor House, winner of the 1934 England-Australia race, restored and airworthy again

steam shovel were working day and night to complete the track. Low-lying areas were drained and filled, tree stumps were pulled out and a small hill removed. 10 000 tons of gravel, 7 000 tons of crushed stone and 100 000 square yards of asphalt were used to build the track that was to be 27 feet wide with up to 50 feet on the corners. The long straights were to be joined by hairpin bends and one very difficult series of consecutive zigzag corners called, after its designer, Mac's Waggle. Other evocatively named corners were to be dubbed Bullnose, Snake's Head, Dead Man's Heal and Dead Man's Toe. The circuit could accommodate up to 100 000 spectators, with a grandstand seating 1 700 and open seating for 12 000 on ramped banks around the perimeter. It was to prove a punishing course, allowing speeds of up to 200 mph on the straights but no more than 30 mph

through the tight hairpin bends.

In early November A.O. Edwards returned to the Cape on the *Stirling Castle* with his new wife, a Polish princess, Countess Helene Kosakowska. He inspected the Pollsmoor site, approved of the progress being made and offered both £10 000 in prize money and a superb solid silver Grosvenor



A.O. Edwards with the magnificent Grosvenor Grand Prix floating trophy

Grand Prix floating trophy for the winner.

Later that month Dave McKnight entered his Hillman Hawk in the Camps Bay Hill Climb. The competition was intense as amongst the 50 competitors were the experienced racing drivers Dougie van Riet, Steve Chiappini, George Anderson and Mario Mazzacurati. McKnight nearly had a serious accident while practicing, he swerved to avoid a man riding a bicycle and almost went over the edge.

The final six weeks leading up to the 1st Grosvenor GP on 16 January 1937 were frenetic. Motorists were invited to try out the track in an attempt to bed down the surface, one man overturned his car but avoided serious injury. Over 200 track officials including flag marshals, timekeepers and pit stewards had to be trained and 150 St John's Ambulance staff equipped with tents and ambulances. Generous catering facilities were laid on and elaborate arrangements made for spectators arriving by car and train.

Eight international and nine local drivers started the race which was marred by windy conditions that stirred up columns of dust from the newly-laid facilities surrounding the track. The 208.5-mile race involved 45 laps of the circuit. It was a triumph for the superb 6006-litre V16 Auto-Unions from Germany which, driven by Ernst von Delius and Bernd Rosemeyer, came in first and second.

As a spectacle the 1st Grosvenor GP had been highly successful but the crowd it attracted, 32 000, had been well below expectations. Nevertheless a full programme of track events was laid on for 1937 and the Grosvenor Grands Prix were repeated during the next two

years. McKnight won the 1937 Cape-Rand-Cape Trial in a new Hillman Hawk.

During WW II the Pollsmoor

estate was bought by the Union Government as a transit camp for the international troops being shipped around the Cape, and later

Pollsmoor prison was erected on the site. The layout of the prison buildings echoes the orientation of the straights on the Grosvenor circuit.

After the war A.O. Edwards moved to the USA and built an outstanding residential development, Palm Beach Shores, in Florida. Dave McKnight, after volunteering as a Flight Sergeant in the SAAF, was shot down over Italy but escaped capture. After a long

career as a highly respected and popular engineer in Salisbury (Harare) and Johannesburg, he died in 1973.

He always retained vivid memories of 1936, his year of living dangerously.

Acknowledgements to the Cape Times and Cape Argus, June 1936 to January 1937, John Brewster and Dave McKnight's daughter, Liz Westby-Nunn 🏎️



The first casualty at the Grosvenor Circuit, the driver and his passenger were uninjured



Ernst von Delius being pushed to the practice line in his V16 Auto Union



Dave McKnight and his trophies on the bonnet of his Hillman Hawk, winners of the 1937 Cape-Rand-Cape Trial

Welcome to Tomorrow

An interesting prediction forwarded by Rudi Schats

Change is on the horizon. There is reason to believe most, or all the following will become reality in the next 10-20 years - some of us won't see the changes, but our kids and grand-kids will!

1 - Auto repair shops will disappear.

2 - A petrol/diesel engine has 20,000 individual parts. An electrical motor has 20. Electric cars are sold with lifetime guarantees and are repaired only by dealers. It takes only 10 minutes to remove and replace an electric motor.

3 - Faulty electric motors are NOT repaired in the dealership but are sent to a regional repair shop that repairs them with ROBOTS.

4 - Your electric motor malfunction light goes on, so you drive up to what looks like a car wash, and your car is towed through while you have a cup of coffee. Then your car comes out on the other side with a new electric motor or component.

5 - Petrol pumps will go away.

6 - Street corners will have meters that dispense electricity. Companies will install electrical recharging stations, in fact, they've already started in the developed world.

7 - Smart major auto manufacturers have already designated money to start building new plants that build ONLY electric cars.

8 - The "Coal Industries" will go away. Gasoline/oil companies will go away. Drilling for oil will stop. So say goodbye to OPEC. The middle-east is in trouble.

9 - Homes will produce and store more electrical energy during the day than they use. It will be sold back to "The Grid". The Grid will store and dispense it to the industries that are high electricity users. Has anybody seen the Tesla roof?

10 - A baby of today, will only see "personal cars" in museums. The FUTURE is approaching faster than most of us can even handle.

11 - In 1998, Kodak had 170,000

employees and sold 85% of all photo paper worldwide. Within just a few years, their business model disappeared and they went bankrupt. Who would have thought of that ever happening?

12 - What happened to Kodak and Polaroid will happen in a lot of industries in the next 5-10 year and most people don't even see it coming.

13 - Did you think in 1998 that 3 years later, you would never take pictures on film again. With today's smart phones, who even has a camera these days?

14 - Yet digital cameras were invented in 1975. The first ones only had 10,000 pixels but followed Moore's law. As with all exponential technologies, it was a disappointment in the beginning. Before it became way superior and mainstream in only a few short years.

15 - It will now happen again (but much faster) with Artificial Intel-

ligence (AI), health, autonomous and electric cars, education, 3D printing, agriculture and jobs.

16 - Forget the book, "Future Shock", welcome to the 4th Industrial Revolution.

17 - Software has disrupted and will continue to disrupt most traditional industries (in the next 5 to 10 years

18 - UBER is just a software tool, (they don't own any cars), and are now the biggest taxi company in the world. (Ask any taxi driver if they saw that coming)

19 - AIR-BnB is now the biggest hotel company in the world (they don't own any properties) Ask Hilton Hotels or the Marriott, if they saw that coming.

20 - Artificial Intelligence (AI): Computers become exponentially better in understanding the world This year, a computer beat the best Go-player in the world (10 years earlier than expected)

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