

## **SX Papendal May 27-28th**

By Gerrit Does  
Waalre, Holland  
May 30th, 2011

### **Overall impression of the venue.**

When I arrived at the Papendal SX venue, I was very excited. The overall impression was: "THIS IS HOW A TOP EVENT LIKE THIS SHOULD LOOK, JUST FANTASTIC!" Here, I saw my dream come true.

This was the idea we had in 1996: enough space is essential. A good routing can be made, vendors, riders parc (pit area), parking, public area, VIP facility, all of that was just as it should be.

We have seen this at World Championship events and now this should become a "standard" for SX events, in my opinion. The length of the track is just great, and as I always wanted it to be: for Elite Ladies around 420 mtrs. And for Elite Men around 475 mtrs.

The BMX track itself looked great too. Impressive starting hill (9 mtrs. high) and nice layout of the track in general. Grandstands on one side for around 3500 people. Good facilities for first aid, registration and so on.

The NOC's (Dutch National Olympic Committee) Olympic Training Center/Papendal, and their responsible officers did a great job.

Also compliments to the track builder Tom Ritz, all under responsibility of GSX CEO Johan Lindström.

**Gerrit Comment:** it was however disturbing to me, when I learned that the KNWU (the Dutch National Cycling Federation) BMX department had no say in this project at all. I was not able to hear both sides of the story yet, so the reason why is still a question mark for me.

The accommodations on the venue, like party tents, vendor accommodation, rider housing, VIP area, grandstands, demo area for other bicycle disciplines and so on were all the responsibility of a company called "BMX/Holland B.V." This is a business that also runs important bicycle road racing events in Holland, but has never done anything in BMX... this was their first! On this part of the overall organization, they did a good job for sure.

**Gerrit Comment:** There are KNWU BMX clubs with experience enough (to produce an even of this scale and quality), IF money is available. Nobody of those clubs knew or was asked!

I understand why the NOC/NSF choose this professional organization, on the other hand, KNWU clubs lose the opportunity of organizing such events and developing a professional organization of their own.

Problems did occur because of the fact BMX Holland B.V. had no historical background in the history and tradition of BMX. I will come back to that, later on in this evaluation.

### **About the BMX Supercross track**

As we know, this track is a replica of the Olympic BMX track, currently being built in London for the 2012 Olympic Games. The track \*looked\* great, but riding it was a different story.

During the Thursday practice, there were several bad falls. At the time, there were high-wind conditions, blowing toward the starting hill. Although it was a hindrance, the wind did not cause a lot of problems by itself (although Bas de Bever states otherwise in an interview in Holland's largest newspaper, De Telegraaf).

The medics present on the track had a busy afternoon, and the ambulance had to leave for the local hospital three times. The very high starting hill plus the extreme jumps and bottle neck step-up (the BOX) halfway down the track, were the cause of a lot of problems.

On Friday (May 27th), the time trials were run. Riding the track on your own without any competitors around you was OK. But, still, there were many bad falls.

As I watched all this taking place, I spoke to several coaches, and Elite riders (among them, former National, European and World Champions). They were all very worried about riders getting injured during Saturday's racing, when they had to compete with eight riders per moto. A solo time trial lap, and racing at full-speed, with seven other competitors is a different story.

Everybody I spoke to stated that this track design was, probably 10% too much...too extreme. Keep in mind that these remarks were kind of emotional "in the moment" remarks, even though they were coming from riders and people with deep experience.

Here are some stats on the Elite Men Class:

- In total there were 133 entries in that class (from all over the world!).
- After watching and/or taking part in the Thursday Practice, 40 riders decided NOT to race. "Too dangerous a track," they said.
- With those 40 pull-outs, 93 riders were left to compete on Friday.
- During the time trials, NINE riders were DNF, and did not have a chance to qualify. The main reason for the DNFs were that they weren't able to jump onto the 90-degree-vertical step up (Box-jump), or they crashed too hard and were treated by the medics present.
- Out of the 84 riders left, 64 qualified for the Saturday rounds.

**Gerrit Comment:** If 30% of your total entries in the Elite Men class don't race OR have been stopped by a section on the track one cannot race/ride on/over, my opinion is, something is wrong.

First of all, the "container step-up/box" (not possible to ride if something goes wrong!) halfway the track, does not make BMX more spectacular. An obstacle like that should NOT be used at an Olympic event, where it is among the sole deciding factors on whether a rider makes the next round or not. As said before, riding on your own and catching the ideal line every time, it should be no problem for any rider among Elite Men to ride the step-up/box. But using the Box jump in 8-man competition assumes all lines will be perfect, and nothing will go wrong, and a lot of times it isn't (perfect).

Essential in my opinion is that the TRACK should not be the deciding factor (on whether a rider qualifies or not), it must be the RIDERS.

Also, for spectators it is disappointing to see a riders being stopped by an obstacle like that. Spectators cannot really even tell what is happening when they're watching it live- they have to watch the Jumbotron, which makes it less exiting again (the face of the Box-jump was out of spectators' line of sight).

Remember the BMX World Cup/Supercross at Woodward - USA? Robert de Wilde won, but it was impossible to "ride, roll or speedjump" several double jumps? If you couldn't make the jump, you were simply out, in a ditch, or hurt. No possibility to recover, catch up and maybe qualify. We should not repeat this!

Granted, the NBL had their problems building extreme tracks in the 80's and 90's. And, yes, BMX was developing and with new track design, they tried to make BMX more "spectacular" than it once was... and with that, more technical.

Riders broke legs, collarbones and even suffered broken necks!

A flurry of lawsuits hit the NBL, landowners, trackbuilders, the manufacturers and so on. Quickly track design changed to a more safe situation.

Re: Starting-hill... Why does it have to be that high? Motivation: it looks spectacular, and gives the riders enormous speed. This, of course, looks exiting for the on-site audience, TV and at the Olympics. This hill, in combination with extreme jumps, cross-overs etc. might turn out to be a little bit too much as well.

During development of the World Cup project in 1996, the average speed by Elite Men on the track then, was 25MPH. Competition was heavy, racing close and spectacular from start to finish.

On the modern SX hill, the top speed reached at the bottom is around 37MPH for Elite Men and 34MPH for Elite Women. So, they hit the first jumps on the first straight hard, and when there is a crash, athletes get hurt accordingly.

To make BMX even more spectacular, are we then going to build 12-meter high starting hills? And what kind of jumps will be built then? With a 20-inch BMX bike, there is a "top speed" that is safe for athletes to ride safely over certain jumps. I think the limit has been reached in the case of the Papendal SX track, or even been surpassed.

Another item to take into consideration is that seeing all of this unfold on TV, parents of young people will not allow them to start racing BMX bikes if that is their first impression of our sport.

If we want to use the World Cup/Supercross events as tool to promote BMX racing, don't let it backfire in a way that the sport will be considered too dangerous.

The "balance" between track difficulty and rider skill should be 50/50. When that balance is swung to be 60% track-difficulty, and 40% rider skill, things will go badly wrong.

To make a comparison with motocross, from which the sport of BMX is derived/inspired... 30 years ago a 250cc MX machine produced around 25/30 horsepower. MX tracks were built to accommodate those machines. Trying to jump a set of doubles 20 meters (65 feet) apart, would be impossible with those bikes (not enough power).

Nowadays, a modern 250cc Honda has around 65/70 horsepower in its engine. They have incredibly more power than 30 years ago. They also have much better suspension, and have a higher top speed than the old machines.

For such a machine, 20 meters can be cleared easily. So, engine power drove changes in track design (mostly). An MX bike is a machine—adding 200% more horsepower is a mechanical achievement... but in a pro BMXer, it is unlikely you would be able to attain 200% more power in his (leg) muscles, however well-trained he may be. That is also something we have to think of, the balance between the physics of riders, the maximum speed they can ride to be safe on a 20-inch bike, which has its limits also.

Yes, one "handicap" our SX riders face are the very 20-inch wheels they race on. Those wheels have their limits for easy jumping. As you all know, it is easier to ride a 24-inch bike around a track.

Another thing. I did not measure it, but I believe that if you take away the highest speed at the bottom of the starting hill (Elite Men around 37MPH), and take the average laptime starting entering the first corner and ending at the finishline, that the average time will be around 27MPH, so around 7% higher than during the 1996 series.

IF the six-meter starting hill, and jumps (no box jumps) are made somewhat easier and rideable for all, the average speed might even be higher than the speed attained with the help of the 6-meter ramp. Again a balance between track and riders, with the deciding factor being the best trained and most skilled athlete. If one wants to enter an extreme sport, go ride BMX Freestyle.

One more point concerning the track.

Most of the time, the start and the first straight, racing looks good. However a lot of times, just after the first corner, when riders hit, or make a mistake, the group of eight is torn apart. Eight men riding, single file, with large gaps between them is not nice to see. If, then, another two or three riders can't jump the box, the race is effectively over. There is no fun, no spectacle whatsoever in that type of display.

Personally, I must say that most of Saturday's races were not very interesting, competition wise. Several of the Elite Women races were more exiting than the men. The Final was "OK," but still, I felt it would have been so much better if the group could stay together. In Papendal, the track was so difficult that it did not happen. Don't let this happen in London!

### **SAFETY first.**

Sport in general is dangerous, especially when speed is involved. All bicycle disciplines have a certain amount of danger in them. Simply competing in an event could mean one can get hurt. It's the task of organizers to limit the dangers as much as possible, by building safe tracks (in all disciplines).

Riders have to prepare as best they can, practicing on their bikes and preparing their bodies, physically.

Not much is said about safety equipment. Except for a helmet, gloves, long sleeves, long pants and the right BMX shoes, all the rest of the protection equipment is the riders' choice.

The developments in BMX World Cup/Supercross and Olympic events, especially track design, are starting to get an "extreme" look, in a way.

There seems to be no discussion on improving safety equipment, and maybe even making safety equipment of a certain standard mandatory!

In the present situation, can the BMX helmets being used resist the impact when a rider crashes into a jump at 37 miles per hour? Has this been tested lately? What should the helmet standards be for top riders in Junior and Elite classes?

The same goes for body protection. Of course, accidents occurred in the past. I know a lot of riders who ruptured their spleen when falling down, getting handlebar in their stomach. These injuries, and risk to other internal organs can be helped when using the right body protection.

In my opinion, the materials used now are not sufficient for the current Supercross tracks. Flexible, strong and longer front body protection should be used. Here again, have tests been done?

Essential in this matter of safety is: does UCI, or any of the national governing bodies have data available on injuries suffered during national (or similar large-scale races) as well as local events? A follow up to this question would be: On what part of the tracks are these injuries occurring? All facts available are needed to make a safety plan to be able to properly advise what protection should be used.

One item that is already in place is the LEATT neck brace. Doctor Chris LEATT of South Africa has done extensive research and design the LEATT neck brace. It's effectiveness has been proven several times already (in Motocross and), also within the sport of BMX. It should be considered to make using these neck braces mandatory at the above events mentioned, by all riders!

After Raymon v.d. Biezen's crash on Saturday, I saw his neck brace. Without that brace his neck would have been in a very bad situation for sure. With it, he was able to walk away. The same for Roger Rinderknechts crash, where his neck brace saved him from bad neck injury.

I also feel that, at this level of competition, it should be forbidden that riders race in shorts. It's not safe and it does not look professional at all to the outside world. BMX Supercross is not Freestyle, sorry!

Promoting BMX? During this event over 50 riders crashed, 39 were treated in the Medical center, the ambulance had to leave to bring riders to the hospital three times. For an event with just around 160 riders total this is a lot.

Again, it is impossible to prevent injuries, we must realize that, BUT all must be done to prevent as many injuries as possible.

### **Conclusion/Advice on Track Design and Safety:**

Try to find the balance between the difficulty of the track and the capacity of the Elite riders, keeping in mind that ALL riders should be able to finish the track (no box obstacles). If there are 200 riders present, then all 200 should be able to participate in qualification. It is a bad thing when 50 riders would say, the track is too dangerous, and not ride.

The challenge is to build spectacular tracks with the least possibility of injuries, and tracks which keep the eight riders on the course as close together as possible from start to finish.

Work on making safety equipment (helmets, gloves, pants, etc) better should continue... and new products like body-protection and neck protection should be welcomed as essential components of rider safety. Strong consideration should be given to making use of such protection mandatory for all riders in BMX Supercross and Olympic Competition.

When we talk PR/promoting our sport on the track and on TV, I think this is the way to go. I do have so much more to say, but that will take too much time now, sorry.

### **PUBLICITY/PR**

My guess is that BMX Holland B.V. was responsible for publicity on this matter. I don't know what their goals were for this event, but I found publicity was at a low. I live in the South of Holland (Brabant) about 45/50 minutes away from Papendal, and I did not read anything about this prestigious event in the newspapers here before the event happened.

No word in our National newspaper, De Telegraaf, announcing the event. I understand that, around Arnhem / Papendal, publicity was somewhat better. Even city buses had posters announcing the event.

I did find it very disappointing to see the Grandstands (which had a capacity of 3500-4000 people) filled only to about 80% on Saturday. After counting, my guess is about 3200 people in the Grandstands and about 250 in the VIP area.

Of the Grandstand spectators, I estimate that 90% were BMX related (riders, and a lot of old school BMXers, with their children) but almost NO outside-BMX spectators.

How can I say this? Well, I have been walking around, meeting people, talking to people and almost everyone present, I know from BMX, at present and past. It sounds crazy, but I know tons of people at national and international level.

The goal of "The New Concept" was to try to get people/spectators from outside BMX circles to these events. It seems it is still a big challenge to realize that goal.

BMX Holland B.V., the organizer, had a VIP credential, and approximately 200-250 people were walking about (with them). The ONLY BMX people present there on Saturday were Louis Vrijdag and family, Jeroen Vrijdag (former UCI BMX co-ordinator), "Zonto" Dingen and sometimes Rob v.d. Wildenberg and the brothers van Kruistum. The rest were "outside-BMX people," invited for this event. Relations of NOC and BMX Holland, potential sponsors, people from the company building the track etc., etc.

## **RESPECT?**

By the way, as the person who introduced BMX in Holland, and founded of the first BMX organization; S.F.N., NO invitation was sent to me for this historic event. This was the start of a new era in the development of BMX, yet "the godfather," as they say, was NOT invited by BMX Holland B.V. They clearly have no knowledge of the background / history of BMX racing and no respect for its national founder, among others. Because of me, we were all here now! I say this in all modesty, but it has to be said.

At the venue, I also did meet one of the best promoters of the sport in all of Holland, old school BMXer and KNWU-decorated-sportsman, PHIL HOOGENDOORN. He holds one of the highest honorable titles within the KNWU and was not invited, nor honored with a VIP pass.

Even the Chairman of the KNWU BMX committee, Peter Vaessen, wasn't invited, and had NO VIP pass.

Thanks to BMX Holland B.V. – **NOT!**

Again, the same goes for myself and Louis Vrijdag, Past-president of the UCI BMX Commission, among others. Through "contacts," we were invited and given VIP passes. No word/invitation from BMX Holland B.V.

There is a small list of names, people that should have been given some honour by inviting them to witness this unique event, a first in Holland, and starting a new era in the development of BMX racing, so an "historic moment" for sure!

## **PUBLICITY after the event.**

Again today NO article on this event in our regional newspaper "Eindhovens Dagblad," not even the results.

Last Saturday (May 28), there was a short article in "De Volkskrant" (a national newspaper) and the headline was:

"A BMX(er) ONLY COUNTS HIS BROKEN BONES." It was all about the risks of our sport and a rider telling how many bones she (the Elite rider interviewed) had broken already.

Also I was quoted as founding father of BMX in Holland and coordinator in Europe, more specific they asked about my work as Ambassador Safety for the sport. I think I responded at a professional way (again, said in all modesty).

In our national newspaper "De Telegraaf" an article on our sport with the headline:

"FIETCROSS (BMX Racing) IS GETTING MORE AND MORE EXTREME" In this article, even the reporter noticed that the track was too radical. Bas de Bever was interviewed, and stated that everybody said this track was over the limit, too dangerous. He did not think so. Seven years ago, something similar happened, and after some time nobody complained anymore! I think this is a totally different situation, as you can understand reading this evaluation.

Pity to say nobody in the article in "De Telegraaf" said anything on safety and what is done to keep the sport as safe as possible (equipment and so on).

In my opinion, both not very optimistic articles on our sport. It has been almost a year since any article on BMX racing appeared in a national newspaper.

## **TV: Freecaster and the NOS (Dutch National Sports channel).**

On Saturday, Freecaster did a live Webcast of the racing action. Pete Dylewski (USA) and Anneke Beerten (Holland) were the reporters and they did a fantastic job. Why? They know BMX racing, and the riders, and the background/history. They spoke very professionally about our sport.

Compliments...well done!

NOS – National Sports Channel.

Between 4PM and 6PM, fragments of the event were broadcast, as well as takes that had been shot the day before. It was frustrating that, over and over again, they felt compelled to explain what BMX is all about, and why they use those small ("children's") bikes...in fact, it was actually reported as "big guys on small bikes."

This situation has been the same since about 1993. From 1980 through 1993 BMX was on Dutch National TV several times per year in the beginning and later on (1989) one could watch BMX on TV about every year for sure.

People in Holland knew what BMX was all about. 75% of people in Holland knew what BMX meant (research via RAI). But since 1994, one has to explain what BMX is all about, the 20-inch "children's" bikes etc.etc. BMX is considered a "small" sport by journalists (and it is!).

Also on TV an interview with Raymon v.d. Biezen (great sportsman). The reporter asked him why riding those small bikes on 20-inch wheels? Here we go again.... after 33 years of BMX in Holland, still this question? Raymon's answer wasn't correct either, I know! Better tell the correct story and reason, then talk around it a bit. Those guys have to be coached in this field too.

Donny Robinson (top athlete from the USA, and 2008 Olympic Bronze Medalist) was also interviewed, and told exactly the same (story). In the USA, very few people know about BMX racing. Nobody "on the street" knows who Donny Robinson is, he said. The problems faced in the US are the same as ours. It looks like attention must be given to PR, promoting and marketing our sport globally.

It was not nice to see the many crashes during the TV coverage, and not nice to see a single-file "train" of riders crossing the finish line. BMX people watching TV recognized many oldschool BMXers in the Grandstands when the cameras panned the crowd. But many also remarked that when people in the VIP accommodation were shown, almost nobody recognized any BMX related people among the "VIPs."

I understand the TV program drew around 325,000 people (out of the 16 million in Holland). That's not bad, but still only around 2% of our population. In the early days of BMX and even up to around 1993, the percentage of people watching BMX on TV (from national TV stations Veronica, AVRO, TROS in that order) was around 6-7 % at the time. What does that tell us?

It must be said that, here again, the promo to announce that this event would be televised was inadequate.

## **Presentation of Awards**

A personal note concerning the presentation of awards.

Mr. Schneider and the responsible officers of the NOC – BMX facility handed out the podium awards. That's OK, of course, but I would have given the honour to, among others, Phil Hoogendoorn, carrier of "Erelid van Verdienste KNWU" award... or, because of the special event, given the honour to Louis Vrijdag (who coordinated the merger between I.BMX.F. and UCI), as well as myself as "father of Dutch BMX"/original founder of I.BMX.F. Now UCI-BMX, project manager UCI WC/SX events etc.

Who would think of that??? BMX Holland B.V., if they organized the award ceremony, they did not have the know-how about this all. I think you know what I mean! Those "small" details are very important to give BMX, as well as the sport's heroes, the respect they deserve.

## **LAST WORDS.**

Reading all of the above, it looks like things were all wrong, THAT'S ABSOLUTELY NOT THE CASE. Remember, I am in "insider" and just want to let you know, with the background I have what, in my opinion, can be better and start a discussion to that end. Do with my remarks/advice what you think is best.

It's a couple of days after the event now and, in the meantime, the discussion has started on Facebook also. Those are just short/sharp remarks and I am trying to give background info with this written evaluation, and make remarks, but also offer advice. THIS IS NOT MEANT TO TALK DOWN TO ANYBODY, this is to help the sport.

If you read remarks on Facebook, this evaluation, and look at the NOS TV show of the event, you can see that most comments have to do with the track. Well, you guys do have the best BMX trackbuilder at hand, in Tom Ritz and he can easily change what might be wrong(?).

A lot of my remarks in this evaluation also have to do with the KNWU and BMX Holland B.V. Hope they do read this all seriously and act upon it, TO MAKE THINGS BETTER, organization wise.

I also can tell you that this kind of evaluation was written by me concerning my own events, like the E.C.C. (European Challenge Cup 1 through 10) – Slagharen events. Why? To improve my organization for the next event.

(In Papendal), I spoke with so many people during the event and their remarks were all substantially the same:

- This venue is fantastic, professional exposure for sure.
- The track is too radical, dangerous, this is NOT BMX
- They found the ambience/atmosphere not very good. Better announcers could be of good use here to improve the atmosphere, not only report on the races, but give info on developments, talk history in relation to event, interviews NOT with Abe Schneider (example) but with

former top riders, organizers present (maybe?). As long as I have been in BMX, this has been an item with me. It is very hard to change the present culture in this field, but especially when you want to have outside BMX people, it is what you need.

- Many people present had comments on the VIP situation (as mentioned already). Because of those remarks, you can see that almost only inside BMX people were present. Outside BMX spectators wouldn't care who were in that VIP unit. Remarkable!

#### **THE NEW COMMUNICATION TOOLS!**

As I said, on Facebook, a lot of comments too, but all about the track. From several persons even concrete advice / criteria how to built a track on paper, with standard measures. An example:

- The starting hill: build it high enough so Elite men riders have a Max speed of 28MPH;
- The same man said Double jumps built in relation to that speed, no more then a 30ft gap.

I know, you can't take all remarks (hundreds of them probably) in, but just reading them would be a good thing, that is my advice.

#### **Twitter, Facebook, and so on.**

One thing is for sure, when I started to set up the UCI World Cup/Supercross Series in 1995, we had to communicate with the potential Junior and Elite riders worldwide, through a information Bulletin. This bulletin was one of the most important tools for me to get the NEW CONCEPT known among the riders and national organizations worldwide.

Now we can use Facebook and others to get in touch and inform the BMX SX participants and keep them informed on things. They also can react back and give their opinions. Might be an idea to start a Facebook page just for qualified UCI BMX SX Elite men and women riders, worldwide. You have the possibility to accept qualified riders as "friends" or not.

A lot of former top international BMX riders are now acting as coaches and team managers for national organizations. Also some are involved in individual coaching and I think its FANTASTIC to see this develop.

It also means you have experienced men and women watching developments in the sport and their advice/remarks should be taken very seriously too. One has to watch out, though, for "tunnelvision" and "politics." It's the execution of how the sport is run that is important, and SAFETY nowadays is a HOT topic within that development.

Friends in BMX, I think I have said enough right now. I hope more attention will be given to the SAFETY aspects of our sport. I will try my best to advise specifically in that area.

With this extended evaluation of the complete event (not just the track), I hope to have given some ideas to improve the organization of WC and SX events in general.

Always willing to give a helping hand, with kindest regards,

#### **GERRIT DOES**

*Ambassador Safety for "LEATT neck braces"*

#### **Additional Suggestion:**

Want to make BMX Supercross more exiting to watch on TV and on the track? Upgrade our qualifying system.

**Current:** Elite Men, 8 groups of 8 riders. Now top 4 finishers qualify till the Main event.

**New:** After the three motos (so starting from the quarterfinals on), only the top TWO per quarterfinal would qualify for semi final. That would give you FOUR riders. The other 12 riders will be those with the fastest lapttime raced among the rest (28 riders).

Display lap times on scoring board, riders and spectators can follow development during racing, nobody will "shut down" anymore, as they do now. In this suggested qualifying system they have to keep on racing, because riders in the other quarter final might be faster! Plus you will have the fastest riders in the main event (mostly). Same goes for the semi-finals. Think about it-- try it out sometime.

This is nothing new, it's done in running/ahtletics (at Olympics also). This idea goes back around the NEW CONCEPT (1995-1997) area as well!