

## **Wildrose Motocross: Special MX People and a Special MX Place**

### **Written By David Pinkman**

While we always think of the machinery and the riders as the core of motocross sport, there are obviously a variety of other factors which make motocross what it is. Principal among those factors are land and a core organization around whom the sport can be formed. Possibly more than any other participant-based activity, motocross requires the commitment of dozens of died-in-the-wool enthusiasts prepared to give up their time and skills in order to make motocross happen. And their ability to make that sacrifice is always tied to the availability of a central place where the sport makes sense. You may be completely involved with the motocross group in your area, or you may think the track and events suddenly appeared like magic. Whatever the case, few sagas could compete with the wild west history of Calgary's Wild Rose Motocross Association and its hard-core motocross lovers. This is the story of a motocross park nestled in the center of a major city (yes, really – it is so close to the city center you could walk to downtown!), and the gang of keeners who sacrifice more than could be reasonably asked by anyone to keep the place alive and well for the motocross faithful of Southern Alberta.

Calgary has been a lucky city to a lot of people, but few have been more fortunate than those of us who see the MX bike as the true path to freedom. We always fantasize about the prospect of cutting laps on the local golf course, or ski hill, or other chunk of land which offers the best view, best traction, and best topography for roosting on a motocross bike. In Calgary, Wild Rose Motocross Park offers all of those features – and includes one of the best views of the city core in the entire region. Originally called “Blackfoot Motorcycle Park”, this 88-acre chunk of coulee and rolling prairie offered a perfect location for the use of the early off road motorcycle. Whether converted British four-stroke dinosaurs or zippy little Japanese street bikes, the terrain gave the 60's motorcyclist a perfect venue to test his and his machine's hill climbing abilities. At the same time, the core group of serious motocross aficionados – men such as Zoli Berinyi, Sr. and local motorcycle royalty like Wayne Addison and Walt Healy – found a perfect spot for serious off road competition. Having been land controlled by the City for as long as we can remember, those at City Hall seemed enthused with the prospect of

this rabid chunk of property being used for the new and hip motorcycle sports. With official sanction, Blackfoot Park found itself the host of the earliest sanctioned motocross events in the region, and was likely being accessed as an off road destination by motorcyclists since the first motorcycles arrived in Calgary.

In the 60's and 70's, Blackfoot Park was open and accessible to all who entered to ride motorcycles, and under the auspices of the Calgary Motorcycle Club, was the site of numerous trials, T.T. and scrambles/ motocross events. The Calgary Club was a CMA affiliate and routinely hosted two-day events, sometimes holding a T.T. on the Saturday followed by motocross on Sunday, and took pride in ensuring that the track layout for each new race was unique. No set tracks existed, but by the same token no manicuring, watering or obstacle building existed either, and the early format for MX's included a three-moto per day format. Imagine three 30 minute motos and no dust control: better make it to the first corner before the rest of the gang! Early on, Blackfoot Park developed a national reputation as a facility with near perfect hills, valleys, flats and soil for the sport of motocross, and was a popular location for the 1973 National Amateur Championship race. Prodded by keen promoters, the Park was also the site of the 1972 Calgary International Motocross, complete with a couple international stars – or at least, guys whose name made them sound like Euro stars – and lots of TV advertising. While this event seemed to put motocross and the park on the local map, it also did something very important for the current crop of moto-enthusiasts: it created the famed International Jump, an obstacle still in use today, and one which forms the backbone of the track used for Calgary's leg of the CMRC National series.

While it's location is obviously it's most unique feature, the facility has a number of other elements which make it special and permit us to keep riding off-road bikes: the hills and dales of the glacially-formed coulees, in addition to being attractive to racers, offered thick topsoil with hardy indigenous plant growth on leeward hillsides. This allowed limited erosion, allowed track routing to reduce dust problems, and contributed indirectly to noise reduction, important features in a facility located near the heart of a major urban center.

Calgary's phenomenal growth during the 70's led to a re-evaluation of the worth of Blackfoot Park by City officials as a variety of projects were seen as potential beneficiaries of the land. The proverbial "wrecking ball" was put to the park at the end of the decade, many of the hills were flattened and much of the topsoil was removed as the motorcyclists made way for "progress". While the City agreed to allow motocrossers to access a new chunk of land on the east side of town, no one was happy that the famed Blackfoot Park was being closed down. However, in a strange twist of fate, the dismantling of the Park was stopped when Calgary's seemingly endless oil boom ran out of gas, as it were. Motorcycle historians have routinely argued about the causes of the oil boom collapse, but the consensus of opinion in our quarter is that the then Prime Minister of Canada, the Honourable P.E. Trudeau, heard the desperate pleas of Calgary motocross racers as they saw their beloved Blackfoot Park being flattened, and responded by introducing the National Energy Program.

Thanks to the success of the NEP in turning Calgary into an economic ghost town by the early 80's, off road enthusiasts were gradually able to move back into the remaining hills at Blackfoot Park. Unfortunately, they did so without control or order, and soon motocrossers found themselves riding beside 4x4's and other off road vehicles. Anarchy reigned, and something had to be done. Enter Wild Rose Motocross Association.

## **The People: Wildrose Motocross Association**

The Wild Rose club originated as a splinter group of the local Calgary Motorcycle Club after a number of members determined that the specific needs of their sport could be better met by establishing an organization with its focus solely on motocross. Incorporated under the provincial Societies Act as a non-profit organization and lead by Murray Colclough, the new group set out to complete its first mission: securing Blackfoot Motorcycle Park as an open facility for safe and easy access by recreational off road motorcyclists. Wild Rose succeeded in convincing the City Fathers that the grant of a lease to the club made good economic and social sense, but were able to do so with one major proviso: afraid of the liability issues surrounding motocross racing, the City would not allow the club to hold sanctioned motocross events.

Despite this kick in the gut, the club knew that any riding area as attractive as Blackfoot Park could not be ignored. Common sense and the new lease with the City meant that the volunteer-based club would now be in the motocross business, as controlled access required that riders paid to ride or joined the club. Money is what makes the world go round, and now Wild Rose was paying for security personnel, fencing and the other elements of a recreational park which required regular attention. On top of that, even though managing Blackfoot Park absorbed the majority of the club's attention, a central objective of the group was hosting motocross races. To fill in that blank, the club secured access to a second facility on the edge of the Badlands northeast of Calgary. The Carbon Valley track had many attractive features, but its distance more than 45 minutes from the City wasn't one of them. Nevertheless, the intrepid club members decided that the inconvenience and expense of maintaining two separate facilities was worth the effort. As is so often the case, and as is likely demonstrated in the backrooms of every motocross club in the country, it was the promethean efforts of a few dedicated members which kept things moving. Carbon Valley hosted amateur Nationals, and was always a big draw on both the CMA and CMC schedules. Despite the grief experienced in Canadian motocross politics in the late 80's and early 90's, Wild Rose was able to thrive. Carbon Valley was a decent track, but few could deny that the exceptional location and geography of the Blackfoot Park made it a very special motocross place. Bound together by all those acres of central urban land, motocrossers would regularly join the club as kids, then move through the ranks of the sport, all the while calling Blackfoot Park their motocross home. Of course, there is nothing quite like having a close-to-home track to learn and hone one's riding skills, and this large chunk of land dedicated to nothing but motocross has been for many years the glue holding many lifelong friendships together. Open most days of the week, the park was the training facility that bred some of Canada's most successful and famous racers. From the great Ross Pederson to the soon-to-be great Dean Wilson, the course of Canadian motocross history may not have been the same but for this unique piece of dirt and hills.

Good times aside, there was always a thorn nestled in the side of the club's directors and members alike, and that was the inability of the Park to host real races. This pain became particularly acute when the Carbon Valley property

was sold in the mid-90's, and the new buyers decided that the track represented a less desirable use of the land than as pasture for a couple cows. Probably the lowest point in the club's history, Wild Rose became a motocross club with no ability to host motocross races.

## **Wildrose Motocross: The Rebirth of MX**

No one would credit the irony, but it was the police who ultimately caused the transformation of Blackfoot Park back to a motocross-hosting track. The club had been stoically searching for a replacement to the Carbon track, but as Calgary grew, the prospects of establishing a new track in someone's back yard became more remote with each passing year. Then word of broke that Calgary was to host the World Police and Fire Games, a kind of Olympics for police and fire service personnel from around the world. Normally not a big deal to the MX crowd – until it was learned that one of the popular sports at the Games was motocross. A few of the club's best people agreed to work with the organizers to promote the activity, but, like the club, they had trouble finding a suitable location for a track. When the organizers suggested to the City that Blackfoot represented the best place in the area for a motocross race, Wild Rose's fortunes improved immediately. On the basis that Wild Rose could hold limited races in the future, the club agreed to host the MX portion of the Games at Blackfoot Park, and a new era in Alberta motocross was born. The 1997 World Police and Fire Games was a huge success, but more importantly it opened a door for motocross in Calgary that the club has been building on with great relish ever since.

Re-energized by the prospect of hosting sanctioned events in the heart of the City, and with the new and vibrant CMRC reshaping the organizational map for motocross in Canada, Wild Rose moved ahead aggressively with new track designs, new maintenance programs and new facilities aimed at making the motocross racer and spectator even more at home in the Calgary dirt. Impressed with the ability of the Calgary club to fashion a safe yet exciting track out of the Park's hills and dales, Mark Stallybrass soon offered Wild Rose a stop on the new National tour. Few would argue that the cityscape backdrop made for good TV, and few would argue that the central location made the Wild Rose track a perfect spot for riding or watching.

## **Wildrose Motocross Inc.**

Wild Rose Motocross is still run by volunteers, but the demands of members and the expectation of general riders alike have caused the club to become as much a motocross business as a social community drawn by a common interest. Machinery, a labour force, even the cost of water, all factor into creating and managing a budget and balance sheet to rival the complexity of any medium-sized business. That Wild Rose succeeds in managing its operation well is evidenced by the smiles on its members faces and the positive numbers at the bottom of those financials. The Park now features not less than three separate tracks for full-on MX, a mini track, a beginner's track, and an independent BMX facility. The Club has made a grooming commitment to its members, and also promotes occasional evening races, a spring and fall Club series, and hosts other events – like the National – which only make motocross more popular in this neck of the woods.

But don't worry, the only mandate of this operation is to turn all profits back into dirt. With as many as 30,000 rider visits a year, Wild Rose Motocross Park is seeding itself as a piece of the cultural fabric of Calgary. And no one enjoys the cultural activity of churning that dirt more than yours truly.