

WHEELS

Second Woodstock disguised as bike race'

Racers invited to rev engines for three-day Strawberry Fields at Mosport 40 years ago

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Who was the second man to walk on the moon? Who finished second in the Masters? Who's the second greatest goal scorer in NHL history?

Nobody remembers second place, but that doesn't mean it's not a significant achievement.

Whether you call it an outdoor concert, rock festival, love-in or tribal gathering, Woodstock was arguably the greatest and most significant event of its type in history. This weekend marks the 40th anniversary of a similar event that took place at Mosport which, if not for a small group of local motorcycle racers, never might have happened.

The August 1969 festival on Max Yasgur's farm in upstate New York was such a major event that a "second Woodstock" was planned for the following summer. Beatle John Lennon and Yoko Ono were among the early supporters of the Toronto Peace Festival, but the usual bureaucratic dithering and hand-wringing denied the necessary permits.

Promoter John Brower then proposed a venue in Maine (rejected) and Moncton, N.B. (no go). So the event, named Strawberry Fields, ended up at Mosport.

At some point, it was discovered that local bylaws prevented Mosport from hosting concerts of any kind, so the organizers pulled a fast one by staging a motorcycle race with "supplemental entertainment."

Three days' worth.

The musical aspect was publicly downplayed and, in Canada, the event was advertised as The First Annual Strawberry Cup Trophy Race.

Invitations were sent to those



with valid competition licences — we'd get free passes to the concert and a cheque for 50 bucks. Seeing as I was a fuzzy-cheeked teenager making about \$90 a week then, it was an offer I couldn't refuse.

The Strawberry Fields Festival was heavily promoted in the northern U.S. and, in the weeks leading up to the weekend of Aug. 7, it was common to see numerous "long-haired, hippie weirdos" hitchhiking throughout southern Ontario as the Woodstock generation made its way to Mosport. It must have been a major shock to the tight-laced establishment types: hippies and motorcycle racers all in one convenient package.

On what's now Regional Rd. 20, there were police roadblocks, officers searching vehicles for contraband. I pulled up in my '67 Chev van with my race bike in the back and the officer ordered us out, while he conducted a professional investigation. He eyed my shoulder length hair and sideburns down to my jawline, while he rooted through my glovebox.

"What's this?" he asked suspiciously before fumbling open the package and dropping it in the dirt.

Um, that was a \$5, almost-impossible-to-get-in-Canada, racing spark plug.

"And whattaya need those for



TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTOS

Entrants in the Strawberry Fields motorcycle race at Mosport prep their machines for the 'race' that never really happened.

here?" Yep, the crack team of elite professionals was on the job.

At the riders' meeting, our instructions were simple. "Go out, do two slow laps and pull back in the pits. Under no circumstances do we want anybody racing with anyone else."

I've done literally thousands of

laps around Mosport, but those two were, by far, the most interesting, even though I'm sure my top speed never exceeded 70 km/h.

For starters, my bike was a full-on, highly-strung road racer, and it was difficult to keep it running at that slow a speed. And I'd never had to dodge pedestrians at Mosport be-

fore. Some were walking dogs, some were dancing to music only they could hear while others carried guitars and, as I approached Moss Corner, there were four or five people waving at me — stark naked.

What could I do? I waved back.

I did my two laps, fulfilling my requirements for the "race," collected my 50 bucks and the pass to the festival.

The "supplemental entertainment" included major musical acts of the day including Jethro Tull, Crowbar, Jose Feliciano, Melanie, Alice Cooper, Procol Harum, Chicago, Grand Funk Railroad, Sha Na Na, Sly and the Family Stone and Ten Years After.

The stage was set up in a natural amphitheatre in the infield and the smoke from cigarettes, campfires and — ahem — recreational vegetables, hung over the concert area like a wispy blanket.

The lighting guys had a ball with that, with strobes and spotlights penetrating the gloom like so many multi-coloured lighthouses in the fog.

The highlights for me were Chicago's "25 or 6 to 4," Feliciano's version of "Light my Fire," Jethro Tull's entire set and, of course, Ten Years After and Alvin Lee's amazing guitar work during their version of "Going Home."

The final act, Sly and the Family Stone, started at 3 a.m. Monday morning and kept going till the sun came up.

Geez, these days I can barely make the 11 o'clock news — on Saturday nights.

Strawberry Fields may not have garnered the spotlight like Woodstock did, but it was a major event for its time in Canada with estimated attendance figures of 80,000 to 100,000.

I'm kind of proud that I played a minor part in its history.

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