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NATIONAL
QUALIFICATIONS
2007

TUESDAY, 1 MAY

ENGLISH
STANDARD GRADE
General Level
Reading
Text

Read carefully the passage overleaf. It will help if you read it twice. When you have done so, answer the questions. Use the spaces provided in the Question/Answer booklet.

Biker Boys and Girls

There is only one “wall of death” doing the rounds at British fairs today. But a new generation of daredevil riders is intent on keeping the show on (or rather, off) the road.



- 1 Last year Kerri Cameron, aged 19 and a little bored with her job as a horse-riding instructor, was looking up job vacancies on the internet. Puzzled, she turned to her mother and said, “Mum, what’s a wall of death?”
- 2 Her mother, Denise, a health worker who has always had a horror of motorcycles, told her that walls of death were places where people rode motorbikes round the insides of a 20 ft-high wooden drum and tried not to fall off and get killed. “Gosh,” said Kerri, “that sounds fun.”
- 3 She picked up her mobile, phoned the number mentioned on the internet and then arranged to see Ken Fox, owner of the wall of death. Ken Fox didn’t ask about her school qualifications, only if she wanted a ride on the back of his bike around the wall. Yes, she said.
- 4 Ken Fox revved up the demonstration bike and spun it on to the 45-degree wooden apron that bridges the ground and the perpendicular wall and then took it three or four times around the lower bits of the wall itself just to see if she could cope. Then he went round with Kerri sitting on the handlebars. She passed that test, too. She thought it was fantastic. Unbelievable. The best!
- 5 A year later Kerri is doing 20 shows a day, driving a skeletal aluminium go-kart around Ken Fox’s wall of death to within six inches of the safety wire at the top—the wire that’s there to prevent the machines sailing off into the crowd. “It’s much more fun than helping kids on horses,” she says, giggling nervously and brushing a strand of blonde hair back behind her ear. “The only thing I really miss about home is flush toilets.”

- 6 Ken Fox and his wife Julie, their sons, Luke and Alex, and their troupe of Kerri, a new girl rider called Emma Starr, a man who prefers to be known just as Philip, and a wall-of-death enthusiast of an accountant named Neil Calladine, now operate the last wall of death in business in Britain. Calladine is the wall's "spieler", stalking the front of the attraction with a microphone, promising thrills and excitement as Ken and Luke Fox sit on their bikes, creating the roaring throttle noises of impending danger. Later, Luke and his father dip and zig-zag their bikes across each other, spinning round the drum every four seconds, as the holiday crowds peer tentatively down over the safety wire and then, in the traditional way, shower coins into the ring after being told that wall-of-death riders can never get insurance. Each show lasts 20 minutes; at one stage four riders are zipping up, down and all around.
- 7 In the 1930s and 1940s there were almost 30 walls of death at seaside resorts and fairgrounds around the country, often competing side-by-side in fairgrounds; now there are four left. One is in a steam museum in Derbyshire, another is the hobby/toy of a Cornish builder, and a third is owned by a 54-year-old agricultural engineer who "has done everything in motorcycles except ridden a wall of death". That wall's old owner, Graham Cripsey, of the Cripsey fairground family, is coming down from Skegness to teach him how to ride it.
- 8 Only Ken Fox and his band, together with pet dog Freebie, two ferrets and two cockatiels, tour in the traditional way, squelching out of their winter quarters from behind the Cambridgeshire hedgerows just before Easter and heading in convoy for the first of the 6,000 miles they will complete by the end of October. Ken is lucky that Julie can drive one of the trucks, change the 2 ft-high tyres, make sure Alex does his school lessons on his laptop, cook, make sandwiches and dish out the £2 tickets. She, too, loves the travelling life. "When you think I used to be a dental nurse," she says, her eyes misting a little.
- 9 She also helped her husband build his wall of death. "My old wall was wearing out," he says, "so I bought a 200 ft section of very long, very straight, Oregon pine that cost £70,000 (Oregon pine, one of the tallest trees in the world, is used for all walls of death because of the straightness of its grain and the lack of knot in its timber). I got the planks cut in a milling yard. I went to a boatyard where they built submarines. The place was so big we could have built 50 walls of death."

- 10 The motorbikes used for shows are Indian Scouts made in the 1920s by the Hendee Motorcycle Company of Springfield, Massachusetts, deliberately engineered for easy balance with all the controls on the left, so Chicago cops could use their right hands for drawing their revolvers and shooting at Al Capone-style gangsters. This means the bikes are perfect for tricks. Take your hand off the throttle of a modern motorbike and it slips back to idling mode, thus losing the power that keeps the bike on the wall. Take your hand off the throttle of an Indian Scout, and the revs stay as they are—which means that you can zoom round and round the wall of death, arms in the air, to your heart’s content.
- 11 The first wall of death is said by Graham Cripsey to have come to Britain from America in 1928 with others close on its heels. His grandfather, Walter, and father, Roy, trained lions to ride in the sidecars, as did the famous George “Tornado” Smith at Southend’s Kursaal fairground. The Cripseys also developed a technique of being towed round behind the Indian Scouts on roller skates. “If you were competing side by side in a fairground, you always had to have one stunt better than the other,” explains Graham. Smith also kept a skeleton in a sidecar which, with a flick on a control, would suddenly sit bolt upright. And Ricky Abrey, 61, who rode with him as “The Black Baron”, says Tornado perfected a ride where three riders would cut off their engines at the top of the wall and instantly re-start them again, causing the audience to gasp as 2 ft-long flashes of flame escaped the exhaust pipes.
- 12 Fun, then, for all the family. “People still love the wall of death,” says Ken Fox emphatically. “People like what we put on and get good value for it. If they see it once, they always want to see it again. The problem is finding the people to work on it. There are a lot of soft men around.”



- 13 “Wall of death” is, thankfully, a bit of a misnomer, for there have been no fatal accidents on British walls, though whether that’s due to good luck or fear-induced careful preparation is difficult to tell. “I’ve been knocked off by other riders, the engine’s stalled, I’ve had punctures and I’ve hit a safety cable,” says Ken Fox, pointing at his scars. “Everyone gets falls at some time but we try to be spot-on in our preparations. Before every show we spend a complete day trying to get the machines working perfectly.”
- 14 Luke Fox suffered his first bad fall last year, flicking a safety-cable bolt on one of his “dips” as he zig-zagged his bike up and down. He fell 20 ft, got up and started again, even though he’d severely torn his knee. In a sense, he’s got his own good-luck charm. His Indian bike was originally ridden by no less a daredevil than Tornado Smith himself. Luke has also inherited his father’s total dedication to the trade and the Fox family wall looks set to last into the immediate future. Indeed, he and Kerri are now a partnership, sharing the long-haul driving and other things, while young Alex, the ferret-fancier, is raring for his first go at the wall.
- 15 Even Neil Calladine, the spieler, has shed his accountant duties and can indulge his lifelong passion for fairgrounds, though he needs to talk almost non-stop from 2 pm to 10 pm each show day and consumes mountains of throat sweets. “I make sure I go back and see the missus once a month,” he says, “and of course I’m there all winter. I suppose I’m one of those fortunate people whose hobby has become his life. I love the freedom of travel, no nine-to-five, just us and the open road.”
- 16 In that he’s just like Kerri Cameron, bless her daredevil heart.

Adapted from an article
by John Dodd

[*END OF PASSAGE*]