

And then rain stopped play...

By Graham Cooke

Graham Cooke from the Swindon track staff has for several months been keeping a blog detailing the track maintenance team's experiences. It gives a valuable insight into the efforts these volunteers make to allow the rest of us to enjoy our fix of speedway. Of course, the recent bad weather has made their job much harder, as we find out in this extract from the blog. The meeting was the Swindon v Belle Vue clash that was scheduled to take place on Thursday 26th July 2007.



Nothing can compare with the scenes of devastation seen around Gloucester, Tewkesbury, Abingdon, Oxford and other areas hit by the appalling flooding this week. It is difficult to appreciate just how lucky we have been in North Wiltshire when all around has been so badly affected.

That we were even contemplating putting on a speedway meeting was in doubt from the very off set. As I left home in Malmesbury the local BBC weather forecast was full of doom and gloom yet when I arrived at the track Punch, Gerald and Roy were already well ahead with preparations - the weather forecasts they had heard were much more positive than mine.

But the clouds were dark and ominous and, as I gazed out upon the Abbey track and saw the lone figure of Gerald Richter, track curator extraordinaire, walking up the rain sodden back straight, I was reminded of S. T. Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner."

Gerald and Punch had been at the track all day on Wednesday removing several JCB bucket loads of sand from the track, deposited there from the dog track after last week's torrential rainfall. They had then graded the track flat and tyre packed it thoroughly in preparation for the forthcoming weather front and its portents of gloom.

We inflated the air fence and then I hooked up the fence to the safety fence. As I walked round the outside of the safety fence the sheer enormity of the task before us became apparent. All around water was running off the greyhound track sand and gathering against the air fence. Even if we had no more rain there was still an enormous amount of sand laden water just waiting to rush across the track.

Even the pits car park was flooding as Gerald, Punch and I started to fill a trailer with top dressing material (which might be able to dry up the surface later on in the day.)

A sudden shower at 11 o'clock sent us scurrying to the shelter of the staff room. Here we were joined by a soggy Brian Cox, who had been repairing and maintaining the advertising hoardings that adorn the centre green during race night, and Stan, our starting marshall, who was full of the joys of spring, NOT!

By the time that the rain had eased the River Richter was running in full flow down the white line, taking water from all parts of the Abbey circuit to wards turns 1 and 2.

Little, and not so little rivulets, gushed water from the sand in our direction and at one spot the water was actually bubbling up through the shale from behind a kickboard.

But did we despair? Did we moan? Did we feel wet and sodden and cold? Too bloody right we did! The ancient greeks told a story of a character called Sisyphus who, after committing some minor misdemeanour, was sentenced by the Gods to push a stone to the summit of a mountain. No matter how hard he pushed he could never move it far enough up and so was condemned to an eternity of misery and fruitless effort.

Me and you, Sis!

Canceling a sporting meeting, or any sort of event, cannot be taken lightly. There are people's livelihoods to be taken into account. Riders and fans would be coming from all over the country, some riders even flying in, for this meeting. Even though, deep down, we all knew that we were fighting a rearguard and ultimately futile battle, we had to carry on.

Gerald consulted every weather forecasting service available - he wasn't far off holding a seance in an attempt to get some confirmation about what the weather would be like. Terry Russell and Alun Rossiter were similarly anxious to try to get the meeting on if possible.

And so we battled on, each of us literally soaked to the skin.



A bright spell! It wasn't raining! We rushed out to see what could be done. Gerald was sure that if there was to be no more rain then the meeting could go ahead. Punch and I

weren't so sure and Roy was sure that he was either suffering from a dose of Trench Foot or that his toes were webbing, duck style, in the soggy conditions.

A gateway that Punch had dug out - it had filled with sodden sand - was filled again.

As I walked down the back straight I left footprints, Man Friday style, in the shale, the water now bubbling up around my boots.

And then it rained again. At just after two o'clock the heavens opened and all hell fell on the stadium. It took just five minutes, but in that time we watched the water spread across the floor of the staff room.

Out on track, Lake Russell, named after our esteemed owner, burst its banks. The drains could take no more.

While Roy and used a small Honda pump to pump water onto the centre green, Gerald, Punch, Rosco and Olly Allen, who had appeared at lunchtime, brought the water tanker out and we started to try to pump the water away.

As fast as we pumped, more water just gushed down the white line.

Eventually Roy and I had to stop our pumping onto the centre green. It was now so wet and waterlogged that the water was actually running back onto the track!

If it hadn't been so awful it would have been tragic. Quite why we were doing this was beyond us. But the Dunkirk spirit kicked in and we became determined that we would at least clear the standing water.

Roy was now so cold and wet that we sent him home. Shortly after came the news that further heavy rain was expected and the meeting was called off.

But still we splashed and pumped for all we were worth. 12,000 gallons later and all of the water was gone from turns 1 and 2. That water was now forming a swimming pool in the middle of the pits car park.

No doubt some people will be disappointed that the match didn't go ahead.

Some will point the finger of criticism at the track staff for not doing enough.

But as I sit here, slowly thawing and drying, I know we couldn't have done more. The lengths we go to ...

You can read many similarly themed articles on Graham's regularly updated Blunsdon Blog at <http://www.tattingermarsh.co.uk/blog/index.html>

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