

An Interview with Martin Dugard

Alex Raby meets up with Martin Dugard to discuss the famed Eastbourne training programme and how similar schemes could benefit the sport at a national level.



Martin Dugard (© Alex Raby)

The professionalism of modern speedway is undeniable, and with an increasing standard of racing and preparation, one of the most important parts of a rider's career is the training which he undergoes. I was lucky enough to catch up with former Eastbourne captain Martin Dugard, who gave me an insight into the way in which the Eastbourne Speedway Training policy formed and has been carried out, and his personal thoughts on its place in British Speedway.

The official opening of the training track was in 1981, when the track held its first training sessions for people between the ages of six and fourteen. But, as Martin recalls, it began much earlier than that in reality.

"It all started when I was about 6 years old, in about 1975 when I used to go to the track and my brother Paul and myself use to ride around the field and car park on our small motocross bikes.

"As we spent so much time just going around 2 markers my dad [Bob Dugard, former Eastbourne promoter] decided that he would cut a track out and we could use that. Next week the tractor came out and Roy and my dad had a tape measure and rope; they eyed up what they thought was a good place to make a track and that was the start of the track.

"A few hours later and the shape of the track could be seen cut out and soon it would be ready to use. After a lorry load or two of shale from the senior track, that had been

collected during the year, was put on the base of the track and rolled in we were ready to rock and roll."

And rock and roll they did! Martin Dugard went on to become a name synonymous with Eastbourne Speedway and success. As captain he won the 1995 and 2000 league championships, as well as lifting the trophy in the Knockout Cup final in 1997 after a demolition of Poole. On an individual front he made 45 appearances for England and Great Britain, and finished 11th in the world in 1990. He is, however, best known for becoming the first British rider to stand on the top step of the podium in a home Grand Prix, following his Wild Card exploits in the 2000 British Grand Prix.

'The Master of Arlington', as he is affectionately known, would hardly have been able to imagine these possibilities when riding around the track with his brother as a child.

"We spent hours and hours going round and round on the track and a few people who watched us started to get together and wanted to make a club for their children.

"During this time Alan Johns had started to make a small scaled down bikes which we used then more and more people were interested and after a few months the club started to take shape."

The first official match to be held on the track was the schoolboy championship, held in 1983 and won by Martin Dugard himself. Although, as Martin recalls, it was about more than just success at that time.

"The personal memories I have is that I made lots of friends and still keep in touch with them, even years after the training. We all laugh and talk about what happened during our training days, as we all had the same problems; learning how to ride, how to slide the bike, how to fall off the correct way. Everything we learnt during training we carried throughout our racing days. The most important thing was to make sure you could fall off and lay a bike down to make sure you are able to get up and walk away from every crash."

Riders have been bouncing ever since, but still progressing through a very difficult system. Dugard acknowledges that the fact that many riders moved on quickly into the Premier League "would never have happened" without the training that they received. Sponsorship from C.Dugard Machine Tools was important in the creation of a "school of excellence" in 1994, and a grant from Sussex Police in 1999 certainly enthused the organisers.

However, Martin cites the main problem for current British riders rising through the ranks as being the fact that not everybody has that kind of support. Although the Eastbourne facilities have given opportunity to local riders, other countries have a larger system which links closely to their motorcycle federations.

"The biggest problem is that the Polish, Swedish, Danish motorcycle federations have all seen that the up and coming future of speedway in their country is now with the younger generation. Most of the tracks you see abroad have a training track of a training programme for youngsters who want to try speedway. They all run events and competitions for the kids to keep their interest in the sport but the UK does not have

anyone who is really dedicated to take that role and make English speedway a nation to stand on top and become the number one nation again."

The success of the Eastbourne training policy has been proven, with riders like Edward Kennett rising through the ranks. Kennett is, of course, the latest line in a family with a proud speedway history, yet his regular opportunities can have done little harm in helping him to a great start to his career. How many British riders can say that by the age of twenty, they already have had Grand Prix points and an appearance for Great Britain.

Martin sees the strength of Eastbourne's youth policy, but feels that other clubs could take a leaf out of their book in an attempt to move British Speedway away from its current struggling status.

"We are the only club that run training schools, and we seem to be the only club who have a second half which allows the riders to progress the way they have done in the previous years; Lewis Bridger is a good example. Within the next few years we would hope to see that British speedway will step off the bottom rung of the ladder and will be moving its way up with riders who have come from our training track."

Certainly Martin feels that British speedway is still the place to be, but feels that other countries could 'invade' the league if our overall strength is not improved.

"British speedway was, and still is, the cutting edge; that's why all the main speedway is held in the UK and all of the European riders now come to race in the UK."

Bright spots like Kennett and Bridger aside, there have been few to stem the tide of a downward spiral for the British youth which has seen the British World Cup team, for example, slowly drifting away from the top sides. To leave the last word with Martin, the solution is far from simple, and yet it is possible to bridge this gap as he suggests.

"We need English speedway to get a grip and have these training tracks and training schools for the English guys or we will find that there will be no English riders in the top flight due to the fact that we are years behind other countries."

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