

Live "Dead in the Water" Speedway Meeting By Jeff Scott



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Another week, another Sky Sports live broadcast where the rhetoric outruns the reality of what's on display. The presenters are impressed to be at Monmore Green for the first time this season. Kelvin luxuriates in the "triffic atmosphere in the stadium" and Jonathan is chuffed with the "fantastic crowd" huddled together in front of the main grandstand on the home straight. "Belle Vue looking for some pride" opines Kelvin is the best they can come up with to describe the so-called importance of this run-of-the-mill encounter. At least they have Gary 'Havvy' Havelock to add some liveliness and colour to proceedings this week. He's an intelligent commentator and always good value to listen to. Though even Havvy gets infected by the anodyne and relentless boosterism that is the house style at any Sky live speedway meeting - the employee handbook apparently insists upon it for all who cross the Sky portal at any stadium in Europe - he actually has something to say!

Down at the shale surface, we learn from Havvy that the surface is "mint", something he attributes to its preparation by "Alan Bridges" who I assume must be distantly related to track curator Alan 'Doc' Bridgett? In a weekly broadcast riddled with errors and fatuousness, we can easily forgive him the odd unforced error. We learn that the track is 264 metres long and Havvy then adds to the speedway lexicon of the general public when he raises, for the first time I've ever heard it, the concept of the "Karlsson corridor". It's a reference to the favoured inside line that PK has used to great effect to defeat opponents round this track, but, as Havvy rightly notes, "knowing it's there is one thing, using it's another!" This is great insight but, sadly since the Green-Tatum partnership have so little that is original to say, they blunt its interpretative utility by endless repetition throughout the night. If it were a brick they would have worn in into a smooth round pebble within a broadcast. Expect to hear about this every time the cameras go to Wolverhampton in future.

Back at the table with two computers, Kelvin frets about a Belle Vue line up that features "guests everywhere tonight" - in the form of Ben Barker, David Norris and Jason Bunyan - before he sounds like a schoolmaster, "I expect big things of David

this evening". Though this might not be so likely since Havvy tells us later that he's suffering from "man flu". Kelvin consoles himself with the presence in the Belle Vue team of Kevin Doolan who he describes in a way that makes him sound like a lethally sharp knife or vicious dog that might suddenly combust ("he's on fire at the moment - a reserve that's in top form is very dangerous indeed"). Wolves are missing the services of Freddie Lindgren so Kelvin trots out a sports inappropriate analogy, "it's like a team going down to 10 men". Luckily Jonathan is on hand to add some much needed gravitas and insight about Belle Vue, "all these guys riding in the first few heats have got to score points!"

Another person on the broadcast team that inspires strong emotions on the internet forums for his relentless use of cliché and the ineptitude of his descriptions is Tony Millard. I don't find these attributes irritating myself since I view him as the aural equivalent of a distant uncle who's slightly deaf but sadly gone slightly doolally and is, thereby, frequently unintentionally entertaining. He's on fine early form on microphone duty tonight and excited about the meeting ahead, so we learn it's a "Bank Holiday battle and a Bank Holiday" before we're soon thrown into a philosophy lesson, "Joe Screen, like speedway, can always spring surprises!"

Jonathan segues down to the first pits interview of the night with the introduction, "Sarrah Elgan is down in the pits for us". We're not quite told if this week Sky Sports are operating 'Reporter Replacement' for Abi or, like early season impatient and success hungry but parsimonious promoters, they have pre-emptorily sacked her. [Afterwards I learn Abi was the Tony Rickardsson of speedway reporting - in his 2006 Oxford incarnation - brought in to do a job on a short-term contract but ultimately disappointing.] My first impressions are that something has gone very wrong with the recruitment system at Sky since blonde-haired Sarrah actually appears impressive, knowledgeable and to the point in her interviews. You could even claim that we learn something from her contributions. This is probably a bad career move since it will throw the almost looped interjections of other colleagues into a bad light and buck the 'interview-lite' credentials the channel has strived for so long to consistently project in these, admittedly, brief interviews. At one point, David Howe politely struggles ("pardon me?") a bit with the twang of her accent - is it Welsh? - but not the perspicacity of her questions.

Belle Vue surprise the easily excited Jonathan with a competitive start to the meeting, "good job so far by Belle Vue - I'm impressed cos it was never going to be easy was it?" Havvy is equally gobsmacked by the battling resistance shown by the Aces, "some teams just come here and throw in the towel" (this sounds suspiciously like he's rode for some of them?) While the racing is better than the fare served up for the armchair viewer in recent weeks, between races we're treated to the same old, same old as Jonathan and Kelvin rehash exactly what we've just seen in painstakingly banal detail as though they're describing how to split the atom in the style of a daytime cookery programme to someone shockingly slow on the uptake. The laughable technology revolution that is the slow motion reply with arrows and small superimposed faces makes its comeback and Kelvin is back in his presentational element with his gizmo. We learn nothing new but, after a delay that lasts for an eon and gives the sap of rising anticipation time to well up in the viewers, it's delivered with trademark banal simplicity masquerading as profundity. Kelvin ostentatiously stops the slo-mo, awaits the appearance of the arrows and says something along the

lines of, "this is where he overtakes him". A pastiche of this speedway meets children's hour approach could be, if you imagine it overlaid arrows too, "David rides a bike. He wears a crash helmet. Listen to it go brum brum. Close to the fence, David passes the other man in the red helmet. Golly, David has done very well."

In the booth, Havvy has temporarily become possessed and temporarily suddenly thinks he's Jonathan, "I know there's going to be some action in the first corner". While alongside him, Tony Millard bates his critics with a lengthy reading from his handy book of clichés placed next to his microphone. "He's all over Billy Hamill like a rash", "the master of speedway here at Monmore Green", "Screen is doing the chasing and Hamill is doing the winning" and "Hamill who waves to the fans who really love him - Hamill the man the fans love now". Ignoring that the summer of love 2007 style has arrived unseasonably early in Wolverhampton, all these bon mots flood out in little over a lap but fall well short of the all-comers cliché count that Tony can easily set when the wind is behind him and he's truly excited.

No meeting on the telly would be complete without a discussion of the track; except, of course, when the track is dangerously wet and a league meeting has been forced to go ahead because of the presence of the cameras or it's a GP and a one-off track cuts up to nearly unrideable. Kevin Doolan starts the discussions with "it's a little bit choppy" before Kelvin raises himself to his full ex-rider height to give a bit of technical insight, "looking at the base of the track it's quite dry and the surface is quite powdery." Though he often apparently operates with an understanding of the rules not actually in the current rulebook, Kelvin is at his most engaged when discussing the finer points of technical detail. However, Kelv often flounders when asked to stray from the owner's handbook to editorialise during these moments he either re-iterates in painful detail what we've all just seen or, instead, says something in an unemotional, railway station public announcement type manner. "Yeh, I think it was one of the best races I've seen all year to be honest," sounds a few words short of catatonia.

Tony Millard has noticeably cranked up the flow of 'insight', so now tries to talk up even the most predictable of races beforehand. "Can David Norris win this one?" he wonders dramatically as though he was in a run-off for the World championship crown against Jason Crump, Tomas Gollob and Nicki Pedersen rather than a race that has him pitted against William Lawson and Theo Pijper. Havvy isn't prepared to play ball, "yeh, I think he can, he's out against two reserves" [it was three reserves since Doolan is also a reserve for Belle Vue]. A race prediction that is completely wrong since in the actual race Pijper wins so comfortably that Tony Millard responds in the only way he knows how, "the 27-year-old Dutchman really was the flying Dutchman in that one...the Pijper indeed calling the tune!" Kelvin is so impressed that he talks us all back through the race again, albeit merely rehashing what we've all just seen without the hint of any additional insight. Back in the commentary booth, Havvy tries to get excited by the Doolan-Pijper duel in heat 8, "I say it was only for second and third but it was probably the best race of the night."

With the score at 29-19 to Wolves, it's no longer exciting enough of a 'spectacle' for Jonathan, who continues his not-so-subtle guerrilla campaign to force the SCB to alter the 2007 rules in mid-season with his campaign of attrition that involves constant low level grumbling about the level of entertainment denied to him and the armchair

viewers since the recent alteration to/correction of the rider replacement rules. He warms us up with a philosophical rumination, "why is no-one using the 15 metre tactical?" before he shows he's done a modicum of homework when he presses ahead with his killer follow up question, "why would they vote it in, if they're not going to use it?" Thank goodness the SCB can't introduce flogging or the death penalty with Jonathan around. Kelvin senses a perverse conspiracy to dull the sport and incite boredom in the spectators and armchair viewers, "well...only the association can answer that question" (said in a sceptical voice that he reserves for special occasions and the mysteries of the universe). His facial expression is one that manages to mix bewilderment, raised eyebrows and the shocked look of a lottery winner seconds after they've heard the news. With scores now twelve points apart, once he has a presentational trope locked into his brain Jonathan won't let it go, so we're treated to our next instalment of 'Forrest Gump talks speedway with Chancy Gardner' when he asks querulously before heat 10, "you wouldn't go for a double using him [Doolan] now?" Even Kelvin is shocked by the idiocy of this suggestion, particularly since it reveals after five (is it six?) seasons of work as the anchorman presenter, Jonathan effectively still has no real idea or insight about the speedway he visits every week! "Well, I don't think he'd beat PK" is an adroit recovery. Plus, Kelvin equally could have highlighted that Doolan would have struggled off a 15 metre handicap in a race that also featured David Norris and David Howe. Predictably enough, he finishes last though Havvy spots some mechanical gremlins, "sparks from Doolan's bike, I don't know what that's about!" Before the race starts Havvy has simultaneously blown smoke up the arse of Sky Sports management team and, inadvertently, given the game away about the dire quality of the racing fare often served up by Sky in the live meetings they cover, "I thought it was a great rule to keep meetings alive that were dead in the water - I think it's a bit of a backward step to be honest!"

Sadly I taped over the rest of the meeting (with The Apprentice - wouldn't it be great to see Kelvin and Jonathan got to do some tasks on this programme?) so missed the exciting conclusion of the meeting. Perhaps, it will be fondly remembered in the future as the first positive step taken in a long speedway career for Sarra Elgan? Or that Havvy was honest enough to reveal the paucity of entertainment regularly offered up by Sky's weekly coverage of Elite League speedway?

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Jeff Scott is the author of two regularly updated speedway blogs. These feature on the www.methanolpress.com and www.elite-eagles.com websites.

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