

Your Shout: Oxford and the Implications - Part Two

Comments on the closure of Oxford and the future of the sport continue to pour in. Here's the latest batch we've received.



"If you alienate your customers over petty things, it will cost you"

By Keith Butler

I was sorry to hear of Oxford's demise, particularly mid-way through the season. With this starting off a debate on speedway's future & failings, I thought I'd add my two-penneth. I've been a Speedway fan for over 40 years on and off & do not intend this as a knock on the sport, more food for thought.

When my kids were younger, I could take them to watch Coventry relatively economically. As they got to 15 they suddenly became adults price wise. They were too old to be children & too young to get concessions as students. Hence our visits to Brandon as a family diminished. My youngest daughter has consequently lost all interest in Speedway. My eldest however has retained an interest, but as a student now can only afford occasional visits.

So Point 1 - When you've captured the interest of youngsters, don't price them out of attending too soon.

In the 70's attendances were considerably better than today. You could literally take a picnic with you, sit on chairs along the back straight and share your drink, food & humour with all around. Not too long ago I was stopped from taking a small bottle of water into a stadium and told all foodstuffs must be bought on the premises. I used to treat the kids to chips, ice creams, pop etc at the stadium generally. Not anymore.

Point 2 – If you alienate your customers over petty things, it will cost you.

Also in the 70's, at Brandon you could get right up to the pits fence. Get autographs, photos & chat with most of the riders. Some of the riders then would even let kids push their bikes from their car park into the pits area. Nowadays you can hardly get near a rider.

Point 3 – Although things have to change, repartee between the paying public (especially youngsters) and the riders etc produces a feel good factor beneficial to all now and for the future.

I could go on to make numerous more points about admission prices, track condition, general tidiness around stadiums, the effects of technology, TV coverage, programmes, suitable race nights etc etc which, in the interests of not sending everyone to sleep, I'll pass on.

However, I would like to comment on one more thing which I feel is fundamental to the well being of the sport. There is no incentive for any team to be successful. Your reward is to have your team decimated for the next campaign. I acknowledge the good intention of trying to start each season giving all teams an even chance, but when has this ever happened? Do Belle Vue fans believe their team started this season as strong as Swindon? If a team develops riders why should others gain that benefit? If riders want to move or teams decide to change then fair enough, you can legislate to keep a fairer system which acknowledges success.

For instance: all teams should be allowed to keep all their riders for the next season if they wish. If they want, or have, to make changes then any new riders coming into the side must then only bring the team up to a nominated team average. I would like to see it at about 45 to encourage teams to bring better riders in, as opposed to taking riders who are not yet really able to cope at Elite league levels just to keep the average down. Too many teams lack continuity and fans want teams with riders who are associated fully with their team. Not journeymen who they must boo one year, cheer the next and then boo again the year after.

Finally let's remember, that although admission costs are high, all the riders deserve an adequate return for their endeavours. Besides the costs they incur on equipment etc, they are risking their lives every time they take to the track for our entertainment. Not many people would be prepared to do that. I thank them for many years of enjoyment.

"The talent will always emerge"

By Mick Cast

It's doom and gloom, the end of the sport, too many foreigners, too expensive, too fast, too frequent. Okay life as a speedway person, be that promoter, rider, track staff, admin, officials and supporter (particularly the ones who attend meetings), is tough at the moment. To steal the Millwall slogan, 'NO ONE LIKES US', is quite appropriate.

If as much vitriol went into helping put speedway back where it should be, or could be. Everybody seems to be critical of Sky Tv and their coverage, but I can only speak from my own experience, when I had my enthusiasm renewed thanks to their coverage. So it's been back to the terraces on Saturday nights, cheering on Nicki P.

So is it more expensive? Of course it is, I stopped going to live speedway in the 90s before Hackney and Wimbledon closed. Otherwise I do not consider the admission charges to be excessive, particularly when compared to Football and entrance fees to many other places, theme parks for example.

Foreigners, all the time the authorities pay lip service only to the need to bring on fresh new talent, the situation will remain. Although the talent will always emerge

either with or without their help. For example; Chris Harris, Simon Stead, Ed Kennett, Louis Bridger and David Howe. I don't seem to remember any wonderful incentives in the early seventies when riders of the calibre of, Peter Collins, Chris Morton, Dave Jessup, Gordon Kennett, John Davis and many others were coming through as juniors.

So is speedway dying? Of course not, strangely there are lots of people who still go every week to the track of their choice, and cheer for their favourite rider, who don't look at the league tables, and are just happy to see the racing. Have a good night out, and if they win the meeting, it was a very good night. When I see some of the comments expressed within these pages, I wonder are these people real supporters, or just very good at using a keyboard.

"Speedway may get sick from time to time but it'll never actually die"

By Gregor Pattinson

As a former Leicester Lions supporter I feel for the Cheetahs fans. It usually means other local teams benefit in the short term from the demise of a nearby club. Coventry, for example, have always had a healthy following and this is where I get my Speedway fix nowadays (even if it is a bitter pill to swallow).

My six year old son worships at the altar of Chris Harris rather than a latter day Les Collins or John Titman, but I have to live with that. However, even Coventry are subject to rumours that the new stadium owners have only invested in it as a cash cow to be sold to local developers (something they have, perhaps tellingly, emphatically denied).

Speedway has always had peaks and troughs but I suspect capacity attendances at Wembley (now there's a thought) will never be seen again. Sky has helped, no matter how many dissenters may disagree, without it and the exposure it's brought we may be in a far worse state. Whereas we don't want to be reliant on Murdoch's involvement, when Speedway has been covered on the telly it's popularity has always remained fairly constant. Dave Lanning and ITV in the 70s and early 80s looks amateurish in comparison but the man's enthusiasm jumped out and grabbed you. If we could get some decent commentators on Sky instead of the gibbering imbeciles we have currently it might be watchable without the sound off, the camera work is very good after all.

The main problem is Britain is now one big building site and short of getting some sort of listed status on Speedway stadia more tracks may well close. I'd urge everyone to check out the leicesterspeedway.co.uk website. Not only for the magnificent footage of the Collins brothers making Ole and Tommy eat their dust but also to support their campaign to bring back Leicester Speedway.

Sky Sports may come and go but as long as the Leicester Lions supporters and Speedway Plus and their contributors exist, speedway may get sick from time to time but it'll never actually die.

"Keep the punters wanting more"

By Chris Berry

To pay £10-15 to stand in the open in a basic stadium (sometimes worse) is a throwback to the 1970's and football stadiums. With other attractions and draws on money people now look for greater comfort and quality in different areas.

Witness the success of the Grand Prix in the Millennium Stadium - comfort, cleanliness, slick presentation and value for money. The Welsh Football Association discovered something a few years ago when they opened the Millennium Stadium with a game against Finland. Instead of expensive tickets in an inferior stadium resulting in a small crowd, they charged £5.00 per ticket and filled the stadium thus taking more money.

Another thought would be to copy the schedule that football use. Week 1 first team at home, week 2 first team away with academy/conference team at home or no meeting. i.e fewer meetings, develop the youth and keep the punters wanting more. It can be as exciting watching Conference speedway as it is Elite speedway.

"A regional league that ran on a short season"

By Pat Jackson

1. They need to make speedway cheaper to promote.
2. Remember there are more supporters without a team they can easily visit than those that can go to regular track.
3. The above fans would probably be delighted to support a regional league say that ran on a short season every other week.
4. Planning permission for a track that would only stage say 10 meetings per season would probably be easier, portable safety fences and other facilities could be shared between tracks thus reducing costs.
5. In the 1930s and late 1940s speedway on grass / sand / shale etc. was common there was an Anglian league just after the war which ran on such tracks, then some chinless wonder decreed it was not speedway.

Something needs doing PDQ or speedway will be consigned to the dustbin of history!

"Where are the English guys?"

By Graham Bates

The Elite League is poor, why? With the exception of one or two riders where are the English guys? Why do promoters think that we as PAYING spectators want to see six or seven foreigners riding for our team. You only have to look at football to see where it's gone wrong. It's a luxury to buy a high earning foreigner to boost your gate, a

little. But you create a system like you see in the Elite League now. There are clubs that can afford these riders, and clubs who can't.

With lack of funding/sponsorship by big or medium sized business, into the sport, what chance does this sport have.....

Why would a firm think about sponsoring a team with 5 or 6 foreigners in it? They won't. If I wanted to pump money into a club, I would be looking at:

1. Is this club going to get British riders in. The businesses are looking at getting something back for their return. What do they get for it at the moment. Nothing I guess.
2. Sponsors want to be able to find and nurture a new Chris Harris, Scott Nicholls or Edward Kennett, etc.

I know it may not be popular with everybody, but I feel for the sport to claw itself back to past glories, you have to get the public back, and there are so many places now, trying to get their money.

I'm sure if you asked speedway (or Football) fans what they wanted to watch, they would want to get behind British Riders/players, and not want to watch a team of foreigners.

Speedway should look at what has happened in football for the way they have gone, and learn from the mistakes, not try and copy them. I fell maybe a limit should be imposed on foreign riders in a team, about 3, so over half the team is British. I'm sure gates will then go up.

"Teams should be built by common sense and not by 0.10 of a point"

By Bill Reynolds

I've been a speedway supporter since Newport opened in 1964, and I do believe that a return to a British League would be a step forward for British speedway (again), less repetition and more variation. Speedway needs to be run by people who are not promoters, teams should be built by common sense and not by 0.10 of a point (can't sign that rider). Rider control in the 60's wasn't perfect but it was better than what we have today. Please for the sake of speedway, get back to basics, not rules which defy description. If a team is obviously suffering let them strengthen up, help them, sod the averages, let's get racing again!

"Too many 'here today, gone tomorrow' promoters"

By Graeme Selkirk

Oxford were on the way down the minute that joker with his 'Silver machine' nonsense moved in - Colin Horton just made the easy mistake of biting off more than he could chew. The BSPA should make it mandatory for all new promoters to commit to at least five years with a large bond to put their money where their mouth is. There

are far too many 'here today, gone tomorrow' promoters. I notice that clubs like Ipswich (despite their current woes) and Wolverhampton who both have a stable promotion don't seem to be in danger of closing. Reading always came to the tapes when Pat Bliss (the Margaret Thatcher of speedway!) ran the show despite the rollercoaster results of the nineties (top of the elite AND bottom of the premier) but the present incumbents are already making noises about financial shortfalls! Nuff said!"

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