

An Interview With...Lee Dunton

Lee Dunton was team manager of the White City Rebels when they won the 1977 British League title. His father Danny was co-promoter of the club in conjunction with Bob Dugard. Lee now lives in Vietnam but was happy to cast his mind back thirty years to those days in Shepherd's Bush.



White City Rebels 1977
(Lee is on the right)

The team finished in thirteenth position in the table in 1976, and you lost Richard Greer and Dag Lovaas who were your second and third heatleaders over the winter. So what were your honest aspirations for the season ahead?

I was talking to Dag all through the winter months, we had become close friends and our wives also, in '76 we sometimes would all travel to matches together. Unfortunately, and not many people know this, Dag had suffered from a stomach ulcer during the '76 season and his motorcycle business in Holmestrand (Norway) wasn't doing too well without him, so he was in two minds about whether the '77 season would be a good idea, he eventually decided to call it a day in the British League. The management tried to lure a few riders to White City but deals fell through and when it came to the start of the season we were allowed to use Rider Replacement for Dag. Richard wanted away to a smaller track. We were alerted to two Polish riders Marek Cieslak and Andreyz Jurczynski and with Marek a big track specialist we were fairly sure he would cover for Richard, so all in all, we weren't too despondent. We also had lots of youngsters in the wings at our other two National League tracks, Eastbourne and Peterborough, who we knew if we hit problems would fit in admirably.

The team lost Paul Gachet to a broken leg in April. What was the feeling in the camp at that point?

Paul started the season really well, both home and away and he was a great loss to us, as the season before he was flying for Eastbourne. He was very difficult to replace, although at this time winning the league wasn't on our minds.

One of the success stories of the season was Marek Cieslak. He was reputedly signed after an impressive appearance in the World Team Cup at White City the previous season. What are your memories of him?

Marek arrived at White City with his compatriot Andrej Jurczynski in an old Trabant with trailer, how on earth they managed to drive all that way in one piece was a miracle in itself. Marek didn't speak any English and we had an interpreter in the pits at all matches, he was a really laid back person always smiling. He rode really well at White City and the larger tracks, but as he once said through an interpreter, on his first visit to Eastbourne for a practice session, "the car park at my home track in Poland is bigger than this whole stadium". The track, well, I seem to remember the track staff replacing metres and metres of fencing every time he shot through the third and fourth bend safety fence. He always was a 100% trier and by the end of the season had a healthy average.

What was the atmosphere like at White City, given that the stadium had a capacity of 80,000 and crowds seldom reached 5% of that?

When we had matches there, I wasn't really aware during the meeting itself as I was always concentrating on the racing and any tactical moves to be made. However, during the intervals and after matches there were always, it seems, eager supporters wishing everyone well. We had a great away travel club that were always singing in the stands whether we won or lost but on most occasions during that season we won more than lost, so the atmosphere all season was really great. I suppose looking back I would liken it to stadiums I visited just to watch speedway, Hampden Park held 150,000 and had crowds of hundreds. Wembley had a 90,000 capacity and small crowds, people dotted about all over the stadium. At White City the home straight and the pits bend always had lots of supporters and as I was always in this vicinity I didn't really take in what was happening elsewhere in the stadium.

The Rebels' use of Rider Replacement for Dag all season was much criticised – particularly by Ivan Mauger whose Exeter team (not co-incidentally) finished second in the league! How do you react when that criticism is levelled?

We were granted the R/R by the Speedway Control Board and Promoters Association, we, as I said previously, tried to sign other riders, however, at that time there wasn't a surplus of riders available. R/R is not always what it's cracked up to be, get a wet

track, raining, lots of dirt, not all riders want the extra rides or if you only have a couple of riders on form, then you lose out. It worked well for us on most occasions, although it went against us as well.

In May the promoters made it clear that track was losing money and the future was uncertain. Did that ever threaten to unsettle the team?

It didn't unsettle the team, we were just doing the business on track. We knew that the Dugard family were doing all that could be done to ensure that speedway would continue for at least until the end of the season. Without all their and my father's help and efforts, it could not have been achieved. They worked wonders.

Tell us about the night you won at Belle Vue.

It's always difficult to describe your feelings at one match in a season, but in the case of Belle Vue then if any meeting would be remembered it would be this one, especially for me. I had always loved Hyde Road since the days of Peter Craven, Dick Fisher, Bob Duckworth etc. My father rode for them I think it was late 50's or early sixties, and it always was a place that was special. I don't know what it was, just being there whether as spectator or as team manager was always a great evening. I think Belle Vue was always held in such high esteem and many were in awe of the Aces especially at Hyde Road. We went there with expectations as we did everywhere, but not many teams won there with the likes of Peter Collins, Alan Wilkinson, Chris Pusey, Chis Morton etc. The match went well from the start, we held our own. I seem to remember R/R was cancelled out as we had John Titman riding for us, he scored well, the races between PC and Gordon Kennett were great crowd pleasers and Steve Weatherley also weighed in with some great rides. It was a solid team performance, from memory I think we won 40-38 on the old 13 heat format. (If someone can send me a copy of the filled in programme that would be appreciated, I lost mine). After heat 13 both Alan Wilkinson and team manager Eric Boocock came and shook hands and insisted the team take to the track for a victory lap. I remember the crowd giving us a great reception, very sporting. The after match memories are even more hazy, as Eric insisted on a couple of beers to celebrate and I ended up staying the night in a hotel not far from the stadium.

The league was won on the back of an incredible unbeaten sequence of 15 meetings stretching from June 22nd until September 26th. Were you aware of that run at the time and was it a motivating factor to keep it going?

I don't think we really appreciated it at the time, several teams were always in contact with us points wise, so it really was one match at a time. Looking back now, it really was an amazing run, one I don't think there has been since considering the amount of matches that were raced in those days.

Was there a single moment in the season when you first thought “we could win this”?

About heat 10 at the last match, away at Wolverhampton.

The team was led magnificently by Gordon Kennett who scored 524 points. Could you have done it without him?

In a word NO. Gordon had an amazing season, he really was head and shoulders above not only the rest of the team but the so called stars of the league as well. I don't think he really got the credit he deserved. Big tracks, small tracks, he hit double figures everywhere he went, and remember this was from a rider who was ill, he was diabetic, and I think he could have at least had some sponsorship from Mars Bars, as he ate one between every race to keep his energy levels up.

None of his team-mates got within three points of him in the averages, but it was a very solid side. Was that solidity important or would you rather have had another ‘big hitter’ in the side?

It was always nice to have three heat leaders, riders who normally weighed in with 9 / 10 points everywhere, it made it easy for the rest of the team who only needed 10 points or so between the other four and you had a win. However, Gordon was in top form throughout the whole season, but the rest of the team were solid in every department, Marek Cieslak, Steve Weatherley, Trevor Geer, Kai Niemi, Mike Sampson, David Kennett all scored points when required, if one was off form then someone else stepped up and scored high. I think as a team I preferred the solidarity that we had, all too often on our travels away, the "big" boys didn't do so well and their team suffered.

Mike Sampson had an incredible season, winning the league with both White City and Eastbourne. He only raced in 15 league meetings for the Rebels, but how important was his contribution?

Very important, he was renowned for his fast gating, his ability to perform at large and small tracks, he ruined quite a few reputations in the matches he rode in.

The league title was clinched at Wolverhampton on Sunday 16th October. Kai Niemi clinched second place in heat 12 to win the meeting. What do you remember about that moment and the celebrations that followed?

The meeting is a bit of a blur, but I can remember that one of our sponsors - a coach hire company, offered any White City Supporter a free ride to Wolverhampton to

support the team. The whole of his 30 coaches in his fleet were used, and the Wolves had their biggest crowd of the season. At around heat 10, we were almost there, heat 11 almost guaranteed it and as you say, Kai went out and got the two points we needed. At this point the meeting was held up by about 15 minutes as the celebrations went on, the referee in charge being most obliging as were the Wolves management. The after match celebrations went on well into the night. I remember being thrown on the top of someone's shoulders and passed over the crowd to the bar, pandemonium, great celebrations, lots of singing, a great night.

Do you recall that you nearly won the league two days earlier at Bristol? The referee accidentally put the red lights on when your boys were on a 5-1. In the re-run the Bulldogs got a heat advantage and that was enough for them to win the meeting.

No I can't remember that! I can remember the match at Bristol; it was very wet and foggy and the Bristol track surface was sandy, sand and shale, which didn't allow for the water to drain off, and the racing was very hairy scary.

Is there anyone else you'd single out as a key factor in the success?

I wouldn't single out any one person, the team as a whole were always a unit, the promoters Bobby Dugard, the Dugard family and my father, were always behind the team. It was a big family, everyone looked out for one another, there were no favourites. I was given a free hand, and with all the extra rides that had to be taken, the riders were always receptive of the changes. One factor outside of the team, I would say was the tremendous support we had from a hardcore set of supporters, fanatics, who travelled the length and breadth of the country giving their support, always greatly appreciated.

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