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SpeedwayPlus

ISSUE 5 – SUMMER 2006



Ian Adam

DAVID WALSH INTERVIEW

**MIKE BENNETT ON TOUR WITH
THE BRITISH LIONS**

SHOWERED IN SHALE

**CRAVEN &
THE CHADS**

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We're now up to issue five of the magazine and we thank those of you who've downloaded them all so far and offer a warm welcome to anyone joining us for the first time. Back issues are still available to download from the website if you'd like to see our previous editions.

We catch up with David Walsh for our big interview this edition. 'Walshie' was always a big fans' favourite and contributed to league title wins for four different teams. He talks us through his long career and lets us know what he's up to these days.

Mike Bennett looks back on the Great Britian tour of Australia in 1988. Which of the riders ended up in a swimming pool wearing full riding kit? Why were the riders chased out of a shopping mall? The answers are in MB's column.

We also feature an exclusive extract from Jeff Scott's brilliant travelogue - "Showered in Shale". This book has been described as a "printed documentary" and that's an excellent summary of the contents. Jeff pokes his nose into every aspect of British speedway and speaks to many of the most influential figures in the sport. If you love speedway, then you'll love his book.

The ever-entertaining Dave Gifford takes us back to the sixties and the days when he shared a flat with Torbjorn Harryson.

Belle Vue's Kirky Lane and Parken in Denmark feature in our track photography sections. The Manchester venue isn't a patch on the legendary Hyde Road stadium that we featured in a previous edition, but has now built up quite a long speedway history of its own.

Don Maddocks shares his memories of Liverpool Chads and of Peter Craven before he hit the big time.

Dave Green and Chris Seaward are also back with their regular columns.

Enjoy the magazine!

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SpeedwayPlus always welcomes unsolicited contributions.

“ The record books won't show that I crossed the finish line of my last race while bouncing on my head! ”

David Walsh rode for eleven different clubs in a career that lasted eighteen years and saw him capture league medals with Newcastle, Ellesmere Port, Glasgow and Bradford. Walshie took time to talk to us about his career and the crash that brought it all to a sudden end.

Were you a speedway fan when you were growing up, or was your interest solely as a competitor?

I was very much a fan. As a kid my dad took me, along with my brothers, to Halifax speedway regularly – almost every week. I can't remember the first time we went because I was so young, but we grew up watching from the third and fourth bend terraces. I was completely captivated and thrilled by the sport. All my childhood heroes were speedway riders.

What kind of names are you thinking about, who were your big heroes?

It's difficult to pinpoint any individuals from the early years. I don't want to overstate it but riders represented almost God-like figures. I found that just being a speedway rider was enough to transform some very ordinary, down to earth names into those that described super-human daredevils, chariot racers of the twentieth century! The earliest Halifax team that I remember included names like Greg Kentwell, Terry Lee, Eric Boocock, Dave Younghusband and people like that. It was just magical to watch what these people did, and no brakes! As I got a little bit older I followed Ole Olsen's career. He was something of an idol but was then usurped by the emergence of Kenny Carter. A local lad who was an obvious candidate for us to follow. He was great to watch, week in, week out and was very exciting.

You started your own career at Sheffield rather than Halifax, why was that?

For very practical reasons. When I first decided to have a go to see if I could become a speedway rider, Sheffield ran a training school through the winter and I got my very first bike in the October of 1982. The training facilities

that were available at that point were either the little training track at Sheffield or Belle Vue's Hyde Road. There weren't any training facilities at Halifax so I decided that it would be more useful to master the little track at Sheffield rather than the big track at Belle Vue. I never missed that winter, I was there every Saturday and developed quite a good relationship with the Glovers who ran Sheffield. It seemed a natural thing for me to sign for them at the start of the following season.

As well as that, there was another reason why I was happy to sign for someone other than Halifax. I bought my first ever moped from Terry Lee who had a motorcycle shop in Sowerby Bridge. When I bought the bike off him, me and my dad sat for half an hour chatting with him about speedway. He said in the course of the conversation that one of the mistakes he made was to sign for his local team. When things were going well it was great, but speedway's very much a confidence sport and if you have a bad spell then you never hear the last of it, he said. You get people coming up to you and talking about a bad meeting you've had. You can't forget about it and I've found in my own experience that it's very much the case. If you have a really bad meeting or a bad spell then you want to drive away and forget about it. You want to try to build yourself up for the next meeting. Different riders may feel differently, but I bore in mind what Terry Lee said and thought in the long run it may be best to ride somewhere other than my own doorstep. Especially starting off in the sport and more likely to have bad meetings.

Your first break came when you got offered a chance with Glasgow. Riding at Craighead Park must have been a culture shock after Owlerton?

It certainly was. It was a peculiar little track but the culture shock wasn't just down to the stadium! When I got the call to try my hand with second halves at Craighead Park I'd never been to Scotland before. Once I started riding speedway it opened up the whole country, by that I mean Britain of course! I found that all of a sudden I was travelling round to places that were well off the radar previously. Getting the chance to get into the team at Glasgow was a culture shock in all kinds of ways. I found it very difficult initially with the West of Scotland accent and then Craighead Park was a very challenging place to go. It was very advantageous to have the inside gates, but in those days there was a pecking order for gate positions and I remember more often than not having to struggle off gates three and four. I was very glad of getting a chance and really enjoyed my initial spell at Glasgow.

At that time I was fearless to the point of being reckless and it didn't matter which track I rode on. I just gave it everything and I had one or two good moments there at Craighead Park. I broke my wrist riding for Glasgow at Milton Keynes and getting injured then actually did me a lot of good in the long run. I struggled when I came back from the injury and had to start thinking more about what I was doing. That actually tied in with something that Guy Allott, another wise old speedway head, said some time afterwards. It sounds like a peculiar thing to say but he thought injuries, as long as they're not too serious obviously, can do speedway riders a lot of good. You have to start thinking about what you're doing and stop riding as recklessly as you otherwise would. The chance I got at Glasgow constituted the break I needed – no pun intended!

I was in a rush to try and establish myself though. With support from my parents, I decided to give speedway twelve months to see if I had any sort of potential. I certainly did not want to be scratching around in the juniors for years. Getting a chance in the National League so quickly encouraged me to carry on.

Unfortunately, I lost my place in the team following that injury but I was picked up by Newcastle towards the end of the season and I ended up with a rather fortuitous championship medal, which encouraged me further.

The first of many!

As it turned out, yes! It was an interesting first season. I think back to my time at Craighead Park, even though it was quite a difficult venue, with fond memories. I was fortunate to get the chances that I did. I played a very minor role at Newcastle for a month and ended the season on the sidelines with injury again. But I certainly felt very encouraged to continue and was always looking from that point on to see some sort of

improvement as I went along. In the early years, including that first one, I certainly felt that I did make reasonable progress.

The following season you were farmed out again, this time to Berwick, what do you remember of that?

I very much enjoyed it, the small track at Berrington probably suited me as I'd started on the Sheffield training track. I did okay, then again I was very fortunate since I'd ridden in 1983 and had a proper average – just over three I think. Berwick had an unsettled bottom end and they'd signed Phil Kynman who'd just returned from South Africa. He was on a reassessed average below mine, so by bringing me into the team they were able to run Phil Kynman at reserve. It meant that for as long as Phil Kynman's average didn't change I had an extended run in the team. It was very difficult because I was riding at number two, but it gave me a few meetings to familiarise myself with the track. So, I got a little bit of a 'leg-up' there and it worked out great. When Phil Kynman went up into the team I dropped to reserve and started scoring points. I held my place until the end of the season.

It was a good team spirit and I enjoyed going up there. Just like I'd found at Glasgow, the people were very welcoming and that's where my most enduring friendship in speedway began, with Mick who was my mechanic for many years. It was a very fortuitous chance I was given and I managed to use it to make a little bit more progress. When I first started at Sheffield I wanted to be a British League rider immediately, but I was told that it takes years to learn to ride a bike, which indeed it does. The chances I got early on in the National League allowed me to develop relatively rapidly.

In 1985 you moved onto Ellesmere Port and won the league again. Did you appreciate at the time how significant an achievement that actually was?

Not on a personal level. When you win anything in a team, that's exactly what it is, a team effort. We had some great riders in that side, the three heatleaders were fantastic and they obviously played the leading roles in that championship win. I played a supporting role, but again I felt as though I'd improved on my previous season. The difference for me that season was that I learned how to race, rather than just ride the bike. It is a different thing. Sure, there were times when I went away and struggled, but around Ellesmere Port I always felt in control and was racing people rather than just getting around in one piece. It was a significant psychological difference between 1985 and 1984. So, in those terms I was pleased and felt I'd achieved something. The championship win was a team effort and I was

fortunate to be a part of it. I got the call to Ellesmere just before the season started and the team just fell into place. It was a brand new promotion, brand new team and everything clicked. There were some very professional riders there and I felt the benefit of riding with those lads.



Ellesmere Port Gunners 1985

You moved into the British League with Sheffield the following season. Was it a difficult decision to move up, did you have any doubts about it?

Not at the time, because I was in a rush. My ambition, probably somewhat misplaced, was to be a top British League rider. I always regarded junior racing and National League racing as a stepping stone and I couldn't wait to get into the British League. At the time I felt it was completely the right thing to do. The first meeting of '86 was a challenge match at Stoke against Ellesmere and I remember going there and scoring double figures and felt that if I could score double figures in the National League then I should move up immediately. What I didn't want was to fall into a trap, which I think a lot of riders used to do, and stay in the National League too long. To fall into a comfort zone and never really push myself was something I wanted to avoid. However, getting the timing right is pretty important and in retrospect I perhaps moved up too quickly. Obviously, I didn't feel like that at the time and gave everything I had to the British League. I probably didn't appreciate just how difficult it was but I was always looking ahead and moved up with Sheffield with relish.

You moved onto Cradley after that, that must have been exciting?

Of course. I seemed to have embarked upon this journey that seemed to be moving in the right direction. I got a chance to go to Cradley Heath and be part of another successful side. I was riding with and against the very best in the world. It was a terrific experience. Again, very challenging but I obviously did enough in my first year at Cradley to warrant a recall the year after. Unfortunately, my second year at Cradley

was the first year that I didn't really progress. It was difficult at the time to identify what the problem was, but when you look back over your career you see things in a different light. I think there were certain opportunities at Cradley that I wasted, the standout reason was that I was a little bit slow in investing in machinery. I had good standard equipment but was always a bit cautious about investing heavily with tuning and experimentation, especially when I was attempting to get into a position to make my racing support itself on a day-to-day basis. I think there definitely comes a time, especially riding in the top division, when you've just got to throw caution to wind, not only in your riding but also in your financial input as well. I think that's probably one of the things that I let myself down with.

Is that why you dropped down to the National League the following season? Was that a conscious decision on your part or was it forced upon you?

It wasn't so much a conscious decision, but in the second year at Cradley there were times that I struggled badly. I started to question what I was capable of achieving and when Cradley released me I just had to weigh up my options. At the time two National League tracks showed an interest, one was Newcastle and the other was Berwick and more or less because of my previous links with Berwick I thought that I'd be happier, more settled and perhaps more successful going back there. I've got no regrets about that. I think by then I'd established myself as a useful team member and I was just happy to get the chance to continue riding speedway. The high-falutin ambitions I had when I started out had probably been tempered by then.

You'd only been riding for five or six years at that point and it now seems to take riders around ten years to reach the top of the tree. So may you have been premature in drawing those conclusions?

Perhaps so. If ever I felt I hadn't done very well then I always had a tendency to blame myself. Which again is a mistake, I've encountered riders who if they have a bad meeting will blame anything and everything except for themselves. I think that can be construed as arrogance, but actually, it's also a valuable method of maintaining your own sense of confidence. I think when you become a bit too self-critical it automatically has a negative effect on your self-confidence. It's another element of my own make up that affected my career in those early years, those difficult years in the British League.

You were still with Berwick when they went into the First Division. That must have been a season to remember?

Well it was. It was an extraordinary season for Berwick speedway. I don't know for sure, but I suspect that it may have been the financial burden of that season in the first division that led to the eventual closure of Berwick at the end of 1992. I've spoken about that period with numerous people in the Berwick area and everyone that I've spoken to wouldn't change that season in the first division for anything. Even if it did lead to the financial troubles that beset the club the following year. To have first class racing and all those world stars coming to tiny Berrington was just magical. People loved it and it was extraordinary. I loved being involved with it and it gave me the chance to rub shoulders again with the British League stars. It was another challenge, speedway riding always is a challenge, if you have a competitive spirit then you ought to respond to the bigger challenges. It was very enjoyable and we had a good team and were successful. We won the Gold Cup, so speedway-wise it was very worthwhile. I think the audacity of Terry Lindon's move into the first division shocked a few, but it brought a lot of pleasure to people for that season. Thankfully, Mike and Yvette Hope led heroic efforts to resurrect the team a couple of years later and the Bandits live on.

After Berwick, you moved onto Glasgow and whilst there you won back-to-back league and cup doubles. You also probably hit your best ever personal form – would you agree with that?

Undoubtedly. Perhaps not the first season, on a personal level I had a bit of a mixed year but, again, to ride in any successful team is very rewarding. The Glasgow management put together a very strong team in '93 and it was great to be a part of that. We managed to maintain a strong team for the next season and '94 coincided with a change in my own personal life. I moved house to Glasgow and though it's difficult to pinpoint why, I felt a new sense of purpose. Living independently in the city made me more 'hungry for the points' - to borrow a cliché. 1994 was a great year for me, and everybody in the team. For a good while that season, there were three of us on 10 point averages, for most of the year in fact.

Yourself and Crabby (Nigel Crabtree) both performed so well that there were rumours suggesting you enjoyed some kind of mechanical advantage. I take it there's no truth in that?

Absolutely not. I think the rumours you mention were that our engines may have been oversize. I can't speak for Crabby but I just felt my confidence start to soar. The other significant part about my form was that, apart from the second year at Cradley, I've tended to do well generally if I've stayed at a club for more than one year. It does take some time to readjust to

new surroundings and you often need to adjust your machinery to suit conditions. Everything just clicked in 1994 and I was very happy with everything that I was doing. Living in the city was great for me, I was very happy with my machinery and I just managed to raise my performances that little bit more. I also became obsessed with making the start and would set my bikes up solely to achieve that. I managed to keep it going throughout the season, there was no big secret. I suppose it was just about time that I pulled my finger out!



Trophy success with Glasgow Tigers
(Picture by Ian Adam)

The following season saw the introduction of "one big league", the new Premier League and riding against the best in the world you had an eight and a half point average and qualified for the British Final. Was that your best full season?

Again you'd have to say yes. With it being one Premier League it was that bit more challenging and I went into that season very determined again and totally focussed on doing well at speedway. I became very driven and I was made captain that year. Often there doesn't seem to be that much to be done as a speedway captain - unlike, say, a cricket captain, you're not responsible for the team selection or other club administrative matters. There's an old joke

that all a speedway captain has to do is toss the coin, but I took it seriously. I wanted to try and keep some momentum going in the team and that included pushing myself and trying to use that extra responsibility to spur myself on. I managed to remain focussed and thoroughly enjoyed it. When you're entirely happy with your circumstances and enjoying yourself as much as I was, I think it's only natural to do well.



In action for Glasgow in 1994
(Picture by Ian Adam)

I suppose at that period of time I felt as though whatever potential I may have had as a speedway rider, I was beginning to make it count. I was very disappointed with some things. For example, you mentioned the British Final. To find myself, as a former fan on the terraces, riding in the British Final was something a childhood dream come true. Unfortunately, it's no doubt true to say that when it mattered most I was probably still half-asleep! Actually, I did all right in my second British Final but in the other two I struggled badly.

After Glasgow you really became quite nomadic. First of all at Middlesbrough in their last season. Was that an enjoyable season or was it a bit depressing with the impending closure?

It was ultimately depressing. The previous season they'd made changes to the track. It used to have quite long straights and tight corners but they made it a bit wider. It suited me much more and I thoroughly enjoyed riding with Middlesbrough. I always got on very well with Malcolm Wright and felt very much at home there. I would have been more than happy to stay at Middlesbrough for a lot longer, I had no intentions of moving. I was very happy there and I'd had a good enough season in '96 to suggest I could really establish myself there as well, but it was taken away. Those were very unfortunate circumstances, the place closed and that led to something of a nomadic period in my career, which became quite frustrating really. I

was always keen to find a place for myself and put down some roots again, try and establish myself in the same way that I did at Glasgow. A succession of tracks closed down, first of all Glasgow, then Middlesbrough and the year after at Bradford.

Yes, the following season you finally realised your ambition to become a Duke, albeit a Bradford one rather than one of the Halifax variety. Again you ended the season with a league winners medal.

That's right. It did mean something a little bit extra to spend a season riding for the Dukes. It wasn't quite the same for me personally as had it been Halifax but it gave me a lot of pleasure to be at Bradford and have a successful season. My father and grandfather used to watch there in the post-war years, as well as Halifax, of course.

It was a season that was quite mixed really, I missed three months through injury. In separate incidents I broke both scaphoids and had another crash that damaged my shoulder and broke a rib, so I really had a poor season's health. Even so I felt fortunate to get the chance to win the inaugural Elite League championship.

The standard of the Elite League was higher than it is now. You were facing superstars in each race.

The format was incredibly tough. They changed a few things, there were six man teams and to ride in that league as a reserve was so much more difficult than it is now. Of course that was the original intention of setting up the Elite League. They introduced a format to reflect the whole concept, each team was supposed to be the strongest team possible. For a rider like me, in the long run, it was probably just a little bit too difficult and could well explain the injuries, pushing it too hard. It was relentlessly tough and during that season I did suffer something of a crisis of confidence again, but that's the risk you take, it was very challenging. To a certain extent, I felt that winning another team championship as a Duke was compensation enough.

You stuck with the Elite League the following season by moving to Coventry. You only lasted half the year there before you dropped down. Was that a bad move for you in retrospect?

As I remember it, I don't think I had much choice. As I recall my options at the beginning of 1998 were very limited and I only got the call from Coventry when Shane Bowes decided to stay at home in Australia. I was happy to take the opportunity and fill that gap. I did struggle, it wasn't the best move that I made. It was frustrating in the end as that season I did make

the effort to try and spend my way out of the rut I'd got myself into. I bought a brand new GM, it was the first short stroke that I'd ever had and I thought it would put me in good stead. I struggled on it and the old tendency was to blame myself and my head just went down. It wasn't until the end of that season, during the winter, that I did some more experimentation with the engine and realised, far too late obviously, that it had the wrong camshaft in it. I changed the camshaft and straight away it felt like a different bike. If I'd have realised that when I was still at Coventry I might have done enough to avoid getting dropped. I was wise after the event, it may sound peculiar to people to admit that, after so many years experience in the sport, I was unable to sort out my machinery problems when it mattered. Sometimes things get a bit confusing and in the end I didn't give myself a chance at Coventry with the mistakes I made with machinery.

It was still a very difficult league, though, but ultimately you'd have to conclude that I was perhaps a little bit out my depth. Having the right machinery would have been a start, I messed up badly with Coventry and had to re-establish myself. I saw the rest of the season out at Berwick and didn't pull up any trees really. I was just trying to salvage what I could from a very poor season. The season after I'd made the changes to the GM that I'd bought and I had a much better year at Newcastle. I always felt frustrated that I hadn't been one step ahead of the game at Coventry, it was a low point, definitely.



David the Diamond
(Picture by Ian Adam)

After Newcastle you moved onto another club – Stoke. What prompted the move to Stoke?

Again I wasn't really sure that I had much choice. I changed track so many times that I can't recall the exact circumstances but I believe that Newcastle made their team plans without me so I had to look for a new club. Stoke were looking for riders and I managed to get my chance there. I started off very indifferently and it took me a few weeks to readjust to the conditions at Stoke. It was being used as a stockcar track at that time and I found track conditions at times difficult for me. It was certainly a lot heavier than Newcastle, that tended to be on the slick side. It took me a few weeks to adjust, that included making changes to the bikes in order to cope with the conditions. I ended up with a half-decent run at Stoke and quite enjoyed my time there.

You mentioned that the points limit worked in your favour in your early days at Berwick. Later in your career it probably worked against you, so it's something of a double-edged sword for riders.

It is. Opportunities for a team place often come down to decimal points on your average rather than merit. It can work for or against you in any position in a team unless you're an out-and-out number one, then you're the first name on the teamsheet. You just have to remain philosophical about these things and make the best of the options that arise. That's all you can do. Circumstances being what they were, took me to the tracks they did. Actually I was very busy at Stoke as I got a lot of guest bookings that season, Swindon used me a lot as Frank Smart was banned at that time. I felt I had a really good season in the end but the way you start off can often cast the die for how people relate to you in the coming months. I had a slow start but there were reasons for that. It was mainly due to having to readjust and adapt to new track conditions and routines. Speedway riders can get into a routine and do things by habit, by repetition, doing certain things off certain gates. When you spend a few years at the same track these routines work their way into your whole approach to the sport and you can make them work for you. It can become easier if you prepare yourself in a certain way on racedays. This is something that takes time and, to a certain extent, I suffered from not having the chance to put down some roots in the last few years of my career.

You were on the move again and reunited with Malcolm Wright in 2001 when you moved to Hull. Was that through the connection with Malcolm, did he own your contract at that point?

Yes, from '96 I was always loaned out from the old Middlesbrough promotion. It was the first year for quite a while that I felt that the team I rode for planned to have me in the team. In fact, if I recall rightly, Hull dropped down into the second division at the start of 2000. Malcolm wanted me to go to Hull then but I'd already agreed to ride for Stoke. It was always likely, being a Hull asset, that Malcolm would use me in 2001, it was a natural move to make. During the course of 2000 I'd had some really good meetings at Hull so I was looking forward to going there. During the winter Malcolm had intimated that I was part of his plans so I felt quite boosted by that.

Your career came to a sudden end on the 5th of September 2001 when you suffered back injuries in a crash at Craven Park. What do you remember of the accident itself?

It was something that could happen anytime. No one was at fault, I was racing Jan Andersen for second place and Jan's bike packed up coming off the last bend. I was right behind him and tried to swerve to miss his back wheel but I caught his elbow going past and it pushed me into the wire fencing. Once I'd touched the fence the bike just stopped dead and I went over the top, it was a big mess. I think I broke my back by hitting my head on the top of the fence. The front of my crash helmet had completely collapsed. Initially, Jan hadn't come off, but the impact with the fence snapped my handlebars which severed the cut-out wires and ripped my throttle cable out. My bike just revved up again and careered into Jan and wiped him out as well. It was a sudden end but you take your chances. I always had a bit of a cavalier attitude to injuries, I think you have to when you're a speedway rider. I was always very wary of back and head injuries but anything else I viewed as an occupational hazard. That was the big one though, and it kind of put me off!

I'm not surprised! Did you ever think about a comeback or were you definitely finished from that point onwards?

I'll probably be thinking of coming back when I'm seventy years old! I'm not sure it's something you ever get fully out of your system. It may be different depending upon the circumstances under which you finish. I've spoken to other riders who retired because they

got sick of all the travelling and cleaning or were struggling to score points at the end of their career. But when your career ends before you're ready to stop, that's quite different. It no doubt depends on the individual, but I certainly found it very difficult to readjust to life without speedway. In my case I have to remember how lucky I was, though. You could say I was unlucky to have had the crash but under the circumstances very lucky for it not to be more serious.

Looking further on the bright side, I don't think there are many speedway riders who finish their careers on a paid maximum, which is something, at least. Fortunately, the record books won't show that I crossed the finish line of my last race while bouncing on my head! That aside, one of the most notable things about the crash was that it ended the careers of two riders. I haven't seen Jan Andersen for a few years now but I wish him well.

Do you think you still might have been riding if it hadn't been for the accident?

I'm not sure. Although I wasn't ready to finish, I was already thinking about what I was going to do afterwards. It seems to me that as soon as a rider reaches thirty years plus, the questions start to come on when you're planning to retire! That sort of thing does tend to make you start to wonder just how long you can go on for. Prior to the accident I'd started to pursue this other interest that I have in studying which began when I lived in Glasgow, actually. I'd already put myself in line for a place on a degree course but I did intend to defer it and keep my options open. In the end having the crash made my mind up for me with regards speedway. I still wasn't sure for a while whether I should pursue the opportunity to start a degree in earnest and I did actually defer it until I decided it was the right thing to do. I've just completed the third year of an American and Canadian studies programme and I'm committed to the course. Hopefully when I'm finished it will lead to some other opportunities, though I'm not exactly sure what those would be at this stage. Whatever, it's certainly an interesting time to be studying that particular subject.

Do you still keep in touch with speedway?

I still keep in touch, yes, though I haven't been around to go to any speedway this past year as I've been in Canada. I did actually go to Sheffield for the first time last night. I don't go to that many speedway meetings but I check the live updates page for the results. A lot of my time is devoted elsewhere for now.



PRAISE FOR PROMOTERS

Dave Green pays tribute to all those who provide us with our regular fix of track action.

I remember exactly when it happened - it was on the M6 motorway as I headed home from a night's speedway 'oop north'. I suddenly realised that for many years I'd been quite, quite, one hundred percent, totally wrong.

I've never been one to be impressed with anything less than the exceptional. I recognise quality and ability in all spheres of life, but when it comes to the mediocre or downright poor I've always been quick to criticise. The way a speedway promotion operates has always been something I've judged and commented on. I've long admired the work done by Tony Mole, Matt Ford and certain others - there are a number of highly professional operators involved in speedway promotion these days. What I'd failed to appreciate was that many of the promotions that I'd considered to be merely adequate or even poor were actually all worthy of great praise.

Think about it - how many hours a week must promoters spend to provide ungrateful sods like me with an evening's entertainment? They prepare tracks, print programmes, co-ordinate staff, fret about the weather and then open the gates to a disappointing attendance that, all too frequently, falls below their breakeven point. Then they do it all again the next week, and the week after that, and the week after that.

I'd always assumed that promoting a speedway track was a job that any reasonably intelligent individual could perform. Whenever I spend my (imaginary) lottery winnings - I'm operating a successful track in a modern stadium and chatting cosily with the great and the good of the speedway world. It's probably a dream that many of you have shared and that some of you may even go on to experience for real. It all sounds

fantastic, though there is a fundamental flaw in the plan - me.

What my new found wealth won't give me is the dedication, work ethic and commitment required to actually fulfill this fantasy. Could I really go through the ups and downs that these guys must experience? How would I feel when my stadium is full to capacity and the heavens open up? How would I cope if my incident recorder phoned at 7.25pm to say he couldn't make tonight's meeting?

In my heart of hearts I know that I couldn't handle that kind of pressure or stress. When my numbers do come up I'll have to adopt a different strategy. I'll still have a speedway track, that's non-negotiable, but I'll get someone in to run it for me. Eric Boocock would be my preferred candidate - he should stand-by for my phone call, just as soon as those six numbers are pulled out.

It's all too easy to criticise promoters, particularly after their annual jaunt when they spend too long in the sun and dream up ridiculous new rules. And there's the rub - most of the criticisms that I and others make actually relate to rules and regulations. Perhaps the people with the qualities necessary to promote a speedway track are not necessarily those with the qualities required of legislators?

I've certainly found a new respect for promoters in recent weeks. I watch them closely and notice that standing around chatting isn't often on the agenda, there's always some task requiring attention or some query to be resolved. This is in addition to the many hours that go in before and after each week's meeting. They must be a special breed and they must love speedway.

Speedway promoters - I salute you all!

HARRY THE SWEDE

Dave Gifford recalls the time he spent with Torbjorn Harrysson in the sixties. It seems that Harry wasn't one to waste time in the workshop – a bucket of water was all he needed to get his bike into tip-top shape!

It's a given fact that the Swedes are not noted for their sense of humour. If you think I'm wrong just name one Swedish comedy act, apart from ABBA. See what I mean, there aren't any. Gee, I hope Bob Ferry isn't an ABBA fan! There are always exceptions to every rule though and in this case the exception is one Torbjorn Harrysson who came over to Britain to ride for Newport about 1967 or 68. The stylish Gote Nordin who had been the favourite with the Newport faithful had retired and in an inspired move Mike Parker brought Harry over from the frozen Tundra to ride in the British League. Mike, with his usual organizing brilliance, dumped him on our doorstep in Manchester when he first arrived and asked my wife and I to "look after him till he gets settled" and before I could bring up the question of "who's paying?" Mike was gone and we found ourselves with a Swedish lodger.



Torbjorn Harrysson

To put it mildly Harry's English was not good, but it never stopped him from talking even if he was the only one listening and he laughed a lot which made him good company. A few days after he arrived I received word from Briggo that my new Jawa was ready to be picked up from Southampton and so I rushed south to pick up my first new bike, three hundred quid for the bike and an extra three quid if you want a manual, Briggo was all heart and a true Kiwi!

Now, in those days we lived in a semi detached house owned by promoter Mike Parker on Upper Chorlton Road. The house was made into four flats, Ivan and his family had the flat above ours and next door were Graham Coombes and his family and for a time Gordon Guasco and his wife were also there. Mike Parker had his offices about six houses further up the road where Goog Allen had a flat and at the back of the building Mike had four or five lockups built for us to use as workshops although Goog and Ivan had their workshops in the basement beneath the building. So when I returned with the new Jawa I was about to wheel it down to the workshop when Harry insisted that we take into the house and put it in the kitchen so we could stare at it while we had our evening meal. Following the meal Harry took the bike into the living room so we could polish all the shiny bits and do a bit of imaginary cornering around an old apple box that served as a coffee table. Ah, such simple pleasures, and such simple minds too!

I think Harry had one of the lock up garages behind Mike Parker's offices but to be honest I'm not sure. You see Harry had never been told that you had to work on the bikes to keep them going properly and accordingly never did any maintenance at all. He would drive his old Merc diesel into the yard with his bike on the rack and get three buckets off the back seat which he would then fill with water. Then with as much theatrical aplomb as he could muster he would empty the buckets over the bike, "one for Ivan, one for Ole and one for Geefy," and that was all the maintenance he ever did.

Actually Ivan couldn't figure Harry out and Ole, who used one of the lockups, didn't like him as he disliked all the Swedes, they always gave him a hard time when he had to race in Sweden in a time when he was the only Danish rider of note. I remember one time when Harry actually took

the bike off the rack to clean it and used soap powder too, I was impressed. "Phoo," I said "This looks a bit serious Harry, is it your birthday or something?" "No" he replied "Tonight we race against Swindon and I must be beating the blutty Bricko so I do all this extra tuning to make sure." It must be said that Harry did have a bundle of natural talent and like all shortish riders was good to watch on a bike. I don't know if he thumped Briggo that night but if memory serves he did down the great man a couple of times at Newport in his short British career.

I remember one time he came round to the house with his head all covered in cuts and bruises which I took to be the result of a track accident but the cause was far more sinister.



Harry and Ove

Ove Fundin was riding for the Zoo at that time and he and Harry had gone into town for a quiet drink or two and after a pretty good session Harry had taken Ove home but on the way to his own place he had decided it might be best to park and sleep off the effects of the night. Of course the plod had to arrive on the scene and charge Harry with being drunk in charge of a parked car which didn't go down to well with my little Swedish mate so he told them what he thought of them in no uncertain terms and then they responded by beating the crap out of him and chucking him in a cell for the night. Where were these wonderful English Boppies he'd heard so much about, he wanted to know.

Harry qualified as Newport's representative at the League Riders Final at Belle Vue, the meeting that Briggo just about owned in those days, and he was worried that his motor

wouldn't be quick enough to compete so he asked if he could borrow a motor off me for the night. That makes it sound like I had a bench covered in spare motors but I didn't, most of us only had the one bike in those days and even one spare motor was a rare luxury that very few riders had. So I pulled the motor out of my bike and gave it to him and he came up with a novel way of payment for the use of it. "Geefy" he said "before I give my bike back to Mike Parker you can take all the good bits off it and put all your old worn out yunk on it".

Mike had given him a new bike at the start of the season as part of his deal but he had to return it at the end of the season and his offer seemed reasonable so I agreed. After the Riders Final he came round to my workshop with the bike and said rather grandly "help yourself Geef, all the good bits are yours". Well I looked at the bike all over for about five minutes and I finally asked him "which bits do you think are the good ones Harry?". I could see his feelings were hurt but the bike was really in a dreadful state. "Look mate," I said "even my yunk is better than anything on your bike but don't worry you've had the loan of the motor for nothing." He did exactly the same thing the following year and I ended up getting paid exactly the same. I really was a slow learner.



Harry in action for Newport

Unfortunately Harry joined that long list of talented riders who were forced to quit after receiving severe injuries and I never saw him after 1970 which was a great shame, speedway lost a fine rider and I lost a Swedish mate with a sense of humour. Harry was a neat Swede!

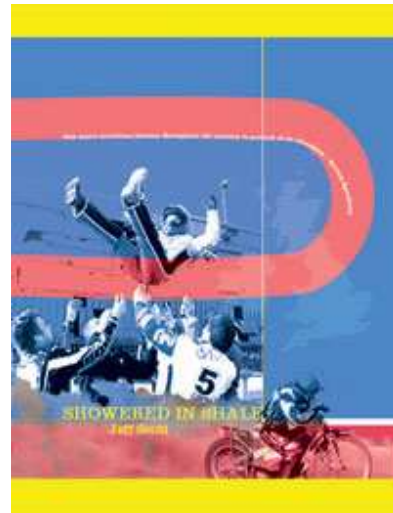
SHOWERED IN SHALE

Jeff Scott spent the 2005 season visiting 30 tracks around the UK. Along the way he met promoters, riders, fans and many unsung members of the track staff. These encounters and conversations form the basis of this most entertaining read. This extract comes from Chapter 11 of the book - "An Evening with Ronnie Russell in Thurrock".

The man at the gate is affable and helpful, he calls ahead on the phone and I hear him say "that writer's here for Ronnie". I have arrived early, as previously arranged, to meet the enthusiastic, down-to-earth promoter and team manager Ronnie Russell. From the pages of the Speedway Star as well as from his voluble appearances on the live televised meetings shown on Sky Sports, you just know that Ronnie is an enthusiast for all things Arena Essex. You also just know that he's patriotically English too! He can certainly talk for Britain and tirelessly promotes the forthcoming meetings at the stadium at every opportunity. RR cuts a strikingly distinctive figure. He looks most like a middle-aged version, albeit much slimmer, of a now forgotten lead singer from 1980s ska band Bad Manners – Buster Bloodvessel. Though I'm pretty sure Buster has never entered Ronnie's consciousness or served as any sort of role model for him. Especially when you consider that RR is always smartly dressed whenever you see him on TV (and later tonight) in that collared, well-ironed blue shirt worn in a way that cries out to you with a, 'I grew up when there was still National Service' attitude much more than I'm just off to bowls.

Strangely for a compulsive and capable self-publicist, during the slow-news period winter months of the close season Ronnie has spectacularly managed to embroil himself in a heated debate he can't possibly win, or recover from, with any glory. This has been played out in the most public of all forums within the sport, the letters and news pages of the Speedway Star or, less visibly, on the Internet forums. The dispute centred upon his intention to increase future admission charges for old age pensioners. Given that the popularity of speedway has severely declined from the pomp of its heyday, OAPs remain the backbone of the sport as we know it and, morbidly worryingly for the immediate future, will continue to be the largest age group from which the future lifeblood of the sport will be drawn. Ronnie has tried to justify this rather alienating proposal in a number of unsatisfactory ways. The central plank of his justification concerned the supposed systematic abuse by pensioners of the concession system of

reduced entry fees, through a failure to provide proper documentation or, he implied, the use of forged documents. Maybe this concern with entitlement and correct paperwork is another manifestation of the National Service training thing again? Another spurious justification for this decision that Ronnie tried to advance was to claim a general intention throughout the sport to raise prices for pensioners through the abolition of concession entry fees, despite the subsequent conspicuous failure by any other promoters to implement these ill-conceived plans. The final and most tenuous excuse trotted out by RR was the complete failure of the old codgers to realise that increases in inflation and the cost of living generally would affect speedway in line with all other goods and services.



The whole situation became needlessly complicated and was undoubtedly a public relations disaster, no matter how tortuously Ronnie tried to explain or justify his stance on price increases. In a bizarre and rather delightful statement, Ronnie tried to run with a version of the economic facts of life that combined a variation of Harold Wilson's 'pound in your pocket' speech with a very complicated parable

that involved OAPs at the supermarket checkout who still continued to do their weekly shop and bought food they needed to live on, even when prices went up dramatically! With a lot less hullabaloo than its initial suggestion, all his plans were suddenly dropped with some vague reference to Ronnie having been seriously misled by other promoters about their intentions.

The heat of the day scorches as I pass the main entrance way and grandstand while the racetrack bakes in the sunshine. There's quite a display of flagpoles with a nice patriotic array of Union flags, St George's flags and some of the chequered variety they wave at the Formula 1 drivers on the finish line. When it's not a speedway night, the stadium is mainly used for banger racing. First stop in my search to locate RR is the well-used and slightly tatty portacabin that forms the private office cum inner sanctum and nerve centre of operations on race night. Ronnie is the tenant and not the landlord at the Arena Essex Raceway, so the pervasive attitude appears to be very much make do and mend. Like the cupboard at Old Mother Hubbard's, the office is bare as RR is to be found down at the pits, where he chats amiably with Eastbourne's Adam Shields while he fastidiously cleans his bike. It's a work night and, although there are many hours to go before the meeting starts, Ronnie only has a "quick 10 minutes" to spare.

If you forget that we're geographically situated outside the unofficial border that is the M25, as soon as Ronnie opens his mouth you just know that really you're in London, the East End of London to be precise, most likely within the audible sound of Bow bells. Ronnie is charming, affable and helpful. He's infectiously enthusiastic about the sport and the riders. If time permitted, he could talk endlessly about his philosophy and opinions or recount many stories he's gained through years of involvement with speedway. Ronnie is at pains to stress that it's been an experience lived from both sides of the fence, both as a spectator and as a promoter. I'm enjoyably swept along on a tide of reminiscence, insight and opinion for nearly an hour. We're only fleetingly interrupted by a "quick word" with Paul Hurry about possible fixture clashes between his European long-track racing commitments and Arena Essex speedway fixtures ("lovely bloke. You should see his arm it would really horrify you"). Or by a "quick call" much later from Eve, his "lady wife" (RR speaks about many things with an old-fashioned manner), who punctures his reverie enough to remind him that it's race night and time for him to bustle off energetically to get on with tonight's "Showtime" once more. And "Showtime", I soon realise, when I watch him bounce about everywhere later that night as well as from the level of genuine excitement he generates during our conversation, is something

that RR relishes and excels at. This evening's contest with the local rivals the Eastbourne Eagles is also yet another chance to go head to head with his more successful elder brother Terry, rival promoter of both Swindon and Eastbourne among his many other connections to speedway in this country. RR's tremendous respect for "my brother Terry" frequently peppers his stories and conversation.

For this evening's encounter, RR has rather excitingly managed to sign the current World Champion Jason Crump as a replacement number 1 for the absent Mark Loram. Mark was sadly injured, at the start of the season at Eastbourne, in a freak low-speed accident. Now he has secured the coup of a gifted guest rider like Jason Crump, Ronnie has an extra spring in his step and additional jauntiness to his demeanour.

The natural showman and promoter in him kicks in, buoyed up by the thought of all the extra Arena fans that might flood back through the turnstiles tonight excited at the prospect to watch Crump ride for Arena. Though it will be a delight still strongly tinged with sadness at what might have been, if only Mark hadn't had the misfortune to get so badly injured early in the season.

The injury has been a personal catastrophe for Mark, which has been compounded for the club by their continued failure to regularly find adequate temporary replacements. Well, to Ronnie's joy they did have an amazing temporary replacement in the form of Tony Rickardsson for a short while – "amazing", "what a rider", "what a professional" – who excelled in the Hammers' colours and managed to excite the often difficult-to-please home crowd. Ultimately (and very sadly for British speedway) Tony treated these rides as an extended chance to gain some early season practice, sharpen his consummate skills, perfect his bike set ups and achieve some additional match fitness for his forthcoming Grand Prix campaign and his tireless pursuit of the record six wins, held by Ivan Mauger. Uncontroversially Ronnie believes, "he's the best rider of his time, that's all you can ever say. You can't really compare, there have been so many greats – the legendary Ivan Mauger, the great Hans Nielsen and so on – they were the ultimate for their time, it's as far as you can say". According to RR, all these truly great riders have key qualities that helped them stand out from the rest – the ability, the mental energy and focus, the professionalism, the killer instinct that prevents them from being as easily beaten as some other riders – "your number 1 is different from the rest of the team, they're so special!" Since then he has spent endless hours on his mobile phone in a fruitless search for suitable alternative replacements. So much time that, at one stage, the mobile company blocked

his phone because they thought it had been stolen, in light of the sudden high volume of overseas calls. Despite the best but inadequate efforts of the various guests Ronnie did secure, no one has managed to step into Mark's vacant steel shoe and his absence has badly affected results on the track. The frustration of his search for Mark's adequate replacement, in combination with the poor results and the dwindling crowds has so far made it the "worst season ever" for Ronnie as the promoter of Arena Essex speedway.

However, Ronnie is an indomitable type since he has been around the promotion game for quite a while now. Well, since 1982 give or take a few years when he had a sabbatical, which he found "very hard as it had been my total life", before he finally returned to speedway again with Arena in 2000. Her indoors, Eve, claims he's like a "drug addict", always on the lookout for his next fix. Never mind all the time and money he's "poured into it" over the years. RR has been that way about speedway ever since it got into his blood when he first went to see a meeting with his Dad. This was in Bow, East London, and the visitors were the Poole Pirates. The thrill of the sport caught his childish imagination, mostly due to the innate glamour and resonance of the striking image of the skull and crossbones on the race bibs of the Poole team. Ronnie was also fascinated with the spectacle of people who rode sideways at speed. After that he was hooked, though his formal involvement only started in 1963 when, after he'd endeared himself to the local track staff, which enabled him to start in the sport as "a pusher-outer". Since then it's been a glittering career in speedway promotion, often with his brother, which has taken in various tracks and includes spells at Crayford, Rye House and Arena. Where he finds himself now is very much where he wants to be. Arena Essex is the place he's laid his hat and therefore it's very much his home.



Ronnie Russell
(Picture by Jeff Scott)

Since the turn of the 21st century, under his command, it's been drive and ambition all the way for the Arena Essex team. The first thing RR did was to purchase an inflatable air fence and thereby put his track ahead of the curve when it came to this aspect of rider safety. It was a decision that resulted in a reduction in his insurance premiums as the team immediately plummeted from top to bottom of the most unwanted title in the sport – the Race Crashes league rankings compiled on a yearly basis by the insurers. "Without disrespecting the teams in the Premier League, which is very difficult, like the first division nowadays in football", Ronnie only ever had eyes for the main prize to finally see Arena ride in the Elite League. He's never looked back though he admits he misses the "good crack together" that you'd have as a team of riders and mechanics during a three- or four-day "Northern Tour". However in the highest division, where Arena now find themselves, you no longer get that kind of tour experience or camaraderie. The modern-day reality is that the top riders work throughout Europe and fly here, there and everywhere. So it's likely that any Elite League team squad will only be together on the nights that they actually have a fixture.

Although the Elite League is "more professional in terms of equipment and attitude" it has resulted in a couple of very tough years financially for the Arena promotion, particularly since they stepped up a division. However, the dynamics of the modern version of the sport has changed and one of the most positive, in Ronnie's forceful view, is the coverage by Sky Sports, "the most fantastic thing to happen to speedway in many years". This, as if his acknowledged speedway habit and desire to succeed meant that he needed any further evidence, was a key factor in the move up in leagues from the Premier to the Elite League for Arena Essex. It's been a decision that has helped significantly increase the interest from and level of payments received from the club's sponsors. For example, the air fence adverts and sponsorship raised £80,000 in 2004 in the Elite League compared with only £11,700 raised without the air fence in the Premier League the previous year.

According to Ronnie, the sport has always attracted a very broad crosssection of society as spectators, riders, referees and it's the same with the sponsors. People watch the sport on the telly and it ignites a latent or previous interest which often means that they then decide that they want to be part of it again. That's what RR sincerely believes but also continues to hope. The medium of television is so powerful that Ronnie marvels that he was recently recognised as "Essex" when he was on holiday at Paignton in Devon. Never one to let the grass grow under his feet, he's recently attracted a firm of city stockbrokers to possibly take an interest in

Arena and has ambitious plans to exploit the interest potential of 23,000 West Ham United season ticket holders (and thereby attract one group of "Hammers" fans to support another local "Hammers" team). Ronnie indicates that he could even get one of the buses he already runs locally to Arena fixtures every week, if it transpired that transport (or alcohol consumption) was a problem for newly interested fans to get to Thurrock from the East End.

Not that RR paints a rosy picture of the precarious finances of the average rider or promoter. After he's slipped a metaphorical onion casually from his pocket, Ronnie bemoans the uniquely shocking financial structure of the sport with regards to the distribution of profits from the Labour and Capital employed. It's a situation where the traditional relationship of the 'Wages of Labour' to the 'Profit of Capital', eloquently described by Marx in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, has become inverted. The net result is that "so much of your money is given to your employees". Marx might have provided some great analysis, but he has absolutely nothing to say when it comes to what RR describes as the "unaffordable bit of the cake" which the riders then inevitably fritter away, "all their money goes on engine tuners and equipment" while they perpetually search for that magic vital but elusive ingredient required for instant success. Like the revolutionary but often useless equipment bought by obsessed club golfers in the hope of improved performance; it's a mostly fruitless quest for perfection that is invariably and pathologically shared by speedway riders everywhere. They optimistically and continually try to distinguish themselves from their rivals through obsessive tinkering with their equipment in the attempt to ensure their bikes go just that little bit faster.

It's enough to drive a bitter man to tears, but RR rises above these petty vicissitudes. He's delighted with the team's main sponsor – Husqvarna – so much so that he omits to mention to me that they manufacture the world's largest lawnmower! Which is definitively another unique claim to fame as well as another close association with success and innovation for the Husqvarna Hammers. Apart from the sponsors, Ronnie is delighted with the fans, of course, and quickly acknowledges that they're "committed" and "deeply knowledgeable". Though he still needs to chase the essential growth through the turnstiles that can apparently only come when you attract the "floating audience" to or back to speedway. Hopefully, the promise of regular TV coverage allied to the Husqvarna leadership position in the horticulture market will suffice to fulfil this ambition². To achieve the required growth in spectator numbers, while you overcome the

structural problem caused by the iniquitous business model between promoters and riders within the sport that Ronnie despairs of, you basically have to put on a damn good show week in and week out.

After only a few minutes in his company, you know that, if anyone is, Ronnie is a showman and an optimist. It just needs more hard work and the talking of the talk for it to all come together. This committed man sincerely hopes that the 'ifs, ands, buts and maybes' might shortly start to stack up in Arena's favour again. Basically, if Mark recovers quickly from injury and comes back racing shortly, Ronnie is sure that it'll boost the fans while, most importantly, add that vital intangible but absent ingredient back into the side. If that significant 'X' factor returned, he believes that it would give the team some increased oomph and generate the buzz for that elusive but vital "word of mouth" he always seeks.

It's suddenly only 90 minutes to go to the off and I've had a whistle-stop tour of the world of speedway according to Ronnie. His energy and enthusiasm is exhaustingly infectious. He's keen to get off to fry the many fish that is the typical race night lot of a person who combines the duties of promoter and team manager! The need to look the part is another crucial aspect of the process, so with a firm shake of the hand and a determination in his demeanour, he's off for tonight's latest fix. We're not at all far from take-off as RR bustles away to change from his casual civvies into his smart clothes which he'll wear, as ever, with his optimistic but plain speaking outlook.

Phew, is all I can say – to the evening's heat and the whirlwind that is Ronnie – as I lurk in the shadow of the main stand for a minute's rest. The car park has started to fill slowly and the crowd begins to filter in clutching their boards and garden chairs. A few of the early birds loiter by the rather well-stocked track shop situated in the main grandstand building. This is the only outlet open in a slightly sad parade of shuttered shops, though it boasts a panoramic view of the track and a sign that rather grandly proclaims it to be the 'Bangers & Speedway Souvenir Shop'. The shop definitely has even more than the usual array of merchandise crammed into a very small space and, for the next 30 minutes while I linger there, it attracts anyone who's anyone from the world of speedway who happens to be around in that part of Essex for this fixture against Eastbourne. Practically every passer-by stops for a chat, a question or to complain about the resolutely closed bar, particularly since it's a scorching evening when even the mind of the most loyal member of the temperance society would turn to the need for the cool refreshment of an alcoholic beverage. The general consensus is that the

shut bar typifies the poor organisational skills you can regularly expect as part of the Arena experience, in this case where sobriety rules and thirsts remain unquenched. "Laughable" is as polite a summary as I hear. Something about trips and breweries also gets frequently mentioned. So I can't help but realise that Ronnie really does need the bags of energetic determination he already has, but in even greater abundance if he's to staunch and turn round this apparently habitual level of casual grumbling. The knock-on impact of Mark's injuries to the results of the team on the track can't have exactly helped brighten the mood of this particular 'knowledgeable crowd'. All these serial moans and grumbles – from the "you're not going to believe what they've gone and done now" school of thought – makes me wonder if those West Ham season ticket holders haven't already started to attend Arena meetings in force.

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Pictures courtesy of Harry Ward





NOT BENNETT?... NOT BENNETT?... **IT'S BENNETT!!!**

WORLD DOMINATION? SETTLE FOR THE PREMIER LEAGUE THANKS!

Well, here we are in August and boy, those people who decided to spend their two weeks holiday touring the speedway tracks instead of sunning themselves in Majorca must be laughing all the way to the League Riders championship!

During July, I managed to scare the opposition on parade by showing my un-waxed legs to the crowd at Kings Lynn and just look at the results? Wins for the Money Centre Stars both home and away, sitting at the top end of the league table and enjoying a very entertaining cup run. I take full credit for this as it's obvious that the sight of my white fur lined limbs is enough to put anyone off and it clearly has more of an effect on the visitors.

I did offer to wear a kilt for the Glasgow match but strangely enough the suggestion didn't quite get the reaction I expected. Perhaps they want me to wear it in October as I'm sure I heard Keith Buster Chapman say "It'll be a ***** cold day before he wears a skirt at the Norfolk Arena!" Oh well, just a thought.....

WALTZING MATILDA SUNG HERE.....

It's 20 years since I made my presenting debut at the much missed Plough Lane stadium once occupied by the Wimbledon Dons and just 2 years later I was heading halfway round the world to join the British Speedway touring team in Australia as resident presenter. What an honour for a native of Glasgow and, although my old sparring partner Dick Barrie had some experience of working down under (he always dreamed of becoming a gynecologist!) I was the first British presenter to be invited to Oz for an entire winter season.

Within a few hours of arriving in Brisbane it was fairly obvious that "babysitting" some of the riders would become a major part of the trip – despite that not appearing on the job description!

We went the "pretty way" via Continental airlines (nuff said) and I should have known that

things were not going to go smoothly when we were nearly arrested in Denver Airport thanks to yours truly offering to buy an underage (by USA standards) Ray Morton a beer!! How was I to know that the legal age in the States was 21?

Oh how we laughed.....just ahead of the handcuffs being shown to us. Next stop Honolulu and we lost David Clarke somewhere between the gate and the gents! Found him with about two minutes to spare locked in the gents. You don't need to know any more!

By the end of the next leg it was Sydney and the boys had to open their hand luggage. I thought Jeremy Doncaster was struggling with a cardboard box at Heathrow but didn't expect to see an entire JAWA ENGINE appear from the bubble wrap! That took some explaining and we missed our connecting flight to Brisbane so had a 4 hour wait in Sydney airport. Ray Morton headed to the bar along with Sean Wilson and we didn't see much of them until the flight was called.



Jeremy Doncaster

The promoter was Troy Butler's Dad Vic who had rented a house for all of us on the Gold Coast. It didn't take Carol Vorderman to work out that a four bedroomed house was not going to be quite enough for everyone and there were speedway riders camping on the floor, out by the pool and some were farmed out elsewhere.

In those days speedway was a big sport in Queensland so no time for Jetlag. Jeremy Doncaster and Troy Butler were invited to B107 radio station in Brisbane for a pre meeting interview where they announced that there would be a display of bikes, riders etc in the main shopping area at 2pm. Think Piccadilly circus in an outdoor Mall and you have the idea. We were given a small PA, a cassette with some music to attract an audience (No CDs guys, this was 1988!) and the riders were there in 30c heat complete with leathers, helmets, gloves – the works. Donkey suggested starting up a bike, just to attract attention. Good idea said your already washed out presenter – just do it quietly???

Within 30 seconds they were standing 4 deep at the rotunda looking at this leather clad gladiator and then someone had the bright idea of doing "a few donuts for a bit of a laugh" and you can guess the next bit..... Australia's finest police and security team quickly ending the impromptu display with those subtle words "Youze are outa here ya pommie *****"

As we were led away to the cheers of a much larger crowd than we could have wished for, somebody was handing out flyers for the meeting the next night at the Brisbane Exhibition Speedway.

It must have done the trick as the crowd was almost 22,000 that evening despite the fact that John Farnham was doing a gig the same night in Brisbane.

Trevor Harding's Granddad (Also Trevor) Ghostie ran the Qwicksnax Empire at that time and he held a pre season welcome party on board a boat on the Gold coast the night before the first meeting. The food was fantastic and the drink was flowing but you couldn't help but notice that Troy Butler, Mark Carlson, Stephen Davies and all of the Aussie team were on diet cokes and mineral water all night. The same couldn't be said for a few of the Poms and it's fair to say that was reflected in the scoreline the next night!!!

Lesson 23... If invited to a party by the Aussie hosts before a meeting decline the invitation or go tea total!

Ray Morton knew how to enjoy himself in those days (I'm sure he's a lot quieter now???) and one evening he thought it would be fun to ride a pushbike round the outside of the swimming

pool. After 10 minutes he was getting closer and closer to the edge (in more ways than one) and the inevitable happened – much to the delight of everyone in the house. He then proceeded to set up a ramp and launch himself into the pool on this bike.

We noticed he had gone a little quiet and assumed that he'd gone for a rest but no, not Ray. Someone bet him \$20 that he wouldn't ride his bike into the pool with his crash helmet on so five minutes later, he appears with helmet, goggles and leathers!!! That was funny enough, what brought the house down was that the leathers belonged to Steven Butler (Troy's brother) and he was the one who'd made the \$20 bet with Mr Morton!!

The evening continued with poor David Clarke, who was only about 16 or 17 at the time, being held upside down over the pool by Sean Wilson and Ali Stevens. From nowhere, the largest cockroach known to man appeared and was promptly dropped down Clarke's shorts – never to be seen again!

No wonder he didn't offer to tour Australia the next season!

The first meeting at the Brisbane exhibition speedway (The Ekka) was just amazing. The track there was so big the riders only did 3 laps and there was no such thing as an air fence! Alan Rivett used to scrape his footrest along the outside of the track – right on the concrete barrier!

The promoters said they had the ideal clothes for me to wear on the centre that night and I believed them. A full Formula one style suit – very popular in those days??? No! What about tartan to represent Scotland? No!

They gave me a bleedin John Bull outfit complete with top hat and tails! I looked like Groucho Marx!!! Not happy but it didn't stop me having the most amazing experience of introducing the riders and presenting the meeting to 21,990 Aussie fans – and 10 Brits who were on holiday at the time!

Next time I'll tell you about Steve Schofield & the Kangaroo, Sean Wilson & the Townsville police and Ray Morton in the wardrobe!!

Enjoy the end of season play offs and cup finals people – see you at Kings Lynn!!

Mike Bennett

KIRKMANSHULME LANE – BELLE VUE



CRAVEN AND THE CHADS

Don Maddocks used to be a fan at the long-lost Liverpool Speedway. He looks back on those happy times.

My first speedway memory dates back to the 1940's. My elder brother took me on the train from Liverpool to the Belle Vue Amusement Gardens in Manchester, just after WW2. After some breathtaking rides on the Roller Coaster, we found ourselves at the gates to the Greyhound and Speedway stadium, which had been opened to allow some spectators to leave early. So in we went - for free!!

There was a speedway meeting in progress, and it seems, it must have been a Test Match between England and Australia. This is because I can remember the fact, that there were two brothers riding together, with the name of Parker. Jack and Norman, and it would only be by representing England that they would have been together in the same team. Jack rode for Belle Vue and Norman for Wimbledon.

The occasion so excited me, the smell of combusted methanol and the roar from the bikes (no silencers in those days), that when I read, a year or so later, that the Stanley Stadium in Liverpool was to open up for Speedway, with a team called "The Chads", it was inevitable that I would soon be there on Monday evenings, pressed up against the wall surrounding the track.

Each meeting opened promptly at 7.30pm, with "Twelfth Street Rag" (by Pee Wee Hunt) and followed by "Imperial Echoes", which was the cue for riders, track staff officials, graders, and St. John's Ambulance staff, to march smartly onto the track for the opening of the meeting.

Riders were introduced to the crowd, the stadium lights dimmed, and the racing started. It was pure magic! Mr Chad incidentally was a post-war-time cartoon character, who would pose the question "What no sugar?" or whatever other particular commodity was in short supply at the time. The team comprised, Harry Welch, George Bason, Alex Gray, Doug Serrurier, Fred Wills, Charlie Oates, Alf Webster, and Derek Glover.

This was also the breaking era of Cycle Speedway, and where I lived, near Croxteth, in Liverpool, was a patch of waste ground, which was to play a significant part in the history of British Speedway. This patch became the home of Prestbury Chads, the name being borrowed

from the senior speedway team. One warm evening in that first summer of Liverpool Speedway, I was watching the lads pedalling furiously around the cinders of the small oval, along with a tiny crowd including Harry Welch, Doug Serrurier and Fred Wills.

Two of the lads taking part were Brian, and his little brother Peter, of the Craven family, who I knew and who lived in the road next to where we lived. I followed these two budding riders for the rest of that cycle speedway season, and then during the winter I heard of a Speedway school, situated on Ainsdale Sands, to the north of Liverpool. This was run by Charlie Oates, another member of the Liverpool Speedway team. My brother and I braved the foul weather on many a Sunday morning and afternoon during that following winter, to watch Charlie putting novice riders through their paces on the beach. The track was marked out by small sweet bags of sand but was only accessible when the tide went out!



The brothers Craven by then had graduated to speedway proper, and along with other riders such as Don Potter of Fleetwood Flyers, and Angus Maguire of Liverpool, would lap this sand track, coached and cajoled by Charlie, until the tide re-appeared. Peter Craven worked as a trainee mechanic in the garage owned by Charlie

in Brunswick Road, Liverpool, and he would ride to his place of work and back home, on his cycle speedway bike passing through the road where I lived.

In the evenings, when the rest of the lads and I were playing football or whatever in the road, Peter would come home on his bike, face covered in oil and grease, dressed in khaki overalls. He would take the corner of our road like the speedway star he was to become, foot placed both well forward and on the pavement, his left brake lever shaped just like the clutch lever on a speedway bike. Most of the lads in our road would jeer and laugh at him, but I preferred to wave and give him a thumbs up. In time he would wave and give me the thumbs up as he passed, ignoring the other lads.

The next speedway season dawned at Stanley Stadium and second half rides were given to novices attached to the track. Amongst them were of course, Brian and Peter. Brian graduated to the team, but never really achieved much at that time, but later in his life he did achieve success in the Pirate league with Liverpool.

Peter also joined the full team, but was never considered to be a great prospect, his style of riding was conservative to say the least. He was so small, that his bike appeared to be twice the size of the normal bike, and his style of riding consisted of planting his bike and left foot firmly on the inside white line, and staying there. Any rider of substance, simply rode around Peter, and that happened continually. I think Jimmy Baxter was in charge of Liverpool at that time, and Jimmy decided to release him. I am not sure, but I believe he went to Fleetwood first, then on to Belle Vue. We all know the rest of the Peter Craven story!!!.

Meanwhile back to the Liverpool Chads. In the close season they had been "moved" from out of the 3rd Division, where they had not set the place on fire, to say the least, and into the 2nd Division. To bulk up the team Jimmy Baxter, who also ran Plymouth Devils and Southampton Saints at that time, merely took Peter Robinson and Len Read from Plymouth, and Bill Griffiths and Buck Whitby from Southampton, plus a developing rider, Reg Duval, and put them into the Chads' team. They were also joined by the great George Newton from Walthamstow, and Tommy Allott from Sheffield.

Both these latter riders were veteran riders from pre-war, and were near retiring age when they joined the team, indeed Tommy used to remove his false teeth, when he went out to race. Nevertheless his machinery and leathers were always immaculate, and his bike probably one of the fastest around. If he got out of the gate first, nobody would catch him around Stanley,

and he held the 4 lap record of the 446 yard track at 75 and 2/5ths seconds. He set it when he beat Merv Harding (The Red Devil) of Glasgow Ashfield in one of the most thrilling races I have ever witnessed.

George Newton was the last of the great leg-trailers along with Oliver Hart (Odsal) and he revelled in the wide open spaces of the Stanley track. His bike, "The Copper Flyer" was also a belter, and one of my greatest memories is of George "ear-holing" around the track. The angles he achieved, when he was on song, were similar to those that Peter Craven produced in his prime.

Peter Robinson - Chads' skipper - was a stylist and the anchor of the team, and he paired with George to make a fantastic combination of different styles. Len Read was so small and slight that he had weights added under the saddled of his bike to help him maintain control. Bill Griffiths and Buck Whitby never really achieved greatness, but along with Harry Welch (original skipper) and Reg Duval, and with Peter, George, Len and Tommy, they were an entertaining mid-table team.

The crowds at Liverpool were a consistent 7,000 at this time, and racing was always of a very high standard, any visiting rider willing to open the throttle and have a go, did well at Stanley. I remember well, Les Hewitt (Coventry Bees), Merv Harding - see above - along with Ken Le Breton (White Ghost), Keith Gurtner (Little Boy Blue) all of Ashfield, Arthur Forrest (Halifax), Billy Bales (Yarmouth) and of course the great Jack Young of Edinburgh Monarchs, were riders who could always be relied on to bring in the crowds, and remember this was still the 2nd Division.

Sadly for a number of reasons, by the time 1953 dawned, these crowds had dwindled, and eventually crippling overheads, and the iniquitous Entertainment tax brought an end to that particular era at Stanley. Supporters of the sport made a vain attempt to rally support, but by this time all the principle riders had either moved to other clubs or retired.

I moved away from Merseyside shortly after that, relocating to Southampton, where I was able to follow The Saints for a number of years, and then on their demise, Poole Pirates. I now live in Devon, and was able to follow my favourite sport at Exeter and still get the buzz.

Do you have a story to tell? Drop us an email at speedwayplus@hotmail.com and we'll get right back to you.



SPEEDWAY'S SECOND COMING

Chris Seaward draws a comparison between the return of a television favourite of yesteryear and the future direction for our sport.

When I was younger I used to love Sharpe, the ITV drama starring Yorkshire's loveable rogue Sean Bean. Imagine then my excitement ten years later when it was announced Sharpe was back with a bang, two mind blowing episodes over consecutive nights.

The setting was as picturesque as before, the action as heroic and the characters just as fantastically portrayed as I remembered. Yet as I sat down to enjoy the high budget show something wasn't right, my attention was wavering far too easily. I had craved to see Sharpe for a decade but when it was placed in front of me I realised it didn't compete with the original making of the show.

It was second rate, caught in the wake of the original production back in the early 90's; it was attempting to resurrect an untouchable series that had left our TV screens in a blaze of glory some ten years ago. It posed the question, Is it ever possible to revive or take seriously something that has already reached the pinnacle of its existence?

Suddenly I lugged speedway into the equation; it seems we continually compare the sport's current state to the glory days of yesteryear. Fans complain that speedway was far better in the past, more characters, improved racing, larger crowds, healthy media coverage and better value for money. Whilst this maybe genuinely true we have to shake the tendency to dwell on the glory days of the past and instead actively embrace speedway's future. Many older fans feel the same as me when I watched Sharpe's brief resurgence, why should they take modern day speedway seriously when it can never emulate the glory days of a golden era that has long passed?

It is therefore necessary to entice a new group of supporters to our terraces, a younger generation that isn't aware or obsessed with speedway's past and isn't concerned with drawing continual comparisons to days gone by. Yes it maybe horribly frustrating to have hundreds of kids running round causing havoc at speedway meetings but they are the ones who will dictate whether the sport can once again climb the ladder of success. Kids for a quid promotions, big mascots chucking sweets into the crowd and interacting with youngsters is what the sport needs in order to lower the age of the average speedway fan. Even if the children aren't glued to the track action at least the sport will become familiar in their minds and in ten years down the line they won't be alien to the word speedway.

Many have expressed their views on the re-branding of Reading, but anyone who has visited Smallmead this season will agree that BSI are presenting speedway in a fantastic way. Each week at Reading's stadium hundreds of children are asking their parents about our sport and crucially the promotion are making sure their parents bring them back by providing enjoyable off track entertainment.

We need to shake the Sharpe mentality in order to move forward, we are still a relatively young sport which peaked very early. The speedway flame has never burnt out and despite immense adversity still shines brightly, together let's divert our gaze away from the successful past and instead look towards the uncertain future. Wipe the slate clean, grab a fresh piece of chalk and be part of speedway's second coming.