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ISSUE 6



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TOMMY JANSSON

**MARTIN DUGARD ON THE
ARLINGTON ACADEMY**

OLIVER ALLEN INTERVIEW

**ERIC
BOOCOCK**

**BLACKBIRD
ROAD**

**MIKE
BENNETT**

**POWDERHALL
OPENING**

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Welcome to issue six of the Speedway Plus downloadable magazine. It's been a while since the last one was produced, so hopefully you'll think it was worth the wait.

In this issue we're pleased to feature two interviews conducted by Alex Raby. In the first of these he quizzes Martin Dugard on the history of the famed Eastbourne training track and the important part it's played in the sport. Alex also catches up with Oliver Allen for a very honest review of his career to date and his hopes for the future.

Thanks to Tony McDonald at Retro Speedway, we're able to bring you extracts from two very interesting new speedway books. "Jansson - Legend Who Died Young" is the story of the life, and untimely death, of the legendary Tommy Jansson. The extract we feature covers events immediately prior to and following the track crash that claimed his life. It's a powerful piece of writing that many of our visitors have found moving.

The second extract is from "Booey - Around in Circles", the auto-biography of Eric Boocock. The extract covers his departure from the manager's chair at Belle Vue in 1982. Of course, Booey will be back in that same role when the tapes rise on the 2007 season.

If you enjoy reading the extracts then you can order the books by calling Tony at Retro Speedway on **01708 734 502**. Check out the 'books' page on our website to read extracts from many other recently published speedway books.

The magazine also includes our usual selection of track pictures, including some of the greatly missed Blackbird Road circuit in Leicester. We're indebted to the many people who've supplied us with track photographs over the years.

Finally, we thank Mike Bennett and Dave Green for sharing their thoughts with us once again.

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Special Thanks to: Tony McDonald; David Taylor; Steve Hone

SpeedwayPlus always welcomes unsolicited contributions.

“ I made lots of friends and still keep in touch with them, even years after the training. ”

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

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

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

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

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

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

senior track, that had been collected during the year, was put on the base of the track and rolled in we were ready to rock and roll.”



The Master of Arlington
(Picture by David Taylor)

And rock and roll they did! Martin Dugard went on to become a name synonymous with Eastbourne Speedway and success. As

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captain he won the 1995 and 2000 league championships, as well as lifting the trophy in the Knockout Cup final in 1997 after a demolition of Poole. On an individual front he made 45 appearances for England and Great Britain, and finished 11th in the world in 1990. He is, however, best known for becoming the first British rider to stand on the top step of the podium in a home Grand Prix, following his Wild Card exploits in the 2000 British Grand Prix.

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

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

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

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



Still winning silverware
(Picture by Alex Raby)

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

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

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

"The biggest problem is that the Polish, Swedish, Danish motorcycle federations have all seen that the up and coming future of speedway in their country is now with the younger generation. Most of the tracks you see abroad have a training track of a training programme for youngsters who want to try speedway. They all run events and competitions for the kids to keep their interest in the sport but the UK does not have anyone who is really dedicated to take that role and make English speedway a nation to stand on top and become the number one nation again."

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

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have had Grand Prix points and an appearance for Great Britain.

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



Hot Prospect – Lewis Bridger
(Picture by Alex Raby)

"We are the only club that run training schools, and we seem to be the only club

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

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

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

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

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

KAPARNA - SWEDEN

Pictures courtesy of Tim Grant





FOR THE BENEFIT OF...

Dave Green takes a look at the largely discredited testimonial system.

Mike Broadbanks' recent benefit meeting at Swindon got me thinking about testimonial meetings in general. 'Broady' was being rewarded for his many years service to the Robins back in the days before testimonials had been invented. There's no doubt that meeting was well deserved and loyal club servants like Mike are exactly those for whom these meetings should be held.

I believe that the first testimonial meeting was held for Nigel Boocock back in the mid-seventies. 'Little Boy Blue' had racked up umpteen years of action for the Coventry Bees and had scored thousands of points for the club. His event was well attended as Brandon regulars and fans from further afield turned out to pay tribute to him. Many other similar meetings followed in future years as other club stalwarts like Peter Collins, John Louis, Steve Lawson, Rob Grant and Chris Morton were rewarded.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of these meetings and I've been left scratching my head at times. Riders that have moved clubs frequently seem to be having the majority of these, in fact I genuinely can't remember the last one that celebrated ten year's continuous service with one club.

Most of the recent recipients have received a meeting because their 'ownership' has not changed hands for ten seasons. In some cases this means they're owned by one club and loaned to another. In others it means that an individual promoter, who may even have moved from club-to-club himself, has owned that rider's contract for ten years. That the rider concerned may have appeared for seven, eight or nine clubs during that decade seems not to matter.

Of course there are mitigating circumstances in all this. The points limit has undoubtedly played a part in forcing some riders to move on. If teams had a free hand to select whichever riders they wished then perhaps teams would be a little more static than they presently are? It would certainly make it easier for middle-order men, often the most likely to be forced out by virtue of their average, to build up a record of loyal service.

The almost total collapse of the transfer system is another important factor. It's now very rare for one club to buy a rider from another club, this leads to many riders remaining assets of their very first club.

There are also those unfortunates who are forced to move on when a track closes. In situations like those it's quite right that their record of service passes on to their new employer. Even if this does mean that they subsequently stage their testimonial meeting at a track with which they've no long term connection.

I wonder though if some change is required to the system? It does seem too easy now for a rider to spend his whole career out on loan, jumping from club to club in search of the best deal, while all the time clocking up service towards a testimonial.

Might it be better to award testimonials on the following criteria?

- 10 years continuous service to a single club (perhaps with a maximum of 2 years out on loan allowed)
- 15 years continuous service to British speedway as a whole - unless testimonial has already been staged
- 25 years service to British speedway as a whole

Of course, benefit meetings for those forced to retire through injury would continue as at present.

I personally think this would be a more transparent system than the one we currently have. It would reward loyalty to a single club but still allow us to recognise good value performers who have moved around a little.

Ultimately, I suppose the success of any testimonial depends on the reputation of the recipient. If the supporters are unimpressed with his credentials then they won't turn out to watch. Similarly it may be difficult for the rider to attract a strong field if his fellow professionals doubt he's worthy of the honour.

JANSSON: LEGEND WHO DIED YOUNG

TOMMY Jansson was one of the most talented and popular riders to grace world speedway in the early 70s and few disagree that the sport lost a likely World Champion when the 23-year-old Swede died following a track crash in his homeland in May 1976.

Thanks to our friends at publishers Retro Speedway, we reproduce here an edited extract from the emotive new book, TOMMY JANSSON: LEGEND WHO DIED YOUNG. In this chapter you're about to read, Swedish author Magnus Nystrom recalls in detail the sad and horrifying chain of events that led to the Jansson tragedy in Stockholm.

The day after the match against Dackarna, Tommy was in a bad mood. His engine had worked so badly, he planned to travel early to Stockholm that night for the Swedish World Championship round, to work on his bike on-site. He also felt unhappy because of his low number of points and the feeling that he was letting the fans down. He felt that 3,800 fans had not shown up at the track to see him collect only six points they came out to see him win all his heats.

Besides, he was also going to miss Smederna's next match after the Swedish speedway federation had decided to move a previously postponed meeting to the following Tuesday the same day Wimbledon were scheduled to visit Leicester for a British League fixture. According to his contract, Tommy had to race in England, it was his obligation. "I have to race for Wimbledon that day, the schedule was set a long time ago. There is nothing I can do about that," he told disappointed fans in Sweden. Deep down, he was angry with SVEMO he wanted to race as often as he could for both Wimbledon and Smederna. He wanted to become a Swedish League champion with his home-town team again. Tommy's father, Joel, the Smederna promoter, was furious with the authorities and he had threatened them with a walk-over. He felt that SVEMO should respect the fixture programme in England, not ignore it completely.

On the morning of May 20, 1976 Tommy flicked through his small, black diary. During that month he'd already travelled between England and Sweden eight times. Before May was out, he was scheduled to compete in another eight meetings in the space of just 11 days, in three countries Sweden, England and Finland. He was a little tired of all the travelling, which only felt worse when he didn't reach his potential and a dreadful night like last night didn't help. He was also tired from all the hard work he'd been doing on the bikes, which had recently led him to

appoint Phil Pratt as his new engine tuner in England.

Misbehaving engines, many long trips, only a few off nights, but all that didn't matter much when he could spend time with his beloved girlfriend Lotta. In her company he could easily forget all the hassles. She made him smile and when he spent time with her he felt happy and convinced that his future would be with her. In her mother's beautiful garden, filled with a strong scent of flowers and in the shadow of cherry trees, he felt it was time to talk about South Africa.

"Next winter I plan to go not to Australia, but to South Africa instead. Would you consider accompanying me?"

She smiled and thought to herself that if he'd have asked her to follow him to the moon, she would have said yes. "Of course I want to join you on that trip!" she said. "Great."

Tommy laughed and made jokes about how smart Lotta's mother's husband had made his leathers look he had taken care of them after last night's meeting. His race suit was hung outside to dry and Tommy remarked that Lotta would be seeing a lot more of this cleaning up operation in the future. Tommy and Lotta were sitting there together in the sun, dreaming about moving in together in a house in England. "But, Lotta, you know . . . hmm . . . going to South Africa without being married . . . well, that might look odd. You know, it's different over there and . . ." Tommy didn't have the courage at that moment to push the conversation any further forward than that. He changed the subject.

Lotta complained about all the weeks she still had left to work in school. She liked the time she

BOOK EXTRACT – JANSSON: LEGEND WHO DIED YOUNG

spent as an intern at a nursing home in the village of Flen, where she was working at the time and where she was going that same night. They were both looking forward to England and a life together. Lotta couldn't wait, while Tommy had even written it up in his diary. His entry for June 4, 1976 read: 'Lotta finishes in school.' Lotta was sitting in the backyard of her mother's house and felt a happiness she had never felt in her whole life. When Tommy had said goodbye she ran in to her mother and yelled excitedly to her about Tommy's words about going to South Africa and them not being married. "What do you think he meant by saying that . . . do you think he wants to marry me?"

During his whole speedway career Lars Jansson was famous for nothing more than being Bengt's brother just as Bosse was widely known as 'Tommy Jansson's brother'.

Benga's brother was two years younger than him, not as skilled on the track and nowhere near as successful as the Swedish star and former World No.2 who remains a legend among supporters of Hackney Hawks. Lars, 32-years-old, was riding for the Valsarna team from Hagfors, in the Swedish second division. At that level he was one of the stars and on his good days he could challenge the very best. It was an uncle of the Jansson brothers who had got Bengt and Lars interested in speedway to begin with, when he'd taken the boys with him to meetings in Stockholm.

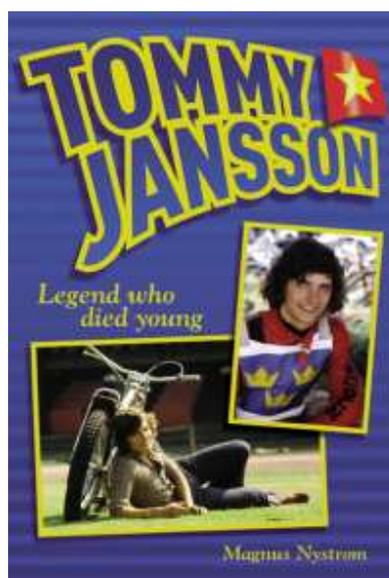
Lars liked to work with the bikes as much as the racing itself. Bengt showed early on that he was the best rider of the two of them and, from 1963 onwards, Bengt was always in a different class to his younger brother.

Lars' best result was fourth place in a Swedish Final. Every time he raced he did so with one thing in mind to show that he was more than just 'Bengt's brother.' The 1976 season had started brilliantly for him when he won a qualifying round of the World Championship in Malilla with a maximum 15 points. He had beaten many world class riders that night, including Bo Wirebrand and World Finalist Tommy Johansson. King's Lynn newcomers Richard Hellsen and a young Jan Andersson, who'd made his BL debut for Swindon Robins the previous season, were also in the line-up.

Now it was time for the next stage of qualification en route to the World Final in Lars' home city of Stockholm. The Gubbangen track was very familiar to Lars, who was going to have brother Bengt for company on track. Lars felt that this was a perfect opportunity for him to show what he was made of. 'I have everything

to win, nothing to lose,' he thought during his trip to Stockholm.

"How the hell are we going to make it without Tommy?" Cyril Maidment was worried. Tonight's BL match at Sheffield Tigers was not an easy one, especially without their top rider. Cyril had strongly opposed the ban on commuting foreigners two years earlier and he praised his Swedish import every chance he got.



Many times, when critics and fans had doubted the practicalities and loyalty of riders dividing their league commitments between two countries at the same time, he reminded them that Tommy "always showed 100 percent commitment to both Wimbledon and Smederna."

The most important argument for Tommy and the other imports, according to Cyril, was that their presence even though they were expensive due to their travel bills made the English riders better. Just the chance of competing against the best riders in the world, week in and week out, made the young British riders develop faster. Cyril never wavered from that opinion. But now he had other things on his mind. Sheffield Tigers away. Without Tommy.

In desperation, the Dons' team boss had hunted high and low for a guest rider replacement before finally getting Hackney No.1 Dave Morton to fill Tommy's place at Owlerton one of Mort's favourite tracks and relatively close to his Manchester base. When Morton agreed, Cyril felt relieved and said: "This might turn out to be a great night after all."

Anders Michanek and Bernt Persson had started to acknowledge each other again. Bernt would never accept Anders' apologies for the crash in the Swedish Final of 1973 but, as time went by, Bernt had to get back to being normal towards his former best friend. Time had to heal all wounds, he decided.

Injuries and all the travelling had taken its toll on Bernt, who was also falling out of love with his beloved Cradley Heath. A few weeks before the individual round at Gubbangen Bernt had cancelled his contract with Cradley and decided he was just going to race in Sweden from now on. On his day, Bernt could still beat the best riders in the world indeed, to get to Gubbangen he'd won the previous round in Kumla with a maximum.

Tommy had also qualified for Gubbangen with a maximum in Lindesberg on May 9, when he led Hans Holmqvist and Christer Sjosten onto the rostrum. Anders Michanek could also beat the best when he produced his top form. But he was 33-years-old three years older than Bernt. Not even Anders had the same consistency or hunger for success any more. Of the 16 riders competing at Gubbangen, nine were going to reach the next stage the Nordic Final at Norrkoping, Sweden on June 2. Both Anders and Bernt counted on making it. If there was any rider the two veterans feared, it was Tommy Jansson. Bernt and Anders both agreed on one thing: "Tommy Jansson is a future World Champion."

Inga-Lill Jansson was supposed to go with the rest of the family to Stockholm that night but, because she had to work late, she stayed at home. When she returned home to the apartment she found all Tommy's bags in his room. He was booked to travel back to England the day after and he'd said that maybe he'd spend the night at Bengt Jansson's house, in Taby, outside of Stockholm, and catch the morning flight from there. 'Okay, this means that now he's coming home tonight instead,' Inga-Lill thought to herself. The whole family was in Stockholm, except her. Inga-Lill planned for a night on her own. She had ordered pizza and was going to watch the TV series, Heirs, that she had started to follow with interest.

Bosse Jansson had started to establish himself as a top rider in Sweden. He had missed the last match against Dackarna because of a fracture to

his right hand, an injury he'd tried to keep a secret from his father.

Bosse hurt himself when he'd played football for fun with some friends. The day before the match against Dackarna, he had made a doctor remove his plaster cast, but the doctor had ordered Bosse to sign a paper accepting full responsibility in case he became involved in another accident. Bosse was racing at his own risk. "If my father calls you, tell him it's nothing serious, just a slight bruise," Bosse demanded. Joel wasn't stupid, he found out the truth and forced Bosse to take part in a junior event instead of the main senior match. "That's below my dignity," Bosse complained.

He was furious and close to leaving the track, but Inga-Lill made him stop and think before he acted. "If you leave now, you'll never race for Smederna again," she warned him. Bosse realised it was in his best interests to listen to his parents, both of them. He had been in a lot of pain while racing, but he managed to win both his junior-heats in good race times even faster than a few winners in the main match.

Bosse felt that he belonged with the best, that he had the ability to perform at top level. In his first qualifying meeting before Gubbangen he'd ended fourth overall in the round at Kumla behind Persson, Tommy Nilsson and Soren Sjosten. The Swedish Final at Gubbangen was going to be Bosse's first big step on the international scene and he too was aiming for a place in the Nordic Final. 'Even if I'm going to cry out in pain, I'm going to make it to the Nordic Final I want to ride against Tommy twice,' he thought.

Bosse liked racing at Gubbangen, where he'd won the Swedish Junior Championship the previous year. Of course, now his opponents were of a much higher calibre but both Joel and Tommy believed that Bosse had a great chance to make it to the next stage.

When Joel and Bosse arrived at the track, they met up with Tommy in the pits. He was in a great mood, having travelled to Stockholm early to tune his bike at the workshop run by Per-Lennart Ericsson a well known super-tuner who had worked for Anders Michanek for many years. After Michanek won the World Final in 1974, he brought Per-Lennart up onto the rostrum to join in the celebrations and to acknowledge his role in his success.

Per-Lennart didn't help everybody he said no to many riders, but not to Tommy. "Now my engine is going to work great. Now I'm not going to go up on my back wheel all the time. I'm going to be so much better from the gate," Tommy said. Joel was a little sceptical. "Are you

really sure it's the bike's fault that you're not better at the gate?" "I promise. Now I'm going to go straight forward, not lose time on my back-wheel," Tommy insisted.

Beside Tommy in the pits, Joel noticed a couple of boxes from some of his son's sponsors some motor-oil and engine parts. Bosse felt a little lost in the pits. "Where should I take my place?" "Wherever you want," Tommy said. Tommy's mechanic, Kenneth Swedin, made some final adjustments to Tommy's bike. It was time to start it up and Tommy went away for a quick test spin on the track.

When he came back, he looked concerned and annoyed. Joel, who was going to watch the meeting from the pits, understood why. He'd seen how riders went all over the place on the bumpy track. "The track is in really bad shape. It reminds me of farmland," Tommy told Joel and Kenneth.

Anders Michanek had raced at Gubbängen for many years it was home to his Swedish team Getingarna. But he had never liked the track and had repeatedly complained about the bumpy surface. He had even been close to changing teams in Sweden, because he was sick and tired of having to race there so often. Another rider who also called Gubbängen home was Lars Jansson. He was also in a bad mood, because he'd never enjoyed racing there either. It was such a big track, where speed mattered most, and there was never any close speedway at Gubbängen. Bengt's brother preferred more technically demanding venues over the big, fast tracks where speed counted for everything. Now that the track was also in much worse condition than usual, Lars didn't have a good feeling.

Bosse was standing tall when the announcer introduced the riders to the fans prior to the meeting:
 "Number 12, from Smederna in Eskilstuna . . . Bosse Jansson."
 "Number 13, from Smederna in Eskilstuna . . . Tommy Jansson."

The schedule meant that Bosse was going to make his first start in the third heat of the night, with Tommy taking his opening ride in heat four. Lars Jansson wore number 15.

Heat one brought the first crash of the evening Per-Ake Gerhardsson and Tommy Johansson both went crashing into the solid, wooden fence. The red flag went up and the heat was stopped. Per-Ake had to be taken to the Sodersjhuset hospital by ambulance because medical staff at the track were worried that he might have badly

injured his back. Johansson also complained of pain in his back, although he had to wait for the ambulance to return to the track before he too could be taken to hospital for a precautionary check-up. Nobody in the pits had been surprised by the first race incident not with the track as bumpy as it was on the night.

The vastly experienced Soren Sjosten was in heat two but when he came back to the pits after his first race, he was furious. "The track is so f*****g terrible," he fumed. "This is the worst track I've ever ridden and I'm not going to continue. This is it for me tonight, I'm not racing another heat." Race three saw Bosse up against Bengt Jansson, Bosse Wirebrand and Christer Sjosten.

Tommy, aware of the abysmal track conditions, walked over to his big brother and said: "Be careful out there." Bosse would never forget those words. They were the last words Tommy ever said to him.

Out on the track, Bosse could just about suffer the pain in his damaged hand for one lap before he had to give up and cruise around for the rest of the heat. He reluctantly accepted that he wasn't fit enough to race again that night. He told Joel that he'd had enough and that a reserve would have to take his place for the rest of the evening. It was time for the fourth heat...

Lars Jansson knew he was an outsider in the upcoming race. His opponents were: Tommy Jansson, Soren Karlsson (who had made his BL debut for Swindon just weeks earlier) and the vastly experienced Hans Holmqvist all three having raced in the top division in Sweden and as professionals in England. Normally Bengt's brother would not be expected to beat any of these riders, so he knew it was going to be very tough for him.

He had already been in a few battles with Holmqvist. In one race, Holmqvist had leaned so hard over Jansson in a turn a tactic for which the former Wolverhampton and Oxford star was renowned that his chain went right through Lars' boot and caused a nasty cut.

But the rider that Lars Jansson feared most in this race was Tommy Jansson. They had raced together with Young Sweden in England in the summer of '72. Lars had been impressed then by Tommy's willingness to learn and always improve. Tommy was so serious, on and off the track, that Lars was sure, like many others, that Tommy would one day become World Champion. Lars didn't feel intimidated, though. He always managed to put aside thoughts of who he was up against and almost rode better when he was up against quality opposition. Under a lot of pressure, Lars could often raise his own game.

BOOK EXTRACT – JANSSON: LEGEND WHO DIED YOUNG

Like in another qualifier for the Swedish Final, when Lars was chased by his own brother in one heat. Bengt was in his favourite position he was one of the best riders in the world when it came to sneaking up from behind and he really tried very hard against Lars. But Lars remained strong and he made it over four laps. It was a great effort and afterwards Bengt couldn't help feeling happy for his brother. Now Bengt was in the pits, wondering who he was going to cheer for. His own brother or his Smederna team-mate, Tommy? He just hoped that they were both going to make it through to the Nordic Final. Tommy made a practice start, lifting on his back wheel as he did so. He made another start and, to his great dismay, the same thing happened again. Joel stood in the pits shaking his head. 'Is it really the bike that's the problem?' he asked himself.

Tommy was upset but his bike lifted again anyway. He was not supposed to start this way any more. Why didn't the bike respond to him like he wanted it to? Even so, he still felt sure of winning the heat without machine failure, he was the most talented racer in the field and he was going to win the meeting if only he performed to his normal high standard. Tommy started off gate three.



Tommy Jansson, wearing the No.13 racejacket on the outside of Hasse Holmqvist during the fatal World Championship round in Stockholm. In less than 60 seconds Tommy was dead.

When the tapes went up, Holmqvist roared ahead, while Karlsson and Lars Jansson also made decent starts. Tommy's front wheel again lifted as he dropped the clutch which is exactly what was not supposed to happen. He was angry, although he often performed at his best when he was fired up. He started chasing the others.

He had four laps to make it and no-one doubted that he would. It was in moments like these that had made him so popular. The spectacular

chases from behind, the way he passed his opponents at will and thrilled the fans. This was also what made the sport so special. It was time for some of that sheer brilliance again. More than 3,000 spectators watched Tommy and they just knew he was not going to finish last in this heat, or any other that night. Among the crowd was Tommy's Smederna team-mate, Sven-Olof Lindh. Despite Tommy's bad start, Sven-Olof was also certain that Tommy would still win the race he'd seen it happen so many times before.

Going into the third corner on the first lap, Tommy decided to ride around the outside, to pick up more speed and line himself up perfectly to pass Lars Jansson on the next straight. Describing this race to me almost three decades later, Lars said he saw only Karlsson and Holmqvist in front of him. At the same time, Lars knew that Tommy would not be content to sit in fourth place. He was also aware that Tommy could be tough and ruthless on the track, although not at all dirty. All the riders had to hold on to their bikes really tightly to avoid crashing on the bumpy circuit.

All of a sudden, Lars ended up in a big hole, lost control of his bike and careered towards the fence . . . at exactly the same moment that Tommy was about to pass him on the outside. Their arms and handlebars became entangled. Lars felt they had got stuck together and at a speed of more than 60mph they were moving rapidly towards the solid, board fence.

A few thoughts raced through Lars' mind.
'We're going to crash.'
'This is it.'
'How am I going to hit the fence?'

Tommy, of course, must have had those same terrifying fears.

They couldn't shake themselves or their bikes loose. It was impossible to avoid what was going to happen next. They were going to crash very badly and there was no way of avoiding the inevitable.

In the pits, Bosse heard somebody scream out loud: 'Oh, no. What a crash!'

By that time, Joel was already on his way over to where Tommy lay. Shocked fans had seen two riders slam, head-first, right in to the fence. Joel had seen the crash from the pits as far away from the fourth corner, where it happened, as you could be. But he'd still been able to hear the sickening thud when the two riders thundered into the boards. 'This can never end well,' Joel thought to himself, as he ran across

the football pitch inside the speedway track, towards the scene of the serious accident.

The track doctor had rushed to attend the two fallen riders and Joel was quickly on the scene too. The only thing he could think about was that Tommy needed air, so he removed his son's mask, goggles, helmet and also unbuttoned Tommy's No.13 racejacket.

The sight of the blood almost made him lurch backwards in shock, for he could clearly see that Tommy's beautiful face had been badly damaged. The ambulance had returned from its second trip to the hospital and the crew ran over to Tommy. The doctor did her best to make Tommy breathe again. But he was gone.

Sven-Olof Lindh was in the stands with tears in his eyes. When he saw his friend being carried away to the ambulance, he saw one of Tommy's legs fall to the side. It was at that moment that Sven-Olof knew it was over.

Bosse, who had also run across the football pitch and was standing by Joel's side, didn't want to comprehend the worst. The only thing he could think about was how Tommy's beautiful face had been badly damaged. 'Poor, Tommy, he always looked so good,' a stunned Bosse remembers thinking.

Joel didn't want to understand either. "Come on, drive!" he barked to the ambulance crew. "You're need to hurry fast."

As the ambulance took off, Joel and Bosse went back to the pits together and found somebody to drive them to the hospital. Joel called the race director and told him: "I'm not sure how this is going to end, but don't race a single heat more before we know for sure how Tommy is doing."

Before joining his father on their way to hospital, Bosse momentarily sat down and Bernt Persson walked over to him. "Can I have a cigarette?" Bosse asked. They took one cigarette each.

Bernt was badly shaken up. He remembered the time when he'd been to Poland for pre-season training and he and the others had attended a Polish league match in which one Polish rider had died on the track in front of their eyes. After that tragedy, Bernt had been sick and lay in bed for days afterwards. He started shaking and developed a fever. It took him a while before he got over it. Like all the other riders in the sport, he was aware of the risks involved in racing. A few times, when he had been cruising around to the starting gate before a race, he'd thought to himself: 'I might never get back to the pits again.'

Now he and Bosse finished their cigarettes, clinging to the hope that Tommy was going to make it all right. Bernt mumbled to himself: 'No, no, no not Tommy. Not Joel's kid.' Back out on the track, Bengt Jansson was by his brother's side. Lars was badly hurt, bleeding and in a lot of pain.

Bengt couldn't believe it. His own brother and one of his best friends, involved in the same crash. Both were in very bad shape. "How are you?" Bengt asked Lars.

Lars never lost consciousness. His jaw and nose were broken but he knew he'd been lucky. He was in severe pain and he wasn't going to race again that night, but he was okay. At least he was still alive.

Nobody told Lars about Tommy's condition. Nobody in the car that took Joel and Bosse to the Sodersjukhuset hospital, in the southern part of central Stockholm, said anything during the drive there. Joel had seen bad crashes before, of course. He had attended the funerals of two riders who had died on the track. But for the sport to take his own son away from him . . . no, that just couldn't happen, he repeatedly told himself. Joel refused to give up hope and when they arrived at the hospital a glimmer of light emerged when a nurse told him and Bosse that Tommy had been taken for x-rays. "That's good, he can make it. This is the capital of Sweden, they have all the resources they need here," Bosse said.

Back home in Eskilstuna, Inga-Lill was watching television, having just finished her pizza. In the background, she listened to the sports report on the radio but when the phone rang she turned the volume of the radio down. Luckily she did, because that's when they reported her son's horrific accident.

At least she received the terrible news direct from her husband. "There's been an accident," Joel said.

Thoughts of all Bosse's crashes through the years immediately flashed through Inga-Lill's mind. "Is it Bosse?" she asked him. "No, it's Tommy. We're at Sodersjukhuset hospital. I don't know how this is going to end. I'll call you as soon as we hear anything," Joel told his wife.

Inga-Lill wanted to travel to Stockholm at once but, instead, she called a few people, including her mother, and they all promised to come over to comfort her. Lotta was at a friend's place in Flenm before starting her shift as an intern at

the nursery home at 9.30pm. She had been telling her friend about her planned move to London and the trip she would be taking to South Africa with Tommy the following winter. "I've never been this happy in my whole life," an excited Lotta told her.

Bosse, still wearing his speedway leathers and boots, and Joel were sitting by themselves in a waiting room at the hospital and desperate for news of Tommy's condition.

The door opened, a doctor walked in and Joel stood up.

"How is he doing?"

"Who are you?" the doctor asked.

"I'm Tommy's father."

"He is dead," the doctor said.

"What?"

"He was dead on arrival."

"What?"

Tommy had died of severe head injuries and a severed artery in his neck. Joel didn't want to understand. He started crying. Bosse didn't know what to do. He asked a nurse for a cigarette and she gave him a packet. Joel pulled himself together enough to call Inga-Lill. She grabbed the phone immediately. Joel said: "We don't have a Tommy any more."

Back in the pits at Gubbangen, mechanic Kenneth Swedin had collected all of Tommy's belongings together. Anders Michanek had felt sick when he'd heard bells from a church nearby, announcing some evening ceremony. Anders suspected it was a very bad omen and he feared the worst. Hans Holmqvist had already told all the other riders that whatever news they were going to hear from the hospital, they weren't going to continue the Swedish Final qualifying round that night. "Everybody who wants to stop racing for the night, raise your hand," Hans asked. Everybody raised their hands.

Bengt Jansson talked to a reporter from the Expressen newspaper, saying: "Tommy and me have been racing together in Smederna since 1973. We have been racing against each other for years in England. Tommy is the best young rider we have. He is a future World Champion."

A moment later the sad news came over the speakers. "The meeting is postponed. Tommy Jansson has died." Bengt Jansson broke down and started crying.

Kenneth Swedin sat down among all of Tommy's equipment while many riders started crying. A boy in the stands passed out. Kenneth looked at his blue t-shirt with the words 'Tommy Jansson Speedway' printed on it. He removed the shirt, turned it inside out and then put it back on again. He didn't want to talk to anybody not about Tommy. He knew this was it for him, he was going to leave the sport forever. Bengt Jansson stood still, like he'd been struck by lightning. "It's unbelievable. He was so great. He was the best." Benga started crying again.

When Tommy's grandmother, Maja, arrived at Inga-Lill's place, she wanted to calm her daughter and showed her some towels she had made for Tommy. They were for her grandson to take to England, to his new house where he was going to live with Lotta.

"Tommy is dead," Inga-Lill said.

"Why? Why?" Maja screamed as she collapsed to the floor.

The radio reported the tragic news again. In Flen, Lotta was still at her friend's house, unaware of what had happened, when her friend's boyfriend came over. Lotta told him about her and Tommy's plans but the boyfriend acted very strangely at the mention of his name. Lotta left quickly to go to work and couldn't help thinking about the boyfriend's strange behaviour. He then told his girlfriend about the awful news he'd heard on the radio the news he'd been unable to mention to Lotta just seconds before she'd left them to go to work.

At the same time, the evening sports news on TV began with a report of the speedway tragedy at Gubbangen. At home in Falun, Gote Nordin was sitting in front of the television when he suddenly screamed out. "Noooooo."

Lotta arrived at work, a nursing home for mentally retarded patients. One of the patients greeted her at the door and said. "There has been an accident . . . a guy has died . . . they said so on TV."

Lotta didn't understand what the patient was talking about. Then her boss emerged from the TV room and confirmed the devastating truth: "Lotta, they just said on television that Tommy has died in an accident."

At that moment, the front door opened and Lotta's friend and her boyfriend came in. They took care of Lotta, who was so shocked that she

BOOK EXTRACT – JANSSON: LEGEND WHO DIED YOUNG

hardly knew what was happening around her. "It must be a mistake, it can't be true. It must be a misunderstanding," she cried.

When they arrived in Eskilstuna, Lotta's mother and her husband were waiting anxiously for her outside the door to their house. That's the moment when reality struck Lotta. Tommy was never going to come back to her again.

A 39-39 draw away against Sheffield Tigers, where Wimbledon's guest rider Dave Morton had collected a maximum 15 points. He had achieved the impossible, or he had done what Tommy usually did. Cyril Maidment was suitably happy.

Next Tuesday the Dons had an away match against Leicester Lions and were looking forward to welcoming Tommy back into their line-up, even though Cyril knew that Wimbledon's superstar was not happy about missing a league fixture for Smederna.

But he also knew how loyal Tommy was towards Wimbledon. The march up the standings had just started and on the way back home to London Cyril called home. That's when he heard the news.

"I just can't believe it's true," he said. He had been involved in speedway for more than 30 years and had seen people die on the track. He had seen some complete nutcases flirting with disaster. But most of them escaped in one piece. Tommy was in a class by himself. In many ways, Cyril had looked at the young Swede as a perfectionist, a rider who was never dirty and never took any stupid risks. Something like this just couldn't happen. Not to Tommy.

On the way out from the hospital, Bosse and Joel met the parents of Per-Ake Gerhardsson, who still didn't know how badly injured their son was after his crash in the first heat, which seemed to have happened an eternity ago.

It was when Bosse saw the Gerhardssons that he broke down. He sat down on the roadside and cried, while Joel tried to comfort him. Together with Kenneth Swedin and Smederna supporters' club secretary Gunnar Arnold, Bosse and Joel sat in a car for the hour-and-a-half long ride back to Eskilstuna. Nobody said anything. Not a single word.

Back in the apartment at Tornerosgatan, Inga-Lill was waiting anxiously together with Bosse's wife Vivianne, other relatives and friends. The phone was ringing off the hook. Bosse, still wearing his leathers and boots from the fateful meeting, walked in to Tommy's room. He promised his parents he'd stay there overnight, but the only clothes he could borrow were Tommy's.

Bosse laid down and tried to sleep in his brother's bed but, not surprisingly, he didn't sleep a wink that night.

If you would like to read the full story about the rise and fall of the former Wimbledon crowd favourite, you can order the book for £15.99 (post-free in the UK) from www.retro-speedway.com or by calling 01708 734 502

NEWCASTLE SHOWGROUND – N.S.W

Pictures courtesy of Alan Garner





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

WHAT A YEAR THAT WAS!

After my last column in the world's finest on line speedway publication, I had planned on some more tales from Australia in 1988 but it's been such an eventful few months that I've decided to save that for a future issue and concentrate on more recent events.

Let's start with Kings Lynn and the historic & long awaited league championship win. Love 'em or hate them, the Play Offs provided some terrific entertainment and the atmosphere at the Norfolk Arena on the 2nd leg against Sheffield was simply electric. I've made no secret of the fact that I fancy a bash on the radio mic at Cardiff but even that would take 2nd place to the feelings we all shared on that October night.

When I spoke with the team on press day last year, it was obvious that they were on a mission and Kevin Doolan coined the phrase "We're doing it for Ash" in memory of the much missed Ashley Jones. From the Premier Trophy to the KO cup, the team were unstoppable but it was the league title that mattered and, after a wobbly performance up at Sheffield on the Thursday, there were a lot of insomniacs in the Kings Lynn camp that night!



Four 5/1 heat advantages for the Tigers gave them a healthy lead but by the time the gates were opened the next night at the Norfolk Arena, the mood was not only positive but very VERY determined! I can honestly say, the noise on parade was unbelievable. We were halfway down the home straight and team manager Rob Lyon confessed that, not only was he totally deafened by the air horns, he was lost for words. Just as well really as we couldn't hear him anyway!

The most fitting result I have seen in my 20 years of speedway presentation came in heat 14 when Kevin Doolan took the win that confirmed what we prayed for from March – The Kings Lynn Money Centre Stars were the Premier League champions. No sooner had he finished his double lap of honour, he rode to the 2nd bend to salute the fans who had proudly displayed a banner dedicated to Ashley throughout the season. Not a dry eye in the house after that!

Amongst the other highlights that night? Trying to do an interview for Anglia TV while keeping

hold of the radio mic and running a live commentary on BBC Radio Norfolk at the end of the meeting. For the many away fans who, over the years, have told me where I should stick my mic, their prayers were almost answered at one stage as I really did run out of hands!

Midway through another interview I was aware of someone behind me but by the time I realised what was going on, Trevor Harding and Troy Batchelor had poured ¾ of a bottle of "Chateaux Tesco's" down the back of my bright yellow Ski suit. It was worth it just to be a part of that night and I know one thing, Ash would have been very proud of them all.

PREMIER LEAGUE ON TV? THEY'LL NEVER DO THAT!

Why is there never any Premier League Speedway on TV? That's one of the most popular questions you'll hear or see on the many internet forums so, after a long battle (see previous speedway plus issues for details!) and many chats with Ken Burnett, we decided to have a go at producing a pilot programme for Motors TV on Sky 418. As with many small satellite channels, Motors don't pay for independent productions but they do give you airtime and the opportunity to use sponsors to finance the production costs.

I was invited to Rugby for a meeting with the BSPA to discuss content and ideas for the show and it was agreed that we could go ahead and produce a programme featuring highlights from the PLRC at Sheffield and some background items for newcomers to speedway. This was in July so we had a couple of months to assemble a crew and start working on the format.

It was too late to obtain a programme sponsor so it was decided (!) that we would ask everyone to work on the main meeting for the love of the sport (in other words, no money!) and that my company (Media Answers Limited) would finance everything else – so we did! Trips to Berwick, Glasgow, Mildenhall, Rye House and Sheffield for stock pictures, countless phone calls and emails to everyone and anyone we could involve and then 3 weeks solid on the production work which meant 3 weeks of no other work – a costly exercise when you run a small business!

Ken and I agreed on a team that included the “Dave Lanning Sound-alike” Burnett as commentator and my good mate and near neighbour Ollie Allen making his debut as co commentator. On the day of the meeting we needed four main cameras so my better half Tracey took a break from DVD filming at Kings Lynn to cover turn four, Bob Tasker from GRT Media provided himself and two of his crew for the rest of the track and Chris Moorcroft did his bionic man impression on the centre. My Job was to present the show and keep everyone happy – well one out of two ‘aint bad?

The end result appeared on Motors 3 weeks later and the feedback was very positive. We had emails, phone calls and about 20 pages on the speedway forum so the seed had been planted and Motors Executives were more than happy. Of course there were things that we would change but for a first effort, I was pretty proud of it.

The problem now is where do we go from here? The BSPA have given us their blessing for the 2007 season, Motors TV want more (why not, it doesn't cost them anything?) The majority of the fans want us to do it but the reality is that my company can't afford to subsidise the project. As I said, we had a fantastic team on the day at Sheffield but all the other work was done by me and although Ken and Bob would be happy to help out every week if we asked, it's just not a viable business plan to spend time on something with no financial return. The solution seems simple, find a sponsor! Easier said than done and Ken Burnett sends me emails on a daily basis with ideas and contacts but so far, nobody wants to invest in the programme. We have reduced costs to a minimum but it's only fair that Tracey, Ken, Bob, Ian, Steve and Chris earn money for their work and I need to cover costs for the work I have to sub contract out so I can concentrate on the programme.

I reckon it will be easier to get one sponsor for the entire season as opposed to an individual advertiser per show but I'm keen to listen to any sensible ideas, speak to any genuine potential sponsors or send advertiser packages to any company who may wish to take advantage of this European wide advertising opportunity.

We'll keep you posted via this site and the British speedway forum but you can always sent an email to mb@mikebennettspeedway.co.uk or visit www.mikebennettspeedway.co.uk if you think you may have some contacts we can try.

NORMAN BENNETT

Well I did say it had been an eventful few months and I think that's an understatement. Long serving speedway fans from Scotland will remember Norman (my Dad) as the track photographer at Hampden Park from 1969 when Charlie Monk was King and Jim McMillan was just starting his career. Two of his most treasured photos were Charlie Monk with a smile on his face (very rare) and Ivan Mauger wearing a Glasgow Tigers race jacket during an individual meeting in 1970. He introduced me to speedway back then and the rest really is history.

I used to joke with him that if I hadn't gone to Hampden that April night I wouldn't have found my first radio job as a speedway reporter and if he hadn't encouraged me to follow in his footsteps as a photographer and later, a camera operator, I may never have worked in television so it was all his fault!

Years later the roles were reversed and I gave him his first computer. He always made a point of telling me the hours spent reformatting his drives were all my fault but he genuinely became a computer expert as time went on. We would often spend hours on the phone talking about new computer programmes and comparing notes on who's machine was faster. He also took the blame for being my dad but enjoyed the fact that my work included the sport that he introduced me to as a child. He used to make a point of telling people that he was the nice one in the family and it had missed a generation!

For the past 18 months he fought a long and brave battle against cancer but sadly, he passed away in December. I would like to thank everyone for their emails, phone calls, cards and letters and in particular, the management, riders and fans at Glasgow speedway who made his only visit to Ashfield last year so special. People that didn't even know him expressed concern over his illness and he would have been surprised that so many people were interested in his well being. Over the next few months, I'm hoping to scan some of the many hundreds of his speedway negatives that he kept in pristine condition and perhaps show some of them on this site. He would have liked that.

Mike Bennett

“ I wasn’t anywhere near as focussed as I should have been, and I lost my way. I lost track of where I was going and where I wanted to go, and I didn’t work hard. ”

Alex Raby interviews Oliver Allen of the Coventry Bees.

While riders were preparing for another exciting Brighton Bonanza Individual Championship, the tenth since 1997, one rider was relaxing in the narrow confines of the dusty loading-bay pits. Oliver Allen was preparing for a meeting in which he was among the favourites in his own way, and allowed us a glimpse into his career, one which stretches back to his early days for Peterborough in 1997.

After the early days for the ‘Thundercats’ in what was then the Amateur League, he moved on to ride for Norfolk and Mildenhall in the Conference League. In six matches with the latter he boasted a 9.00 average, while in his six matches with Norfolk he registered an impressive double-figure sum. He still fondly recalls the learning curve which he undertook. “They were fun times, that was one of the reasons it was helpful is because I really enjoyed it. There’s kind of no pressure on you at that age, the teams I rode for then were a joy to ride for.” The 1998 season was indeed a busy one for the young Brit, as he also took on rides with Peterborough’s Premier League team as well as Arena Essex in a very important period for any young rider, the early stages.

The 1999 season was a full-time step up into the Premier League, and after making the commitment many fans quickly saw the potential and ability in their new signing who became the team’s only ever-present that year. Allen stayed with Premier League and Swindon despite the many pundits who opined that a shorter

stay and swift obtention of an Elite League berth would be wiser. As he explains “I was really happy there, I think the track there had everything to make you as a rider. It’s fast, and you also have to turn the bike pretty sharp. As a young rider you can learn everything at that track, so I had no reason to leave and I was happy there with the promotion.”



Olly Allen
(Picture by Steve Hone)

Many have been critical of the doubling-up rule, which allows young riders to compete for two different teams across different leagues in an attempt to allow them to experience more difficult races and to progress as a rider. Olly took advantage of that rule to its fullest extent, and sees no reason for it to be scrapped. As he states "Yes, it was very helpful; it's a good thing for the English riders. I don't think anyone else should be able to do it, but for English guys it's good. It's a great way to encourage people to take the step up into the Elite League."

The full-time move into the sport's highest tier was simply a natural move for Olly, as Swindon also moved into the Elite League at the same time. However, the transition was not as easy as many had expected, and Allen struggled to get to grips with his full-time berth. "It was quite hard for me, really. I started the season really good, then I had a few accidents and got knocked out a couple of times, and I lost my way in the sport for a year to 18 months. I wasn't anywhere near as focussed as I should have been, and I lost my way. I lost track of where I was going and where I wanted to go, and I didn't work hard. Whether that's to do with the club, or whether it's to do with the people that were around me, I don't know. No, it's unfair to blame anyone else; really, I was the only one to blame. It's up to yourself to look after yourself, so it was a hard step up. I was ready for it, at the time, but after the crashes I had it kind of got me down; it was a bad time really."

After such a struggling period, the natural progression was to take a backward step and to take time to prepare for another assault on the top-flight. Although it was seemingly a two-pace reverse move, it did help to boost the rider's confidence, and he was soon banging in great scores once again. The move had clearly paid off, "it was good; good to ride for a local track and I went there to enjoy my speedway again and get focussed again, and it worked for me. I can't say enough about how much I enjoyed my time at Kings Lynn Speedway, it was fantastic."

Towards the end of that same season, Allen was in demand once again for Elite League rides, and soon found himself on his way to south-coast team Eastbourne,

once again taking advantage of the doubling-up ruling. "It was good; Eastbourne has been a track that I have always liked, and the track held no fear for me. There's a real family atmosphere at Eastbourne, I love it, and I can't say enough good words about the track, the promotion, or the other riders. It was really good."

The success he enjoyed further bolstered the number of interested parties as he looked to re-join the Elite League for a second full-on assault. This time he rode with Coventry, for whom he has also signed for the 2007 season after a brilliant debut season in the yellow and black of the Bees. He has clear targets set for the coming season in the British League, and shows a determination which will be useful in the future. "On a British League level, I have upped my average by a couple of points this year, and I intend to do the same next year. I will work as hard or harder this winter, and I'll carry on doing the same things as I did last year to improve, and hopefully I can push another couple of points on my average and go from there."

Olly has had a huge amount of success for a rider at just 24. His appearances in the World Under-21 Championship gave him useful experience, and culminated in him becoming a World Under-21 Finalist back in 2002 in the Czech Republic. He has also earned places in the final of the British Championship, with one memorable match being one of his early competitions back in 2003, when he finished 8th at Eastbourne's Arlington Stadium. At a club level he has won cups and trophies galore; including league titles, knockout cup success, a 4-team tournament win and young shield victory. Despite this glory, he is still focussed on his individual aims for the future. "On a long term basis, I want to be in the Grand Prix. That's why I started speedway, to be part of that kind of circus, and I want to be in the England team. I don't think that's out of sight for this season, I really don't. If I can improve really quickly at the start of the season, there's no reason why I can't be in the World Cup team."

BLACKBIRD ROAD - LEICESTER



Pictures by Chris Holmes and Dean Murphy

OPENING NIGHTS: POWDERHALL

A look back to 1977 when the Edinburgh Monarchs opened the doors at Powderhall Stadium.

Between 1968 and 1976 Edinburgh was a city without a speedway team. The Monarchs had lost their Old Meadowbank home when the stadium was demolished to allow a new Commonwealth Games stadium to be built. They had switched their operations to Coatbridge for the couple of seasons that followed but the venture proved to be shortlived.

Despite this, the sport could still boast a great following in the city. Supporters clubs remained active and fans got their regular 'fix' at either Glasgow or Berwick.

Powderhall Stadium, a well appointed greyhound circuit not far from the town centre, had often been coveted by prospective speedway promoters but the Greyhound Racing Association (GRA) had always rebuffed all approaches. That changed in late 1976 when Neil MacFarlane negotiated a deal to allow the Monarchs to be reborn.

MacFarlane was already a recognised promoter having operated the Paisley circuit in 1975 and 1976. That track wasn't proving too profitable and he saw Powderhall as a more viable concern.

MacFarlane pressed ahead with his plans but he was dealt a blow when Mike Parker played his trump card. Mike Parker Promotions operated a number of tracks throughout the country and held exclusive rights to promote speedway at GRA stadiums. He decided to partially exercise that option and join MacFarlane as co-promoter of the Monarchs.

Building a side was never going to be easy for a new track located so far in the North. Bert Harkins, a Monarch from the sixties, was recruited to captain the side. He'd spent the previous season racing on the "shinbone alley" circuits in the USA but had been a reliable performer for many years. As a big personality and as a link with the

past he was an obvious and excellent choice to lead the team.

His team mate Jack Millen was another huge personality and a more rough-and-ready performer it's difficult to recall. The third heatleader, Charlie Monk, offered a complete contrast to his two aforementioned colleagues. He was one of the great 'quiet men' of the sport and legend has it he got rid of his phone because he didn't want to be bothered by people. Charlie had been a great hero at Glasgow in the sixties but by this time he was struggling with arthritis in his wrists and was a shadow of his former self.



"Millen the Villain"

Dave Trownson and Alan Bridgett were the second strings in the new team. Trownson was to remain with the Monarchs for 11 seasons and become one of the club's all-time top scorers. 'Doc' Bridgett combined his racing with track maintenance duties where he worked alongside Ted Flanagan. Bridgett is once again in charge of track

OPENING NIGHTS: POWDERHALL STADIUM

maintenance for the Monarchs at their present Armadale home.

Completing the side on opening night were Aberdonian Alan Morrison and Neil Webb.

A crowd reported to be in the region of 10,000 packed into Powderhall to watch the new Monarchs team take on the Berwick Bandits. The fixture was initially scheduled as a league match but the Monarchs' management decided to play safe and requested it be changed to a challenge, presumably wary of the lack of home advantage the new side would initially face.

The honour of winning heat one went to Willie Templeton after mechanical gremlins slowed Bert Harkins. Willie was a veteran of the Scottish scene and had ridden for the Monarchs during their Old Meadowbank days. He was to prove a thorn in the Monarchs' side throughout the meeting and ended up with eight points to show for his efforts.

The Bandits ran out 42-36 winners on the night with Dave Gifford, an irregular columnist on this very website, scoring a 12 point maximum. He also left the stadium as the new track record holder after winning heat twelve in a time of 70.2 seconds.

Best Monarchs on the night were 'Millen the Villain' with ten points and Charlie Monk with 8. Dave Trownson got off to an inauspicious start as he recorded a big fat zero, though he more than made up for it in the years that followed.

15th April 1977 - Challenge Match

Edinburgh **36**
Jack Millen 10, Charlie Monk 8, Bert Harkins 7, Alan Bridgett 6, Alan Morrison 4, Neil Webb 1, Dave Trownson 0

Berwick **42**
Dave Gifford 12, Willie Templeton 8, Graham Jones 7, Mike Hiftle 5, Noel Suckling 5, Robin Adlington 4, Wayne Brown 1

- 1) Templeton, Harkins, Hiftle, Bridgett (exc) (no time)
- 2) Morrison, Suckling, Webb, Brown (f) 74.0
- 3) Gifford, Millen, Adlington, Trownson 70.7
- 4) Monk, Suckling, Morrison, Jones (exc) 72.1
- 5) Hiftle, Millen, Templeton, Trownson (r) 71.3
- 6) Jones, Harkins, Brown, Bridgett 70.7
- 7) Gifford, Monk, Harkins, Adlington 71.3
- 8) Bridgett, Templeton, Suckling, Webb 71.6
- 9) Jones, Millen, Bridgett, Brown 70.8
- 10) Gifford, Bridgett, Adlington, Harkins 74.0
- 11) Monk, Millen, Templeton, Hiftle 71.8
- 12) Gifford, Harkins, Jones, Trownson 70.2
- 13) Millen, Adlington, Hiftle, Monk 71.5

The result was a blow to the new promotion as they must have hoped to start with a victory. The defeat was perhaps inevitable as Berwick were already well into their season and the Monarchs were short on match fitness.

Mike Parker was sure that results would improve as the team became familiar with their new surroundings. He gave Berwick little credit when he reflected on the match, saying:

"Everybody knows that normally Bert Harkins and Charlie Monk would walk all over Dave Gifford. So Dave got a maximum tonight. Nobody could catch him and he was instrumental in sending Monarchs back in with their first defeat. I know Dave. I brought him over from New Zealand when he was a kid and he rode for me for seven years. He wouldn't have lived with Charlie or Bert tonight if the Monarchs had got in enough match practice."

He was also happy with the attendance and the prospects for the venue:

"I'm over the moon about the response. I knew we'd bring a whole lot of people back to the sport but tonight's turn out exceeded everybody's expectations. If the gates level out to 4,000 or 5,000, we'll live. The queues just after seven were so long I had to go on the gate myself! I tell you this track is going to be the envy of every other in Britain - in both leagues. The potential is mind boggling."

Powderhall remained the home of the Monarchs until the end of 1995.

BOOEY – AROUND IN CIRCLES

Eric Boocock is delighted to be going back to Belle Vue. But in this extract from his auto-biography, BooeY recalls his acrimonious departure from the old Hyde Road set-up in 1982....

HAVING Chris Morton and Peter Collins leading the Aces was a team manager's dream. Mort was in PC's shadow much of the time, which was a shame because anywhere else he would have been an outstanding No.1. His contribution was absolutely enormous and to have him in a team with PC was a dream.

I never rated Chris any less highly than I rated Peter. They were both my No1 and, if ever you needed two boys to pull a 5-1 out of the bag when the chips were down, they were the pair to do it.

Mort was dyed-in-the-wool Belle Vue and a great team member. The deal he was on wasn't good neither was PC's because in those days nobody was on a good deal but he just wanted to ride for the Aces. If you said the wrong thing to Mort he would bite and respond, but that didn't work with PC. If you wanted to get Peter going you would have to ask him questions like: "Is your bike OK tonight?" or "Have you lost some compression?" Talking to him like that, and making him think, could really have an effect.

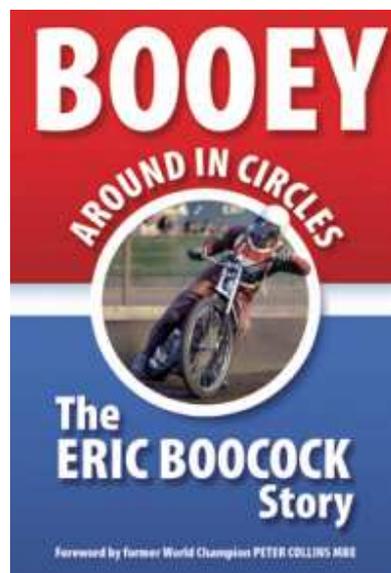
That is a part of trying to build a successful team all the riders are different and respond in different ways. Some would want a shoulder to cry on, others would want a kick up the arse!

In 1981, however, the dynamic duo looked like they had ridden their last meeting together in Belle Vue colours. At the very end of 1980, PC crashed heavily in the KO Cup final at Cradley and damaged his shoulder really badly. He managed just a handful of meetings the following year and then announced his retirement.

He was back in 1982, but he was certainly serious about calling it quits. Even today we haven't got to the bottom of how that cup final was given the go-ahead to take place. It was right at the end of the season so the weather wasn't so good and on the morning of the meeting I had a call from Cradley to say the meeting was off because the track was too bad.

I then phoned our riders and passed on the news. Then, at about one o'clock, I had another

phone call to say the meeting was back on. I wasn't happy because I had already told everyone the meeting was off but there were no spare dates and it was right at the end of the season, so I agreed to ring round all the riders and tell them it was back on. Unfortunately, one of them had made alternative arrangements and couldn't make it so I had no alternative but to go with a weakened team.



If I knew then what I know now I would have refused, but I was trying to be sporting and doing what I thought was best for speedway. When we got there the Dudley Wood track was terrible and PC crashed heavily, injuring his shoulder. In fact he did it so badly that it's still not right today.

What we still can't get an answer to, even to this day, is who authorised the meeting to be called off? And, more to the point, who authorised it to be back on again once it had already been called off? It shouldn't have gone ahead the conditions were terrible and, in hindsight, I realised I should have been firm and refused to go. Just to add insult to PC's injury, Cradley won the cup.

Peter declared that he wouldn't be able to ride the following year and announced his

retirement, although he subsequently made a comeback when he felt fit enough and went on to reach another World Final. But when he told me to plan the team without him, it left me with the difficult task of replacing him. How on earth do you replace Peter Collins?

The rider I chose to take his place probably the only option at the time, to be honest was New Zealand star Larry Ross, who we bought from Wimbledon for £18,000. He had always gone well at Belle Vue and was looking for a move, so I spoke to Jack Fearnley and a deal was struck. Everything was signed, sealed and delivered, and Larry was all set to make his debut at Belle Vue the following Saturday.

The only thing we didn't have was £18,000! Jack had to go down on the train from Manchester to London to meet the directors of Trust House Forte to ask them to sanction the spending of £18,000 little did they know that the contracts had already been signed and that we had effectively spent the money before we had even got it! Jack was very nervous because the club could easily have folded if they had turned down our request for the money to buy a new No.1. Fortunately they agreed and Larry turned out to be a good signing. He was easy going and got on with his job I enjoyed having him there.

By this time I was also a member of the BSPA management committee. It was amazing to think that, when I had first switched to the other side of the fence I was made unwelcome and seen as a man who was suddenly going to start riding again after a couple of seasons, knowing all the secrets of the BSPA's inner sanctum. Then they realised I wasn't as bad as they first feared I might be and invited me to serve on their management committee. I stayed on the management committee for a number of years and I did so because I wanted to do what I thought was best for the sport. If you are going to change anything, you need to be in a position where your views can be heard.

It was quite an honour to be voted on and in a few short years I had gone from being a rider to team manager, to co-promoter and now management committee member. But my time at Belle Vue was running out.

There had been rumours that THF wanted to sell Belle Vue for some time and Stuart Bamforth emerged as a prospective buyer. There were other suitors but both Jack and I felt that Bamforth was the best option. He had been world stock car champion, which may not be the greatest accolade, but it showed he had been involved in sport and was successful at a high level.

Jack and I knew more about Belle Vue Speedway than anyone at THF headquarters in London we had all the gate figures, programme sales and everything else from every meeting we had run there. Jack gave them to Bamforth quite openly so that he knew what he was letting himself in for and, to be fair, THF London hadn't a clue about speedway, only the Belle Vue Zoological Gardens operation as a whole.

In November of that year the deal went through. Everyone who worked for Belle Vue was actually made redundant by THF because Bamforth didn't want to get involved in any of the pay-offs, but Roy Carter and I were both employed by him straight away in our existing jobs so we were never out of work.

My job throughout the winter was to deal with season ticket sales and get on with all the usual close season jobs. But throughout that time I hardly heard from Bamforth at all. Whenever he phoned he was very abrupt and straight to the point. If a conversation could last a minute it would last a minute, not 65 seconds.

He never asked me how things were going, whether we had sold many season tickets, if I wanted a hand with anything nothing at all. If I had been in his position I would have been so grateful that someone was doing the spadework and want to know how things were progressing, but Bammy was too busy selling scrap from his yard to raise the money for his Belle Vue purchase.

My first suspicions that my working relationship with Bamforth would not be a good one came after he asked me to build up three bikes over the winter while he decided which riders would be on which deals. I still had the shop with Diane so it wasn't a problem for me to do that of an evening. It was fine . . . until I gave him the bill.

He turned very nasty and demanded to know where I thought he was going to get that sort of money from. I told him straight I didn't care. He had placed the order with me and I had spent my own money on buying the parts to build the bikes up surely it was only fair that he paid me what I was owed. Eventually, about three or four weeks later, he paid me, and only then did he get the bikes.

I found Stuart Bamforth difficult to talk to and our relationship soon deteriorated further. I used to write up all my own programme notes and, as the start of the 1982 season approached, I took my contribution for the first meeting into his office, which was in one of two cabins we had at the track. He was in there with some of his workers eating lunch and, no sooner

had I given him the notes than someone had knocked soup all over them.

"Never mind," said Bamforth, "you can write them again." This annoyed me because there wasn't a hint of an apology and a complete disregard for the time and effort it would take for me to type them up a second time.

The final straw came on the night of the opening meeting. Bamforth decided that he didn't want any freeloaders getting in to meetings for nothing so he made virtually everybody pay to get in the St John Ambulance Brigade included. Taffy Owen had the track shop and, even though he paid a rent to be there, he had to pay too. He ended up passing money through the fence to the St John people so that they could get into the stadium.

I'd seen a system in Australia where everyone, even the competitors, had to pay at the gate but, once you had signed in at the office, you got your money back. It's a great foolproof system to clamp down on people getting in for nothing when they shouldn't and you can't knock it. Bamforth wanted to apply the same principle only he didn't tell anyone what he was planning to do and the first they knew of it was when they arrived at the stadium for the opening meeting of the season.

He banned all NUJ passes so respected national newspaper journalists like Richard Frost and Dick Bott, who had given Belle Vue such good and free publicity, had to pay to get in and do their job. He upset so many people that night, I couldn't believe it. We had always worn a collar and tie on the centre green during meetings, but there he was in a check fleece, jeans and boots smoking a big, long cigar.

That was when I realised I'd had enough. I had just enjoyed seven fantastic seasons and I simply didn't want to put up with it. So after the meeting, when it had quietened down a bit, I went over to see him in his office. I said to him: "Stuart, you have fulfilled your ambition by buying Belle Vue Speedway but after one meeting it's plain to see that me and you are chalk and cheese. We're not going to get on."

He was the boss so things weren't going to change. It was never going to get any better for me so I told him I was leaving with immediate effect. The only thing I wanted out of my office was my England file so I went across, picked it up, and walked out. It was a poor end to a lovely relationship with Belle Vue. It was 38 miles there and 38 miles back but I absolutely loved going to work there and I could quite happily have gone in seven days a week.

I didn't mention a word to Diane about what I had done until I arrived home later that night. We were sitting down having a cup of tea when I casually mentioned I had told Bamforth to stick his job where the sun doesn't shine! She couldn't believe it but I told her not to worry. "We're not going to die because I haven't got a job," I told her.

The following day Bamforth phoned me and asked if I had simmered down. I told him that I had, but that my decision stood I wouldn't be going back. He made it clear that he wanted me to stay but that was the nicest thing he had said to me since November and, as such, was a bit late.

Ian Thomas turned out to be my successor as team boss and he went on to win the league that season. That was the Aces team I had put together, of course, and Ian went on record as saying his success had come with a side he'd inherited from me, which was nice of him.

Bamforth was a grafter, there's no doubt about it, but he had to work because all the money he had in the world had gone into Belle Vue Speedway. But there is a right way and a wrong way of doing it. Being polite and civil is the right way treating people like dirt is the wrong way. Peter Morrey and a lot of the track staff left soon after I did, so it obviously wasn't just me who felt that was about Bamforth.

Having bought the stadium for a reported £350,000 in 1982, Bamforth then sold it at the end of the 1987 season for £2.2m. It wasn't long before the bulldozers moved in, but he had no option really because he couldn't have gone on much longer with the stadium in the state it was in. It would have cost millions to put right. It would have been cheaper to demolish it and start again. He spent a lot of money on the toilet blocks but the whole place was very, very dilapidated and needed completely rewiring. Literally just across the road was another good stadium where he could base the team, so when he sold up I thought: 'Good luck to him.'

By the end of 1982 I was looking for work outside speedway. Because not only had I left Belle Vue, but I'd quit my position as England manager too.

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