

Catching Up With...Mike Bennett



Mike and his entourage
(Picture by Steve Hone)

You had a break from the sport for a few years before returning to it. What has speedway been like second time around?

Interesting is one way I would describe it! I've seen my club transform from a Cinderella side to an all conquering team at Premier League level. In a lot of ways, things have moved forward but not all for the better. When I left the sport in the late 90s there was no such thing as an air fence at domestic level, riders wore leathers and I don't remember quite so many riders being seriously hurt?

It's a bit more professional by way of marketing and general approach by some promoters yet, travelling around the tracks last year, I was amazed to see that nothing has changed regarding facilities for supporters at many stadiums. If a family of four have to pay in excess of £50 for a night out, the least they expect is somewhere to sit, clean toilets and a bit more than a caravan offering hot dogs and a burger.

I went to one track last week (no, I'm not saying where!) and the stadium was exactly the same as the last time I was there in 1987! People expect more for their money these days and when I read about crowds being down here and numbers dropping there, it's hardly surprising.

As for the racing? Sorry people, I have the video evidence to prove it, the racing is not as good at Elite or Premier League level as it was in the late 80s and early 90s. Sure, the times might have been a second slower then but things were a lot less predictable. The best racing I've seen has been at Conference level although the Premier League Pairs at Somerset last year was a bit special.

I just don't see that lay down engines and fancy forks have helped to make the sport more exciting. There's not as much dirt at most tracks either compared to 10 years ago and it's a knock on effect. Today's bikes are easier to ride if the track is slicker yet you

can't pass very well on a slick track so the fans are missing out on closer racing. Well, that's my opinion anyway.....

There have been many great nights at King's Lynn in recent seasons, but which ones do you hold the fondest memories of?

There are a couple of recent memories that spring to mind, the first one being the KO cup final of 2005 with the 2nd leg at Rye House. We had a big lead from the first leg but everyone knew that Rye would turn it on at their home track and not many people gave us a chance.

When Ollie Allen got us off to a flying start in the first race and Jan Jaros won heat two it was game on and, after too long in the speedway wilderness, Kings Lynn took the KO Cup for the first of what was to become a hat trick of wins.

On a personal note I just remember the smile on Ashley Jones face when we filmed him at the end of the meeting. He told me that night how much this had meant and that nobody could take that feeling away from him. Who would have guessed what a cruel turn of events would take place just a few weeks after that celebration and that we wouldn't see Ash again the following year.

With that in mind, I would have to say the strongest memory I have is the following season when Kevin Doolan (who was Ashley's best mate for years) came across the line to take the win that gave the Money Centre Stars their play off league title win in 2006. There was not a dry eye in the house when Kevin rode round to the 2nd bend to salute the fans who had a beautiful banner dedicated to Ash. That win, in fact the entire season was dedicated to Ashley and it was fitting that Kevin was the rider who took the win. The atmosphere that night was like nothing I have ever experienced in speedway and will remain as my personal highlight and fondest memory.

During the eighties and nineties you ran the highly successful MBI video company and I understand the entire video archive is now available to purchase on DVD?

Yes, after years of saying it wasn't possible we finally managed to lift all the old VHS tapes and put them on DVD. Not an easy task but it's done now and the fun has been watching some of the tapes while they were being transferred. Names like Erik Gundersen, Simon Wigg, Per Jonsson, Hans Nielsen, Sam Ermolenko, Chris Morton, Kelvin Tatum, Henka Gustafsson, The Luckhurst brothers, Andy Galvin... the list is endless.

It's so sad to see riders in their prime who's careers were cut short by injury or illness but the racing and pure nostalgia makes up for the lack of technical expertise we have now.

Some of the racing at tracks no longer in existence is head and shoulders above some of today's tracks. Places like Long Eaton and Milton Keynes were hardly Wembley standards but the racing was superb.

There are a few meetings that stand the test of time even today despite the lack of graphics and special effects. All we've done is transfer them from VHS to disk to make them future proof - until we're all using Blu-ray then we'll have to do it all over again!

Which meetings would you particularly recommend to potential customers?

That's a difficult one as some meetings were better produced with two or three cameras yet the racing was average and other single camera shoots were well worth watching. I think my favourite league style meetings were the Wimbledon ones as we always made a special effort filming there. We had real characters too with Andy Graham, Neville Tatum and Pete Chapman up for a laugh most of the time.

Meetings featuring Glasgow were always good too as they gave 100% every time. They won at Milton Keynes one year and the tape sales on that meeting alone paid for a flight to Australia!

The most popular DVDs are the old "Anything can happen on the night" and we now have the entire set available as a collection. We have a video night at Kings Lynn in December and show clips from those old productions and they always go down a storm.

The 1990 World Final from Bradford is another popular choice with Per Jonsson and Shawn Moran taking it right down to the wire. We have regular customers from Newcastle who take everything we ever filmed home and away plus a chap from Poole who loves all the old away meetings involving the Pirates.

Watching the Kings Lynn meetings from the late 80s is a real eye opener and for a while the only team that didn't win at Saddlebow Road was Kings Lynn!!

Finally, you've never made any secret of your desire to present the British GP at Cardiff. Any progress on that front or have you given up on that particular dream?

The truth is that politics and sport have always meant that speaking your mind will see you upsetting those in power and some people seem to remember comments made in 1986 and continue to hold that thought!

I have made a few suggestions about ways to improve the already great product and have recently been talking to the organisers about doing exactly what we did at Kings Lynn recently before the Elite League pairs was rained off. It's something I have done on a regular basis in my "other life" and involves going round the crowd with a

camera following me while I try and interview them beaming the pictures up on the big screen.

The kids love it, their parents love it, the fans enjoy seeing me struggle to get a sentence out of some of the people and it involves the public. The only positive thing written on the speedway forum about the rained off pairs was me and the fans on the big screen so that's one thing I KNOW would work at Cardiff.

As I've said before, I don't want the announcers job. The bloke who does that now is very professional and articulate and is really spot on in that role. I am much happier in with the crowd and talking to the people. Even if the riders are too busy to talk, there are plenty of others who are good for a few words. That's where I think I could do a good job but it's not down to me is it?

In the meantime, I'll carry on doing what we do at Kings Lynn for as long as I can - or as long as the fantastic Stars fans want me to!

Mike's Website - <http://www.mediaanswers.co.uk/speedway/index.htm>

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