

Riders to Remember....Bjorn Knutsson

By Geoff Langley



Bjorn Knutsson

In any list of speedway's greatest riders the names of Ove Fundin and Barry Briggs will be very close to the top (some would say at the top), yet Bjorn Knutsson who was for several years their contemporary and in every respect their equal has been largely forgotten. This is probably because his international career was relatively short, but in those few short years he won every major honour the sport had to offer, before retiring, aged 28. So I hope this tribute will jog a few memories.

Bjorn first crept into the Speedway Star and News World Rankings at Number 19 in 1959. The following year, aged 22 he was in the top ten, then for the rest of his career he was never ranked lower than fourth.

He was still only 22 when first selected for Sweden's world cup side, but it was the following year, 1961 that he set the world on fire. In that year he qualified for his first World Final, by coming second only to Ove Fundin in the European Championship and beating the great Igor Plechanov into third place. Then, at Malmo, he almost took the world title at his first attempt. He won four races and set the three fastest times of the night, but fell when matched against the eventual winner, Fundin when second place would have brought overall victory. As it was he took the silver medal after beating Briggo and Gote Nordin in a run-off. The same year he signed for Southampton, where he was in a formidable partnership with Barry Briggs and it was no surprise that Southampton finished second in the National League that year and then went on to become clear winners in 1962.

In the 1962 World Final Knutsson took 10 points from 4 rides but an engine failure in his other race left him facing Ove Fundin in a run off for the bronze medal. Fundin won the run off after Knutsson fell. However he had the consolation of having won both the Nordic and European Championships that year, beating Fundin into second place on both occasions. A trio of victories over Fundin was completed when he beat him in the Golden Helmet match race championship.

Ove Fundin won the 1963 World Final, but dropped his only point of the night to Knutsson, who was the only rider to out-gate the fast-starting Fundin, and then held on to get the biggest cheer have ever heard in a speedway stadium as he took the chequered flag after both riders performed a master-class in high speed riding. Bjorn finished second overall with 13 points. He had however retained the European Championship, again pushing Fundin into second place so there was very little to choose between them by this stage.

In 1964 he came to West Ham where I saw him regularly. He was an extremely stylish rider who always seemed to find plenty of drive without wasting an ounce of effort by wandering off line, overshooting a bend or lifting his front wheel. His inch-perfect machine control enabled him to dive into the narrowest of gaps between an opponent and the apex of a corner then nudge the opponent aside without knocking him off and thus not getting excluded. He was, in my opinion one of the most exciting riders I have ever seen.

He was only fifth in the 1964 World Final after heavy rain turned the track into a mud bowl and made serious racing almost impossible, but his performances over the season, which included Nordic Champion, still kept him third in the Speedway Star World Rankings. However in 1965 he swept all before him, taking the World Title at Wembley and moving to number one in the World Rankings.

Having achieved his ambition and had an injury-free career, apart from a broken arm, he seems to have decided to quit at the top. His attention seems to have been on business interests in the 1966 season, form suffered slightly, and he retired .

It was a loss to speedway as he was only about a year older than Ivan Mauger and was the only rider with a realistic chance of challenging Mauger's domination of the sport from 1968-79. I have often pondered on whether any Ivan's Six World Crowns might otherwise have gone to Knutsson. We will never know, of course, but I think there is a high chance they some of them would have. People often overlook the fact that Mauger was unable to win the World title until Knutsson had retired and Briggs and Fundin who were both several years older, and by then had been at the top for more than a decade, were getting past their best. Mauger was almost 29 years old when he first became World Champion, which makes him one of the oldest men to win for the first time. Moreover Mauger was never ranked above Knutsson in the World Rankings. Bjorn Knutsson on the other hand proved himself to be capable of beating Briggs and Fundin at the peak of their powers. Maybe some will disagree with this assessment but by any standard, Bjorn Knutsson was a great rider who deserves to be remembered.

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