

Catching Up With...The Blunsdon Blog

We catch up with Graham Cooke to find out what's new with his popular website.



The Blunsdon Blog has proven to be a quality and popular addition to the 'net over the last 18 months. For those who have yet to visit, how would you describe it?

I suppose the best way to describe the Blunsdon Blog would be a slightly irreverent look at the hidden side of speedway, what happens behind the scenes to enable the sport to continue. The speedway that we see from the terraces, on the television, in the written media and on most web sites is the gloss and the glamour of the sport; the Blunsdon Blog deals with the "getting down and dirty" aspect. Speedway is a little like a swan on a river - reasonably calm and serene on the surface, but working like a mad thing underneath.

Have you notice any change in attitudes to the track staff since the blog was launched?

That's one of the really positive spin offs of the Blog. It's great that people like Gerald Richter and Rod "Punch" Ford are now recognisable characters at Swindon Speedway and that an increasing number of people are now taking much more interest in what happens before, during and after a speedway meeting, aside from the racing itself. I hope, also, that track staff around the country are viewed in a more enlightened manner as a consequence of the Blog's work. The launch on the EdinBlog, a sub section of the Blunsdon Blog dealing with the work at Edinburgh's Armadale track, is already showing benefits for Ian Hawkins and the others who help prepare the Edinburgh track.

It is good to talk with fans at the end of a meeting about how the track had fared and I have also noticed a marked increase in the number of fans wishing to talk about the track and its preparation on pre meeting walk rounds.

There is so much about our sport that the fans don't know about - the pay structures, contracts, the work of the BSPA, averages and the machinery that the riders use. If the Blog has done anything I hope it has brought a smile to people's faces and a little more knowledge about what is happening behind the facade.

One recent very positive development has been the sponsorship of track staff overalls at Swindon by Malmesbury businessman Andy Nurden. Andy has joined the travelling Blunsdon Bloggers (who include Neil Wise of Tattinger Marsh Ltd. who has kindly donated web space for the blog) for a number of visits to other tracks and has become very interested in our work at Swindon.

I understand the blog has recently broadened in scope and is no longer solely about work at Blunsdon?

Ian Hawkins and the Edinburgh track staff have been staunch supporters of the Blunsdon Blog since I launched it in October 2006 and I was really pleased when Ian won the 2007 Blunsdon Blog Winter Quiz. In a series of emails he told me about the work that they do at Armadale and it set me thinking - why can't we do something to celebrate the work of track staff around the country. As a consequence I have introduced a new section of the Blog entitled the EdinBlog which covers the work that Ian, Doc Bridgett and the others at Edinburgh get up to as they prepare a Premier League track about as far geographically from Swindon as possible.

I've also had a couple of other approaches from other track staff so keep an eye out for even more coverage.

What other elements of the sport does the Blunsdon Blog cover?

In addition to a very detailed diary of work on the Swindon track and regular reports on the work at Edinburgh, the Blunsdon Blog also features downloadable Speedway Grand Prix score sheets in both Excel and .PDF formats, the former offering a gate analysis as each GP progresses. The Blog also features much of the Swedish tour text and photographs and interviews with experienced track men including Gerald Richter (Swindon and Lakeside) and Rod "Punch" Ford (Swindon for over 30 years).

You published a couple of books last year, would you consider these to be successful and are there more in the pipeline?

Last year I published two speedway related books using the Lulu, Publish on Demand service available on the internet. Jeff Scott (of "Showered in Shale" and others fame)

encouraged me to write at greater length and, as an ex English teacher of many years experience, I really enjoyed the challenge. The first was about a week long tour of Swedish speedway that I undertook with two speedway mad friends last August. We arrived on the Tuesday, took in Vetlanda speedway that night, Linkoping (Filbyterna) on the Wednesday, Gislaved (Lejonen) on Thursday, the GP practice at Malilla on Friday, the GP on Saturday and a three team junior meeting at Gislaved on the Sunday before flying back to the UK that night. I came back so enthused about the set up in Sweden that I just had to get all my thoughts down on paper, and the book just grew from that. There is a black and white version but the full colour one is so much better, and the latter has sold quite well even though it has received precious little promotion.

"The Year of the Blog" was a much more adventurous project, running to over 100,000 words and nearly 300 pages, and covers an entire year in speedway behind the scenes at Swindon from October 2006 to October 2007. I have been very surprised by the support that the project got and am very proud of the product. Again, I must try to promote the book a bit more but there's not always the time to do it.

Publishing with "Print on Demand" services such as Lulu do offer the fledgling author a real chance to try out publishing. The books are only printed when they are ordered through Lulu (www.Lulu.com) so I haven't had to cope with a vast outlay to get several hundred books printed in the hope and expectation that they may well sell. The down side is that most people will only buy a product they have seen, and unless I order a number of samples there are no spare copies available. The other downside is the delay between placing an order over the internet and the book actually arriving - the books are printed in Spain I believe and can take 10 - 14 days to arrive.

I am just starting on the new tome, tentatively titled "Abbey Rode", which will chronicle the demise of the old Abbey Stadium and the building of the new one.

How excited are you by the prospect of a whole new track to build in the future?

I can clearly remember when the bombshell was dropped mid way through the season before last that the stadium was to be sold and a new one built, without speedway. Behind the pits we were a very glum group; the plans that we had been making to improve the abysmal drainage system at The Abbey were just so many words now. And then there was the surge in support from the speedway fraternity and the people of Swindon and its environs. Speedway was saved and included in the new plans. Amidst the flurry of meetings and consultations (I believe the matter is now with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister for her consideration (it's Harriet Harman and I'm not sure what her take on speedway is)) we have begun to ponder on what we would like. The old Abbey is unique, something of a throw back to earlier times, but its long straights and banked curves do make it a challenge to ride and maintain. Something smaller, perhaps along the lines of that cracking little track at Somerset, would be easier. Drainage both on the infield and in the area between the dog track and the speedway track would also be a bonus.

But most of all, it would be just great to build a new speedway track for the future, one that reflects the present nature of the sport and which will be able to develop as the sport enters another era.

So how do we find the Blunsdon Blog?

You really need to find it via Google. Type Blunsdon Blog in Google and it's there. Alternatively, there is a link on the right hand column on the pages of the Swindon Robins web site.

What rule would you like to see changed in British speedway?

I think that the idea of the extra point for an away win was an interesting development but I cannot understand the loss of the Aggregate Bonus point. When it was first dropped I discussed it with a person with many more years worth of speedway experience than I. For a time I accepted his view but I'm not sure now. Of course, in a sport where riders are paid according to the number of points that they score, they will all want to score as many points as possible so the presence of an aggregate bonus point is irrelevant to them, but it is important to spectators. That extra point gives the fans a real sense of excitement - you can be either winning or losing yet there is still something to cheer your team on for, something to get the adrenalin rushing. Can it be right that a team who wins at home by 20 points and is beaten away in the return fixture by just 2 gets the same number of League points as the team they have beaten so comprehensively over the two legs?

But the main reason why I hope the powers that be re-install the aggregate bonus point next season (please God they don't try it mid season) is to acknowledge that the rules should take into account the fans of the sport - not many fans make away trips these days, but they do witness meetings where a close aggregate score is a source of tension and excitement and that extra point is just what they want.

The Blunsdon Blog - <http://www.tattingermarsh.co.uk/blog/index.html>

We always welcome and value any feedback from our visitors. If you'd like to comment on this article then please fill in our feedback form at <http://www.speedwayplus.com/BlunsdonBlogCatchup.shtml#feedback>