

The Bond Has Gone

By Dave Green



Periodically my favourite television soap opera undergoes a change of producer or attempts to reverse a ratings decline. This inevitably leads to an influx of new characters, often arriving en-masse as a new 'family' or as long-lost relatives of established characters. While some viewers may welcome the introduction of these new faces, I can't abide it. I've generally little interest in their activities and tend to lose interest in the programme. Of course, over time those newcomers become familiar faces and I accept them as part of the fabric of the show.

Increasingly I begin to feel similar emotions at the start of each new speedway season. All too often the riders that entertained me the previous summer have moved on to pastures new. In their place are a whole new range of 'characters'. Some of whom I've seen perform numerous times in the past, others out to make a favourable first impression on myself and my fellow supporters. It all adds a slightly surreal edge to the opening encounters of the season as I try to engender some passion for 'my team'. This is particularly true when the fixtures see one of last season's heroes make an early return in opposition colours.

As with the soap opera, I gradually come to warm to the newcomers and by mid-season can begin to sense a bond between riders and supporters. Even as I watch them I'm conscious of the fact that any connection we make with these guys is only guaranteed to last until October, then we'll start the whole process again.

In 2007 Coventry made much media capital from the fact their team was unchanged from their 2006 line-up. That this was such a reportable fact only emphasises how unusual an occurrence it was. Even that didn't last as Morten Risager lost his place to Steve Johnson before the season was out.

It wasn't always so. I can recall an era when teams were pretty much unchanged year on year. The same old faces in the same old racejackets. Even those riders that hadn't enjoyed a good year were more often than not welcomed back the following season. After all, they were part of the team.

The constant chopping and changing does little to encourage loyalty from supporters or allow them to build a meaningful relationship with the team. I feel sure this is especially the case for younger supporters, my own boyhood hero rode for my club for many seasons. Nowadays a young Coventry fan has probably thrown out numerous items of redundant Hancock, Hamill, Jonsson and Nicholls memorabilia.

I don't need to tell anyone that the points limit is largely to blame. It was initially introduced to ensure that no team became too strong, something that is as important today as it was then. Over time the emphasis on the rule changed, it became a mechanism that attempted to balance team strengths equally for all clubs. A subtle but important difference.

Now I feel its emphasis has changed again. It's now just the answer to a complicated piece of algebra. Which seven averages, largely regardless of the riders they're attached to, can be put together to get as close as possible to the target figure? The upshot is that teams no longer start with their existing team and work out how to change it to fit with the limit, they now start with a blank piece of paper and comb the world for the seven riders that will offer the best chance of success.

It's up to the reader to decide if I'm correct in saying that, or whether that's necessarily even a bad thing. I just wish that we could return to the days when I could genuinely identify with the riders wearing my team's colours.

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