

GP's the future is rosy? By Charles McKay



'Approaching 100 Grand Prix later the championship is flourishing . . . In recent weeks it has been confirmed that the giant IMG organisation, the biggest marketing company in the world, has taken over BSI Speedway with a promise to make the Speedway Grand Prix even better and bigger'.

Peter Oakes Swedish GP programme 26/05/07

The speedway press and various internet forums have recently been full of comments from the powers that be and the fans on the terraces on the likely effects, on both the Speedway Grand Prix (SGP) itself and league speedway in general, of the takeover of BSI Speedway by the IMG organisation.

The majority view appears to be that the takeover will result in a greatly enlarged SGP series, on par with Formula One and the Motorcycle GP series, with GPs being staged throughout the year and throughout the world. In time it is believed that SGP riders will be forced to give up their league commitments in Europe to concentrate on the SGP full time, either through shortage of time or the SGP organisers banning them from riding in the leagues fearing that their star performers could be injured and so devalue their series in which they have invested so much money.

So the question must be asked, will IMG be able to expand the SGP as much as people fear? For the series to be greatly expanded so that it becomes a year-long worldwide series various things will need to happen. Enough riders of a high enough standard must be prepared to take part in the enlarged series.

This may prove difficult especially if SGP becomes a year long series, and IMG ban SGP riders from having other riding commitments. In the end I would suggest that it will all come down to money. IMG will have to vastly increase the prize money available to the riders taking part to cover the increased expenses of transporting bikes and support staff throughout the world and to cover the loss of earnings from their British/Swedish and Polish leagues. Bear in mind that on 10th April 2007 the leading Polish newspapers "Gazeta Wyborcza" claimed that the average rider in Poland asks for £270 per point plus a £35,000 signing fee and the top riders want even more. One rider it was claimed demanded £6,250 per meeting no matter how many points he scored.

When the SGP started back in 1995 the riders were told that monies would increase as sponsors came on board to support the riders. Yet throughout its history the GP prize money has been very poor often remaining the same for 3 years or so and even now

increases are small and I would be surprised if it has over the years kept pace with inflation. For example the 2007 pay rates were the same as in 2006 and as all GP prize money is in US\$ and so taking into account the poor exchange rate of the dollar against most European currencies the riders were looking at a 10-15% wage cut hardly the sign of a series that is flourishing.

Another factor which should be borne in mind is that the prize money covers everything. There are no travelling expenses, no hotel expenses and no start money so the 2007 figures of 1st \$11,000, 2nd \$8,200, 3rd \$6,900, 4th \$6,000, 5th \$5,250, 6th \$5,100, 7th \$4,650, 8th \$4,500, 9th \$3,850, 10th \$3,700, 11th \$3,650, 12th \$3,600, 13th \$3,550, 14th \$3,500, 15th \$3,450, 16th \$3,400 17th & 18th \$2,100 do not appear very generous. These figures meant that in 2006 Jason Crump earned \$8,140 per GP, Scott Nicholls \$4,844 and Lee Richardson \$3,620.

Spectator numbers to increase greatly.

This would have a double benefit. The increase in income would go some way to offset the increase in prize money, or of course you could increase the admission prices, and also filled stadiums would suggest that the series is a success and encourage major international companies to become associated with SGP by becoming sponsors

. Once again it appears that IMG may have a difficult task. Based on official FIM attendance figures the average crowd per GP since 1997 are 1997 12,916, 1998 9,583, 1999 15,166, 2000 13,672, 2001 15,750, 2002 20,100, 2003 17,163 and 2004 15,793. These are less than wonderful figures, and questions exist about how accurate the official figures are. Many are suspiciously rounded and I have been told by a member of the BSPA that when they receive their share of the monies from the ticket sales it is not based on the "official" attendance as BSI inform them that many of the tickets were give aways. If the SGP cannot fill stadiums in its European heartland, IMG will have a major task when they expand into areas where people know little if anything about speedway to get a reasonable attendance, unless of course they flood the market with free tickets which will of course not do their bank balance any good.

Attract major international companies as sponsors.

It is to be hoped that IMG will be able to use their contacts built up over the years to get international household companies on board as sponsors. Not only could the sponsorship money go towards an increased prize fund for the riders but it could also be used to cover any shortfall in funds as they try to expand the SGP into new counties, especially where these counties have little history or knowledge of speedway. Judging by the fence advertising boards at this years Swedish GP at Eskilstuna they may have some work to do. The Eskilstuna boards were for:

PartyPorker.net. An internet gambling site that is a 'title' sponsor for a number of 2007 GP's.

Veidec. A Swedish based specialist aerosol company. On its web site it features its sponsorship of both car and superbike racing but not its association with the SGP.

Speedy Hire. An equipment hire company trading in Britain and the Republic of Ireland. Its web site does feature a draw with tickets to the Cardiff GP to the winners.

Meridian Lifts. A south coast based lift service company. Its web site has no mention of its association with the SGP or its general sponsorship of speedway.

J.A.K. Workman. A Danish company which is the official clothing supplier to SGP. Their web site does not mention its association with the SGP

Mitas. Czech tyre company.

Visit Wales.com. The Welsh national tourist board which also had an ad about the delights of visiting Wales in the programme which of course being in a Swedish programme was all in English. Whilst all the ads in the Speedway Star for the Cardiff GP feature the logo of the tourist board the official SGP does not list the board as being an official sponsor of SGP.

All the other fence ads were either for the official SGP web site or for ticket sales for upcoming GPs. So either the organisers of the SGP have decided that they do not want to maximize income and sell all the fence advertising to sponsors or they cannot sell the remaining spaces and have decided rather than have empty spaces to "sell" them to themselves. Also whilst I am sure that the companies associated with the SGP are very good at what they do they are not exactly household names in Europe never mind the world and how often in the past year have you needed the services of a lift company or a specialist aerosol company?

I wish IMG the best of luck as they expand the SGP from Europe to the rest of the world, they may need it because it is clear that beneath the PR gloss and hype that everything in the SGP garden is not as rosy as it appears on the surface.

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