

Enjoying the Greenfield Experience

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During more than forty years as a speedway supporter, I have been a spectator at many different venues.

These have varied enormously in size, comfort and atmosphere. They have included the great metropolitan arenas like Wembley, Wimbledon, Harringay and the old Manchester Belle Vue, with their towering stands and terraces.

Then there have been the classic greyhound/speedway stadia – Brandon, Coventry, Blackbird Road, Leicester, Monmore Green, Wolverhampton, and Owlerton, Sheffield.

The football/rugby stadia like Wimborne Road, Poole, Somerton Park, Newport, the almost forgotten Seedhill at Nelson, and the County Ground, Exeter.

Not forgetting the down at heel but atmospheric arenas like Cradley's Dudley Wood bowl and Station Road at Long Eaton.

Some still flourish, others have vanished.

So it was with some misgivings that I set off to experience for the first time the new style of speedway - the greenfield variety. The match itself was between two teams with names that would have made the average fan blink with disbelief even a couple of decades ago.

Somerset v the Isle of Wight. Sounds more like the early round of cricket's knock-out cup competition. What would it really be like?

With the ever-growing difficulty of gaining planning approval for urban speedways (Birmingham apart) many believe this is the future for the sport. Out of town venues with just the very minimum of facilities, with plenty of car parking and few neighbours to upset.

Does it work? The answer has to be yes. Although it was a chilly late August evening on the exposed Somerset levels, at a venue where to date the facilities are primitive, the promoters have already established a distinct and genuine speedway atmosphere. Long-term fans will probably understand what I mean by that.

The track is impeccably maintained, the high grass banking that surrounds the race strip not only baffles much of the noise but also gives a good, clear view of the racing for a crowd much larger than I had anticipated, and older fans will appreciate the traditional pre-meeting parade and the calm, informative announcer on the impressive tannoy system. I never saw any Southern Area League racing, at rural venues like California, Ringwood, Brafield, the old Rye House and Eastbourne, as it was before the impressive developments of recent years.

These tracks were essentially training grounds, opportunities for novices and second strings to get some experience in Sunday afternoon challenge matches and individual events.

Venues and teams like Somerset and the Isle of Wight (no doubt Scunthorpe and Plymouth will eventually graduate from the Conference League) are without doubt the real thing.

The racing was full-blooded between two strong teams vying for play-off honours. The success of both the Rebels and the Islanders in the Premier League, with results and, I suspect, average gates, better than many of their more traditional stadium-based big-city rivals, offers real hope for the future of the sport.

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