

Some Thoughts on the Future

By Ivor Craine

In making one of my periodical returns to the UK this year I was devastated to see the extent to which the public interest and support for the sport of speedway racing had slumped. I started following the sport as a 10 year old in the early 1950's. It was still a major sport when I went to Australia in the early seventies but whenever I return (every 2-4 years) notice a bigger drop off in attendance at meetings and interest in the sport. Some new innovations need to be tried and I have a couple of suggestions in the summary of my thoughts below:-

It is hard to believe that speedway racing was once the number two spectator sport in the UK with over 9 million fans cramming through the gates annually with six tracks, including Wembley operating in London. What a contrast with today when it is a virtually an unknown sport attracting miniscule crowds of diehard supporters, mainly relics from its glory days.

Why has it lost its appeal and can anything be done to establish a new significant supporter base?

It is pointless blaming the national press as they have always been criticised for not supporting speedway even when they published annuals such as People Speedway Guide and the Daily Mirror Speedway Yearbooks. Certainly more exposure in the press would help the sport but with such declining attendances it is hard to justify wider coverage.

The real reasons for the declining fan base has to be the image. In general Speedway has not moved with the times. Sure it has far more colour than the black leather days and the introduction of the shale deflector has improved racing but presentation is poor, mainly in archaic stadiums with limited facilities and little or no atmosphere, before docile crowds few of whom are aged under forty. Cricket, rugby and other sports have innovated to attract new fans and are flourishing. What can be done to revive speedway?

The ongoing criticism that races are a procession with first out of the gate winning should be attended with the introduction of a Handicap Competition. A possible format would be to classify riders A,B,C or D grade where A graders start 20m behind both home and away, B graders 10m behind at home and 10m away, C graders 10m behind at home and at the gate away, D grade at the gate home and away. Points for places could be allocated as follows:-

	20m gate	10m gate	gate
First	5 or (10)*	4(8)	3(6)
Second	3(6)	2.5(5)	2(4)
Third	2(4)	1.5(3)	1(2)

*figures in brackets doubles points to avoid halves

Increasing point scores for riders off a handicap justifies their effort and also really puts some real interest into tactical substitutions. I realise rider gradings are not easy (may have to be reclassified during meeting) and handicap distances stated are arbitrary. However its about time something new was tried to compete with 20/20 etc. The lowering of the team points limit means there will be an even bigger contrast between the riders ability and a handicap system is the only way to offset this and put some interest into races

While greyhound stadiums have been the sites for most speedway tracks they certainly do not provide the best spectacle and there is no comparison between standing against the safety fence at the original Belle View Speedway in the Zoological Gardens to the remote atmosphere at the current Kirkmanshulme Lane circuit tucked away behind the greyhound track. Modern football or rugby stadiums are the places to go but in order to do so a new form of temporary track will have to be developed. The temporary dirt tracks laid for GP's are to expensive for League racing but surely it must be possible to develop a form of plastic sheeting/mesh that could be readily laid and removed in order not to damage the football surface.

Also a major concern is the lack of youth interest in speedway. Encouragement of and assistance to cycle speedway and BMX eg having BMX events prior to meeting and cheap/free admission for students etc may help.

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