

Riders to Remember....Jerzy Szczakiel

By Tracy Holmes

In the second of this new series, Tracy mounts a spirited defence of the 1973 World Champion.



Jerzy Szczakiel

When Jerzy won the 1973 World Final, he was cruelly belittled by many of the mainstream press, annoyed that a Communist block rider had walked off with the sport's ultimate prize. While it is true that Jerzy was never a British League first division superstar, he was most certainly a crack rider with the achievements to prove it.

It is true that had the World Championship qualifying system been halfway accurate, Jerzy may not have been there but cashing in on his birthright was all his to do! Certainly there should not have been five Polish places direct that year but that being the case, Jerzy had every right to go for one, and get one he did.

Any Western follower should not have been surprised by this. Back in the late 60s, Jerzy was making heads turn.

1969

British League first division winners Poole toured Poland. Their 2nd match was against Kolejarsz Opole. The home team won 43-35 and Jerzy scored a 15 point maximum.

1970

Jerzy is World Final reserve.

1971

Poland tours the UK and Jerzy is one of those who makes a name for himself. He also wins the World Pairs Final with his partner, the legendary Andrzej Wyglenda. At Rybnik, they were unbeaten from NZ, Mauger/Briggs and Sweden, Michanek/Persson.

The European Final was at Wembley. Jerzy won his first heat and went on to qualify for the World Final, the only Pole to do so. At Gothenburg, he was last with no points. In his second heat, he fell, knocking Mauger as he did.

The World Cup Final was at Wroclaw and here was Jerzy's big opportunity to impress. Tragically, it never happened. Poland's number one was not selected! How the Poles expected to win without him was incomprehensible! And they got thrashed. Many years later it would come to pass that Jerzy's deep religious convictions were in conflict with the Communist parties ideals and this would spill over into his professional life.

Jerzy had the chance to show them their blunder and he did not disappoint. He scored 13 points to finish second to Jerzy Gryt in the Polish Final.

1972

Jerzy got to the Continental Final but injury stopped him from attending. Dropped from the big league, he finished 2nd in the Polish Junior Final behind Bernard Jader. At the season's end, Sweden toured Poland and Jerzy got two caps, scoring 6 then 17.

1973

Jerzy's dream was to ride in the World Final at Katowice. In May/June, Great Britain toured Poland. He missed the first Test and when he failed to score in the second, things did not look good. The 3rd Test saw the inclusion of the World Champion, Ivan Mauger. Well, the visitors got a hiding, 75-33. Zenon Plech was unbeaten, Jerzy scored 14 as did Edward Jancarz. Jerzy raced Mauger twice and beat him twice.

The Poles then flew to the UK in July for the Daily Mirror World League series. Jerzy rode in the first two Matches against the USSR and Australia, failing to score. Mike Patrick's snaps of his huge crash and being stuck under the Oxford safety fence are still famous. That night, Jerzy received the news that his mother had died and of course, he returned home immediately.

It was to the West, something of a surprise to see that Jerzy had made it to the World Final, no-one really gave him a chance. All eyes were on Mauger, Olsen (despite injury), Michanek and the home favourite Plech. So it was an even bigger surprise that at half time, Jerzy was unbeaten, two points clear!

In his first heat, he disposed of John Boulger, the West's new 'Wonder Boy' Peter Collins and Bernie Persson.

In round two, Mauger completely blew the gate, waiting for Valeri Gordeev to come into line. The tapes went up, Jerzy bolted to the front from Pawel Waloszek leaving Mauger to get by Gordeev. This he did but try as he may, the defending Champ could not find a way to pass the Poles.

In round three, Michanek broke the tapes, being excluded leaving Jerzy to beat Plech.

In the fourth round, Jerzy actually went from first to last. Russian ace Grigori Chlinovski took him on the first bend. Well, Jerzy regained his composure and clawed his way back to second.

So to round five, Ole Olsen, unable to shake his injury woes, shot from the gate leaving Jerzy to cling to second place for 13 points overall. This equalled Mauger's score.

Well, Ivan would surely not blow this one. And this time, Ivan was first up to the tapes. Jerzy crept up slowly and without stopping, shot into the lead. Ivan stayed with him and looked to have the speed to make a challenge. This he did on the second lap, second bend. Jerzy went wide, left a hole, Mauger went for it, Jerzy shut the gate, Ivan slammed into him midships. They locked together for an awkward second, Mauger toppled over Jerzy's back wheel and was left spread-eagled by the pit gate.

The race wasn't stopped, Jerzy completed the four laps and became Champion of the World! By much of the poorly informed Western press, he was treated appallingly. Some of the things written about him were disgraceful!

Here is an interesting statistic that paints a different picture to the hapless rider stuck under the Oxford fence. Between 1971 and 1973, Jerzy raced Mauger 13 times. The score? Mauger 7 - Szczakiel 6. Surprised?

The scores could have been different after the 1973 World Cup Final at Wembley but Mauger was dumped from the Great Britain squad! For the new World Champion, it was another nightmare visit. He crashed in practice and on the night, failed to score. He was loudly "booed" by many in the crowd who were all in love with Peter Collins. Dave Lanning and Wally Loak were equally scathing in their commentaries.

Back in Poland, Jerzy's team Kolejarz Opole were relegated to the second division. Good news for him came in the form of an offer from Mauger and Barry Briggs, to tour with them, Ole Olsen, Scott Autrey, Chris Pusey and Bert Harkins to the USA, Australia and NZ. What a dream for any sportsman, Communist or not. But the dream turned to another nightmare, he was refused permission to leave. Edward Jancarz and Zenon Plech got to go instead.

1974

Two Polish teams toured the UK, first and second division. Jerzy was in neither! He went to West Germany to start his defence of the World Title. He scored 13 points. Then in his second round, a crash in round one saw him unable to continue and his elimination from the competition.

Despite being starved of International competition for a year, Jerzy was named in Poland's World Cup Final side. Back at Katowice, he was last in round one and immediately withdrawn! Yet another humiliation he was forced to endure. One thing to smile about was Opole won the 2nd division.

1975

Poland tours Australia and NZ. Jerzy again was forced to stay home. In the World Champs, he was fifth in round one but failed to qualify from the second.

England toured Poland that year for four tests. Jerzy made one appearance, England 56-Poland 52, Jerzy scores a very respectable 11.

1976

Poland toured British League sides, Jerzy rode in 4 matches, struggling with scores of 0 Newport, 4 Poole, 4 Hackney and 1 Coventry. He was now a shadow of the giant killer of a few years ago.

Post 1976

Jerzy continued to ride for Opole up until 1980 when a back injury ended his career. He told me, "I was lucky to walk away and the doctor said one more fall and I could be in a wheelchair!"

His enforced retirement did not end his involvement. "Until 1986, I was manager of the team. Now, I am an honorary member of the club. I have a house with a big garden and I am in the shoe import business. I am happily married and have three children now in their 20s."

It is with a huge measure of humbleness that Jerzy holds no grudges with regard to what may have been. "I was prevented from racing league speedway in England. I could race in Europe, but wasn't allowed to stay in England and live there. But I'm not complaining, I saw Western Europe, met some fantastic people and made good friends. I really enjoyed that time and if I could turn the clock back, I would not change a thing."

I hope this article has given you an insight into the career of one of Speedway's most misunderstood heroes. Sure, he cannot live in the same light as Penhall, Nielsen or Rickardsson, but on a sunny Sunday afternoon in Chorzow, this 24 year old, outsmarted, outgated, outmanoeuvred and outrode the 33 year old World Champion, Ivan Mauger, not once but TWICE!! How good is that?

Jerzy Szczakiel deserves his place in Speedways Hall of Fame and I hope that this article confirms that fact.

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/JerzySzczakiel.shtml#feedback>