

Niall Strudwick...My Story so Far

We invited Eastbourne junior Niall Strudwick to contribute an article on his career to date. In this fabulous piece you can read just what it's like for a young kid making his way in the sport today.



Niall Strudwick

Since 1992, when I first saw speedway at the age of two at Arlington, I have always wanted to have a go because I wanted to emulate my hero Martin Dugard. In 2000 when the Eagles won the Elite League title my parents heard that the junior track was being re-opened to the general public.

At this time Mick Norris and ex-rider Colin Ackroyd were running the Eastbourne junior track. I got my first taste of Speedway in 2001 in about the middle of April on a Marvyn Cox 50cc bike. These bikes had been brought over from Europe and Marvyn only gave Eastbourne one of these bikes to test, which I was the first to use. As 2001 season progressed I stayed on the 50cc engine for the remainder, but there was only one real problem, I was getting too big for the bike.

So as 2001 came to a close, my dad and me went along to Sittingbourne who were having a sort of jumble sale of old speedway stuff, this was to be where I would get parts for my very first own speedway bike. I remember buying sets of Paul Hurry mudguards; a set of old style forks, front wheel and other parts. But the engine had to be completely rebuilt because the bike we got it out of hadn't been used in a few years. So that was my first real mechanical knowledge on Honda engines.

As the 2002 season was rapidly approaching my bike was nearing completion. As the first meeting of the season at Arlington came around I was ready and raring to go. I was nervous because it was a 125cc Honda engine so to me at the time it was a big jump, but I was still quite a small kid so I struggled with that. But as the season progressed forward I had to learn a new way of life - being a speedway rider.

I had to learn how to do basic maintenance of a bike, how to wash chains, carb's and the rest of the bike. Plus on race nights look and learn from some of the big boys so I had an understanding of what to expect when I jumped onto the 500.

Some of the riders I have grown up with through the junior ranks are Lewis Bridger, Nick Laurence and James Walker to name a few.

I managed to pick up two medals and one trophy during the year, these were in a junior series held at Sittingbourne over three rounds.

When the season finally finished I was invited to go to Lydd Speedway dinner, where I picked up two trophies, they were the 'B' Final 2nd Place and 'C' Final 3rd Place, these for two different club championship meetings. Even though they weren't winners it still meant a lot to me.

During the winter months, which were a lot quieter than the previous winter, we were shocked to hear the news that Lydd Speedway was closing its doors. For me at this stage of my career it was a devastating blow to my racing, because I had come a long way whilst learning on that track.

Towards the beginning of the 2003 season I was very eager to get back into the racing. There hadn't been many changes to my racing programme this season apart from I had grown a bit that, was really the only difference to me. Apart from the Eagles having a very average season, my aim for the year was to improve on what I could.

At the start of the year I was all excited but half way through the season I started having other interests away from the speedway, which slowed my progression down. I think that it was mainly put down to the fact I was only riding two tracks, both at weekends, week in and week out. However as the month of July was coming to an end I got an invite to go up to Wimbledon Speedway with a very good friend of ours to the London Best Pairs meeting. The meeting itself was very good and an eye opener for me because it was a venue that I hadn't really heard about over the years.

I can remember going back there in August and asking if they would let me have a ride on my 125, they said yes with open arms. They had already got youth 500cc races plus a demonstration race with a girl on a 125. So my first ride there was against a girl called Amy Carpenter. I already knew her from down at Sittingbourne.

I remember rolling up to the start and going through stages like I had seen the pro's do, digging around looking for the best spot etc, but I'd never done a proper green light start because on the junior track that was not working at the time. As the green light was about to come on I had butterflies in my stomach but it was like it all was natural to me.

Anyway I made the start and I just rode how I normally do on the junior tracks. As I came to finish I remember looking behind me to see how far I'd won by and it was a fair distance. What got me the most after my first ride was the reception I got from the Wimbledon Dons fans who had stayed behind they were clapping and cheering, this gave me a great buzz.

I only had two rides that night but they were the best two rides ever!



Niall in action at Lydd in 2002

As the 2003 season was getting to the half way stage, my dad said about getting two bikes. We hunted around for another one. When one cropped up we went for it. Weymouth rider Nathan Irwin, who lives just a mile away from me, had a bike for sale. When we went to look at the bike it fitted perfectly but it was a 200cc Honda engine, unlike my 125 Honda, it had a bit more power in it. So we bought the bike.

I remember being down at Arlington, I was nervous being my first time on the bike so I took it nice and steady. The same day Eddie Kennett was down on his crutches, I remember him saying 'when I was racing here that bike use to fly' so it gave me confidence in the machine.

I remember also going back to Plough Lane with my cousin Lee Strudwick and Trevor Heath for one meeting, all of us were on 125's then, this was about my fourth time riding the track, but I managed to win one of the three rides. It was a good fun experience especially between me and Lee because we use to like to get one over each other.

As the season was rolling to the end of year it was the second to last meeting at Plough Lane, I think, it was only Trevor and I, but it was a day that we wouldn't forget. I met a speedway legend who was friends of the Heath family during this time - he was 'Sudden' Sam Ermolenko. Sam was a friend with Steve Heath, Trevor's dad, and Sam had a great interest in the youth side of the sport. He loved what he saw that night at Wimbledon, to see a couple of thirteen year old kids having some fun on a bike. I still keep in contact with Sam at present, which is great. As the season came to the end I didn't pick up any silverware but I had picked up a new friend in Sam Ermolenko. When the season ended I had been asked by certain Wimbledon people to return and do more 2nd half races and I was delighted to.

After a very good and interesting 2003, a new season dawned in 2004. I was just hoping to have an even better season than in '03. I had grown a bit more and I started to fit the bike properly unlike in previous seasons. During the early parts of the season

I broke away slightly from Sittingbourne because I wasn't being challenged in my races there, but I was getting regular rides at Plough Lane.

By this time Trevor and Lee had progressed onto the 500's and were also getting regular rides at Eastbourne, Wimbledon and Sittingbourne doing second halves. I remember helping Lee out at Eastbourne one night, he had a crash in the first ride, which bent his frame and forks slightly, they managed to wheel the bike to the rear gate where Ian (Lee's dad and my uncle) asked if I could look after it. So I was standing there at the gate for about 30 minutes until they came back, getting weird looks from passing fans.

The earlier part of the season was slow to get the ball rolling but once I got back into it I was enjoying it all again. At the start of the season I blew the newer bike up, the 200, which we called the 'green machine' so I had to switch to my other bike, which in the winter had a 200 Honda engine put into it and it had some bloody power in it, I remember that the most.

So I rode that for about a month whilst my green machine was being fixed. In that one month alone everything just clicked, I was brave enough to get more aggressive on the bike and my whole racing mentality had changed. I was going quicker, making good corners though I wasn't quite brave enough to keep it on going into the corner. I was hoping when I got back on the other bike I would be able to crack this.

My gating had also improved as I was getting braver and keeping the throttle pinned all they way around the first corner, which is the best thing to do in speedway. Once I got the green machine back on the track, it was like I was a better rider. My style and technique was perfectly used on the bike, it was brilliant.

On the second to last meeting at Eastbourne I was asked to have a go on the 500cc Jawa just for the one night, sharing it with Trevor Heath. Both James Walker and me were going well at this stage so we both got the chance; James was using Luke Coleman's Weslake. We both had a few practice starts prior to the meeting to get us used to the machines. As the main meeting came to a close and the second half boys were warming up their bikes I donned my kevlar and was ready.

I remember sitting down on the ground with the butterflies going around in my stomach again. I was on the inside gate and it was a race to forget. As I rolled up to the start I was always told to sit far forward to stop it lifting I did that but on the start I was revving the bike like my 200, flat out on the start, then when I dropped the clutch I flipped it good and proper. It sent me back and the bike went half way down the straight. I felt really embarrassed. But we managed to straighten the bike out for my 2nd and final ride of the night. I was on gate two, butterflies still there but I didn't flip it this time. James and I were against Lewis Bridger who was head and shoulders above us but we pushed each other around the track. I just enjoyed the occasion, it was dream that had come true. When I came in I was buzzing at picking up the second place in the race, I was so happy.

Whilst riding through the season I made a new friend in the sport and he was the son of my hero, it was Connor Dugard. He had just started at the end of 2003 but was racing every week in 2004. When the end of the season came in 2004, I was gutted

because the season had gone so well and so quick that it seemed like I blinked and it had finished. I did however get the best bit of news I had ever heard in my career, my dad had built me my very first 500 bike. So that meant I was riding in second halves next season.

At the Eastbourne juniors dinner-dance I picked up the junior track rider of the year award and most improved on the junior track as well. This proved a very successful year for me, and I wanted it to go even better in 2005.

When the 2005 season finally came around I was so excited at the prospect of riding on the big track that I couldn't wait to start. Both Martin Dugard and Dean Barker had put on some practice sessions for about three weeks before the season at Eastbourne. I naturally jumped at the chance of riding in them. The first week was good because I was getting better in every ride, having a good time more than anything. What people don't realise is the massive jump from the junior track to senior track, it's not just the bike it's also preparation, different track sizes and surfaces etc, all of which are big things for a young rider.

In between the first week and the second week my dad had a surprise, which my mum didn't keep very well. Dad had won another 500 on ebay. I was so happy to have two 500's sitting in the garage. It was an old Chris Louis bike that he had only used for a half a season before he sold it. We got that on the Saturday and the practice was on the Sunday, so I rode the new bike then. Looking back on it now I should have left it a week because the bike wasn't set up for my style, but anyway that's life!

When we rolled up at Eastbourne that Sunday afternoon, it was a cold day as I remember. I went out for my first ride against Luke Coleman, because he was out in front I was chasing him down and going pretty quick for myself. In my second ride I was out against James Humby and another rider, though I can't remember who it was now looking back. I was coming into turn one again when I got into a tank slapper when going down the straight, which sent me off heading towards the fence. All that I can remember from the crash is that I just lost control, other than that I don't remember anything about what happened in the next 5 minutes. I went back to the van to cool down and get my senses back, and then I was ready to ride again. But my confidence had gone. I was riding slower because of the crash.

I returned for the last practice session but we suffered from mechanical problems. The carb kept flooding with fuel which was running through the engine. When we emptied the oil out of the bike it was milky colour, which wasn't right. We had several people come over to help but no-one could put a finger on what was wrong. So we packed up and went home to have a think.

During that week we rang several people for advice, but the only person who was willing to help was Steve Heath. So one night, I think it was a Wednesday or Thursday, we went round his house and he showed us what was wrong. In the carb there are floats inside to get the fine balance of fuel in the carb, but these were catching on the edge of the gasket of the carb. So we filed off a bit of each float, and it worked really well.

As the season rolled around, I kept on riding at Eastbourne and Wimbledon, where they had a keen eye on me for the future, as well as doing a few practice sessions at Sittingbourne. We kept in at Wimbledon because they had signed my cousin for his first year in the Conference League, so we managed to get to know the team and the management well.

I got my Conference League debut riding against Wimbledon for the Armadale Devils. I rode at number two as one of three guests for them. When I got the call I was very excited and desperate to do well and when the day came around I wasn't as nervous as I thought I'd be. I think it was because I was riding a track that I had ridden for several seasons.

When I look back at that meeting it helped me for experience more than anything else because it opened my eyes more towards the sport, as well as getting paid for it. I scored one point from three rides. I didn't care how many points I scored, I just wanted to enjoy my racing.

As the season was closing I did a few practices at Sittingbourne where I was getting my confidence back more and more. At one practice session I remember that we changed my handlebars from being where they were to lower down, to where I had them on my 200 bike. And it did make a big difference. At first I didn't think it would make any difference, but I shocked myself. It felt like the old me. We had a very successful afternoon then, I was going faster and harder on the bike. I put it down to being influenced by my other uncle Keith. Keith rode speedway for about three seasons back in the late 80's but only at my level. It was good to have him there because he was looking at a different side of how I was riding, he made me scare myself into taking fast split second decisions.

Even though this was just practice it made me ride better. However whilst I was queuing for my final practice I was watching my friends Nick Laurence and James Walker practicing together. On the inside of the track, on both corners, they had put cones out as there were large puddles on the track but the cones were removed as the day went on. When Nick and James were out it ended in a bad way. James was on the outside and hit the fence and it sent his bike right into the path of Nick, who could not miss it. Nick crashed and went over the handlebars. Nick had broken his leg in two places and broke his collarbone, and that ended the practice day.

In my schedule I only had one fixture left of the 2005 season and that was at Wimbledon's Laurels meeting where I was named as a third reserve. When several riders had pulled out of the meeting the reserves stepped in, but due to the papers not reaching the referee at the start of the meeting I wasn't allowed to ride. I was so p***ed off about it so really I was a spectator in kevlar. Well that's what it felt like.

As the season came to an end I looked back and thought I had an okay season but I had worked hard for not a lot I felt. In November I normally go along to the grasstrack at Tonbridge Collier Street, the Bonfire Burnup. But this day was different because at the last meeting at Eastbourne I met this girl who I had an interest in. We both met up at the Burnup and we started to get to know each other, which was cool. This girl would end up being my girlfriend and we are together to this day over two years on.

Going back to the speedway, I was invited to the Wimbledon Speedway dinner dance, where I picked up an award for being a part of the racing team and an award from the 'Pit Bend Loonies' supporters. After that night I was pleased with my season overall but I wanted to improve in 2006.

As a new season dawned, we were hit with bad news that Plough Lane wasn't going to stage Speedway in 2006. We were shocked when we heard this because I was hoping to get a team place there in '06. Lee managed to get a spot at Rye House for the season, but I resorted to staying at Eastbourne and Sittingbourne doing second halves there. The start of the season was a bit of a confusing time because all the Eastbourne practices got cancelled so I was having no rides until a week before my first second half at Eastbourne.

Due to the lack of practice the season started slowly but I was going well considering. We had heard that Jon Cook was putting together a junior league team for second half riders to ride in the Academy League. Eastbourne, Poole, Rye House and Sittingbourne signed up for this Southern Area league. We had our first match away from home at Rye House; we lost by a mile because they used Conference League boys, but it gave us track time and a different track to ride at.

When we went down to Poole for the first time it was a big eye opener because it was a big stage for me to ride on. But I took it as more track time and another learning curve for myself. Even though we had a bad night the whole team enjoyed it.

When I turned 16 in May we signed up to Southern Track Riders. This is an amateur club to help youngsters like my self. Both Nick Laurence and myself signed up for the first meeting of the season at King's Lynn. We both started in the Amateur section like all newcomers, Nick won the meeting on the day and I came home in 7th scoring 9 points but considering it was my first time riding King's Lynn I was happy.

As the season was rolling around, I did more meetings at King's Lynn and I kept on improving every time I rode there and it was starting show in my second half racing, I started winning from the back. This was a good feeling and helped to bring back the confidence to my racing.

When the end of July came round I was on a good roll of success at King's Lynn, winning plenty of races, but the meeting in July would change my career and confidence. In the last Southern Track meeting in July I had been moved up into intermediate class, did well in the meeting, only dropping one point from five rides. I ended up WINNING the meeting at King's Lynn, I was so happy. Even though it wasn't a major honour in Speedway it was to me at this stage in my young career. This would improve on my confidence a great deal.

At the end of the season I won two meetings overall, came second twice and third once so it was good for me in the Southern Track. My track craft and positive attitude towards my racing got me buzzing again and made want to win races as well. As the season was closing I was getting better because I was aiming for 2007 as the year when it would all click.

Looking back it was an up and down season, which had a lot of success in it. I wanted that every week when I rode. I remember buying the Bruce Penhall book on his racing, I started to read about how he prepared himself for his rides, I was amazed by his attitude of "second isn't good enough;" I wanted this in my racing. So during the winter months I worked on my positive frame of mind, because I know this could help me in my racing. But I remember saying it to other riders on the junior track, where I was helping Connor Dugard to do well by making him think positively. I did the same sort of thing to myself, I remember saying to myself that I hope that this hard work pays off.

As the 2007 season came around there was a lot of media attention at Eastbourne with a new promotion in place, but for me it was a year to step up to the plate and be knocking on the door of the Conference League. Eastbourne ran practice sessions for about a month prior to the start of the 2007 season where I got some good laps in.

This would be a good time for me as I got my first major sponsor in the form of the Eastbourne main team sponsor Meridian Marquees. They had seen me practice and offered me support for the season I was taken aback with them being interested but I was very pleased. They gave me and another close friend of mine Shane Hazelden a sponsorship deal.

As the start of the season approached I had signed up to ride in the Southern Track Riders again for my second season. A season that would see the best of me. When the first second half of the season came to Eastbourne I started off very well by scoring three 2nd places in three rides. Looking back that was an okay start to the season, but I wanted more.

The following day I had to go up to King's Lynn for their first meeting of the season, the best pairs, I was still in the intermediate class I was okay with that because I knew the riders I was riding against.

My partner and I both had a good afternoon's racing in poor conditions. At one stage we were racing in the snow! We finished in third place with me scoring 19 of our team's 26 points, this was a lot better points tally for me, only dropping a single point to an opponent all afternoon.

As the early part of the season progressed, I had a lot of personal problems that put me back a couple of weeks, but this set me up for wanting to do even better and made me want to ride better and win more. I had one bad night, only picking up a point, but I put it down to not being in the right frame of racing mood. However I made some new friends in the sport in the form of two Danish youngsters called Jeppe Schmite and Jan F Pedersen who had come down to Eastbourne on their junior bikes from Denmark.

When the Eastbourne juniors went to Lakeside on the Friday night, we had an okay night as a team, I had a bum night scoring two points but that night was the first time I had been there so it was okay. I had been brave in one of my heats to go flat out a couple of times around the track, that made me have more confidence in myself.

I had improved a hell of a lot, by the beginning of July I had two individual wins in Southern Track and only one second and one third so far and beating my best times at Eastbourne twice.

I particularly remember one race at King's Lynn, ironically the night after Chris Harris won at Cardiff. I was riding in the Final on the worst gate (four), which hadn't worked all day for anyone. The end result was good for me because I was last out of the start but after the first corner I was up to third. As we moved on to lap three I went into second place and was chasing down the leader, as we went into the final lap I had weighed the leader up. I went down between the fence and him, then pinned it on the line on the final corner to take a fantastic win in Chris Harris style. This boosted my confidence up another notch.

As the months of July and August passed, I got a shock phone call from Peter Oakes asking me to ride for Oxford against Plymouth at Cowley. I jumped at the chance, Brendan Johnson who is a close friend of mine, had recommended me to Peter. Even though it was my second time in Conference League this time I was determined to set a much better example of myself. When we turned up at Cowley that Friday night it was a wet one, with the promoter Allen Trump pushing to get the meeting on. I was praying to get the meeting on. The meeting did go ahead; I was so relieved that it went ahead.

I got to know a few more riders in the sport - both Jordan Frampton and Kyle Hughes. Both of them helped me on that wet and rainy evening and I have kept in contact with both of them since that Oxford meeting. Going back to the second half action, with experience of the Conference League fixture under my belt, I wanted to go from strength to strength, improving every week because I wanted to put myself in the shop window for Conference.

After having such a good season, towards the end of the year I turned some of my attention to the Eastbourne Junior track, where I was helping young Connor Dugard with his racing, likewise he was helping me during my second half races at Arlington. As the season was rolling round to the end of the year, I started to relax because I was winding down and looking forward to a break. So as the last meeting of the year at Eastbourne came around I was riding for the Eaglets in a challenge match against Rye House juniors. I knew from my first ride that I was too relaxed because this was to be my last meeting of the year so I took it too easy and got bit in the butt because of it.

I missed the Eaglet's dinner dance due to I had to attend a wedding, but my family picked up my awards for 'junior rider of the year trophy and shield' this was for the second half. As the 2008 season is approaching I wonder what it has in store for in me and hope it will be even better than last season.

Follow Niall's progress on his website - www.freewebs.com/teamstrudwickracing/

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