

Your Shout: Oxford and the Implications

The sudden closure of Oxford and the related article we published last week prompted a huge response from our visitors.



"We must stand on our own two feet"

By Roger Hulbert

Basic economics dictate that if a club such as Oxford are only attracting 400-500 crowds, Elite League Speedway is not viable. A wealthy owner can only provide a short term solution as such a person cannot be expected to continually make good losses.

The problem is worse for clubs who don't own, or who aren't primary lease holders in their stadiums, as they are not able to raise money from other activities in the stadium which would help to support the continuance of speedway.

Maybe the long term future of the sport is in the hands of the likes of Coventry, Eastbourne, King's Lynn, Rye House, Scunthorpe, Buxton and others who have control of their stadiums and are not paying rent to use a stadium for a few hours a week, and have very little security of tenure. Other clubs such as Poole, Wolverhampton, Sheffield etc seem to have a good long term relationship with their stadium owners and are established clubs.

The thread of this is that we must stand on our own two feet and not rely on other sports to provide us with facilities. By and large they only want speedway when it suits them.

"Get professional or die"

By Paul Wilkinson

The sport lacks credibility, changing rules every year. I have taken friends along who have enjoyed speedway and gone again, however they all think that the rules are a joke. The sport needs to be run by an outside body eg ACU and all teams running on the same night, with home meetings every other week. The cost is prohibitive to families (look at football, too expensive for families but lots of numbers to replace families) as it currently stands. I think clubs should have riders on retainers and have a large squad, do away with guest riders, get professional or die.

"Bond with the supporters"

By Dudley Jones

I was very saddened to hear of the demise of the Cheetahs, who weathered even the dark days of the the mid 50s.

My own view is that speedway needs to take stock. There has always been a problem with getting the message out to get the fans in. I was lucky enough to be on the terraces during the 60s & 70s, in my view the true 'golden age'. Most teams from those days lasted for many years, making the sport more stable.

There was showmanship more then, promoting is about more than opening the turnstiles on race night.

Speedway needs to engage the supporters. It makes sense that if the supporter identifies with the team he will come regularly, and perhaps introduce others. Get a really good, lively and perhaps cheeky announcer, wind up the opposition perhaps in good hearted way. Banter makes the fans belong.

Look at the team, have characters and some local lads. Perhaps, dare I say it, find room amongst the advertisements on today's racing hoardings we call riders for the team motif, big and visible from the terraces.

LETS HAVE A 'SEE THE BEE' CAMPAIGN to have each team required to have decent race jackets that supporters can bond with. Riders bedecked in ads, no apparent teams colours - its pathetic. No one will see the ads if the fans dont turn up.

In short BOND WITH THE SUPPORTERS.

Johnny Hoskins, Len Silver, and John Berry all made speedway a jolly good night out.

Then look at the costs. How can the smaller (or any) speedway support teams absolutely full of foreigners, and do they, as they stop for the odd season, really enthuse the fans (excepting the odd star)?

At Norwich we had to fight to have two foreigners, and they were committed top names in Fundin & Nygren, Focus on home grown local talent, better for the future in every way. A splash of genuine top flight colour yes, but not a whole team of unpronounceable names.

Racing seemed closer in the period 1965 -85. Why not have more basic bikes and tighter specs for domestic racing. As F1 shows, faster does not mean better racing. At Coventry Golden Greats in 1988 the 60's & 70's races were much more exciting than the then current riders.

Finally, do not let the grand prix system lead to irregular race days. If a particular night is nearly always race day then people get used to supporting regularly.

On a happier note Ipswich closed in 1962, apparently with gates of 500 or so, and was said to be dead. John Berry made the sport a huge success a few years later, but he did so by involving the supporters, local lads and excellent racing. Fingers crossed for Oxford.

"Run as a viable business"

By Ken Waugh

The situation at Oxford is unfortunately a sad consequence of teams living way beyond their means. Unless something drastic is done then this will be the first of many closures over the next few years. Speedway needs to get back to basics with clubs being run as a viable business. Cut costs by banning GP riders (unfortunate for the likes of Crump and Adams who are excellent ambassadors, but the overall viability must come first) and all commuting foreigners.

Amalgamate the elite and premier leagues then split into a first and second division with pay grades being standardised for each division. Replace points limits with gradings to equalise team strengths and most importantly replace the ridiculous BSPA with an independently appointed body to whom all riders are contracted to.

Of course none of this will materialise as the majority of promoters are only interested in themselves and not the overall good of the sport. Perhaps if they read John Berry's excellent 'More Confessions' book they might get an idea of how it should and could have been done. Sadly though I doubt they will notice anything until it is too late !

"A good racetrack is a must"

By Ross Dow

Promoting speedway has always been a tricky business. It is difficult to get the package right. Too many 'experienced' riders leads to a large wage bill and often a lack of commitment when the going gets tough. Too many inexperienced 'young bucks' and, though the excitement and entertainment level may be high, consistency is usually lacking.

Also, what a lot of promoters forget is that most spectators like to see genuine racing, so a good racetrack is a must. In Oxford's case, there has been a serious deterioration in the entertainment level in recent years due, in my opinion, to the appalling state of the track. I have not been there for some years but have yet to see a good meeting there on Sky.

Kelvin and Jonathan spend most of the match trying to convince the viewers that they are blind or stupid and that the track is not as poor as it looks. In fact, I usually record the meetings there and scan quickly to try to catch the highlights, if there are any. The track is usually like a ploughed field so much heavy shale that riders cannot get a comfortable ride. Racing is for the very brave or foolhardy.

There are all sorts of excuses offered:- local shale has lots of clay etc. Reading is not far up the road and is generally boring for the opposite reason. The track surface is

modelled on Willie Thorne's napper (surely the dirt deflector rule cannot be enforced there).

If a club with the proud record of Oxford, in a densely populated, affluent area cannot entice a viable crowd, there has to be something wrong with the product. Poor home performances do not help but are generally accepted if there has been a fighting performance.

Geographically clubs like Oxford have a great advantage over the more remote provincial clubs (e.g. Glasgow, Edinburgh, Workington, Berwick etc.) as many more riders live within a reasonable distance. However, when the downward spiral starts, team spirit dies and riders often lose interest and confidence. I believe that Oxford could be a great club once again with the right promotion. Perhaps a spell in the Premier League would give them a kickstart towards better things.

"Too expensive for most families"

By Bill Elliot

Agree that speedway is now too expensive for most families, particularly in relation to some other activities - how many families can afford to spend around £200+ per month? However, can't agree on Fri/Sat as only nights for meetings, as firstly while I regret the passing of Oxford, the fact that they have gone under doesn't mean to say that other teams can't make it work on midweek nights (Poole, for example).

Secondly are we saying that it would therefore be ok for the top riders to basically miss every second meeting during the regular season because of Grand Prix commitments? And three, what about tracks like my own (Glasgow) who race on Sunday afternoons and finish in plenty of time to allow supporters home in time to get organised for Monday morning - even tracks like Newcastle have 6.30 starts and with a wee bit of organisation by supporters they can be perfectly ready for their Monday mornings, so I don't think you can be as simplistic as to say Fridays and Saturdays only.

"I won't be taking them again until the summer holidays"

By Jim

Feel sorry for the Oxford supporters. I used to follow Leicester Lions in the late 70's as a kid and we were closed down too, ending my link with the sport. Went to my first fixture for 30 years last night at Belle Vue, as I now live near to Manchester, having recently watched the brilliant Coventry vs Swindon fixture on Sky which wet the old appetite (as an old Lions fan - a sweet result!)

Took my two young children (7 and 4) who loved it - they have been reading and looking at the programme all day today. However, I won't be taking them again until the summer holidays as they will be at school so I totally agree with the comments about weekday fixtures.

As such, I won't be going again too and it's a shame as I loved it although the crowds were certainly smaller than I seem to remember. Have to say I'm itching to follow Belle Vue tomorrow to Coventry (Friday) but can't justify the expense for a family ticket twice in a week.

"Gates like that are, frankly, embarrassing"

By Andrew Gallon

You really do have to wonder just how viable speedway is these days. I was aghast to hear Oxford had an average 'crowd' of between 400 and 500 - in the top division. Sorry, but that's a joke. Now I understand why the promotion was so mealy-mouthed about admitting how many people attended meetings at Cowley when quizzed (in a typically ill-informed fashion) by an interviewer from Sky. Gates like that are, frankly, embarrassing.

"Affordability is probably the real issue"

By Ken Nicholson

The announcement of the closure of Oxford speedway shocked the speedway world. It was the suddenness of the announcement and the absolute finality of it that really rocked the supporters. It was obvious that crowd numbers had dwindled at the track, but was the fact that the Cheetahs had struggled to put a competitive side together in 2007 the sole reason?

Speedway crowds are nowhere nearly as large today as they have been in past years and those promoting the sport need to try and understand why. We have often heard the term 'value for money' bandied around, but for speedway this is a bit meaningless. In order to get value for money, you must have something to compare with it. For instance if somebody asked if the latest Ferrari was good value for money, a lot of us might say yes (after all we would all like to drive one). The reason that I haven't got one however is because I can't afford one. Speedway is about providing affordable entertainment and if it isn't both affordable and entertaining, then the turnstiles won't keep on clicking.

Affordability is probably the real issue where promoters have taken their eye off the ball. I stumbled across an old Canterbury programme from 1976. The programme cost 10p and the cost of the Second Division Four Team Tournament (at King's Lynn) was advertised at 50p. So some hard facts about how this relates to today's prices. The RPI has gone up about 5 times since 1976, although wages have gone up about 7 to 10 times (depending how you measure them). The prices of beer, cigarettes and petrol have gone up more or less in line with wages. And speedway admission costs have gone up about 20 times - even more than houses.

Lakeside rode recently in front of a packed house when they offered free admission. So there is nothing wrong with the profile of speedway and the fact that those supporters were treated to an entertaining match means they would have gone home happy. But they didn't return in such numbers the following week. Presumably because in many cases they found it would be too expensive and they couldn't afford

it. But the solution is not obvious once prices have been inflated to their current levels. Indeed, it would be a brave promoter who would drop admission costs in the assumption that this would result in increased crowd numbers.

So why is speedway so expensive? Part of the problem might be in the amount of travelling that riders undertake. While this might be acceptable to those at the very top of the sport, there are whole loads of ordinary riders who spend all of the time flitting between one country and another. Moreover, these riders each need a stable of bikes and mechanics in each of these countries. Even for domestic riders, it is not unusual to find one travelling 300 or 400 miles to home meetings. This is where a large amount of the expense is incurred and unfortunately, Joe Public can no longer afford to maintain it.

So is speedway entertaining even if it is becoming less affordable? Oddly enough, I was at Oxford's penultimate match and that one most certainly was entertaining. While we may moan about slick tracks and tactical rides, there is no doubt that speedway can still be a very entertaining product. But there must be a message from Oxford's demise and urgent lessons must be learnt. Otherwise it will be a case of 'Who's Next'?

"Let's not bury the sport yet!"

By Steve Cotton

Steady on now! Let's not bury the sport yet! I agree that mid week race nights are not ideal for families with young children, but it all depends on the team you support as to the night they race? Some of the lower leagues do ride at weekends, so there is plenty of chances to watch live speedway if you want to. (There will be a live race somewhere, every night of the week, if I'm not mistaken?). I think it has to be down to promotion, as to how many people actually go to live meetings.

I attend Wimborne Rd as often as I can to watch Poole race. If I take my wife and my 2 children, who are both under 5, it costs me £30. My kids go free at the moment, but when they are over 5 it will cost me £34 for a family ticket. Not bad I say for well over 2 hours of quality entertainment

As a comparison, we all went ten pin bowling yesterday. We spent an age waiting for a lane and while doing so spent £17 on cr*p food, then, when a lane came available, I was charged £34 for 2 games, which lasted about an hour. Now that's poor value for money!

Speedway just needs a bit more mainstream promotion to get people through the gates. I think it compares well, price wise, against other spectator sports and activities locally. If my local banger track can get the kids in, which they do, I'm sure speedway can!

"Too many meetings are boring"

By PCC

Speedway is no longer as exciting as it once was hence fewer people are going through the turnstiles. The powers that be have, in my opinion, a lot to do with the loss of interest in the sport, e.g. too many silly rules.

No moving at the tapes - why? - in years past the start was exciting as riders rolled back and forth to gain an advantage. The telephone at the start with aggrieved riders lambasting the ref, and why not? Too much attention to speed with little or no passing, as a result too many riders do not have enough track craft. The most recent innovation is 14 year olds on 500cc bikes - what a joke!

Let's turn the clock back to the 60's and look at what we were doing then and maybe that will give us some clues as to why today's meetings are so poorly attended. Too many meetings are boring!!

"I am not convinced that letting kids in free will benefit today's promoters"

By Mick Cast

Yes get the youngsters keen, let them come in for nothing, prowl around the terraces, have an unnatural interest in plumbing, particularly the gent's toilets. (ooh look water comes out of these taps, apart from turning them off, if we use all this tissue stuff we could stop it).

I am not convinced that letting kids in free, cheap, etc. will benefit today's promoters, who seem to be always under fire from the fans. Yes have a go if they don't do anything. But I am sure nobody takes on a speedway team, sits back and thinks - "I don't need to do anything, I will get 2000+ each week, at full price, no whingeing about concessions. All the riders will ride for peanuts, and the ones with nut allergies, can ride for some one else."

This season seems to be taking a very big toll on injuries, some teams being very badly hit. If I knew the answer I would tell you. Honestly. We all dream about what we would do if we had money to spare, buying Plough Lane is on my list. But without the back up crowds and supporters, even I would have to withdraw or cease putting money towards a lost cause.

Mind you I could stop the horrible kids blocking the toilets, but someone else would have to control the team.

**"The Oxford situation may have a lot to do with the poor team"
(No name supplied)**

Glasgow have shown that with a bit of promoting you CAN increase the crowds. Not only that, we still have the free entry for kids! The Oxford situation may have a lot to do with the poor team they had. I'm sure they would've struggled to win the PL never mind compete in the EL! As for racing on two nights only, how many tracks could do this? If Glasgow were still at Shawfield they wouldn't be able to run!

**"Crowds of 2000 would have been regarded as disastrous"
By Philip Dalling**

The closure of Oxford was indeed a shock. It must be some time since a track closed mid-season? I visited Oxford about 12-15 years ago, whilst attending a conference at one of the colleges. At the time I was not seeing much speedway and the crowd seemed fairly good to my eyes. I did note however that the taxi driver who took me to the track came out with the old chestnut of 'oh, I used to go to the speedway in the old days of Barry Briggs etc'.

What I think really shocked me about Oxford's official statement, more than the admission that attendances were only around the 400-500 mark, was the claim that a crowd of around 800 would represent something like break-even. It is probably not all that long ago since crowds of 2000 would have been regarded as disastrous. Speedway's reticence regarding attendances has always been something of an irritation to me, but perhaps I am beginning to see the justification. How can you make claims for a serious sport of national standing when one of your top division tracks can only attract the same number of spectators as football clubs in the seventh tier of the soccer pyramid?

I do not usually watch live speedway matches on Sky, but have recently seen three. No matter how much the director focuses attention on the track action, shots are bound to take in a fair amount of crowd/stadium detail. At Coventry recently, where I have done much of my spectating in recent years, the attendance seemed fairly good, and it looks reasonably impressive for the cameras to have a full grandstand, well patronised first and second bends, and a decent sprinkling along the back straight. For the Belle Vue-Wolverhampton match, there was hardly a crowd shot. No doubt most of the spectators were behind glass in the grandstand - there did not seem to be very many elsewhere. The third match I saw on Sky was at Perry Barr. It is unfair to draw conclusions, as it raining heavily, but after the initial fanfare I wonder at what level the crowds have stabilised?

I have personally visited about a dozen tracks in recent years. I suspect that the average crowd over the Elite and Premier leagues does not exceed 1500-2000. No track, to my knowledge, has published attendance figures since Long Eaton closed, ten years ago now. Crowds at Station Road, long regarded as one of speedway's cinderella centres, varied between about 900 and 1400 at best. What a shame the track is lying derelict. On some of the current evidence the Invaders would probably be one of the sport's best supported outfits.

"Speedway is seemingly dying on its feet!"
By Bill Gibbs

There will be many more closures make no mistake. The halcyon days of the 1960's saw crowds of 8,000 plus at many tracks but since then there has been a dramatic reduction due to more home entertainments etc. I hope I am wrong but Speedway is seemingly dying on its feet!

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