

Book Extract: Shifting Shale By Jeff Scott

In this extract Jeff travels to the Reading v Swindon clash on 25th September 2006. This was a Play-off semi-final with local pride also at stake.



A Sky Temple © Jeff Scott

My journey from Sheffield to Reading goes surprisingly smoothly and as a result I find myself in the vicinity of the stadium horrendously early, so I decide to sample the delights of the nearby M4 service station before heading to the dilapidated car park. I have arranged to arrive early as the friendly and efficient Torben Olsen of BSI Reading has kindly put my name on the gate to celebrate the fact that my book will finally be available from the Reading track shop. It could be nicknamed 'Colditz' as comparative to every other shop in the country nothing gets in and nothing gets out. More accurately, all merchandise and materials stocked there have to have prior approval from the BSI. If the Racerdogs do manage to progress to the EL Play-Off final and that of the Craven Shield, it effectively means that the fans will have a maximum of four meetings to buy the book. This is a shame and disappointment on a number of fronts as Reading feature in four chapters and I have followed them for 31 years since my first inspirational trip to Smallmead in 1975.

It's a situation that hasn't happened through lack of contact with the BSI Press Officer, Nicola Sands, whom I've enjoyed dealing with when I can get hold of her. She immediately got back to me in May when I showed her my usually tangential and brief draft comments on the BSI and/or John Postlethwaite in my book. I was only too happy to make her suggested amendments and I enjoyed her Scots accent that exaggerates her direct, slightly brusque manner. She has a demanding job and my subsequent calls and emails to seek authorisation to get my book stocked met either complete silence or the extremely honest reply to my first attempt at chasing a response after some initial time lapse, "I'm very busy with the GPs now so I won't open this [email] for another week and might not read it then and anyway it's not for me to decide as I'll pass it onto someone else". It's widely rumoured that John

Postlethwaite takes a very fastidious and hands-on approach to all communications that emanate from the bowels of the BSI, so the innate difficulty and balancing act that inevitably goes with this demanding position is further magnified. Eventually my request wends its way to the correct BSI 'gatekeeper', Torben, and he responds with, what in comparison, is great alacrity. He's friendly too, welcomes me to Smallmead at the front entrance in confident manner, provides a purple "ReadingBulldogs.com" wristband and then leaves me to it.

While I'm unloading my boxes, I hear a familiar sounding but distinctive Wiltshire accent behind me call "hello" – it belongs to the friendly speedway author and Swindon Press Officer, Robert Bamford. He supports a weird combination of football teams – "Manchester United then Swindon and Chippenham" – but is a dedicated, long-time Robins loyalist. Like many Swindon fans this season he's grown in confidence as results on the track have given the riders, the fans and 'Rosco' belief that they might go all the way this year to championship glory. A huge contingent of Swindon fans are expected for this vital local derby Elite League semi-final play-off fixture. We're so early they have yet to arrive en masse. Robert updates me on the team news. I already knew that with immaculate timing – not at all suspiciously but with "great reluctance but what were we supposed to do?" Rob is at great pains to assure me – the Robins have reported Renat Gafurov for "withholding services". This results in an automatic 28-day ban from the BSPA and enables the Robins to use the rider replacement facility for his absence. Whether this gains them an advantage in the context of his not exactly stellar average is a moot point. Something that does signal that the speedway gods look kindly on the Robins this season is the fact that overnight the Racerdogs captain, Greg Hancock – all-round good fellow as well as inspirational and indefatigable advisor for all his team-mates but particularly of Travis McGowan – will miss this meeting with "reported food poisoning", apparently caught from his wife. If this fixture was so important and it wasn't Greg involved, you'd usually be more suspicious. So while both teams will operate the rider replacement facility, it's definitely a blow that gives the Robins greater cause for confidence.

On the entrance gate is Tadley-based Paul Hunsdon, who tonight has switched from the comfort of the referee's box perched high above the start line in favour of a roving security and facilities management role round the stadium. For this purpose he has donned a sleeveless fluorescent yellow top that, along with his size, height and close-cropped hairstyle, adds authority to his demeanour since it immediately marks him out as an official. Overhead there are some exceptionally dark clouds but in the distance, where the wind blows from tonight and towards the rough direction of Tadley, there are bright, clear skies. The security man on the gate is confident of victory but suspects canny practice by the Robins in their decision to seek a ban for Gafurov, "the Russian's not been here before so would have struggled". My delivery of books to the track shop means that after 31 years I finally get to enter the inner sanctum and see behind the scenes of this outlet. Inside things are very cosy. There is a small stock cupboard area presently packed with excess quantities of recent unsold issues of the Speedway Star that all have to have the front cover bar code removed to be sent back to the publisher's offices, Pinegen, as proof of the excess quantity on hand and their subsequent wastage/destruction. As a teenager the shop appeared packed with a treasure trove of speedway goodies that I hankered for but had no money to buy. Nowadays the stringent BSI authorisation procedures means that the limited range of items that are there for sale look somewhat sparse in the spartan

surroundings and, I imagine, would only appeal to the keenest of Bulldogs fans. That said, nonetheless it's a massive improvement on the start of the season when Bulldogs memorabilia was almost completely absent and you would have thought that the shop solely existed to display empty shelves and an uncluttered display cabinet. What isn't missing at the shop is a zeal for Reading Speedway as well as a warm welcome from Win [ifred] who runs the shop and is the mother of the Racerdogs diminutive, knowledgeable, friendly but always committed Press officer, Andy Povey. Inside the recently deluxe Racerdogs programme – the most expensive league programme in the country at £2.50, though rumoured to cost more than its cover price to produce – an article by Andy has stirred my nostalgia with a superbly evocative piece on the Reading Racers' 1977 season. In an example of branding gone simultaneously barmily mad and totally unsubtle, this twopage article is bordered with six separate name checks, including the 'child-friendly-look' platitudinous logo, for the new club name which – in case you hadn't gathered or had spent time away on the moon – is now the "Reading Bulldogs".

I wander over to the pits and past the mounted Sky camera position that allows the cameraman to film down the length of the back straight as well as cover the third and fourth corners. Also extremely noticeable is the "all expense spared" scoreboard – modelled on the deluxe electronic versions you see at major sports events – that has been transplanted from heaven knows where and erected on the apex of this bend. It's a structure that bears the genesis of its production, since I can still clearly see the outline shape in adhesive of the various country names – used during the recent World Cup meetings staged at Smallmead earlier in the summer – that were originally stuck on the individually coloured (red, blue, green and yellow) boards that it prominently displays. Overall it looks very rickety and more suited to the requirements of a village green cricket team rather than a speedway club. It must have arrived to create a certain impression for the cameras though it will, doubtless, prove useful to those too bemused or rushed between races to fill out their race card or those unable to afford the price of the £2.50 "Reading Bulldogs Speedway Racing Team" programme. While the Swindon side of the pits appears noisy, bustling and full of smiles the Racerdogs side appears subdued or quietly professional depending on your perspective. Steve 'Johnno' Johnston arrives wreathed in smiles with a word for everyone he passes. It's widely rumoured that he'd leap at the chance to ride for the Robins and to further that end, he already lives in Rosco's house, while he now resides elsewhere at the pub he runs. Rosco tirelessly promotes the pub at every opportunity. The away trips start from there, meetings about the club are held there and this has led to the witty suggestion that Rosco is better at promoting the pub than the club! Whatever people say, there's no denying the fact that the results on the track have recently justified owner Terry Russell's faith in his abilities. In the pits, microphone in hand, there is a possible fly in the ointment in the form of Richard Crowley from BBC Radio Wiltshire. Along with Sky Sports television and BBC Radio Berkshire (rather impenetrable slogan – "people you know, travel you trust"), this meeting will be covered live on local radio back in Wiltshire. Sadly every time Richard does manage to cover the Robins he's invariably "a jinx" and they stumble to one defeat after another. They're going to have to stop granting him access if this continues to be the case tonight, particularly as it's important to always have someone to blame when things go wrong.

Unsurprisingly, it appears that Robert knows everyone on the Swindon side of the pits and this also holds true for the track staff, mechanics, riders and practically everyone

else on the Racerdogs side of the pits too. Even at this exulted and frequently over-praised Elite League level, many of the people who work at the club each week do so voluntarily and for the love of the sport. This contrasts sharply with the approach and attitude of the 'talent' who, in a modern age of a different club in a different country almost every night, are increasingly the most fickle and transient part of the equation. Like every self-employed person, they're understandably keen to maximise their earnings and benefits, but unlike the volunteers they often don't live locally or selflessly exhibit years of loyal service to the club. Rob tuts at the thought of it and shakes his head in a resigned manner, "That's promoters for you; pay the riders silly money and expect everyone else to work for free!"

Throughout the stadium the very visible paraphernalia of a live Sky outside broadcast litters the grounds. Along with the raised camera positions constructed from wooden planks and complicated arrangements of scaffolding poles there is, of course, the famous/distinctive interview booth placed right by the pits gate. This choice of location is particularly annoying for me as although I have the rare opportunity of pits access tonight, no matter where I stand in the riders' and guests' viewing area, this construction completely obscures any chance of properly seeing the action along the back straight or the exit from the second corner. Not that I realise this until the racing starts. Nor do the riders; though they have greater permission to wander and so have the option to crowd next to the dog-track catch fence and strain on steel-shoe-clad tiptoe to peer past the booth to get a slightly less restricted but still partially obscured view of the action. This scrum of riders arrives only when the race starts and immediately dissipates as the riders cross the line on the track, which is the signal for them all to retreat back to their own bikes and equipment. A live televised meeting traditionally introduces longueurs into proceedings but tonight's will really take the biscuit as the demands of the Sky contract, sponsor's advert breaks and the armchair audience will totally destroy the meeting as a spectacle for those that bother to come through the turnstiles. I estimate the crowd at well over a thousand but nothing like the huge numbers that Nigel Pearson explicitly claims have come over from Wiltshire to support the Swindon Robins during his live television commentary on the fixture. The inevitable stop-start pattern of any speedway meeting has always been exaggerated by the presence of the cameras but tonight the reality of this contractual relationship between British speedway, the Elite League and Sky Sports will reach its ridiculous but logical conclusion. The reality of the contemporary situation is that the fans who turn up to any televised meeting are merely fodder to provide colour for the cameras rather than valued as paying customers to be feted and, occasionally, taken account of.

All that matters tonight for the television rights' holder and the speedway authorities is the artificial narrative tension that can be eked out from the juxtaposition of each heat from Smallmead when that follows each race from the East of England Showground contest between Peterborough and Coventry. The idea is that the heats will efficiently alternate between the venues, except for commercial breaks, throughout the night and hopefully build up to a thrilling, nail-biting denouement. Even though this is likely to be the biggest Elite League crowd that has paid its way through the Smallmead turnstiles since BSI took over Reading, their needs will be secondary to people completely absent from the stadium. A large enough crowd is expected tonight to prompt the club to arrange an overflow car park nearby used on match day by football fans that regularly flood along to see the soccer at the Madejski Stadium. One of the

most audible improvements at BSI Reading has been the tannoy system and the club does at least have the good grace (or common sense) to manage the expectations of a potentially restless large crowd through repeated announcements "that the gap between each heat will be longer than normal as the racing alternates with Peterborough for Sky". The same would never happen with other sports where Sky own the contractual broadcast rights as soccer, cricket, rugby league etc and these respective sports authorities would resist such an imposition, even if they administered a sport as amenable as speedway for such 'thin-slicing'. If anyone is tempted to write a letter of complaint to the speedway authorities, luckily we learn that there's a "BBC reading and writing campaign in the bar"¹. Letter writers are likely to be thin on the ground, particularly since it's not exactly clear to whom you'd write to on such matters, let alone who would be independent from the contractual negotiation or its associated payments. Even if it was clear, they'll be guaranteed not to react or just to blather on with the usual "necessary exposure for the sport", "improving the profile" platitudes we so often have to listen to uncontested or unsullied with factual information to corroborate the hyperbole of these claims.

The clearest sign of who pays the piper gets the tune they want played is the protracted delay prior to heat 1 which I overlook from the pits viewing area. Leigh Adams and Mads Korneliussen both idle by their bikes to wait for the signal to start their engines and head promptly out to the start gate. Mads calmly sits in completely nonchalant fashion on his bike, content to linger without apparently a care in the world. Leigh Adams appears to live on his nerves and agitates impatiently throughout quite a long delay. Initially he does some further warm-up exercises – arms flailing, knee bending, general stretching – while only a few yards away Jonathan Green and Kelvin Tatum (earlier I overheard one of the mechanics say, "We've drawn the short straw; they've got Sophie and we've got Kelvin") also kick their heels as they wait for the race at Peterborough to be completed. When he does speak Jonathan appears to have his voice modulated at a default setting of loudly bombastic, which suits the relentless larger-than-life bonhomie that he has perfected for the screen. Jonathan also clearly concentrates and tries to remain composed during the delay, while he too awaits his own cue to resume broadcasting. Leigh has by now exhausted his repertoire of exercises and, in an irked manner that defies the normal on-air convention of demarcation between the riders and the broadcast team talent during Sky's live outside broadcasts, loudly demands of Jonathan "how long 'til we race?" Jonathan holds up three fingers and mouths the words "three". This doesn't seem to make Leigh that happy and who can blame him, as the riders are the essential component parts of the drama that is about to unfold on television screens across the country but, like the fans, he momentarily finds himself relegated to secondary consideration in the scheme of things as we wait for the television gods to deign to give their approval for the action to commence. And yet here is Leigh Adams – one of the world's premier exponents of his chosen profession – left to kick his heels close to the Smallmead pits gate. Throughout the night he will also still have to suffer further inordinate delays between races that could fatally disrupt his concentration and that defy the usual swift, repetitive pattern of prepare, race, prepare, race that is the lot of any 'in demand' speedway rider who races in Britain. Just as Leigh is irked by the length of the delay, so too is Jonathan disconcerted by Leigh's pre-emptory interruption and so he spends a great part of the next few minutes before he goes back on air trying to attract – in sign language without being able to leave the interview-cum-presentation booth – the attention of a nearby Sky sports gopher so he can mouth to him to look after Leigh

Adams and keep him updated on the time before the off. This is very professional of him but the whole scene has the air of a slightly mad, motorcycling version of 'signing' for the deaf. This small incident forcefully hammers home to me that speedway is primarily an 'entertainment' dictated by television much more than it is a 'sport' with the riders much more 'performers' than 'sportsmen'. They're not quite at the circus parping their horns and clapping their flippers, just yet – but this suddenly looks a lot closer to the actual reality of the thing than I'd previously imagined.

Finally the signal is given and the bikes start, Leigh leaps on his bike and sets off for the start line for the first race of the night. The wait clearly hasn't improved either his mood or his concentration and to collective groans from the large contingent of Swindon fans – who have based themselves for the evening en masse on the grass slope that overlooks the third bend in one direction and, with a short walk, the pits in the other – he rather unusually completely misses the start and is comprehensively out-gated by Travis McGowan. Was this lack of reaction or concentration brought on by the inordinate wait? Who can say? It certainly can't have helped his mental preparations. What we can say is that he thunders extremely forcefully under Travis on the third bend directly in front of my position and that of the Swindon fans. In 'real time' without the benefit of replays and at high speed, it looks to me that Leigh has angrily and aggressively completely taken off the leading rider and should be excluded for his actions. We then face another delay, during which Leigh stomps back to the pits in high dudgeon, while the referee Mick Posselwhite contemplates life, the meaning of the universe and numerous television replays. To my astonishment, if no one else's other than the whole stadium of Racerdogs fans, the ref then excludes Travis for reasons that completely escape me. The Reading mechanic next to me puts it very eloquently, "he's going to freaking bottle it – the freaking chicken ref". Maybe it's a new rule for having the temerity to lead a marked Grand Prix rider. In the re-run normal service is resumed when Leigh, after this astonishing reprieve, channels his anger into a superlative start and a tremendously comfortable win to give the Robins an initial 1-5 lead.

Reluctant to immediately give up the brilliant opportunity that a pits pass provides, I wait patiently during the inordinate time taken between heats 1 and 2 – something that characterises the whole night but, at least, gives everyone the chance to study the dilapidated surroundings that still greet you at Smallmead that even BSI haven't sorted but that I personally find greatly adds to the appeal of the place – to see if the view improves. It doesn't and I think even the riders find it frustratingly hard to get a good view round the Sky Sports interview booth despite them having the advantage that they can press themselves against the dog track fence to try to see. It's very noticeable that Jonathan Green really doesn't need a microphone to amplify his voice. The Racerdogs have immediately replied with their own 5-1 in that heat and the next sees Lee Richardson recall his time spent at Smallmead in the formative years of his speedway career to win. Albeit if he were really in tune with his formative years spent here, he should have spent time at the back of the race or on the track if he was to provide true authenticity.

A forlorn and dispirited air lingers over the crowd in the stadium during the enforced heat intervals we have to suffer after every single race. The riders take advantage – or, as this is the Elite League, their mechanics do – to thoroughly prepare their bikes for each race. So much so that, unusually, there is no "engine failure" for either side all

night and only one retirement by Adrian Miedzinski. Even Jonathan and Kelvin look intermittently bereft and at a bit of loss with what to do with themselves during all the additional time they have. Mostly they content themselves with some earnest study of the television monitor of the races that take place elsewhere at Alwalton Stadium. It's the most post-modern of experiences since we're at a live event but, to really appreciate it, you need to have access to the live television pictures to sense its rhythm and truly understand all the nuances of the meeting.

Someone who does keep very busy is the clamper who operates in the grounds of the modern business park adjacent to the stadium. This development is the ultimate example of the gradual gentrification of the industrial area that has surrounded Smallmead since it opened in 1975. The place is unrecognisable nowadays and the next-door business park has, no doubt, even attracted consultants to find a suitable name to reflect the aspirations of the businesses that chose to locate themselves in these swish contemporary buildings. They have chosen the designation "Green Park" for themselves, which they must be pretty proud of as they have erected a giant illuminated version of this name – lit up in bright green – on a tall column that you can see some considerable distance away. It's not the greatest choice of name as this is hardly a bucolic or verdant area though, that said, the canal is less polluted than it was and they have planted trees and shrubs and generally prettied up the place with turf laid everywhere to enhance the faux countryside effect. The website for this self-important facility boasts, "it's a place where people, as well as businesses – can flourish in beautiful surroundings (!), and with every facility close at hand". It's the nature of modern business to ensconce themselves in gated communities ("private property – keep out") at work and at home, so it's no surprise that they have high fences, security staff and patrols at this site. Rather generously, there are repeated announcements over the tannoy that give recalcitrant drivers one last chance of an amnesty from the clampers if "they report to the nice man at the front of the stadium and move their car immediately from Green Park where they've parked illegally". If they do decide to move their cars – and I would, no matter how bright an idea it seemed at the time to sneak your car onto the nearby driveway when you arrived late at the stadium and found the official Smallmead car park full and couldn't be bothered to drive to the overflow one comparatively nearby – they will save themselves the "£300" clamping fee! Tonight they will even have ample time to move their car between heats and might not even miss a race, should they decide to park their car some distance away at the M4 service station and then illegally walk along the hard shoulder back to Smallmead! The litany of car makes and registrations read out over the loudspeakers gives an unwitting sociological insight into the income levels of traditional (albeit late arriving) speedway fan and their choice of motor. The parking violators all apparently drive cars with ageing number plates and the models chosen include a silver Focus, a purple Corsa, a white Ford, a Seat without a colour and a white Micra among many rainbowcoloured others. This litany of cars contrasts massively with some of the upscale cars that were already parked up at the stadium hours many hours before tapes up – these were all conspicuous by their sheer expense and a distinct lack of speedway related stickers in the windows – a wonderful display of the range of deluxe Mercedes, 4-by-4s, BMWs and other conspicuously consumed cars of that ilk that are traditionally driven by speedway's managerial and owner class.

Back inside the stadium, I move to a better position from which I can easily see all the action and also spend some time on the first bend with a sparse but mixed group of

Robins and Racerdogs fans. They're pretty content but not ecstatic as their side hold onto a narrow two-point lead or fail to recover a two-point deficit dependent on their allegiance. Heat 6 has McGowan fall theatrically directly in front of us on the third lap of the race that immediately prompts the fan next to me to derisively jeer, "did you forget your stabilisers?" On the track, there is quite a bit of aggression leavened with determination between both sets of riders. The first running of Heat 7 has Matej Zagar and Adrian Miedzinski smash painfully into the apex of the bend. In the rerun, Zagar aggressively treated Richardson to a close view of the safety fence on the first bend of laps one and two. He did this with almost violent determination but without actually touching him and it was enough of a sign for Richardson to back off and to settle for second place. I also think it signalled the point at which the Racerdogs team psychologically intimidated and defeated their rivals on the night. Zagar definitely has the mental mastery of this Swindon partnership pairing when he next easily defeats them in Heat 10, when he's joined up front by Travis McGowan who scatters the Robins like pigeons frightened by a hungry cat, when he bowls aggressively up inside them.

Worse is to come for the Robins when Leigh Adams appears to be taken off by Zagar in Heat 11 and is then excluded for his troubles by the referee. To my untutored eye this looks a harsh decision. Leigh looks even less happy – as though he's sucking on an angry wasp – than he did earlier while he impatiently waited for the meeting to start. He pointedly waves away Zagar who has come round on his bike to offer him a lift back to the pits. The re-run features a successive 5-1 for the Racerdogs and has their cumulative lead extend to an unassailable ten points. Another long delay allows yet more loud imprecations over the tannoy for the Racerdogs faithful to use the time to rush back to their cars or to the stadium entrance for bargains as "there's 50% off everything at the track shop". I wonder if my books have already been heavily discounted on their first ever night on sale here? It's not until the meeting is nearly at a close that these announcements get the addition of the very important caveat "on Bulldogs merchandise". The club Dinner Dance is also extensively trailed all night but this sounds a hugely expensive and improbably deluxe affair – completely out of keeping with the traditions of speedway or, historically, the club itself – at a swish hotel in Caversham. The ludicrous price sounds way out of the pocket of even most football fans and would never have even been countenanced at such a price or location in the last three decades of the running of this club. It signals the aspirations of the ownership for the future at BSI Reading but sounds to me that something has already got lost or, at least, disconnected between the loyal fans and the new management. The choice of the next musical interlude – a Deep Purple song played loudly on the upgraded speakers the club now owns or borrows – then punctures the pretension and wonderfully illustrates in aural fashion the true roots of the club.

I'm standing behind Swindon owner and speedway impresario Terry Russell in the pits viewing area as he intently studies the race card as if in the vain hope that some applied and intense concentration will alter the desperate look of the scores. He explains to the bloke next to him the failure of the Robins to avail themselves of the tactical substitute rider opportunity they now have the option to use under the present rules to reduce the deficit, "we nearly done it but Leigh said he'd do it in the next one! So three-three here. Please". There's no reason for me to remain here as there's nothing to be gained from either eavesdropping or from the horrendously restricted view the Sky booth causes. The general mood on the pits hillock among Swindon riders,

mechanics and staff still appears to be one that expects an imminent fight-back rather than the headless blind panic it would inspire in me, if I supported them. Sadly the speedway fairy has deserted the Robins so Terry's wish doesn't come true and the Racerdogs win the heat 4-2 to take the score to a still theoretically and mathematically conquerable 42-30.



Graham 'Blunsdon Blog' Cooke and son © Jeff Scott

I have retreated back amongst the careworn Robins faithful on the third bend and find myself standing next to one of the volunteer track curatorial staff from Blunsdon, the friendly and enthusiastic Graham Cooke, who proudly wears his allegiance on his shirt and on the flag that he's brought along, with his children, for the occasion. He's quick to praise Travis McGowan as a true gentleman when it comes to the frequently neglected skill of saying 'thank you' – "he's a good bloke – Moose always comes out to thank us afterwards". Graham's forecast of the likelihood of success for the Adams-Ulamek combination doesn't bode well for the outside chance of a fight-back by the Robins. "Adams doesn't like riding with Ulamek – he's first out of the gate but often last out of the bend, and he tends to slow as he enters the corners which doesn't help Leigh one bit. This is especially so on away tracks where he gates like lightning but is often slow in mid to late corner on turns 1 and 2. He is then fast down the straight but slows up entering a corner before blasting out of it. This means there is bunching behind on the entry to the corners and that makes it difficult for his partner to make their way through". It's a perceptive analysis that generates a rational concern, which is immediately borne out by events on the track as the black-and-white helmeted Adams can only manage second place behind Zagar. There's clearly no love lost between these two and they conspicuously don't even bother with the post-race charade of pretending to get on or the charade that would usually see one offer the other rider the consolation of a hand of congratulation.

As if this final nail in the coffin isn't enough on its own, the massed ranks of disappointed Robins fans are then goaded beyond all reasonable stoicism by an ill-advised walk on the track by BSI Reading promoter, Jim Lynch, who for reasons best known to himself decides to walk back to the pits on the track directly in front of the third bend. This is supremely misjudged and thoughtlessly incendiary after such a great disappointment that tonight is exacerbated by a much longer time to view proceedings through the bitter optic of alcohol-fuelled chagrin brought on by the lengthy delays caused by Sky's transmission needs. The sight of Jim raises gleeful cheers from the Racerdogs fans but immediately causes great disapproval and anger from the fans of his keen local rivals. The courtesy and equanimity of speedway fans is widely acknowledged but this is a test too far. I see an apple thrown close by to Jim (and apparently an air horn was too but I didn't witness that). Though it misses him, in pantomime fashion he affects to be shocked at this lack of 'sportsmanship' and exaggeratedly shakes his head in a schoolmasterly way at the cadre of Robins fans directly in front of him who boo and communicate through some easily understandable gestures. I can't ever recall the sight of anyone other than a rider or member of track staff walking back to the pits via the track during a match (except after an injury), let alone an important one like this when feelings will inevitably run high. Jim has at best been thoughtless and bungling, though I don't excuse throwing objects at him, it's an action that does raise this possibility.

In fact it adds a really unpleasant atmosphere to a small group of belligerent and disgruntled Robins fans who then decide to look for a fight. In this case, they light upon the nearest figure of Racerdogs authority in the form of the fluorescent-jacketed Paul Hunsdon. I would say that alcohol gave them 'Dutch courage', except they clearly didn't need that to imagine provocation or to indulge in some fisticuffs. A black-haired stocky, thickset bloke in his early sixties (!) who had a physique clearly well used to manual labour and toned over a lifetime for mindless violence – set off by his 'high mileage' face – tries to manhandle Paul with a view to confrontation. Paul, an imposing figure himself, skilfully defused the situation by his loud demands of, "Don't touch me! Don't touch me!" Without the response he wanted, the would-be assailant glowers at Paul who sensibly has promptly retreated through the pits fence gate to put some much needed fencing between him and the 'still up for it' soon-to-be OAP. This man wore the uniform of chav violence – white trainers, blue casual trousers, tattoos, gold chain, blue track suit top with the cross of St George prominently displayed. He continues to jeer in the hope of a reaction, which never comes. Afterwards Paul tells me, "I'd have been within my rights to have thrown him out then and there with the help of other stewards – but you have to look closely at any situation when you're a steward and do what's best, and that would have made the situation much worse and have set things off in the crowd!" It's a situation he judged to perfection.

I retreat from the glowering male who still shouts and gestures obscenely as he grandstands for his small coterie of dim-witted mates. The vast majority of the Robins fans also shrink away from them as much as they can in a big crowd placed in a confined area. At the top of the slope, like caged animals we all press against the wire fence that overlooks the pits before Heat 15. With the final result a foregone conclusion and with their season's ambitions in tatters, nothing much happens on the Robins side of the pits apart from disconsolate packing away of equipment. Whereas the Racerdogs side is equally becalmed as though they always expected to win and

therefore take this important triumph completely in their nonchalant stride. Someone who is evidently completely beside herself with almost orgasmic delight is a rather gamine-looking lady who clasps everyone available in a clinging hug that involves kisses and thrusting her body close to the shale-splattered kevlar of the riders. Each rider gets this treatment in turn – McGowan, Zagar and so on – even if they pretend to half-heartedly suddenly work on their bikes. Even Jim Lynch gets a huge suffocating hug that temporarily dwarfs him. A Robins fan pressed against the wire mesh of the fence remarks sardonically, "Madam – you have no taste!"

Even though the result is a foregone conclusion, we're still treated to a thrilling last heat which has Zagar fight his way back through the field from last place during which time Leigh Adams stalks Charlie Gjedde until he storms past him on the back straight of the fourth lap. This would usually be enough for a hard-fought race victory but as Adams passes Gjedde to enter the final corner, Zagar uses all his track craft and years of hard won knowledge around the varied contours of the Smallmead track – allied to his natural gifts of skill and bravery at high speed – to sweep round the fourth bend and narrowly manage to beat Adams on the line. Needless to say, they again don't shake hands. The meeting closes at around 10.25 p.m. nearly three hours after the scheduled start time. This is not the way to treat the fans that paid to loyally file through the turnstiles.

Wild celebrations ensue among the Racerdogs riders and fans. As the crowd stream away I bump into Darcia, one of the stewards I met at Blunsdon. She's totally disgusted with what she perceives as the vainglorious behaviour of Jim Lynch, "What sort of idiot is he? He really shouldn't do that as a manager – someone should write to the BSPA about it. I'll write – no matter someone chucked it at him, he shouldn't have been there to have it chucked at him!" It definitely sours recollections of what has been a closely contested meeting. For the Robins who stream away into the Berkshire night defeat is just about bearable but lack of grace in victory is not.

25th September

Reading v Swindon (Elite League Play-Off Semi-Final) 51-43

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