Video Killed the Live Updater?
By Dave Green

There's little doubt that the biggest revolution on the internet in recent years has been the widespread introduction of video. Sites like Youtube have led the way but it's now possible to find video content on many corporate and entertainment websites. Speedway has not yet fully embraced this latest trend. A Danish television channel did 'stream' the Grand Prix series last season, though I believe it no longer does. Some of the club websites have featured some short videos, EM:TV on the Edinburgh Monarchs website being one such example. These have all been relatively small scale efforts and have not yet produced any financial return for the club. I wonder if a trick is being missed here?

Speedway fans do not travel to away meetings in huge numbers, indeed the happenings on away tracks are a complete mystery to the majority of any club's home support. There are obviously exceptions to this as some meetings are shown on television and a few are viewed some weeks later on video. What if these supporters could watch an away meeting progress from the comfort of their own home? Would they be willing to pay a small fee to do so, and do sufficient number of such people exist to make it a worthwhile market? I suspect, though don't know for sure, that such a service would be of great interest to a number of fans that are unable to travel.

The sport of speedway is better suited to showing on the internet than most others. The action isn't continuous and consists of 15 separate chunks of action, all lasting little more than a minute. I'd suggest that by utilising these natural breaks in the action it would be possible to reasonably simply show a meeting on the net. The user at home would not be given a live stream from trackside, they would instead be offered the chance to download 15 distinct video files, one corresponding to each race. These files would be recorded at trackside and uploaded to a web server shortly after their conclusion. When the file had been fully uploaded it would be accessible by the punters at home. This does mean that the action being watched at home isn't live, but would it really matter if there was a 10 minute time delay?

Clearly this isn't going to compare to a Sky television broadcast, it's going to be a delayed and fragmented way to view the action. The point is that people in Berwick would be able to watch their team in action at Somerset, not quite as it happens, but as near as damn it. I'd say that was massively preferable to watching the results come through on the live updates?

Of course, there's no incentive for a track to provide this service for free, indeed it would be financially damaging to do so. The punters at home would have pay a charge to watch a meeting, whether live or retrospectively. I don't think a charge of £10 would be unreasonable, given the costs involved in running the service and the need to maximise revenue streams. Collecting the money via the internet is straightforward in these days of debit and credit cards. If 100 people were to take up the option regularly, and I don't think that's an unreasonable guesstimate for Premier League fixtures, then it could add several hundred pounds a week to a club's profits.

This all sounds a bit too good to be true, so I'd better point out the challenges and risks that would be associated with such a scheme.

The first is that clubs shouldn't offer too good a service, that could be counter productive as home fans would simply sit in the house and watch. That's not so much of a problem if it's a single person, a whole family opting to watch at home would however be a major problem. For that reason it would have to be a fairly basic video provision, good enough if you can't make the meeting but a poor substitute for the real thing! Admittedly a difficult balancing act and one that needs careful consideration.

The other obvious risk is piracy, what's to stop one person downloading the meeting and sending it to friends? There are sites that try to prevent you downloading video content, in fact some go to great lengths to make it difficult. Despite this I doubt that any method is fully effective, there's probably a way around most of these protections. There would obviously have to be some level of security in place, perhaps the files could only be downloaded to the same IP address as the payment was made from? We're into the area of risk assessment on this one, are there enough people likely to abuse the system to make content protection a genuine concern? Given that the service could be withdrawn by the club it would have to be hoped that people would not seek to abuse it.

Very little comes for free, even on the internet, so some investment would be necessary to open up this revenue stream. Actually, much of the equipment required to kick off this kind of enterprise has probably already been purchased. A video team operate at all, or most, circuits so actually capturing the action isn't a big deal. If the output from the camera is plugged into a laptop with a video capture card then the digital video files can be created as the race is in progress. The same laptop can then be used to upload the video to the webserver, admittedly a broadband connection is going to be required within the stadium, that's possibly the biggest stumbling block I can see with this whole suggestion! There would also need to be a reliable webserver available to facilitate the upload and download of the video files. The use of one of these needn't cost a huge amount, there are probably speedway fans around the country who'd be willing to host such a service for less than a faceless multi-national would.

A small pilot project, limiting the number of downloads initially, would probably prove how feasible a project of this nature would be. It seems inevitable that something akin to this will happen at some point, I'm not claiming to have come up with a completely revolutionary idea. My point is that this could be happening now and that fans and clubs could already be reaping the benefits of such a project. Come back and read this article in a few years and I promise you'll be surprised by just how unambitious these suggestions sound!