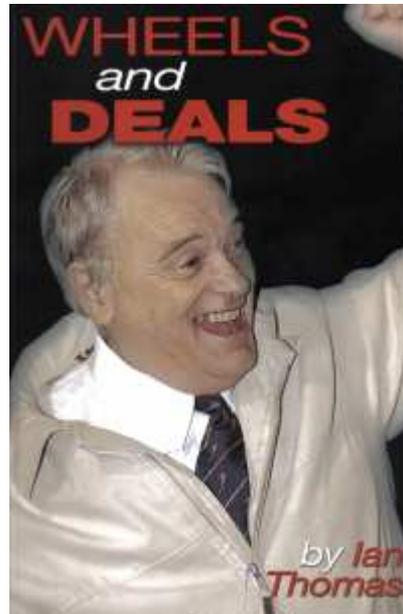


Book Review: Wheels and Deals

Wheels and Deals

By Ian Thomas

216 pages in softback



Ian Thomas has experienced more than most during his extra-ordinary life to date. The one-time junior rider has promoted speedway at Workington, Hull, Ellesmere Port, Newcastle, Belle Vue and Barrow. He's managed his country to a grand slam, promoted indoor ice meetings at home and abroad and team managed some of the sport's biggest stars – Jason Crump, Ivan Mauger and Barry Briggs coming under his command. All of these and more are covered in his auto-biography “Wheels and Deals”.

His story is told roughly chronologically, diverting off on the odd interesting tangent when an amusing anecdote can be slotted in. It's an honest account, though one suspects he holds back slightly when discussing more recent events and the personalities still involved with the sport. On a few occasions the names have been redacted to save embarrassment – an amusing tale about a rider that had taken Viagra being one such example.

Thomas' first speedway promotion was at Workington, a venue selected after other local venues were considered. He's now able to reveal that the track never had planning permission, something that seems incredible in today's climate. It wasn't until Tony Mole re-opened the circuit in 1999, with Thomas back at the track as the general manager, that the appropriate permissions were obtained. He speaks fondly of his initial spell at Workington and the people he worked with, it's clear that it whetted his appetite for promotion as he subsequently opened up Hull and Newcastle.

Hull was his British League (Elite League in today's terms) operation and he tracked Ivan Mauger, Barry Briggs, Egon Muller and the Moran brothers at various times. He also nearly had Ole Olsen in his team after the Dane was allocated to the Vikings by

the Rider Control committee. It never quite worked out as Olsen was determined to move to Coventry. Thomas didn't want to lose him so Coventry had to pay £15,000 to seal the deal. Not a bad bit of business considering Thomas had been given him for nothing and he hadn't ridden once for the Vikings. Pulling 'strokes' such as these seems to be one of Ian Thomas' greatest pleasures, there are numerous such 'little victories' recalled throughout the book.

Newcastle ran in the National League (now Premier League) and complemented his operation at Hull. It was undoubtedly the track with which Thomas enjoyed most success, the Diamonds regularly winning the league's big prizes. He gives us the low-down on some of the famous names from that era – Joe Owen, Tom Owen and Robbie Gardner Rider/Replacement.

The chapter on Newcastle's 1984 season is perhaps the most interesting in the book. The Diamonds moved up into the British League, Hull by then having closed down. The move proved to be a financial disaster and Thomas was left to carry the can by his partners Brian Lerner and Robin Stannard. Thomas eventually cleared all the debts, but it cost him his house. The most moving section of the book is where he recovers his pride several years later by purchasing outright a similar house in the same street. He's still bitter towards his two former partners and neither would find that chapter comfortable reading.

Thomas has also been heavily involved in indoor speedway over the last 30 years. He promoted racing on concrete at Wembley and on ice at Telford and elsewhere. These adventures are covered in the book also, including the remarkable revelation that Ivan Mauger once rode for nothing! These one off events need a different form of promotion from weekly fare and Thomas recalls how he captured the attention of the press by taking them on a mystery tour!

Most people will know that Ian has interests outside speedway, he runs a talent agency and is a professional magician. The book covers this side of his life also and many of the most amusing stories come from those chapters. One that springs to mind relates to the "Man in the Iron Mask" routine that he and Graham Drury have presented across the world. It seems they were once using a car driven by a blindfolded man who could supposedly see nothing at all. When the rain started to fall they had to think of plausible reasons why a blindfolded driver would need to have the windscreen wipers on!

The book was published in 2006 and Ian's second spell at Workington and his first season at Belle Vue are covered. These sections will perhaps be of most interest to younger supporters, as will the sections where he gives his views on all of the tracks in the Elite and Premier Leagues. Given that these were written in 2006, when Ian was working in the Elite League, I wonder if he regrets making some of the comments on the Premier League characters he thought he'd left behind? Certainly his first encounters this season with Peter Waite and the Glasgow machine examiner would have been interesting.

If you've been following speedway for some or all of the last 37 years then you'll enjoy this book. Many of the sport's biggest stars are discussed and a few secrets are spilled. Sometimes the same point is made a number of times, for instance we're often

reminded that Ian never charges extra for interval attractions. It's an interesting insight the first time you read it, by the time you reach the later chapters the repetition starts to grate a little. That aside, it's difficult to criticise this book. It covers all the key aspects of Ian's professional career, thankfully missing out the boring chapters on unremarkable childhoods that appear in so many biographies. There's plenty of humour throughout the book and it doesn't get bogged down with results or dates, it's all about the events and the people.

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