

3

LBC - where news comes first, the transistor radio in Lou Statham's kitchen had crackled out earlier that day. The announcement prompted the Wimbledon manager to turn up the volume, turn a deaf ear to his wife who was reminding him that the lawn needed cutting, and listen closely to the weather forecast for the capital.

'And it's a fine day in prospect across London,' the announcer had promised, 'with a good deal of sunshine and only light winds. Temperatures should reach 70 Fahrenheit, that's 21 Centigrade and it will become increasingly humid towards evening...'

The news was welcome because, so far, the 1977 season had not been blessed with conditions that were particularly warm or especially dry. Maybe last year's heat-wave summer or the thirsty and hot 1975 season had spoiled them. At any rate, he had thought, as he gave his wife a peck on the cheek and climbed into his car, tonight's meeting seemed set to go ahead with no risk of rain and without the need for supporters to be muffled up in coats and scarves. Perhaps Thursday, May 26th would be the date on which the summer actually began in earnest. His mood was optimistic and although he knew the strong Swindon team would provide stiff opposition for the Dons, he had no doubt his boys would rise to the occasion. Maybe the crowd would be bigger, too, on such a nice night. The thought cheered him as he drove the short distance from his Southfields home to the stadium on Plough Lane.

That was this morning. Now, he was standing at the top of the ramp that led down into the pits, surveying the crowd and listening to the introductions coming over the stadium's loudspeakers as the riders were presented. The attendance was

Watershed

not as large as he had hoped and he worried that the track should have been given more water. The last thing he wanted was a dustbowl for the fans to complain about. He had already been forced to fend off a number of comments hurled at him through the iron bars that separated the ramp from the self-styled “first bend loonies”.

‘We’re too weak, Lou. It’s time you got the team strengthened.’

‘You need another heat-leader, Statham, and you know it.’

‘Get yer ’and in yer pocket, Lou and spend some money.’

‘What have you moved Joey Barnes to number one for? You should put him back at three.’

And so on. It was always the same. They were never satisfied but they were undeniably loyal and he couldn’t afford to lose them.

He had just looked at his watch for the fourth time when a tap on the shoulder drew his attention away from the track and he was greeted by Alan Dobbs, his assistant. With him were two men he had just escorted from the car-park.

‘Lou, this is Mr Messenger and Mr Francis,’ he said, gesturing towards the visitors.

The Dons’ manager shook hands with each of them. They were a mismatched couple, he thought. Francis was young-looking, blond, slim, of average height. His companion could have been his grandfather. In his sixties, Lou guessed. Genial enough with a jowly face and a purple-veined nose that suggested he liked a drink, he was short and stooped but his face broke into an apologetic smile as he gripped Lou’s hand firmly.

‘Mr Statham, I’m sorry we’re a little late. Martin was... er... held up unexpectedly. You know how it is in this business.’

In fact, Lou knew nothing about show-business or

the track. One was a four-valve British Weslake, the other three were Czechoslovakian two-valve Jawas. As the referee switched on the green light to bring them under starter's orders, the engine noise rose to screaming pitch. The tapes flew up and the four riders tore away from the line, their rear wheels spraying clouds of shale in their wake.

It appeared to Martin Francis, from his vantage point at the start of the first bend, that the bikes had left the starting gate simultaneously but, as they drew level with him, it became clear that the Swindon heat-leader in the very outside gate had got the drop on the others. He led the way around the first two turns and onto the back straight, followed by Joe Barnes, with Daniel Thorstad holding third place for the Dons and the Swindon second-string struggling at the back.

Barnes closed the gap as they entered turn three, following his opponent around the white line that separated the racing surface from the grass of the centre green, both riders hugging tightly to the inside of the track. Their positions remained unchanged on lap two but, at the start of the third circuit, Barnes moved out to try and pass his opponent on the outside of the bend.

'Don't do that, Joe!' His mechanic was yelling. 'There's no grip there!'

Martin Francis had no idea how the man could tell but he must have been right because Barnes fell behind and was almost overtaken by his team-mate. He made up the ground on the back straight and closed right up to the Robins' rider as they both stuck to the chalk-line once again. This time, however, the young Don's acceleration out of the bend was greater and he pulled alongside his opponent as they streaked up the home straight. They flew into the first turn of the final lap side-by-side but then the opposition heat-leader appeared to try and force Barnes onto the grass, riding as if there was no-one inside him. Inevitably, the two riders bumped but Barnes held his line and his opponent ran wide, locking up and

‘Not just him. I mean, he took one to the Jawa people in Czechoslovakia and they spent four days testing it. They said it took twelve horsepower off their four-valve engines and seven horsepower off a standard Jawa. Worse than that, they claimed it would have a similar effect on other four-valvers like the Neil Street engine and conversions like Briggo’s and Reg Luckhurst’s.’

‘What about the Weslake?’ Joe began to pick up the metal components and examine each one without knowing what any of them was supposed to do.

‘No. For some reason they don’t think the Wessy suffers in the same way.’

‘Well, that’s all right for us then, isn’t it? What does the good doctor think?’

Rick shook his head. ‘He doesn’t think Jawa are right. They’ve got a stuffed silencer full of steel wire which they claim reduces the noise to 109 decibels ...’

‘... And the new BSPA limit is going to be 110?’

‘Yeah. But Geoff has tested their model on different engines and he’s getting anything between 111 and 114 decibels. The Roe Mark II gives only 106. Anyway, we’re told the BSPA aren’t going to allow stuffed silencers. They’ll have to be baffle-types and they must come in below 110 decibels.’

‘Which Geoff’s Mark II does?’

‘Yeah.’

‘So, where’s the problem? Are Weslake happy?’

‘They like the one Briggo’s developing. It’s giving about 106 decibels, too.’

‘Will we go with that one, then?’

‘Could be.’

‘Well, if the problems have all been ironed out, why the long face?’

Rick turned to look at his friend. ‘It’s not exactly as straightforward as it sounds, Joe.’

‘How come?’

Watershed

This time, it was Bill Baxter's gravelly voice that answered from the open doorway. 'Because all silencers, however good they are, reduce engine power. That's the problem isn't it, Rick?'

Neither of them had heard the old man wheel himself silently up the ramp and into his workshop. He had a plate of fresh almond slices balanced on his knees.

'Pops says you might as well eat these out here if you're not coming in.'

'Sorry, Bill,' Joe said as the two of them helped themselves to Poppy Baxter's delicious cakes. 'Is it going to be a real problem then, the loss of power?'

'I'm not sure,' the veteran Australian replied. 'What do you think, Rick?'

Rick bit into his almond slice. 'These are just heaven. I could eat them all myself.'

'We know,' Joe interrupted. 'What about the power loss?'

'Well, remember I told you those baffle silencers work by interference? The key problem is—'

'Hang on... interference? Do you think you could just recap a little for the benefit of an old codger?' Bill asked.

Rick laughed. 'It's not that complicated. You see, because of the way the pistons work, the exhaust gases come out in the form of a series of compressions and expansions – like a sound wave. The baffle splits the gas stream into two parts and sends each of them along a different path but the paths aren't the same length. When the two streams meet up again they've got out of step so that the compressions in one stream meet the expansions in the other. The expansions cancel the compressions to leave no sound wave and that means you've got no sound. It's been silenced.'

'Perfect,' Bill nodded, 'only they aren't silent, are they? Engines still make quite a lot of noise even with a silencer fitted, don't they?'

them in turn. There was no other way of describing them: they were little works of art. He never underestimated what his mechanic was capable of but this was something else altogether. A smile began to spread across his face.

‘This is fantastic. When did you do all this? I mean, is this all your work?’

‘Of course it is! Who do you think did it, Poppy?’

‘I just thought Bill might have helped. Can you do all this welding and stuff on your own?’

‘Thanks for your confidence.’

‘You know I don’t mean that. It’s brilliant.’ Joe hesitated for a moment. ‘Does it... do you know if it actually works?’

Rick shrugged. ‘Well, that’s what we’ve got to find out, isn’t it? In theory, there’s nothing wrong with it and I’ve got no doubt that it’ll take the noise level down well below 110 decibels. What we need to know is whether it affects the engine power. I thought we could test that when you do your riding scenes at Crayford tomorrow.’

Joe looked up. ‘Why Crayford? Why can’t we do a proper test at Plough Lane?’

Rick began to wrap up the metal pieces in the cloth. ‘Look, Joe, you probably think I’m a bit paranoid or something but I really meant it when I said I don’t want anyone else to know about this. There’ll be no other speedway people there except the three Kestrels’ boys who are riding with you. This could be a big thing for you and I don’t want it blown by other people getting to know about it.’

‘It could be big for you, too. You could sell your design or get someone to make them for you. Mass-produce them and make a fortune.’

‘No. That’s exactly what I’m *not* going to do. Don’t you see what this could do for your career? You’d have an advantage that no other rider could match. That would be worth its weight in gold.’ He put the silencer parts back in

6

Like so many speedway tracks, Crayford's 265-yard circuit had been constructed inside the greyhound racing strip that was the venue's principal sporting attraction. The neat London Road stadium complex occupied a 20-acre site close to the town's railway station. The convenience of trains into London had been a consideration when the venue was selected for the filming of the *Stanmere Jinx*, as had been the generous car-parking for Thames Television's outside broadcast trucks and large, mobile control room. The greyhound track had been less of a recommendation since the director had wanted crowds of spectators clustered closer to the safety fence. Happily for the Crayford management, who would gain financially from the filming as well as from the publicity, it was a problem that the production company felt they could work around.

The previous day's humidity had not abated and Sunday began cloudy and still. According to the forecast, it was likely to remain so. By mid-morning, the stadium car-park had become temporary home to a fleet of lorries, trailers, vans and cars which had quickly – and according to a well-practised routine – disgorged their occupants and an impressive array of props, cameras, electronic equipment and large items of scenery. Through the remarkable industry of an army of production workers, everything would be in its place and operating as it ought by mid-day at the latest.

Joe and Rick had been asked to arrive by 11 o'clock – which they duly did – and were met by Gaynor, the director's assistant, a plump, dark-haired young woman, dressed in a blouse and slacks. She carried the obligatory clipboard in one hand and a walkie-talkie in the other.

'Tristan will have a word with you when he's finished

Watershed

The driver accelerated down the back straight and Francis sat upright, straightening the handlebars. The trailer bounced alarmingly at one point but he clung on, putting his leg out again as the Land Rover entered the next bend. All seemed well until it reached the apex of the curve when the trailer suddenly jack-knifed and the rear end clipped the safety fence once, twice then with a third and more violent thud. Amazingly, the actor managed to stay on the bike even after the first two jolts but the impact when the trailer hit the fence again was too severe and he lost his grip on the handlebars. With a yell, he flew off the right-hand side of the bike and hit the floor of the trailer with a thump that knocked the wind out of him. He rolled out towards the right-hand edge where only the low metal side prevented him from ending up on the track.

Tristan Helliwell's face was white. 'My God!' He yelled. 'George! For heaven's sake stop this bloody thing!'

The driver braked as urgently as safety allowed but when the director turned to his cameraman he was appalled to find the man was trying to stifle a smile.

'Nigel, for heaven's sake!' he said through gritted teeth. Jumping onto the trailer, he knelt down beside his stricken star, taking off his face mask, unbuckling his crash-helmet and gently lifting up his goggles. 'Martin, are you all right? Can you speak?'

There was a long pause before the actor opened his eyes. He fixed Helliwell with an icy stare. 'Alright? Did you say alright?' he spoke in a quiet, menacing voice. 'Never been better, Tristan. But my day will be perfect when you have sacked the maniac driving this thing and when I have called my so-called agent and he has got me out of this contract. Now get me up!'

It took a full hour after Martin Francis had been checked over by one of the First Aid team to persuade him to stay. The director had pleaded with him and insisted he was

Watershed

of the first two turns and held off the challenges of the Birmingham heat-leader with relative ease. If there was any loss of power from his Weslake motor, it was impossible to tell and he was only aware, once again, that the sharp edge of the engine's crackle had been removed.

The result was a 4-2 heat win to Poole, which gave them a six-point lead over the Brummies and darkened the already sombre mood of the home supporters. Some of the comments they shouted at their own riders as they rode back into the pits suggested that all was not well with the Perry Barr faithful.

Joe's next race was less satisfactory. He missed the gate – a rare event in itself – but had passed both the Poole and Birmingham second-string riders within two laps. Frustratingly, he could find no way past the home heat-leader, despite keeping up his challenges all the way to the chequered flag.

'There is no power problem,' he reassured Rick at the end of it. 'I could keep up with him easily but I just couldn't get around him.'

Heat seven saw his third appearance and, this time, he flew from the gate ahead of the field once again. Able to choose his line and with the knowledge gained from his earlier rides, he pulled further away from the chasing home rider. As he entered the third lap he knew that unless he made some silly error, this would be another three points for him and the visitors' lead would stretch even further. He smiled behind his facemask. For some reason, it always pleased him especially to score well as a guest rider although, as his average got better and better, there were fewer and fewer opportunities for such bookings.

Coming around the fourth bend he was aware of the starting marshal up ahead with the yellow flag ready to signal the start of the final lap. There was little noise from the crowd as they prepared to see another heat slip away and Joe was just getting his wheels in line when he felt a jolt on the side of his

fascinated, as the two men checked and double-checked the arrangements. His own amateur measurements had been taken closer to the bike so he was feeling less worried about meeting the required sound-level.

Croslegh took readings of the ambient noise and the wind speed. The Weslake was on its stand, facing forwards in the wind direction as the rules required but, in any case, there was only the gentlest of breezes and it hardly seemed to matter.

Finally, he stood beside the bike, took hold of the throttle and asked Rick to turn the back wheel and start up the engine. It fired at once and the inspector twisted the throttle gently a few times. 'Are you ready, Raymond?' he called over to his assistant who raised a hand in acknowledgement. 'Right, Mr Tyson,' he said to Rick, 'I'm going to ask you to disengage the clutch. I shall then open the throttle full and keep the engine revs at maximum for about two seconds. We may have to repeat the procedure once or twice more. Is that all clear?'

'Fire away,' Rick nodded.

'Okay, Raymond,' the man shouted. 'Disengage, Mr Tyson.'

Rick squeezed in the clutch lever and Croslegh wound the throttle to its full extent. The engine screamed while the assistant watched the sound meter and made notes on his clipboard. The process was repeated once then the inspector stepped away from the machine. 'Thank you, Mr Tyson,' he said, 'you can switch off now.'

Rick cut the fuel and watched anxiously as Croslegh consulted his assistant. Together, they looked at the clipboard, some calculation was clearly being made, then they nodded in apparent agreement about something and Raymond set about dismantling the tripod. After all the setting-up, the test appeared to have been completed remarkably quickly.

'Well,' Rick asked, 'has it passed?'

Watershed

A Stanmere rider was standing at the closed door, pointing down at the threshold. Running over to join him, they stood, disbelieving, as they watched a stream of water pouring out from the gap beneath the door.

‘What on earth is going on in there?’ Mike Vernon twisted the handle and pushed the door but it was almost impossible to move. He soon realized why when a torrent of water gushed through the crack. The other men with him put their shoulders to the door and forced it back against the flood as water cascaded out onto the concrete and flowed down into the pits.

In the changing-room, the scene that faced them was difficult to take in. Every shower and tap was turned on full. Water covered the floor to a depth of almost a foot and, despite the rate at which it poured from the doorway, the level seemed hardly to be falling. Riders’ clothes, kitbags and small items of equipment floated about like the flotsam from a shipwreck. A discarded newspaper bobbed past them and a copy of the *Speedway Mail* which had snagged on the wire of a boot-rack, fluttered as waves of water broke against it.

‘For heaven’s sake turn those taps off!’ Vernon yelled as Holmqvist and the others splashed through the flood, heading for the washbasins and showers. Several seconds of furious activity stopped the taps and turned off the showerheads, leaving the group of men standing ankle deep in the receding water. The only noise came from the small crowd of mechanics and others who had gathered outside the door and from the waterfall cascading down the step.

‘Well,’ Stefan Holmqvist’s voice sounded unnaturally loud in the flooded room, ‘it’s easy to see how this happened.’

It was true. Every wash basin had its plug firmly pushed in and its overflow taped off. Each drain in the showers had been similarly sealed but it was clear to them all that the taps must have been running almost since the meeting began. It was another illustration of the Raiders’ awful luck that no one had

Sports reporting was not something that usually came his way these days although he had done his share of it in the past. Now, you had to be so much more of a specialist but then, in the early Fifties, you could find yourself reporting on greyhound racing at Walthamstow one night and wrestling from Brent Town Hall the next, without knowing too much about either. Oddly enough, he had covered more than a few speedway meetings in his youth. It had been a much bigger deal in London then, of course. Today they only had tracks at Hackney, Wimbledon and White City whereas before, there were good teams at West Ham, New Cross, Haringay and more besides.

Truth to tell, speedway racing had rather fallen off his radar. He hadn't watched it for years. It was writing the story about Marty Francis for the kids' magazine that had taken him back to Wimbledon Stadium. Searching for a half-interesting angle had led him to the idea of including Joe Barnes, the guy booked to double for Marty, as part of the story. Through Barnes, he had encountered Rick Tyson and the mechanic's comically secretive behaviour had alerted him to the controversy over the introduction of silencers.

That was when Rafferty's nose for a story had picked up a scent. It was nothing much at first; just the vague possibility of something but worth spending a little time on, especially since good stories were always thinner on the ground during the summer months.

In search of some background, he had made the short walk from Shoe Lane down Fleet Street to Temple Chambers and dropped into the offices of the *Speedway Star*. There, he had looked through back numbers of the magazine for the early months of the year during which the silencer controversy had occupied many a column inch.

A talk with the editor had been even more enlightening. He was able to fill in a lot of the fine detail and had been happy to supply many an anecdote about the real views of the

footballers do, don't they?'

'Quite a lot of sports do,' Rick nodded, 'but not speedway. There's a thing called the Speedway Riders' Association but it hasn't got much in the way of teeth. We're all self-employed. Riders negotiate their own contracts with the promoters.'

'That does rather let the promoters divide and rule, doesn't it? I mean, how do you know someone isn't getting more money for doing the same job?'

'Oh, they *are*, there's no doubt about that but it must be the same in show-business, isn't it? Big names command big fees. In speedway, no-one ever talks about what they get paid but everyone knows who the high earners are and who demands the big appearance money.'

'Well, we've got something in common, at least. Here, have some more of this.' He topped up their glasses. 'So, what you're telling me is that you won't be able to use your silencer at all.'

'No, not in this country, anyway.'

'You *have* to use one of the silencers approved by the Control Board if you want to race in Britain?'

'Exactly. Even though my silencer gets the engine noise down well below the required level.'

Martin Francis said nothing for some moments. Lying back on his sofa, he clasped his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. At length, he said, 'What exactly do the rules say about silencers, Rick? I mean, do you know what the wording is?'

'I can soon tell you.' Rick jumped up and walked over to his jacket which was draped over the back of a chair. From an inside pocket, he pulled a thin, grey booklet. It resembled a small diary and was printed on the front cover with the words, *The Speedway Regulations 1977*. Returning to his seat he began to leaf through the pages.

'You carry the rule-book around with you?' Francis was

unseen by his caller, was one of complete bewilderment. 'Major, I'm afraid I know nothing of any letter. What exactly are we talking about here?'

There was a pause from the other end and Lou could hear papers being shuffled.

'Well, I must say, you amaze me Statham. I should have thought they might have consulted you before taking such a step. It seems to me—'

'Major,' Lou interrupted, 'perhaps if you told me what this letter actually says, I could be of more help.'

Burkitt read out the solicitor's letter that had been drawn up by Martin Francis's friend, outlining his views on the stance taken by the Control Board over Rick's silencer and asking for a response. The man's irritation was evident in every word and, at the end, he could not resist adding, 'I can't imagine how a rider as young as Barnes imagines that this kind of action is going to do his career any good at all.'

Lou was horrified. 'Well, there's not much I can tell you at the moment, Major. I'll certainly speak to the two of them about it at the end of tonight's meeting and I'll give you a ring tomorrow. Will that do?'

'Yes, please do. And while you're talking to them, I hope you will point out that resorting to the law when you can't get your own way is seldom an advisable way to go about things. By the way, I've had a reporter sniffing about this morning. I assume Barnes and Tyson put him up to it since he seemed to be in possession of all the salient facts. That wasn't the wisest thing for them to do, either.'

* * *

On the track, Joe had just begun his heat of the Rider of the Night Trophy – on this occasion sponsored by a local firm and entitled the Wilkinson's Tyres Chase.

For the first time that evening, he hadn't made the gate

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I should like to thank the staff of Hammarby Speedway and, in particular, former Sweden Team Manager Kim Malmberg who was the announcer at Gubbängen on May 20, 1976. His detailed knowledge of the events of that night and his willingness to give up his time were invaluable. I am especially grateful for his help in ensuring an authentic description of the stadium as it was in 1976.

MH
January 2014