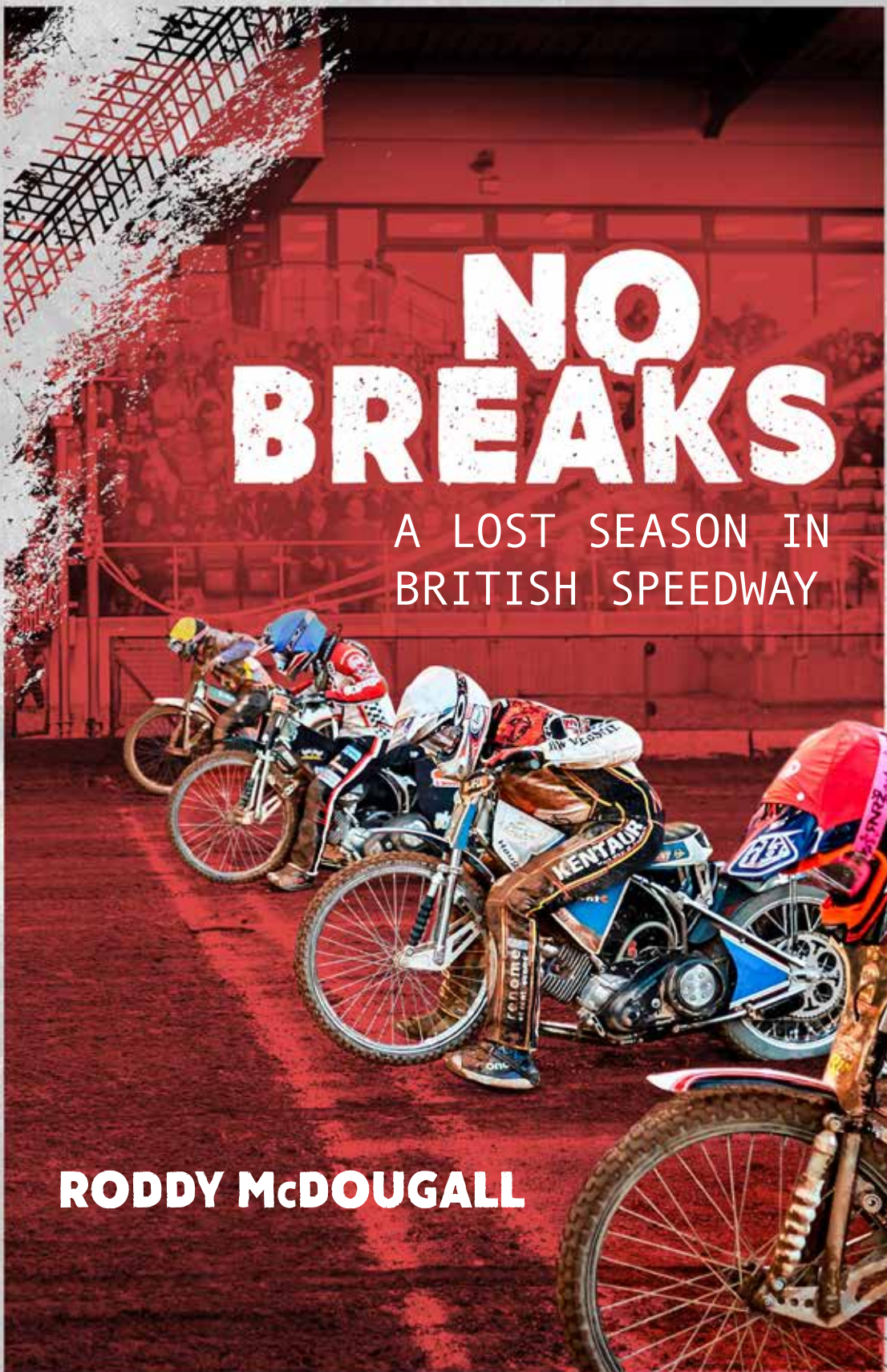
NO BREAKS
A LOST SEASON IN BRITISH SPEEDWAY
KENTAUR
RODDY McDOUGALL

NO BREAKS

A LOST SEASON IN BRITISH SPEEDWAY

RODDY McDOUGALL

pitch

Contents

September 2019 – Same sport, different worlds

LOOMER ROAD Stadium – or, to give it its original title, the Chesterton Greyhound and Speedway Stadium – wouldn't be many people's first choice for a great Saturday night out. It's hidden away, out of sight of the road, in the hinterlands of Newcastle-under-Lyme in Staffordshire, at the end of a featureless industrial estate boasting the likes of Burma Bacon Supplies and Dynamic Pump Services.

'Stadium' is a bit of a stretch, too, if we're being honest. There's a small brick and corrugated metal grandstand along one side of the track, rust-red steelwork holding up a sloping roof, which has 'STOKE SPEEDWAY' in black capitals across the front. It's functional rather than flamboyant. Glass windows offer good views from the bar area above a shallow concreted standing area, and there are red, metal barriers on either side of the grandstand for spectators to lean on as they fill in their scorecards. The other three sides are effectively grass banks where cars can drive up and park – American drive-in cinema style – to overlook the track in the middle. To the uninitiated this looks like a muddy and puddled construction site after a period of heavy rain rather than something that's going to be the centre of paid-for entertainment.

Yet, tonight, a sunlit evening in mid-September that can't decide if it's late summer or early autumn, there are hundreds of people heading towards this unlikely sporting mecca. A long line of cars and vans is

queuing patiently to get through the stadium's narrow entrance from the east. From the west, there's a queue of pedestrians, their entrance money – £13 for adults, £11 for senior citizens, £2 for children aged 5–15 – ready to be handed over at the small brick turnstile block. They've all come out to watch their local speedway team, the Stoke Potters, race against the Leicester Lion Cubs. So many have turned up, in fact, that tonight's advertised start time will have to be pushed back by half an hour to half past seven.

Many are regulars, visitors to Loomer Road for many years. Some have probably made a special trip this evening, having not been for quite a while. Others – including me – are here because tonight is the last time that this stadium will host speedway. A sport that was first staged in Stoke in 1929 – and which has continued, off and on, in the area ever since – will come to an end. Loomer Road Stadium is to be demolished. It may be replaced with more warehouses or housing, no one seems quite sure yet. These good people of Stoke and the surrounding area will have to find something else to do with their summer Saturday nights.

* * *

It's easy to spot Dave Tattum, the promoter of speedway at Stoke. For a start, he's walking around in a red 'Stoke Potters Speedway' fleece jacket with his name neatly printed on the right-hand side. Spend any time amongst real speedway people – the managers who organise the riders on the night, the promoters who are responsible for just about everything else and, of course, the truly committed fans – and you'll soon discover there's real pride in wearing their clubs' branded jackets. But Dave's hard to miss anyway as he seems to be everywhere, chatting to people as they arrive and then moving between the riders in the pits, the volunteer track staff in the centre green and the supporters and former riders in the bar who've turned up to pay a last farewell to the old stadium. He also makes sure to look after the night's guests, including the sponsors of the club's £100 draw – Activity Mobility of Weymouth.

Over the years, the team has attracted a range of sponsors – from Signal Radio, the local independent radio station, to a long association with Easy Rider, a Stafford-based motorcycle and scooter dealer. Since 2016, they've been sponsored by A.R. Richards Ltd of Market Drayton who, amongst other services, specialise in concrete sleepers, farm waste disposal and wheelie bins.

Promoters are the people who run speedway clubs and hire riders to race, although the work involved covers a much wider range of jobs than the title might at first suggest. Dave had arrived at the stadium around 9.30, as he's done on just about every other race day. He unlocks the gates and the sheds to get various vehicles out of storage that will be needed later: two tractors, JCBs and the parade truck on which the winning riders will be driven around after the meeting to wave to fans. Dave makes sure they're all full of diesel and prepared, along with the generator. Then he keeps an eye on what's happening with the weather and whether he needs to put water on the track during the morning or a little more shale around the turns or at the start. Getting the track right is vital for both the riders and the spectators. Shale, a fine-grained sedimentary rock mainly composed of mud, allows the riders to skid around the corners at speed and, hopefully, encourages safe and exciting overtaking. If the track isn't well prepared it's dangerous for the riders. If there's not enough shale, and the track's too slick, racing can be processional and dull for the spectators.

There's always something to do for a speedway promoter and most of it is far from glamorous. Dave has a loyal band of helpers – Ron, Gaynor and Caroline – who help out too, all of them volunteers, looking after, among other things, the bars and the catering while Dave's off doing his many other jobs.

I catch him by the stadium entrance at six o'clock, his fleece collar up despite the warm evening sun. Dave's a friendly soul and, even if tonight's difficult for him, he's doing his best to keep everything together. He says that he was choked on air earlier in the week when he was doing interviews on local radio. 'I felt like a fool because I

couldn't talk. It was very emotional.' But he's pulling himself together tonight: 'You can't let the fans see that. You have to go out as if you're the happiest man in the stadium.'

I tell him I'm an Edinburgh Monarchs' fan and he says he's spoken that morning to Alex Harkess, the co-promoter at Edinburgh who's been involved in speedway even longer than Dave has. It turns out that Alex was one of the volunteers who helped build Loomer Road Stadium when he was living in nearby Newcastle-under-Lyme.

'He wanted to phone and wish me all the best. He'd heard what had happened obviously. You know what? We both ended up in tears.'

Dave's been promoting speedway at Stoke for a quarter of a century. He'd only found out earlier in the week that the stadium owners had decided to sell up and that tonight's meeting, the last of the 2019 season, would be the final one. Full stop.

He's keen to make clear that it's all coming to an end because the owners have simply decided to sell the stadium. 'There's no hidden agenda here or anything with that sort of stuff you read on the internet. We've always paid our rent. We've had some good racing here and we've had some good crowds this year.'

The owners of the stadium have come to a logical decision. With no greyhound racing at the stadium anymore – the last meeting was back in 2003 – and increasingly fewer speedway meetings (tonight's is the 13th of the season when, back in the 1980s, there'd be at least double that number), the only other activity is stock car racing. It's not really enough to justify the maintenance and upkeep of a stadium and its large car parking area. Dave can understand completely. 'I feel certain the buyers have done their homework. It will be developed. I really think it will be under construction come January. They have invested a lot of money and they have to recoup that money somewhere. They don't want to sit on this empty.'

Since speedway first took place in Stoke in 1929, it's had a chequered history in the area. According to the club's website, the Sun Street Stadium at Hanley in Stoke hosted speedway before the Second World War until 1953 when the track closed. The entertainment tax

– a 48 per cent levy on the revenues of many sport and entertainment venues – hit many clubs that had sprung up in the post-war speedway boom. It reopened in 1960 but closed after just three years and only began again ten years later at its new venue here in Loomer Road. Apart from a single-season break in 1993 and a year as the curiously named Cradley Heathens/Stoke in 1996, the Potters have raced at Loomer Road – at different levels of league racing – ever since.

But Dave Tattum isn't banking on this being just a short hiatus before speedway starts up once again. He sees little prospect of a return. 'We're noisy and dusty. No one wants to be near a motorsport stadium. Unfortunately, it will be inevitable the club will end.'

And while there's been some talk of Stoke possibly carrying on by racing next year, 25 miles away, at Buxton in Derbyshire, that's not something Dave thinks likely. He doesn't see how you could move Stoke Speedway to Buxton and call it Stoke. He says it was tried with Cradley in 1996, when it was called Cradley Stoke, and it didn't work. 'The Cradley fans came and the Stoke fans didn't.'

I tell him it's a sad night, we shake hands and he moves on to his next task for the evening.

* * *

The meeting – a National League fixture – is run briskly and without any serious crashes. The National League is the most junior of the three levels of league speedway in Great Britain – although, as we'll see, there's a certain fluidity to riders taking part in different leagues. The Leicester Lion Cubs win 50-40, although no one's really bothered about the result, Leicester having already qualified for the end-of-season play-offs and Stoke out of the running.

Despite the fact that speedway is a competitive team sport, there's none of the latent hostility towards opposing supporters that football has suffered from over the years. During the meeting, I spot several Leicester jackets along with a couple from Wolverhampton, Coventry and Wimbledon, the last two tracks suffering their own closures in the 21st century.

Go into the bar during a race and you'll find a busy and friendly space. The tables by the windows have been carefully covered in tartan and gingham plastic tablecloths and are all occupied. Somebody's set up a trestle table to sell speedway memorabilia – old programmes, photos of riders past and present and club badges. There are glass cases on the wall highlighting Stoke teams from the past, one of which, titled 'Times to remember', seems particularly poignant tonight.

Strangers politely stop to let you pass, semi-apologetic smiles acknowledging the shared but unspoken fact that we won't be here again. When the racing starts, plenty of heads turn to follow the riders around their four laps. One of the great things about speedway – compared to other motorsports – is that you get to see the whole race, not just vehicles flashing by and then disappearing for a while until they come around again on the next lap. But you'll also see some couples or groups of people chatting over a drink, the speedway apparently incidental to their Saturday night out. For them, going to the speedway is much more than just the racing. It's the smell – the sweet aroma of methanol mixed with racing oil which, although less pungent these days, entices speedway aficionados, like the smell of freshly cut grass. It's the raw sound – the angry, impatient revving of the engines just yards away from the spectators. And it's the comfort of familiarity, with many spectators – either in the bar, by their favourite first-corner barrier or on the grass banks surrounding the oval track – in the same place, sharing a few words with the same people next to them, week in, week out. Going to speedway appeals to many of our most basic human needs, familiarity amongst them, and it's all the better for it.

Lots of people are, unsurprisingly, filming the final races on their phones or taking selfies against the backdrop of the grandstand or starting tapes. But not everyone is using the latest technology. I pass two men panning around the track with old-style video cameras, which must have been state-of-the-art back when they were bought in the late 1990s.

I don't actually see anyone in tears as I'm walking around, but the Stoke Potters' Twitter feed – 2,605 followers on the day of the last

meeting – later makes clear that quite a few people most certainly were. After the final race of the evening, Dave invites anyone who wants to come down to the track to walk around it, a symbolic and moving experience for those for whom the Stoke Potters is much more than a slightly oddly named team competing in a largely forgotten sport; it is a real part of both their own lives and the wider community.

Later, in the one remaining weekly speedway magazine, *Speedway Star*, I'll read about Jess Sant, who has been coming here since she was a baby, nearly 24 years ago. She's devastated at the closure and says she's made many friends and memories at the stadium. There's Vickie Ellis, who has been following Stoke since 1973. For her, it's heartbreaking that they won't be there anymore. Her only consolation is that they've had this last meeting to say goodbye properly. She is well aware that other clubs weren't so lucky because they just closed and that was that.

Scan the most recent messages on the club's Twitter feed, those offering sympathy and condolences for what's happened, and you'll soon see a common theme emerging. 'I used to go there for birthdays at primary school', 'Rarely missed a meeting from '81 to '92' and 'My dad used to take me' are typical examples.

And that, along with the kind of sponsors the sport gets and the average age of those attending and those capturing their final memories on 20-year-old DVCAM video cameras, underlines one of the main issues facing British speedway in 2019. The audience for it, the people who know about it and want to watch it and care about it, is growing old. It's not being replaced by anything like the same number of young people.

Despite the long queues and the need for a delayed start, the final attendance is around 1,100. 'If we had crowds like this coming all the time, we could probably do something in future,' says Dave. 'But if we were running the week after, it would have been less than a third. When we were here in the late 90s, we had crowds of 1,200 to 1,500, right up until the mid-2000s. It's a shame. People have lost heart with

speedway. It has gone and it's a great shame. It's a fabulous sport with fabulous people in it.'

But perhaps the saddest thing for us dwindling few who enjoy our speedway is that Stoke's closure will likely not be the only one. A week earlier, Peterborough responded to speculation about redevelopment at their East of England Showground track by saying they were safe in the short term. The Panthers, as they are known, race in the top league, the Premiership, but didn't have a home meeting at all between July 15th and September 5th – effectively prime summertime season for speedway as it covers the school holidays – because, like most speedway clubs, they don't own their own track and don't have first option on its use.

The year before, 2018, four tracks – Workington in Cumbria, Buxton, Lakeside in Essex and Rye House in Hertfordshire – closed too. Just 23 tracks opened for the start of the 2019 season. A 24th, the homeless Cradley Heath – whose track closed back in 1995 but who were revived by supporters in 2010 – race at Wolverhampton's Monmore Green track.

As ever, at the end of the speedway season, which runs from the end of March through to October, there are rumours that other tracks are in financial trouble and are considering their options for the following year. Whatever the truth, it seems highly unlikely that Stoke's closure tonight will be the only one.

Dave Tattum is the last person out of Loomer Road Stadium at around quarter past eleven, his trusty colleague, Ron Parry, still with him. He knows Loomer Road isn't the prettiest of sporting venues. His benchmark is Wolverhampton, one of the better-appointed speedway stadiums due to it being home to one of the country's remaining greyhound tracks. 'Loomer Road was coming on 50 years old, but we did keep it tidy. We spent a lot of money on it in the last ten years – me and the stock car man.' But now, as he locks the gate behind him, it's the end, an unheralded moment that brings another chapter of the British speedway world to a close. Belle Vue in Manchester is now the only surviving speedway club in the north-west of England.

* * *

Around 170 miles or so away, Jitendra Duffill is doing his best to keep speedway going in another part of the country. The town of Redcar sits just outside Middlesbrough town centre on the north-east coast of England. Redcar has a curious, split-personality history – once a popular seaside resort but also a centre for steel and chemical production. It has, like much of the United Kingdom where heavy manufacturing was the basis for employment, seen better days. Its steelworks closed in 2015, with unemployment increasing as a result. The area was featured in the BBC's 2018 series, *The Mighty Redcar,* which followed the real-life experiences of several young people trying to find jobs.

Jitendra – or Ben, as he's known outside the speedway world – isn't your typical speedway promoter. He's just 38 for starters, younger than most. He has an Indian mother and an English father. And he works part-time as an optometrist in the town. I'm guessing he's the only speedway promoter to be profiled in *Optician Online*. He first became interested in speedway when the Redcar Bears raced along the road at Cleveland Stadium in Middlesbrough before that closed in 1996. He rode for a couple of years – 'I wasn't very successful. If I'm really honest, the commitment wasn't there from me' – for Newcastle, Edinburgh and Glasgow and then moved to Redcar's third-tier league team, the Cleveland Bays, when speedway started up again on Teesside in 2006. In 2009, he became team manager. Then, in September 2017, he stepped up to become promoter. Except, as he says in his programme notes for this month's meeting against Eastbourne, 'promoter' isn't an accurate description of his role.

'The one thing I get to spend the least time on is promoting our club. That's not great, I know, but it's a fact. A more accurate job title would be general manager. I spend a minimum of 40 hours per week running our club, which includes staging events, press releases, cashing up, banking and resetting floats, invoicing, accounting, preparing the programme, dealing with all kinds of administration, from sponsorship to correspondence with staff, the Promoters' Association

and riders. The list goes on and on and it eats up all my time, which is all given on a completely voluntary basis.'

Later, he'll tell me he does this because he loves Redcar speedway. 'I was brought up around speedway and my dad and my grandad both used to attend. It can be tough because us promoters get a hard time as the sport's not in a great position; crowds are not what they were years ago and we tend to get the blame. To be frank, we're just giving our own time and, a lot of us, our own money, just to keep the sport going. Whether we're doing things right or wrong, we can only use what's at our disposal. Finances and budgets are pretty tight. I think a lot of promoters deserve a lot more credit for what they do than they get.'

Ask him about the reaction of his patients when he mentions speedway and the answer is sadly familiar. 'It always surprises me because a lot of them don't actually know speedway is there. There are a lot who say they used to go years ago, when there was speedway in Middlesbrough.' He says the local press is very supportive – both radio and TV – and that they're very active on social media, but there are still too many people who don't know they exist. And there's another problem.

'When you ask people if they'll come and watch, it's tough to get them along once they are out of the habit. It's a shame because it's such a fantastic sport. We made admission for under-16s free and that brought quite a few new people in. Once they're there, they tend to be hooked. They absolutely love it. I'm not going to pretend to have all the answers. I'm not a marketing expert; I was brought in to run the speedway club with no experience in that field whatsoever. I have experience in business, but I'm not going to pretend I'm something I'm not. I'm not the answer to speedway's revival. If there was a big marketing push, we'd need experts to be able to do that. I still think we have something there to sell, 100 per cent. I think speedway is one of the most amazing sports in existence. It's just knowing how to get people in and selling that to them because once they're there, most people come back.'

Had he written his list of 'non-promoter' tasks a week later, a time when his Bears' team should have been focusing on the end-of-

season play-offs, Jitendra would have had to include hospital visits and statements to the police. Three of his seven riders end up in casualty after on-track crashes. And their stadium – the Media Prime Arena – is broken into and vandalised. The cost of the damage and losses is over £1,000. Loose change to your average Premier League footballer, but real and vital funds for a speedway club that has no spare money.

'We're pretty vulnerable because, although we're only a five-minute drive from Middlesbrough town centre, we are on an industrial estate and there's nobody there on an evening or through the night. It leaves us vulnerable to theft and it's something that happens on a yearly basis, certainly since I can remember. Every time it does, it's a bit of a gut punch because you work so hard to build up what we have through blood, sweat and tears. Our directors and supporters make generous donations, so for somebody to come and take that away from us and cause the damage they do …' He tails off. 'It's pretty devastating, every time it happens.'

Nevertheless, Jitendra is keen to make progress in his role – despite the time constraints and injuries and break-ins – and along with Bears' supporter John Gallon, he put together a survey of fans earlier in the summer. It's not the biggest survey ever – just 157 participants – but its results, revealed in the match programme, illustrate some of the problems facing speedway in general.

The main – and worrying – finding backs up what I've seen first-hand at Stoke. Namely that more than half of those answering the survey have been supporters for at least 41 years. That suggests they're at least in their 50s. As *Speedway Star* says after reprinting the survey in full: 'No sport is going to be able to flourish and grow when half its audience is in its collective 50s, 60s or even older.'

However hard it's going to be to attract the time-poor, short-attention-spanned, mobile phone-fixated younger generation, it's clear that speedway is going to have to try. The alternative is a continuation of the seemingly downward spiral the sport is in at the moment.

* * *

As ever with speedway, though, there's another side to the sport, a more positive and, dare one say it, glamorous side. And it can be glimpsed – however briefly – in the middle of September.

The current speedway world champion is British. He's spoken of how he is often recognised when he does his supermarket shopping at his local ASDA in Long Eaton in Derbyshire. But he'd probably manage Harrods Food Hall in London's Knightsbridge without being spotted. Relatively unknown or not, Tai Woffinden is not just the country's best rider but, in publicity terms, he's the sport's biggest asset too. At 29, he's been world champion three times. He's a man who clearly doesn't suffer fools gladly and hasn't been afraid to ruffle feathers in the past. Peter Oakes, co-author of Tai's new autobiography, *Raw Speed*, says Woffinden is a workaholic, willing to bend his back to be successful in anything that he does.

Raw Speed has just been published and Woffinden is promoting it with book signings and media appearances. The book is selling well. It enters *The Times* list of best-selling hardback non-fiction books at number ten, alongside new titles by the likes of Jamie Oliver and former Prime Minister David Cameron. It's apparently speedway's fastest-selling book ever. This morning, he's live on BBC TV in Salford.

It's fair to say, given that BBC Breakfast's staple guests are politicians and business leaders, that Tai Woffinden stands out when he's sitting on the sofa. He's a man famous for his tattoos and several are on show, on both his T-shirted arms and up his neck. His trademark, lobe-stretching, gaping-gauge circular earrings are equally prominent.

Normally, when he's interviewed at a meeting in the pits, Woffinden is covered in sponsorship – on his leathers and on his cap. BBC guidelines – and no doubt attentive production staff – have made sure that he's as neutrally dressed as possible. But there's an unmistakable Monster energy drink logo – three lightning-like green lines on the side of his backwards-slung cap – which has squeezed through the pre-broadcast branding check.

The interview is introduced with a quick explanation of speedway to those watching (likely the vast majority) who aren't familiar with it:

no gears, no brakes, acceleration faster than a Formula 1 car – the last claim often made but technically open to debate. Woffinden speaks well and is remarkably down-to-earth about the daily risks of being a speedway rider. It's something that never seems to phase the people who actually do it, the riders, unlike those who are hearing about it for the first time. Woffinden has spoken about how it feels to be on a speedway bike when it slides into the corner and the front wheel tucks in and it pulls his arms up, about how close it is to being out of control but still in control. For him, that's the best feeling.

The BBC producers – to give them credit – have done their research and there are questions about Tai's relationship with his father, Rob, his main influence before he died from cancer in 2010. Tai also confirms that he wouldn't want either of his children – one daughter and another child on the way – to be a speedway rider.

It's not the first time he's been on the BBC Breakfast sofa. As *Raw Speed* details, he was invited on after winning the World Championship for the first time back in 2013. But the discussion then strayed on to the size of the stud in his ear and his tattoos, leaving him to reflect that he'd rather the BBC Breakfast team had been briefed about speedway rather than having them talk to him about body art and ear stretchers.

History repeats itself today, 18 September 2019. One of the two main presenters, Louise Minchin, is obviously unaware of what Woffinden has said about that previous appearance on the programme.

'Your tattoos are mesmerising, by the way,' she says. 'Have you got a favourite?'

'One on my back, which is a portrait of my dad and the letter he wrote me before he passed away,' says Woffinden. 'That's the one that means the most to me.' There are a couple of empathetic 'aws' off camera at this although, knowing the everyday cynicism that is hard-wired into most journalists, you do wonder how genuine they are.

But overall, it is good, and very rare, mainstream, national publicity for speedway. It comes in the week when Woffinden – and the other top speedway riders in the world – will take part in the biggest event of the year in Britain.

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Once a year the centre of Cardiff is taken over by speedway fans from all over Europe. The reason? The British staging of the Speedway Grand Prix series. Once upon a time, the contest to decide speedway's individual world champion was held over a single meeting. But since 1995, it's been expanded into a series of Grand Prix – ten of them – which are, this year, held in Poland (three), Sweden (two) and one each in Great Britain, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Germany and Denmark. The division pretty much reflects the current strength of speedway in each country.

The Grand Prix in Cardiff is the one moment each year that British speedway gets to feel like it is part of the same world as its much richer motorsport relative, Formula 1. For anyone who has never been, it is genuinely one of the best feel-good days out in the British sporting calendar, and Cardiff – the city and its residents – do their bit to make it a real event, even though the city itself hasn't had a speedway team since 1953.

Speedway fans in their thousands take over the city centre. Walk around on the Saturday morning before the event and, to the casual observer, speedway appears to be thriving. There's a sponsored fans' area outside Cardiff Castle and a giant inflatable speedway helmet by the castle walls. Pop-up stalls sell all manner of speedway memorabilia and T-shirts in the city-centre streets. Bars and restaurants are filled with good-natured and well-behaved speedway fans. And they *are* well behaved. While some might shudder at the thought of motorbike enthusiasts descending on their city, worried that they represent a rebellious and noisy collective, all too ready to cock a snoot at more civilised society, that's not the case here.

Councils, as we'll see, have not been the biggest fans of speedway over the years, but Cardiff Council Cabinet Member for Culture and Leisure, Peter Bradbury, is very happy to have it in the city. For him, it has become a well-established part of Cardiff's annual events calendar, with the city looking forward to offering fans from across the world a warm Welsh welcome. Figures from South Wales Police

indicate that looking after speedway crowds is most likely one of their easiest jobs of the year. Over the 13 years since 2007 (since official figures have been available), there were just six arrests at the Cardiff Principality Stadium on the day of the Grand Prix. They were all for minor offences like being drunk and disorderly or using threatening words or behaviour. Speedway fans are most certainly not long-haired hooligans intent on causing trouble.

The Cardiff Principality Stadium is normally the venue for the Welsh rugby union team or big concert events for the likes of the Rolling Stones, Coldplay and Ed Sheeran. Every year, several days are spent installing a custom-built speedway track under the watchful eye of 1970s world speedway champion, Ole Olsen. It helps that there's a roof, which means – whether it rains or not – that the meeting will definitely go ahead. There are fireworks, champagne, glamorous Monster Energy models holding up rider numbers, and 40,000 expectant fans making lots of noise and – whether you like them or not – sounding air-horns as if their lives depended on it. Certain sections of the ground are, deliberately, kept air-horn free.

And yet, this is not what British speedway – everyday British speedway – is all about. It's light years away. It's the once-a-year birthday trip to the big city when the rest of the year is full of mundanities, of six o'clock in the morning starts and waiting for the bus to travel to work.

Many of the fans are bedecked in the red and white of Poland, there to cheer on the current Grand Prix leader, Bartosz Zmarzlik, and his four other Polish compatriots. As speedway declines in countries around the world – Britain is far from being alone – Poland stands out as its most vibrant venue.

Top league matches – all of them televised live – regularly attract capacity crowds in five figures, far in excess of the best that British speedway can offer. It means that riders can be paid much more and so, unsurprisingly, Poland attracts the best in the world. It's telling that, of the 15 permanent Grand Prix riders for the 2019 season, only one – Australia's Jason Doyle – began the season racing for a

club in Great Britain. For the other 14, the focus is on Poland, with Sweden – where crowds are also higher – a close second. Woffinden himself hasn't raced in the British leagues since turning out for Wolverhampton in 2016. He has been vocal in saying that if he is to be the best speedway rider, he needs to ride against the best, week in, week out. 'Unfortunately, they're not racing in England. If all the best riders in the world were racing in England, then that would be the place to be racing. But the fact is that they're not.'

The riders riding tonight are on a different level of pay and sponsorship from those taking part solely in the British league system. Their support staff, the mechanics and back-up teams are much larger too.

The stadium is a mass of flags – many of them red and white from Poland, but plenty too from Denmark, Sweden, Australia and Russia, the other main countries on the international speedway scene in 2019. During the national anthem – which follows 'Land of My Fathers' – there's a cascade of union flags, a working-class Britons' version of the previous week's *Last Night of the Proms* at the Royal Albert Hall. I'm assuming there aren't that many – if any – who've attended both events. But, as the poet T.S. Eliot once said, for a nation to be truly complete, it must have both high and low culture, 'from the opera to a night at the dogs'. While some fans would say that speedway, at its very best, is a true art, most people would place it closer to the latter.

Of the first six heats, five are won by the rider in red, on the inside lane. None of the three British riders – Tai Woffinden, Robert Lambert or Charles Wright – makes it through to the semi-finals. For the many British fans, the only real moment to celebrate is when Lambert holds off Denmark's Leon Madsen to win heat nine. Charles Wright, this year's British champion (Woffinden hasn't competed in it since 2015), gets two battling second places. Woffinden has a disappointing night in his bid to win his first-ever British Grand Prix title. It's perhaps not surprising. He's just back from two months out of the sport after being involved in a crash in a Polish league meeting, which resulted in a compression fracture to his spine along with a broken shoulder

blade and a bruised lung. In terms of injuries, Woffinden has, during his career, broken just about every bone that it's possible to break. But, like so many speedway riders, he keeps coming back.

He's excluded in his first race ('unfairly' according to BT Sport's co-commentator and former rider, Kelvin Tatum) when he clips Freddie Lindgren's back wheel after the Swedish rider has effectively left him with no space to ride. He ends up in the safety fence but has insult added to – thankfully – non-existent injury when he's excluded from the rerun, judged by the referee to be the 'primary cause of the stoppage'. He ends up with just five points, disappointing for him and for all the British supporters in the crowd.

At the end of the meeting – not a classic British Grand Prix, by any means – BT's main commentator, Nigel Pearson, and Tatum are watching the night's top riders – the winner, Denmark's Leon Madsen, second-placed Emil Sayfutdinov from Russia, and Poland's Bartosz Zmarzlik – spraying each other with the customary champagne. Pearson reveals that members of his family have attended the meeting, some of them for the first time.

'And I've just had a text saying they've loved every minute of it. How good is that?'

Tatum agrees it's good, but warns that Pearson will have a lot to live up to the next time he takes them to speedway. It will have to be even better than this. 'I'll take them to Cradley!' says Pearson, whose genuine commitment to speedway goes beyond media duties, as he helps to run Cradley Heath, the third-division National League track.

'Okay. Good luck with that,' is Tatum's verdict.

Tatum's not being unfair to his colleague. Or to Cradley Heath. He probably has some idea of what's going to be announced later in the year.