

BEN FINDON is talking
to SCB referee
GRAEME HUNTER...

OFFICIAL LINE



Birthdate/place

May 23, 1982. Newcastle upon Tyne.

How and when did you first get interested in speedway?

I was born into it. My dad, Tommy, was a mechanic for numerous riders throughout my childhood, notably Joe and Tom Owen, and most family holidays were camping trips that coincided with speedway tours around the country.

Where did you see your first meeting and what do you remember about it?

My earliest memories are of sitting on the old pits wall on the back straight at Brough Park while Dad worked with the track staff, when I would have been about eight. The first specific meeting that sticks in my head was the 1992 Gold Cup Final when Newcastle beat Stoke. Young supporters were invited to make banners and display them on the centre green pre-meeting and I remember being out there thinking this was so great.

As a fan, who was your favourite team and riders?

Newcastle Diamonds. Mark Thorpe was always a favourite through the early 90s before Newcastle closed and then I was a Shane Parker fan in the mid-90s when he rode for Middlesbrough. I went on to be a big Nicki Pedersen fan. I was 15 when he signed for Newcastle, his first British club, in 1998 and I think we all knew straight away he was going to be something special.

Why did you become an SCB referee?

When Newcastle reopened in 1997, I was a bike-pusher for about 10 years. I then returned to the terraces but missed being in and around things. Like any fan on the terraces, we all played both team manager and referee and calling out what they should be doing, and I always said I liked the idea of these roles. Then in 2016, a friend showed me a *Speedway Star* advert for trainee referees. I sent my CV to the SCB, passing the interview later that year before joining the panel for the 2017 season.

Who did you learn from? Who was your mentor during training?

My mentor for my first season was Jim McGregor, then Darren Hartley for my second year. Both were brilliant. It's only when you're in the same position that you realise how much people did for you, sacrificing so many of their meetings for you, etc. Others were also a huge help and influence on me, especially Graham Flint, Chris Durno and Dave Robinson.

What do you remember about the first meeting you took charge of?

In the first race I took charge of as a trainee referee, at Berwick in 2017, Steve Worrall went straight through the tapes. I thought it was my fault but Jim McGregor told me I wasn't responsible for a rider moving at the start.

My first match as a fully qualified referee was on March 31, 2019, a local derby between Newcastle and Redcar. It went to a last-heat decider and there was a 50-50 incident between Lasse Bjerre (Newcastle) and Ben Barker (Redcar). I disqualified Bjerre, awarded Redcar a 5-0 and they won

46-43. As a lifelong Newcastle fan I remember not being very popular around the place for a while after that and the following week's match programme made for some interesting reading!

How do you prepare for a speedway meeting?

The work starts in the days leading up to the meeting, checking all the paperwork. I also refresh any regulations specific to the type of meeting at which I am due to officiate – for example, any supplementary regulations issued for an individual meeting or shared event. I leave with plenty of time to ensure an early arrival and in a good headspace to fulfil my duties well on the day.

What was the biggest or most memorable meeting you have refereed?

I have been fortunate to do a few big meetings but the most recent and memorable was the 2024 Championship Pairs at Oxford. Many will remember the incident in the final between home rider Scott Nicholls and Charles Wright, who crashed on the fourth bend, with the decision to disqualify Scott as the cause of the stoppage handing the win to Redcar.

Do you think refs should be 'miked-up', as they are in rugby? If not, why?

I'm all for referees explaining their decisions. For example, in the above-mentioned Championship Pairs meeting, I agreed to go in front of the BSN cameras immediately afterwards to explain my thought process in the decision I had come up with. This got good feedback and I think referees should do more of it. However, no, I don't think 'miking-up' referees would work. There are multiple private and sometimes sensitive conversations happening about things, such as rider illness and injury details, medical situations in the crowd, disciplinary matters or just general running of the meeting, that do not need to be in the public domain.

Which ex-rider was the most difficult to deal with?

As a rule I don't tend to speak with riders during a meeting. I find in the immediate aftermath of an incident, and with adrenaline flowing, things can be said which don't really help anyone. It's easier to relay any explanations via the team manager, although I'm always open to speak with a rider following the meeting if they still wish.

What advice would you give a new referee?

Be yourself and don't try to be a clone of anyone else. Always be prepared, committed and organised and keep on top of the rules. But otherwise enjoy it and try not to be too hard on yourself. Everyone is human and you won't get everything right all the time. Just ensure you take the learnings from everything and think how you would handle situations differently if you encounter them again.

What one single thing can speedway do to make itself more attractive to new fans?

Presentation needs to be brought up to date at most venues, with fresher, younger presenters, music, screens, etc. I know there is a cost implication but it needs to feel more like a vibrant event, like you would have at the darts or T20 cricket. There are some fantastic volunteers who speedway would not have survived without but the same old presentation that we have had for 40-50 years, sometimes played on speakers you can't hear half the time, is not going to bring in the new, younger fans that the sport is crying out for. They would then share things on social media and get the word out there about what a great product we have.

What is your day job?

I'm a branch manager for EVLO, the finance company.

How do you relax away from speedway?

I like to play five-a-side football and I follow Newcastle United, going to as many games as I can. I love stand-up comedy and other live entertainment. I have tickets for a few shows, including Ross Noble and Derren Brown, later in the year. I like to travel when possible. Otherwise just getting out and being social – I'm always willing to try new experiences. I'm not one for sitting in the house.

