

BEN FINDON is talking to
SCB and FIM referee
CRAIG ACKROYD...

OFFICIAL LINE

Birthdate/place

May 4, 1976, Dewsbury, West Yorkshire.

Family:

Two sons, Oscar aged 13 and Felix, 10, fiancée Nowel and her son, Joseph.

How and when did you get interested in speedway?

Both my grandfathers went to speedway, pre-war and post-war, at Bradford. My dad's father was an out-and-out fan, while my mum's dad was a St John Ambulance man. My mum and dad, Gill and Paul, lived on the same street and then went to speedway at Bradford and Halifax.

Dad was a referee as well, and he now looks after the Speedway Riders' Benevolent Fund. I rode schoolboy grasstrack in the same era as Carl Stonehewer, Garry Stead, Stuart Robson, Phil Morris, Jon Armstrong...the list goes on, as so many riders came into speedway via this route. Although I enjoyed it, I didn't make the grade to be able to make it in speedway.

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

Apparently at Hull v Halifax in 1976, with my parents. I was about eight weeks old. My first memories were from Halifax. You could go right up to the fence on the third and fourth bends and kids would balance 1p coins on the top of the fence to see if they got knocked off by the shale as the riders passed. There was also running around with an empty can crushed under the left shoe pretending it was a steel shoe!

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

Dad started as a referee when I was only five, so I went all over rather than having a single home team/track. My favourite track was Belle Vue's Hyde Road. It was my local track and I remember the huge crowds and fantastic nights at the British League Riders' Championship.

My favourite rider as a child was Erik Gundersen. When I went to Cradley with my dad he was always friendly and chatty. Others talked, too, but he stood out as a truly nice guy and an unbelievable rider.

Why did you become an SCB referee?

I went to university at Bradford and watched speedway at Odsal but never thought about being a referee until the SCB's Graham Brodie and David Hughes suggested I give it a go. I was 21 and thought I was too young but they took me on, trained me and I started in 1999. Dad let me find my own way but he was always ready with advice when I asked for it.

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

Will Hunter and then Graham Flint were my nominated mentors. Both were immensely helpful, for which I'm very grateful. But many referees helped in my training.

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

St Austell v Mildenhall in the Conference League KO Cup, July 27, 1999. A 52-38 home win, a few incidents but without any dramas. I was nervous in an excited way, with heightened concentration, and I still feel it going into meetings today.

How do you prepare for a speedway meeting?

Arrange time away from work if necessary. Various admin is done ongoing, ensuring the latest documents, including team declarations for averages and changes and the like, are downloaded.

The intended line-ups for a specific meeting are posted on a website three

days before the meeting. Referees download these and check they fit the regulations. We then fill this into an online scorecard which will be used during the meeting. We review previous meeting reports, so we're aware of any issues.

These days the travel can be a big issue on meeting day, so I allow plenty of time in case there are problems on the roads. Arriving calm and relaxed puts you in the best position to do a good job. Add in the post-meeting reports and general admin, I'd say 75 per cent of the referee's job actually comes before or after a meeting. Pressing the buttons and making decisions is only part of it.

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

The biggest would be the Grand Prix meetings at Cardiff, Warsaw and Melbourne. I became a FIM referee in 2006. A position came up and I had to apply to the SCB, then have an interview in front of the SCB and ACU. Two of us, Jim Lawrence and myself, were invited to a FIM seminar, we did an exam on rule books and then waited. I did one meeting as a tester at Abensberg and then I was on the list.

The fall-out from grand prix meetings is a lot bigger, particularly social media wise, but the job's still the same: four riders in a race and you are there to make sure the rules are followed, adjudicating on any on-track incidents.

In terms of occasions, Melbourne was a special one, Jason Doyle finally winning the world title in front of his home crowd. It was nice to be in Australia for that one.

But the most memorable was actually Buxton's play-off victory to win the treble in 2010. That team, with the likes of Craig Cook and Nick Morris, epitomised the ethos of the third division of British speedway developing young riders. Buxton was a track I'd done a lot of my training at, so to referee that meeting was very memorable.

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

Yes, I think this could be something that may help. It might not change somebody's opinion but at least it would give a reasoning as to how the referee came to a decision. That said, I think only to give an explanation of a decision. Certain topics, such as rider injuries, need to remain private.

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

There's no one single rider. In the heat of the moment, where a rider feels unjustly treated, they are never happy. Most times, when you meet again it's a new day and a fresh start. Very few riders carry things on into future meetings. As in all walks of life, people have different characters. Some riders you naturally get on with more easily, and it will be the same for riders with referees.

What advice would you give a new referee?

Never stop learning and enjoy doing it.

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

Embrace change. Every time something changes, which is only done with the aim of improving the sport and moving forward, it is generally met with negativity before even being given a chance. The sport needs these changes to adapt and attract new fans.

What is your day job?

I work for myself in food wholesale. We supply pubs, restaurants and other catering outlets with food ingredients.

How do you relax away from speedway?

Spending time with family and friends. Nowel and I have three boys between us, so that keeps us busy. I'm a season ticket holder at Preston North End – still waiting for our time in the Premier League.

