

**BEN FINDON is talking to  
former SCB referee  
BARBARA HORLEY...**

# OFFICIAL LINE

## Birthdate/place

I think I'll keep that one a secret but it was in Wolverhampton back in the mists of time!

## Family:

Husband Peter, sons Richard and Edward, and grandson Joseph.

## How and when did you first get interested in speedway?

As a child, I first went to speedway with my father, Leslie, and uncle Harold at Monmore Green. My mum, Jenny, and dad always used to go to watch speedway there – I'm told they even went to a meeting the night before their wedding! Friday night was always speedway night.

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

It must have been at Wolverhampton but I don't remember which meeting it was. I always looked forward to going, so it must have made a great impression on me. I even remember telling my primary school head teacher that I thought it unfair that girls could not become speedway riders.

We used to stand on the back straight near the third bend and then move round near the starting gate. My father made me a little fold-up stool so that I could stand on it and see over the wall of the dog track. There were regular visits to Cradley Heath when Wolves were riding there – always good to beat the Heathens!

## As a fan, who were your favourite team and riders?

It has to be Wolverhampton. Hasse Holmqvist was my very first favourite rider. As a girl I kept a scrapbook of the team and would scour the pages of *Speedway Star* looking for any pictures of Wolves riders. I'm a fan again now that I'm no longer refereeing so, having spent nearly seven years studying at De Montfort University in Leicester, I would say that Leicester became my surrogate team, although I now enjoy going to watch my local sides, Ipswich and King's Lynn.

Having immersed myself in speedway history over the past few years, Tom Farndon has become my favourite rider from the early days of the sport. It was great to meet his daughter-in-law Betty and it was a very special moment when I held Tom Farndon's Star Riders' Championship medal, which he won in 1933, in my hand.

## Why did you become an SCB referee?

Having seen an advert for Olle Nygren's 'Sliding School' at King's Lynn, I decided to apply and have a go. I knew then that I wanted to do something in speedway, so I decided to apply to become a referee.

I knew that refereeing would be a tough job, especially for a woman in a predominantly male sport, but I thought that my experience as a secondary school teacher would come in useful!

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

As a trainee, Paul Carrington was my mentor and I learnt a lot from him. I also learnt a great deal from Chris Gay and Tony Steele, although it must be said that all referees are willing to help you and so, effectively, you learn from all of them.

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

Wimbledon in 2005, a Conference League match against Boston Barracudas. I had never been to the Plough Lane stadium before and it all looked so big from the outside and a maze of rooms and corridors on the inside. I was surprised at the number of flower baskets hanging around and asked for some to be moved as they were obscuring the view of the track! Interesting fact:

Simon Lambert rode in that first meeting of mine and he also rode in my very last meeting, at Leicester last season.

## How do you prepare for a speedway meeting?

Preparation actually starts three days before the meeting, checking the line-ups are all correct and the riders licensed. On the day, I always liked to arrive two hours before the start time and the first task was to count the number of APDs – no point in going further if there are not the requisite number of air/foam bags, as the meeting cannot go ahead without them.

After that, there is liaison with promoters, team managers, clerk of the course, machine examiners and the medical team, followed by checking the controls in the box, pits inspection and track inspection. Rider and spectator safety is paramount, so checks had to be carried out meticulously. I am still proud of the title that John Louis gave me – Queen of the Fire Extinguishers!

Then, of course, you have to referee the racing and complete all the paperwork when you get home...

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

One of the most recent memorable meetings was at King's Lynn on September 8, 2022, the day Queen Elizabeth died. Her death was announced at 18.30 so we needed to know what the protocol was for such an event: do we cancel or do we continue? After a number of phone calls and because meeting preparations were already underway, we were allowed to carry on. But literally everyone, apart from the spectators, was crowded on to the green, so we could observe a minute's silence and listen to the national anthem. Announcements were kept low-key, as were rider celebrations after winning a race.

Have to say that my last meeting at Wolverhampton was emotional. Before leaving I took one last look at where my dad, uncle and I used to stand all

those years ago and I can't deny that there were tears in my eyes.

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

No, it adds a further layer and half the stadium would agree and half would probably still disagree. Not sure some of the discussions in the box could be broadcast!

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

Can't really think of any rider but team managers are a different matter!

## What advice would you give a new referee?

Get to as many tracks as you can alongside different referees and know the rules inside out. You will also need to be very resilient.

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

Greater recognition of the sport in mainstream media. Speedway was once a regular feature on terrestrial television and in all the newspapers. It would be great to see a resurgence on these platforms.

## What is your day job?

I retired from teaching to study for my PhD. As a new academic sports historian, I speak about speedway at sports history conferences, give talks on it and write papers for academic journals. I've also taken part in panels at Silverstone on women in motorsport.

## How do you relax away from speedway?

Singing. I sing in three choirs in or around Cambridge. Singing in choirs is a team sport – just like speedway!

