

ALL TIME WORLD FINAL

What would happen if we could line up all the greatest speedway riders from the different eras at the peak of their form? Who would be the ultimate World Champion?

Of course this is impossible to answer but the one thing we do have are the statistics and, as a statistician, this question has fascinated me back to when I first started going to speedway in the 80s. There are several ways to look at the numbers and arguably a couple of riders have genuine claims to be the number 1 depending on how you look at things. I have attempted to reflect 'peak' form over a sensible period which does not overly reward those with long careers or unjustly punish those stars who shone only relatively briefly at the top level.

I have included the Star Riders Finals, of the pre-1936 World Final years, and 'British Championship' meetings, when the official world final competitions were suspended due to the war; but have done so at a reduced level compared to 'full' finals. Also I have tried to adjust for incidents such as falls and engine failures which don't reflect a rider's actual scoring power at the time and also races such as Sam Ermolenko's last place in 1993 when he was already confirmed as champion so the result did not matter. Further I have tried to give the best adjustment between the GP results and the scoring of the old one-off finals so as not to give an advantage or disadvantage to those who competed under the differing formats.

There are so many things which are impossible to include of course, the questions which will never be answered!

- What would have actually happened in that 1939 World Final that was never run due to the outbreak of war?
- How would the careers of riders such as Cordy Milne, Wilbur Lamoreaux, Vic Duggan, Bill Kitchen and Eric Chitty be viewed if the war hadn't interrupted normal racing?
- What difference did injuries to riders like Tom Farndon & Erik Gundersen make or even those who started the big day carrying knocks, Ove Fundin & Peter Collins being two famous examples?
- One of the most tantalising unknowns from my era of watching top flight speedway will always be what would the finals of the mid to late 80s have looked like with Michael Lee, Bruce Penhall & Kenny Carter all involved at the top of their form too?
- Then you have just plain bad luck with Dave Jessup in 1978 being probably the most famous example.
- Even taking into account all these things it still remains hard to explain how Tommy Knudsen & Shawn Moran only made it on to one rostrum each, how Kelly Moran & Kenny Carter never made it at all and how Bobby Schwartz didn't even make a single final!

I think it is safe to say that any answer will always be open to debate and I would honestly say that, having spent hours poring over the stats, I believe if this competition could actually be run then every rider in the around top 50 or my rankings would be perfectly capable of winning it on any given day. Even in terms of the pure numbers there is a reasonable argument which can be put forward for several riders as being the all-time greatest but please suspend opinion for a moment and let the pure numbers and a bit of fantasy attempt to find the ultimate answer!!!

NATIONAL FINALS

The rounds began with a series of national championships which led to quarter final (featuring the top 64 riders) and semi-final stages before a one-off final with the top 16 riders of all-time lining up against each other.

Firstly Jason Crump took the Australian title ahead of Jack Young and Leigh Adams with some old timers, in the shape of Lionel Van Praag, Frank Arthur, Vic Huxley & Vic Duggan, all showing up well. No great shocks amongst those not making it although Phil Crump would dearly have loved to qualify alongside son Jason!

Next up was the Polish Final in which the modern stars took charge as Tomasz Gollob won ahead of Jarek Hampel. This meeting is where we lost our first world champion as Jerzy Szczakiel found the going too tough and was well down the field. Others such as Antoni Woryna, Zenon Plech & Edward Jancarz were all capable of mixing it with the best of their day and would not have been out of their depth in the next stage but failed to progress here.

In the American round Greg Hancock came out on top ahead of Billy Hamill and Bruce Penhall but it was great to see the original American stars Cordy Milne, Jack Milne and Wilbur Lamoreaux very much amongst the points too as all qualified comfortable. Probably no great surprises but all the same it still seems odd when riders of the ability of Kelly & Shawn Moran, Lance King and Dennis Sigalos go out of any competition.

The Rest of the World Final unsurprisingly saw a pair of New Zealanders leading the way although Ronnie Moore cause a bit of an upset with his win from Barry Briggs. Ivan Mauger just did enough to qualify further down the field, behind Russian Igor Plechanov and German Egon Muller. It was great to see the old & new very much on the pace too with Eric Chitty of Canada, winner of 3 consecutive British Individual Finals during the war years, and current GP youngster Emil Sayfutdinov not far away from making it to the last 64.

The Danish Final split into two fields almost as Hans Nielsen led the charge at the top ahead of Nicki Pedersen & Erik Gundersen with Knudsen, Jan O. Pedersen, Olsen & Hans Andersen cruising through also. Behind them Finn Thomsen was the best of the challengers but never looked like getting as far as a last 64 spot.

The penultimate round was the Swedish Final where Ove Fundin stamped his class on the meeting with Bjorn Knutsson and Olle Nygren completing the rostrum places. No huge names dipped out though with former world champions Per Jonsson, Tony Rickardsson and Anders Michanek all doing enough.

Finally the British title was won by Bill Kitchen which caused a surprise to many watching as he headed world title winners Peter Collins, Peter Craven & Freddie Williams in doing so. Eric Langton and Jack Parker were others to upset a few better known names of more recent years as they also progressed with ease. It was also good to see the whole of the British mainland represented as Ken McKinlay of Scotland joined Wales' Williams in reaching the next round. Of those that didn't make it to the next stage Jeremy Doncaster, Ray Wilson, Simon Wigg and Chris Louis were amongst the better known names, for modern day fans, who came close.

QUARTER FINALS

Quarter Final 1 was dominated by the Swedes with Fundin, Rickardsson & Knutsson filling 3 of the top 4 spots, Billy Hamill splitting them to claim 3rd overall. As the fight for the final couple of places developed it became apparent we would be losing world champions in the shape of Muller & Price and in the end also Ermolenko as Bruce Penhall just edged in ahead of his countryman.

1. Ove Fundin – Sweden
2. Tony Rickardsson – Sweden
3. Billy Hamill – USA
4. Bjorn Knutsson – Sweden
5. Bluey Wilkinson – Australia
6. Cordy Milne – USA
7. Nicki Pedersen – Denmark
8. Bruce Penhall - USA

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9. Sam Ermolenko – USA
 10. Olle Nygren – Sweden
 11. Tommy Price - Great Britain
 12. Hans Andersen – Denmark
 13. Egon Muller – German
 14. Henrik Gustafsson – Sweden
 15. Billy Sanders – Australia
 16. Ron Johnson – Australia

Quarter Final 2 was a win for 6 times champion Ivan Mauger with Gollob delighting the Polish fans in the crowd by pushing him all the way. Eric Langton continued to surprise many with his quality as he claimed 3rd ahead of other 'blasts from the past' Lamoreaux and Huxley. Crump, Collins & Moore completed the top 8 although they were pushed all the way by Russian star Igor Plechanov and Loram, Nilsen and Duggan were always in the mix too.

1. Ivan Mauger - New Zealand
2. Tomasz Gollob – Poland
3. Eric Langton - Great Britain
4. Wilbur Lamoreaux – USA
5. Vic Huxley – Australia
6. Jason Crump – Australia
7. Peter Collins - Great Britain
8. Ronnie Moore - New Zealand

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9. Igor Plechanov – Russia
 10. Mark Loram - Great Britain
 11. Jimmy Nilsen – Sweden
 12. Vic Duggan – Australia
 13. Ryan Sullivan – Australia
 14. Frank Charles - Great Britain
 15. John Louis - Great Britain
 16. Ken McKinlay - Great Britain

Great news for the Brits in the 3rd meeting as it was Peter Craven who rode classily to get the better of fast starting Danish duo Erik Gundersen and Ole Olsen at the top of the score chart. Other multiple champions Briggs & Williams qualified without too many problems as we lost 3 previous title winners in the shape of Brits Havelock & Lee and Swede Jonsson. Pawel Waloszek was the shock for many as he pushed all the way and only narrowly missed a last 32 place.

1. Peter Craven - Great Britain
2. Erik Gundersen – Denmark
3. Ole Olsen – Denmark
4. Barry Briggs - New Zealand
5. Freddie Williams - Great Britain
6. Jack Parker - Great Britain
7. Frank Arthur – Australia
8. Anders Michanek - Sweden

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9. Pawel Waloszek – Poland
 10. Michael Lee - Great Britain
 11. Per Jonsson – Sweden
 12. Soren Sjosten – Sweden
 13. Malcolm Simmons - Great Britain
 14. Split Waterman - Great Britain
 15. Gary Havelock - Great Britain
 16. Gote Nordin – Sweden

More British success in the final quarter final meeting as Kenny Carter took the honours but in the race for a semi-final place countrymen Jessup & Crutcher just failed to make progress. Jack Young rode well for second place and Hans Nielsen eased through in third with Bill Kitchen looking very good too.

1. Kenny Carter - Great Britain
2. Jack Young – Australia
3. Hans Nielsen – Denmark
4. Bill Kitchen - Great Britain
5. Jack Milne – USA
6. Leigh Adams – Australia
7. Jan O Pedersen – Denmark
8. Greg Hancock - USA

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9. Dave Jessup - Great Britain
 10. Brian Crutcher - Great Britain
 11. Lionel Van Praag – Australia
 12. Jarek Hampel – Poland
 13. Aub Lawson – Australia
 14. Tommy Knudsen – Denmark
 15. Kelvin Tatum - Great Britain
 16. Andreas Jonsson – Sweden

SEMI FINALS

Some really big names started to miss out as we came to the semi-final stage with the first of the meetings seeing us lose a couple of multiple winners as Freddie Williams struggled and Greg Hancock just missed out. Anders Michanek turned in a jet propelled performance reminiscent of his 1974 title victory to top the rostrum. Bluey Wilkinson also shocked some more fancied names in claiming 3rd place here but in the end Rickardsson, Gundersen, Nielsen, Fundin, Mauger & Olsen, all with at least 3 titles to their name, progressed as expected which was the main thing as far as they were concerned.

1. Anders Michanek – Sweden
2. Tony Rickardsson – Sweden
3. Bluey Wilkinson – Australia
4. Erik Gundersen – Denmark
5. Hans Nielsen – Denmark
6. Ove Fundin – Sweden
7. Ivan Mauger - New Zealand
8. Ole Olsen – Denmark

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9. Greg Hancock – USA
 10. Jan O Pedersen – Denmark
 11. Tomasz Gollob – Poland
 12. Leigh Adams – Australia
 13. Billy Hamill – USA
 14. Kenny Carter – British
 15. Cordy Milne – USA
 16. Freddie Williams – British

Jason Crump and Jack Young made the second semi-final an Aussie 1-2 and Jack Milne, Briggs, Moore and Nicki Pedersen also progressed despite the challenge of Knutsson & Penhall who couldn't quite do enough in the end. For the Brits there was a real surprise as world champions Peter Collins and Peter Craven could not get amongst the points but old-timers Jack Parker and Bill Kitchen kept their heads to make it to the big final!

1. Jason Crump – Australia
2. Jack Young – Australia
3. Jack Parker – British
4. Jack Milne – USA
5. Barry Briggs - New Zealand
6. Bill Kitchen – British
7. Ronnie Moore - New Zealand
8. Nicki Pedersen – Denmark

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9. Bjorn Knutsson – Sweden
 10. Bruce Penhall – USA
 11. Wilbur Lamoreaux – USA
 12. Peter Collins – British
 13. Vic Huxley – Australia
 14. Peter Craven – British
 15. Eric Langton – British
 16. Frank Arthur – Australia

GRAND FINAL

So to the big meeting itself and the line-up:

1. Ole Olsen – Denmark (3 times world champion)
2. Tony Rickardsson – Sweden (6 times world champion)
3. Nicki Pedersen – Denmark (3 times world champion)
4. Jack Parker – British (Star & British Riders Champion)
5. Bill Kitchen – British (British Individual Champion)
6. Ronnie Moore - New Zealand (2 times world champion)
7. Ivan Mauger - New Zealand (6 times world champion)
8. Jason Crump – Australia (3 times world champion)
9. Jack Young – Australia (2 times world champion)
10. Erik Gundersen – Denmark (3 times world champion)
11. Anders Michanek – Sweden (1 time world champion)
12. Barry Briggs - New Zealand (4 times world champion)
13. Jack Milne – USA (1 times world champion)
14. Bluey Wilkinson – Australia (1 times world champion)
15. Hans Nielsen – Denmark (4 times world champion)
16. Ove Fundin – Sweden (5 times world champion)

The first 4 races saw highly fancied riders Tony Rickardsson, Ove Fundin and Barry Briggs pick up wins and triple champion Jason Crump also showed he meant business with a victory from the outside in the second heat. That race saw Ivan Mauger relegated to third place as Ronnie Moore also took advantage of the dirt out wide to beat his fellow New Zealander. Hans Nielsen was another highly fancied name to open with just 1 point when Fundin and Jack Milne both had the beating of him after a tight first corner.

Heat 1: Tony Rickardsson - Sweden, Nicki Pedersen - Denmark, Jack Parker - British, Ole Olsen - Denmark

Heat 2: Jason Crump - Australia, Ronnie Moore - New Zealand, Ivan Mauger - New Zealand, Bill Kitchen - British

Heat 3: Barry Briggs - New Zealand, Anders Michanek - Sweden, Jack Young - Australia, Erik Gundersen - Denmark

Heat 4: Ove Fundin - Sweden, Jack Milne - USA, Hans Nielsen - Denmark, Bluey Wilkinson - Australia

The nerves were rising further as the front runners started to emerge and some great riders found themselves with a lot of work to do if they were to stand any chance of being at the top end of the final scorecard. Ole Olsen recovered from his first race blank in heat 5 before heat 6 proved a real shocker as Tony Rickardsson could do no better than last place behind Moore, Wilkinson and Gundersen, the Dane also looking down at the end of 4 laps having just 1 point to his name after 2 races. Mauger & Nielsen both needed to win heat 7 to get back on track and it was the Kiwi who did it in style by flying from the start to lead and although some pressure was exerted he never looked like making a mistake. Finally 3 unbeaten riders met and it was Barry Briggs from gate 3 who saw off Fundin outside and Crump inside to lead the meeting at this early stage.

Heat 5: Ole Olsen - Denmark, Bill Kitchen - British, Jack Young - Australia, Jack Milne - USA

Heat 6: Ronnie Moore - New Zealand, Bluey Wilkinson - Australia, Erik Gundersen - Denmark, Tony Rickardsson - Sweden

Heat 7: Ivan Mauger - New Zealand, Hans Nielsen - Denmark, Nicki Pedersen - Denmark, Anders Michanek - Sweden

Heat 8: Barry Briggs - New Zealand, Ove Fundin - Sweden, Jason Crump - Australia, Jack Parker - British

The shocks kept coming as Anders Michanek found a stunning start in heat 9 which was enough to lead home Ronnie Moore but the sight of Ove Fundin at the back was one nobody in the sport was familiar with seeing! Hans Nielsen headed Tony Rickardsson in heat 10 as meeting leader Barry Briggs found gate 1 no advantage with so many super-charged trappers on show here. The heats to the interval saw Bluey Wilkinson continue to show anybody could beat anybody in this one, Aussie compatriots Young and Crump relegating Nicki Pedersen to the back, before Ivan Mauger continued his revival in the next as the outside gate continued to provide winners.

Heat 9: Anders Michanek - Sweden, Ronnie Moore - New Zealand, Ole Olsen - Denmark, Ove Fundin - Sweden

Heat 10: Hans Nielsen - Denmark, Tony Rickardsson - Sweden, Bill Kitchen - British, Barry Briggs - New Zealand

Heat 11: Bluey Wilkinson - Australia, Jack Young - Australia, Jason Crump - Australia, Nicki Pedersen - Denmark

Heat 12: Ivan Mauger - New Zealand, Jack Milne - USA, Jack Parker - British, Erik Gundersen - Denmark

The result as the riders took a breather at the interval was that New Zealand duo Mauger and Moore led the way on 7 with Briggs and Nielsen just one further back. Aussie pair Crump & Wilkinson and the Swedish trio of Rickardsson, Fundin and Michanek were all on 5 points and well within striking distance. Things were looking a little desperate for Jack Parker (2) and Erik Gundersen (1) at the bottom of the score chart as an inability to hit the first corner in front was leaving them too much to do against riders of this calibre.

Heat 13 brought together two of the leaders in Mauger and Briggs with Wilkinson and Olsen thrown in for good measure and also needing points. The Kiwi duo broke from the inside traps and after a side-by-side battle over the opening laps it was Mauger who pulled clear to stamp his authority on the meeting and put real pressure on Ronnie Moore and the other leaders trying to keep pace with him as he moved into double figures. Next out were Rickardsson, Crump & Michanek, all currently on 5 points, knowing anything but a win would pretty much end their hopes of the title; again the inside gate proved an advantage in this one as Rickardsson moved everyone over and was away. Crump & Michanek both fought past Jack Milne but you don't get two chances against the 6 times world champion and they never got near enough to put in a challenge in on him.

Heat 13: Ivan Mauger - New Zealand, Barry Briggs - New Zealand, Ole Olsen - Denmark, Bluey Wilkinson - Australia

Heat 14: Tony Rickardsson - Sweden, Jason Crump - Australia, Anders Michanek - Sweden, Jack Milne - USA

Heat 15 found Ove Fundin desperately needing a win to cut the gap at the top to 2 points, with just one race each remaining, but he was up against 3 riders who had already seen their title chances disappear and his hunger paid off as gate 1 rewarded another fast start with a tapes-to-flag victory, Nicki Pedersen winning the battle of the Danes ahead of Gundersen behind him. As every rider completed their penultimate ride there were more shocks when Jack Young pulled off a stunning race to come from behind as he picked off Jack Parker and then amazingly got the better of Hans Nielsen on the run-in to the chequered flag! Nielsen's 2 points, coupled with Ronnie Moore making no impression at all, meant the riders would go into their final races with Ivan Mauger looking odds on for the title as he held a 2 point lead.

Heat 15: Ove Fundin - Sweden, Nicki Pedersen - Denmark, Erik Gundersen - Denmark, Bill Kitchen - British

Heat 16: Jack Young - Australia, Hans Nielsen - Denmark, Jack Parker - British, Ronnie Moore - New Zealand

Mauger on 10 now knew he could afford to drop a point and still win ahead of Rickardsson, Briggs, Nielsen & Fundin who were all on 8. Still mathematically in the hunt were Moore, Crump & Young on 7 with Parker, Kitchen (both 3) and Gundersen (2) looking to avoid finishing bottom of the pile.

First up to try and keep the pressure on at the top was Hans Nielsen who came up against triple champions Olsen, Crump and Gundersen, with no love lost between Hans and his fellow Danes in the past! Nobody could stop him though and he moved to 11 points after rounding Olsen down the back straight of the second lap and pulling away over the rest of the race. Last place for Gundersen meant he would amazingly find himself finishing last in a 'world final' meeting!

Heat 17: Hans Nielsen - Denmark, Ole Olsen - Denmark, Jason Crump - Australia, Erik Gundersen - Denmark

And so we came to a massive heat 18 with Young (7) on the inside of Rickardsson (8), Mauger (10) and Fundin (8) with the champion decided by the end of the race if Mauger could take at least second place. I doubt there was any collusion between the Swedes, as both needed the win themselves, but they squeezed Mauger in the first corner and he came out at the back of the field. In an amazing race Mauger picked off Young and set off after the leading pair on the second lap, on lap 3 Fundin blasted around Rickardsson to take up the lead and on the final lap Mauger challenged inside Rickardsson and looked to have got the 2 points he needed but the Swedish 6 times champion kept it wound on out wide and did enough to steal second place back. At the end of a breath-taking 4 laps we found Mauger, Nielsen and Fundin leading the field on 11 points with Rickardsson a point behind.

Heat 18: Ove Fundin - Sweden, Tony Rickardsson - Sweden, Ivan Mauger - New Zealand, Jack Young - Australia

Barry Briggs was the only other rider who could still join the top trio on 11 points and he lined up on gate 2 in the next race with Nicki Pedersen inside him and Milne & Moore in the outside starting positions. Pedersen tends to take no prisoners when he want the points and he clearly wanted to finish higher up the field than he currently was and moved the whole field over to get away and win this heat, ending Briggo's shot at the title in the process. The only change to the order was Ronnie Moore picking off Jack Milne for the odd point but the upshot was that Mauger, Nielsen and Fundin would face a run-off for the title with Rickardsson and Briggs filling the next spots just off the rostrum.

Heat 19: Nicki Pedersen - Denmark, Barry Briggs - New Zealand, Ronnie Moore - New Zealand, Jack Milne - USA

The final heat didn't have much riding on it although Michanek (6) and Wilkinson (5) could both finish pretty well up the field with a win and there was a battle for national pride between Parker and Kitchen, both on 3, to see who would finish as the top British rider. Michanek made the gate but Wilkinson came inside him down the back straight just as Parker went on the outside and he couldn't get back on terms with either after he shut the door on Kitchen who was also trying the inside track. Wilkinson rode a great tight line to keep ahead of an ever pressing Parker before he got mid-track and his speed pulled him away to finish on a high.

Heat 20: Bluey Wilkinson - Australia, Jack Parker - British, Anders Michanek - Sweden, Bill Kitchen - British

So we came to the final race of the evening and the champion of champions would be decided between Ivan Mauger, Hans Nielsen or Ove Fundin. Nielsen had been bettered by both Mauger and Fundin in the early heats but had finished strongly and of course the Swede has just won heat 18 when Mauger had missed a chance to claim the title. The gate positions were drawn and ended with Nielsen on the inside, Fundin going from trap 3 and Mauger right on the outside in gate 4 which had provided the most winners so far although the inside starts had produced 6 of the last 8 heat winners so it was hard to predict any advantage.

Even these great riders looked tense as they came to the start but when the tapes rose it was Nielsen who looked fastest although Mauger got clear of Fundin and used the space to cruise right around and take the lead as they dipped into the 3rd bend. Mauger came out of the turn in front and, after he had already missed a chance to tie up the title in his last race, nobody was going to catch him this time. When in front not many riders could catch Hans

Nielsen but clearly nobody had told Ove Fundin about this and he got inside him at the start of the third lap and held his nerve after the two had raced neck and neck down the back straight to claim second overall.

run off: Ivan Mauger - New Zealand, Ove Fundin - Sweden, Hans Nielsen - Denmark

So the great Ivan Mauger comes out on top of the stats as the greatest rider of all time with the final 16 finishing as below:

1st: Ivan Mauger (New Zealand) - 11

2nd: Ove Fundin (Sweden) - 11

3rd: Hans Nielsen (Denmark) - 11

4th: Tony Rickardsson (Sweden) - 10

5th: Barry Briggs (New Zealand) - 10

6th: Nicki Pedersen (Denmark) - 8

7th: Ronnie Moore (New Zealand) - 8

8th: Jason Crump (Australia) - 8

9th: Bluey Wilkinson (Australia) - 8

10th: Ole Olsen (Denmark) - 7

11th: Jack Young (Australia) - 7

12th: Anders Michanek (Sweden) - 7

13th: Jack Parker (British) - 5

14th: Jack Milne (USA) - 4

15th: Bill Kitchen (British) - 3

16th: Erik Gundersen (Denmark) - 2

Please feel free to comment or mail me (andy.dixon@weare2020.com) for any further information on where your favourite rider ranks in my all-time list or absolutely anything else at all about this!