

## **"We can all have a beer afterwards!" An Interview with Steve Johnston**

*Alex Raby talks teams, television and testimonials with Steve Johnston.*



'Johnno' (© Alex Raby)

Down in pit lane one smile is bigger than all of the others; Steve Johnston, stand-in captain for the Ipswich Witches, finishes signing autographs for a gaggle of fans, before lightly patting another on the back. The itinerant Australian has picked up a fair few admirers on his way, in a British career that stretches as far back as 1992, while he has become something of a cult hero abroad.

'Johnno' as he is affectionately known, is just weeks away from his Testimonial meeting, a thoroughly deserved milestone that recognises his dedication to the British League over the course of these 16 seasons. However, he would scarcely have been able to imagine such a triumph in his first year of British Speedway, recording a 4.18 average for Sheffield in the second tier of British racing. As Steve explains, "I had a year at Sheffield in my first year, and then I had four years at Long Eaton. I really enjoyed it, and it was when I was at Long Eaton that I really started to get regular points, and started to progress in Speedway. I really enjoyed it there, enjoyed my time. It was tough in the early years; I think everyone says "when I was a boy", but it really was! There was none of this coming over with contracts, bikes and vans and stuff, I just saved up all of my money and came over. I bought a bike, bought a van, and went around to training schools trying to get a team place! It is so different now; you see the young guys coming over and they are generally signed for an Elite League team, and lent out to a Premier League team, and they've got pretty good equipment and stuff. I think Speedway is turning for the better really, it's a lot more professional and there's a lot more equipment around and available."

One thing that hasn't changed in Speedway, as Steve astutely notices, is that "Chris [Louis] is still here!" This was one of the clinching factors for his move to Ipswich for the 2008 season, as he explains: "Coming back here, even though it was a long time ago, I knew what to expect, and I had dealt with John before and I'd dealt with Chris. They were good the first time I rode for them, so when it all came about and we were doing a deal for this time, I didn't have any hesitation at all, and it's good to be back there. It's just a bit gutting that we seem to be winning a few matches and things are going alright, but Chris is going to be out for a long time." Another factor that must have influenced Johnston's move to Ipswich was the fact that he enjoyed one of his best seasons in the sport with the Suffolk club way back in 1997, when he recorded an impressive 8.25 average. "My best season averagewise was definitely the last time I was at Ipswich, but the best season was probably last year, because the team spirit was great at Coventry. Just the winning, there's nothing to beat that winning feeling; even if you're going well as an individual and your team is losing, it is a bit of a consolation, but when you're going out and winning home and away, you just don't want the season to end. It was a pleasure", says Johnno.

The Coventry side swept all before it in the 2007 season, and indeed in the closing stages of the season became something of an unstoppable machine. Having already experienced a league title win with Oxford in 2001, however, had the shine been somewhat removed from the glory? "To be part of that feeling is really important. I won one [a league title] at Oxford, and we won an Italian League Championship a few years ago, which was great because I've been riding with the same Italian club for seven years, so it was great to be part of that. Last year was a different feeling though, to be part of that and win the treble - all of them were good to win, but riding for the team the way they were going you felt invincible."

Talking of Italy and invincible, few might remember the fact that Johnston was Italian League Champion in 2004, but Steve clearly holds a fondness for racing in the Mediterranean nation. As he describes, it was a love borne out of somewhat bizarre circumstances, and the story features a former World Speedway Champion. "I think, basically, Peter Collins first took me over there, in 1992 or 1993 to do an open meeting, and it was just when I was still very young. I didn't have a great meeting but I enjoyed it out there and since that time I've become great friends with Armando Castagna, and I suppose the link with him is there. When I go over, I stay with him and his family, and I feel just like part of the family. For me, I really enjoy doing it; it doesn't feel like a chore to ride in Italy, it is more of a fun thing. I've always done quite well out there for the Italians, I've always done the big Italian meeting the Golden Gala - I won it once, which was a pretty big meeting out there, the biggest open meeting they have in Italy. From things like that, I keep on going back and I keep enjoying it."

However, it is not just the Italian League that Steve Johnston still races in regularly and enjoys; now in his fourteenth full season of top-flight racing in Great Britain, he maintains an impressive youthful enthusiasm for the sport. Finding himself in reserve position for Coventry was certainly a rarity, and that seemingly kick-started what eventually proved a long but fruitful season. "I didn't think I was going too terribly at Oxford, I was going alright, and the month before it shut I was just starting to get regular points, and was generally in Heat 15 and stuff like that, so I was quite happy how that was going, it was just disappointing how it went. When I got with Coventry,

things just went from better to better. My last meeting was on the 28th October, we rode right to the end of the year, we were in every competition, it was just great. I had a month off mid-season when the Oxford thing happened; normally when you reach October you're knackered and you've had enough, but I didn't want it to end and I could have kept going!"

The words 'keeping going' always conjure up something in a Speedway rider; hitting a milestone such as a testimonial always sparks talk of eventual retirement. Although Johnno's enthusiasm suggests his retirement is some way off yet, his television work with Sky Sports is possibly something he will delve further into when he does eventually decide to hang up his helmet. "I think it came about originally when I just did one as a guest on there, just doing some interviews and stuff. I enjoyed it, and they seemed to like what I was doing, so I just went from there to getting more and more regular. Last year was probably the least work I'd ever done for Sky, but it was because Coventry were in all of the meetings! This year I've done a few again, and hopefully I'll do a few more this year. It is good fun, it is a different side to the Speedway, and the best thing about it is, I don't have to wash a bike the next day!"

Back to the present, and Steve's Testimonial meeting is just a short time away; his big day begins at lunchtime on 22nd June. Coventry's Brandon Stadium plays host to a meeting that has all the makings of a classic, with an impressive rider line-up, and no doubt a party atmosphere, with a few extra somethings thrown in by Johnno himself. "It's been a lot of work, I've been really lucky, I've got Stephanie Babb and Julie Reading, the girls that have organised nearly as many testimonials as I've ridden in! They've taken a lot of heat off of me because you can't really do that much yourself when you're racing, and those girls have put in a lot of work. We've already announced that Peter Collins is going to come down and bring his World Championship bike from 1976, and is going to do a few laps as a demonstration ride for us, and will be there to sign autographs and do photos. We cannot announce yet the two other stars of yesteryear! There's a couple of other things planned for the parade, but we've got to keep that secret. I'm just looking forward to it all coming around, because it's only a few to go now. With the time of the year, cross my fingers, it should be decent weather, because I've got my mum and Dad, and six of my mates coming out from Perth, so they're travelling an awful long way to come and see it, so I hope we get good weather there. I'm really looking forward to it; I just hope it will be a fun day. I'll look forward to getting to the day, and then it'll be like 'right, we're here and it's on' and all the running around and the organising will be done."

The impressive line-up for the meeting includes current Grand Prix riders Leigh Adams, Jason Crump, Scott Nicholls, Greg Hancock and Chris Harris. Of the riders in the meeting, eleven have raced in the aforementioned series for the world's elite, while every rider of the sixteen competitors has raced at the highest level in this country and overseas. In a field such as this, it is almost impossible to pick a winner, but Johnno ventures in his typical humorous style, "I'd like to win it myself, because if I win it, I don't have to give the prize away, so that'd be nice! It is a quality field, and there's quite a few guys who could win it there; it's back to the old 20 heat World Final format, so everyone will meet everyone once. I wouldn't like to say who will go out and win it, but I hope we have a good day of racing for everyone, and that nobody gets hurt and we can all have a beer afterwards!"

**The Johno Testimonial**  
**Brandon Stadium, Coventry**  
**Sunday 22nd June 2008 at 1pm**

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