

A visit to Perth for the 2009 Australian Sprintcar Title

It is not until you actually get to Western Australia, that one comprehends just how far away it is. That is of course in terms of the distance from its national capital, as Perth holds the unique title of the world's most isolated city. I lived there for four years in the late 1980's and shed more than a few tears when I was transferred back east. It really is that good a city, believe me.

Naturally my Friday nights were always spent at Claremont and a quick Thursday afternoon detour in the rental revealed the sad sight that now confronts speedway addicts at the Showgrounds today. But like Phoenix from the ashes, the Motorplex at Kwinana Beach emerged out of the coffers of the Liberal government.

I met many people from interstate who were seeing Kwinana for the first time. Their reactions upon entering the venue through the bar coded turnstiles were usually all the same. "Bloody hell. Who paid for this?" Or, "Why can't we have one of these in [insert own city name]." There is no argument that it is an incredibly good venue. Easily the best speedway complex in Australia, but does it have the best track?

We were about to find that out across the course of the next three nights. Trevor Green mentioned that he had spent \$4,200 on tyres alone during the World Series swing into Perth late last year. Unsustainable costs for anyone.

The Sportsbet markets looked attractive. Brooke Tatnell, coming off a so far stellar season with WSS and Classic successes was \$2.10 and the nomadic Garry Brazier was \$4.00 to go "back to back" and take his 6th title. However for me, I thought the stand out value was Ryan Farrell who would have the local knowledge and the weight of the home town fans behind him. \$7.00 to win looked good to me and my money was on early. It seemed that others piled it on as well, because his price dropped to \$6.50 late on Thursday afternoon and reduced further on Friday to \$6.00. Tatnell and Brazier both blew out some.

Fans were talking at length about the format of the Title which was held over three nights with 10 heats scheduled for Thursday night, but no feature events. Friday had just five heats (one race for each driver) and one 20 lap A Main, whilst Saturday had the last round of heats, a C, B and A Main. Could this schedule have been accommodated within a two night format?

Thursday night's attendance would have been disappointing to the promotion with the silver and gold sections that provide complimentary access to the pits reasonably full, but the back straight seating area was very sparsely populated.

At around 6.00pm these patrons saw qualifying commence, the results of which would have no bearing on the rest of the racing. Times would only be used to later separate two or more drivers tied on points at any time. This qualifying

session became a little farcical when some drivers had up to eight laps, presumably with the transponders still recording. I saw Kenny Sartori in the pits and asked how many laps he was allowed. "Only got the two", he replied somewhat disappointedly.

The heats were run and done without real incident, except for Mitchell Dumesny inexplicably weighing in light after his heat win and 12/1 man Sartori becoming a non finisher in his heat when he destroyed a driveline. In fact this was just the beginning of the end for Kenny who, if he hadn't had so much bad luck over the weekend, wouldn't have had any luck at all.

Family favourite Farrell was in devastating form and looked the goods, while Tatnell and Brazier confirmed their favouritism in the betting markets. Trevor Green's two very strong heats suggested that the red Adrad SA #4 was also a much underrated chance at 25/1.

Fans were on their way home at 9.30pm after the NOS cars finished their 3rd race for the evening. Verdict? I felt flat and others thought it was anti climatic without any concluding feature races. Most thought that there should have been more support racing if the SCCA insist on a three day show. But then again, Kwinana have been accused before of trying to fit too many classes into one night, so where do you draw the line?

Friday dawned clear, with no present danger of any rain, unlike the unfortunate debacle which surrounded the Parramatta attempt(s) to stage the 2008 version. There would be no need to use the Sunday rain date for this one. On the leisurely 40 minute drive up from Mandurah to the Motorplex, my thoughts surrounded a hoped for larger crowd for the promotion and a longer speedway program for the fans. Both were fulfilled, with what looked like a 100% increase in attendance, plus we had speedcars along with 40 or so Formula 500's for their WA Championship.

The increased crowd prompted me to visit the eastern side of the track tonight and I sat in the "cheap seats" which, apart from the glare of the sun whilst it sets over the Indian Ocean, provides an equally impressive view of the racing.

Yesterday I had walked all over the complex, including watching the first set of heats from the infield. I visited the corporate boxes lined up along the main straight, the TV production studio, the Motorplex offices and strolled around to my heart's content in the pits watching the crews go about their work on the perfectly manicured grass pit-bays, each of which has a substantial tarpaulin laid beneath the race car.

But tonight it was out with the fans in the hill to see what they thought. And they all found it a little strange when following a 6.00pm start, we were not to see the main attractions until 8.10pm, when the sprintcars came out for their one and only round of heats.

In between the earlier speedcar and F500 heats the track was unexpectedly (in my mind) watered and scarified. It had looked alright to me ... why were they doing this? However to the surprise of all my new buddies around me, it dramatically brought the highline into play. Flyin' Ryan Farrell proved this for all time with a stunning triumph from position 14 in the first heat of the night. He was honking. If the bookies were there and saw that, (or watched it live on the Internet, courtesy of Sprintcar World), his odds should have shortened again.

Neville Lance had won the midget feature. And the 40 F500's had been reduced to 28 or so after their six heats before we saw the sprintcars again. The 20 lap A Main, which was lined up according to accumulated results from Thursday night only did carry points, despite the announcers telling all and sundry that it didn't.

Like many other races I have seen lately, this one also went flag to flag. Farrell led for 12 laps from Brazier and Tatnell, but when the Braz unsuccessfully attempted a pass on Farrell in turn 2, Tatnell saw his opportunity and swooped on both. He was never headed again and took the chequered flag, with Brazier pinching third from Farrell on the last bend. How much had this result altered the thinking? What would tomorrow's final heats bring? The magnificent Musco lights were turned off at 10.00pm tonight.

Making friends at the speedway is good fun. Especially when they offer to save you a seat in a prime position. With other responsibilities keeping me away from Kwinana until 5.30pm, I arrived on Saturday night to find a colossal crowd had materialised. Even the West Coast Eagles would have been pleased with this one.

However before assuming my prized position high on turn one, I ventured around to the big screen which lives behind 1 & 2. From here there are just a 150 or so spots to watch from. Next time I'm back at the Motorplex, that's where I'll be putting my chair. A superb panoramic view awaits those who get there early enough.

After studying Friday's preliminary A Main results I noticed that "son of a gun" David Priolo had finished in the top ten. He had slipped under my guard on the night and I realised that this indeed was an unexpected achievement. A quick look at the odds revealed that SportsBet considered him an outsider as well and were still offering \$19 for Pino's boy to finish in the top ten again on Saturday.

You can't look a gift horse in the mouth, so another quick bet was placed. David won the first heat of the night which would place him off eight in the big one. I was quietly confident, as I'm sure the entire Budget Forklifts team would have been.

The remaining heat wins went to Ben Ellement, who would have been delighted with his 9th on the starting grid, Trevor Green and Daryl Clayden.

The field was now set for the Championship, with Scheuerle, Dowling, Wells and Veal transferring from the B. The curators had once again confounded the experts by scarifying and watering the track and following the F500 and midget features it was picture perfect. The high line would be there for those game enough to use it.

From my time in WA I always knew that Sandgroppers were very patriotic and the fans were understandably right behind the eleven local cars that filled the grid. However, only letting off fireworks for each WA car (and ignoring all others) as they were announced and entered through the back straight pit gate, was a little over the top.

As you will read elsewhere in more detailed reports, Brazier went straight to the top and stayed there until he encountered lapped traffic at about the eight lap mark. Farrell, Tatnell and Green followed him faithfully through the holes, but the hard charger was Robbie Farr from 18. He had made his way up to at least 5th but was hampered by several yellows. If they had not come, either Robbie would have caught Brazier, or his right rear would have exploded!!

A moment of controversy came at one of the yellows when Brazier inexplicably decided to pass the pace car, but the stewards chose to warn him rather than anything more drastic. And then as quickly as it started, it was all over with the enigmatic Garry Brazier taking his sixth Australian Title, a car length and one very worn inside rear tyre in front of the rampaging Trevor Green who had passed Tatnell, then Farrell in the dying stages to claim a worthy second.

I had one eye on the Brazier / Green tussle and the other on WA #8 who was spectacular all night up on the high line. And yes, David Priolo finished 9th to make him (and me) very happy indeed.

All in all, a very enjoyable three nights. I will bring into question however why there needs to be a three night format. Those drivers who I spoke to were not in favour of it, with most believing it will need to be reviewed for Darwin in 2010.

You could just about pencil Brazier in now for his seventh, given that the 48th running of the Title will be held in May in the NT. There will be many drivers with USA commitments who just simply won't be there. However in 2009 the 'Plex ticked all the boxes with their first Sprintcar Title and wouldn't they be the envy of all other promoters with that colossal final night crowd.