

SPEEDWAY WORLD INDIVIDUAL FINAL DAY

Sunday 5th, September 1976

The day that I had waited 24 years for had finally arrived and what a miserable day it was. Cloudy skies and patches of rain were all over Poland. We had awoken early in Katowice and were on the road to Chorzow (a suburb) by 8.00am in our Motorhome. Arriving at the stadium about an hour later, we parked the van amongst the buses which had arrived from all over the continent and Great Britain.

And then the fun began

We didn't have tickets for a start, plus we had no idea what time racing commenced. I figured that if we got there early we wouldn't miss anything, so we walked around the huge stadium looking for someone who appeared British. There were a few lines at different gates but we didn't know what they were for. Hardly any Polish people speak English, so when we spotted a German flag we walked over hoping to ask the flag bearer about tickets, etc.

Would you believe there were two English girls sitting next to them! They didn't have tickets either but were waiting for a friend "*who knew someone on the gate*" to come back. So we waited with them. Eventually he returned and said that the gates were opening at 12.30pm and if we were to bribe one of the attendants at a certain gate, he would let us in.

The guy's name was Chris, about my age, and he told me that he used to ride speedway but had given it up through injury. About 11.30am we went back to the gate where he had chatted up an attendant but would you believe that attendant had disappeared! (He'd probably told 400 other people the same thing.)

So we decided to walk around to all the gates holding money to try and entice a scalper. But the reverse happened and Polish people, who themselves didn't have a ticket, raced towards us from all angles thinking we were selling them. We were besieged. You see a Polish zloty is orange in colour and so were the tickets, hence the dramatic confusion.

After that was sorted out, we found a guy who had one ticket for sale but we wanted five in total. The face value of the tickets was 100 zlotys and he was asking 300 for one ticket. We refused, not because of the price, but because all the tickets were numbered and seats allocated. If we had bought five individual tickets we would have been scattered all around the stadium.

We couldn't make him understand we didn't want it because of that, but he thought he would be smart and converted the price into dollars, starting off at \$10. We walked away but he ran after us and said nine. Once again we walked away and he raced after

us shouting “eight dollars”. This kept happening, until the poor little bloke got down to two dollars, which he obviously didn’t realise was less than he paid for it in zlotys.

Not being able to get five tickets, things were becoming desperate, so we went back to the original gate where Chris had seen the attendant and were amazed to see 50 or 60 busloads of soldiers get out and go through the gate obviously to keep “Communist law and order”. Nearly 2,500 troops were disgorged into the Stadium. Each dressed in a blue uniform and armed with a machine gun or an automatic rifle.

But now we were beginning to get lucky

Chris spied a man standing by the pits talking to Polish officials. (*At this stage the gates still hadn’t been opened*). By sign language he got the attendant (*another one*) to get his mate for him. He came over and we told him the ‘no tickets’ story. He immediately said, “*I’ll fix that*”. He came back with a Polish official who spoke rapidly in Polish to the other attendant, who in turn immediately raised the gate and the five of us strolled through. Chris slipped the official five pounds (in English currency which the Poles love to get their hands on) and then our next problem raised its ugly head.

Where to sit, since we didn’t have allocated seats

However that was temporarily forgotten for a while as we went inside the Stadium and stood there mesmerised. Unlike the MCG which has grandstands, this was simply a giant hole dug deep into the ground with the seating built up the sides. It would easily hold its reputed 100,000 people. It was massive, with the track way down below.

We stood at the top and just gazed at the whole panorama. The only other people in there were the troops who completely ringed the perimeter of the stadium, top and bottom. We boldly selected which section we would sit in and walked straight past the orange helmeted officials at the top of the stairs, sat in the seats and waited. It was about 12.10pm and the meeting wasn’t to start until 3.00pm.

People began filing in taking up their seats. Our row remained completely free for some two hours. At about 2.15pm, three blokes came along, looked at their tickets, looked at the numbers on the rows and seats, looked at us, shrugged their shoulders and sat in seats in front of us. When the people came to sit in those seats, the three blokes argued violently with them not once turning around to us and the newly arrived people simply once again sat in vacant seats somewhere else. We must have been causing more than a little confusion, but not once did anyone ask us to produce tickets.

The racing started amidst rain, which soon went away fortunately. Our boy (*the only Aussie*), Phil Crump won his first two races, and with only three more for him to win, looked good. Chris and the other two girls were barracking for Peter Collins, an Englishman.

There were five riders from England, four from Poland, two from Russia, one from New Zealand, one from Australia, one from Czechoslovakia, one from West Germany and one from the USA. Eventually 'Crumpy' was beaten in his third ride which left Collins as the only unbeaten rider.

The crowd noise was immense. Whenever a Polish rider won a race (which was only twice out of twenty heats) the crowd went berserk, cheering, clapping and stomping. Whenever one of the Russians raced (*neither of them finished better than third in any of their races*) the crowd whistled deafeningly – their way of booing. It was prolonged, it was ear piercing and it was loud enough to drown out the noise of the bikes.

Finally Peter Collins became World Champion with 14 pts, followed by another Pom, Malcolm Simmons with 13 pts. Phil Crump finished third in a very good performance. Collins was ecstatic that he had won and Chris and I raced down to above the pits to watch. The band played the English National Anthem and buggared it up too! And to cut a long story a little shorter, the 20 odd busloads of British fans that had come over went home happy, as we did with getting third.

That night we parked in a parking bay adjacent to a Polish motorway and slept like logs after the tension of the racing and the tension of being thrown out of the stadium!

Footnote: *Poland was still well behind the Iron Curtain in those days and had we encountered any trouble with those troops, then just maybe I might not have seen too many more speedway meetings in this lifetime.*

Click on each link for some photos of the day

Outside Chorzow's Slaski Stadium / Katowice Poland in 1976

The opening ceremonies at the 1976 World Speedway Final in Katowice, Poland.

Start of a heat at the 1976 World Final in Katowice, Poland. Note the more colourful British in their own section.

Peter Collins gets "the Bumps" after winning the 1976 World Speedway Final in Katowice, Poland.

Peter Collins holds the garland of flowers after winning the 1976 World Speedway Final at Katowice in Poland.

Peter Collins, Malcolm Simmons (2nd) and Phil Crump (3rd) do a lap of honour at the 1976 World Speedway Final in Katowice, Poland.