

# Pride of the East: Motorcycle Speedway, Transnational Encounters and Provincial Heartlands

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## Abstract

For a century, speedway has operated on a transnational basis. Its riders, competitions and machinery regularly traverse national and continental borders. The imposition of the Cold War's Iron Curtain did little to impede its growth. This article focuses on one of speedway's far-flung and diverse provincial heartlands to show how the sport generated frequent transnational and transsystemic interactions and forged deep relationships that often stood in contrast to the prevailing trends of international politics. As one of speedway's 'entangled peripheries', rural East Anglia owes a debt of gratitude to Australasian pioneers. From the 1950s—decades before imported talent became commonplace in football—the region welcomed Scandinavian and Eastern Bloc riders and hosted visiting clubs and national representations from across the continent. Later, East Anglia became a bridgehead for the successful assault of communist-built machinery on the Western market. These bold endeavours were not without controversy, as British riders voiced objections to foreign men and machines deemed a threat to their livelihoods. The Cold War's end accelerated existing trends and also created exciting new opportunities for itinerant East Anglians abroad. Archival material, conversations with the sport's foreign trailblazers and fans, Swedish and Czechoslovak sources, photographs and official publications serve to demonstrate speedway's enduring ability to forge unexpected ties and give voice to regions at the so-called margins of twentieth-century history.

## I

On 24 February 2023, the Ipswich Witches motorcycle speedway team announced one of the most exciting signings Britain's ailing leagues

I owe a debt of gratitude to riders, fans, journalists, and mechanical engineers whose recollections shaped my understanding of their sport and related international encounters. Sadly, some of them are no longer with us. In addition to the conversations cited in the notes, *Speedway Star's* Peter Oakes offered rich insight, as did Barry Pentelow and Jill Johnson. I am grateful to colleagues Tom Licence, Nicholas Vincent, Becky Taylor, Matthias Neumann, and the two anonymous History reviewers for giving their support to the project, as well as to co-panellists and audiences for their feedback at the Centre of East Anglian Studies Spring Seminar Series 2023, and the 2023 BASEES Conference. Thanks to the staff of the Modern Records Centre, The National Archives, Norfolk Records Office, and Norfolk Heritage Centre. In particular, I wish to acknowledge the generosity of John Somerville for granting permission to reproduce photographs from his remarkable collection.



Figure 1 Emil Sayfutdinov in the colours of Ipswich Witches (Author, 2023). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-230X.13414)]

have seen in years. A multiple European individual and world team champion had been lured to Suffolk.<sup>1</sup> It was almost too good to be true. A fleeting glance at online forums confirmed that the opportunity to acquire such a rider came with strings attached. Ipswich's new signing, Emil Sayfutdinov (born 1989), hails from the Russian Republic of Bashkortostan (Figure 1). His three world team golds had been won for Russia, and the global sanctions sparked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine had led to his disqualification from international competition.

Some speedway fans announced their intention to boycott Witches fixtures, while one forum user noted: 'Anyone would think Emil

<sup>1</sup> *East Anglian Daily Times*, 24 February 2023.

has walked into Donbass with a Kalashnikov, by the amount of hate he's received'.<sup>2</sup> Though inadvertent, Ipswich did not help their case by announcing Sayfutdinov's signing on the invasion's first anniversary.

In Ipswich's and Sayfutdinov's defence, the rider took to social media to express solidarity with the Ukrainian people as soon as the invasion began.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Sayfutdinov has been based in Poland for well over a decade and has held Polish citizenship since 2009. As the season progressed, he was joined in East Anglia by fellow Russian-born riders Artem Laguta (Vladivostok, 1990), the 2021 world champion who was lured to King's Lynn Stars, and Vadim Tarasenko (born in the village of Sukhodol, Russia, on the Sea of Japan, 1994) who donned the Peterborough Panthers race jacket. Like Sayfutdinov, they were both able to ride in the United Kingdom thanks to Polish licences.<sup>4</sup> Historically, controversial imports have been typical of a sport that has operated transnationally since it emerged in rural Australia in the 1920s. Speedway's elite riders have to be inveterate travellers to succeed. It is not unusual for them to compete for teams in the United Kingdom, Poland and Sweden simultaneously, perpetually traversing Europe to race most weeknights, or for them to jump from continent to continent as the European summer ends and that of the Southern Hemisphere begins. Such mobility has posed challenges for speedway over the last century. During the Cold War, when the sport captured the attention of riders and spectators in both blocs, speedway's peculiarities frequently contradicted and challenged accepted Cold War binaries.

Although speedway graced, and filled, cavernous metropolitan stadiums during its heydays of the 1930s and 1940s, for various reasons the sport lost its footing in most major cities and evolved into 'the ultimate provincial sport'.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, I have turned to speedway as a means to understand transnational Cold War encounters, with a particular focus on British anxiety in the face of the highly anticipated Soviet entry into the sport.<sup>6</sup> That research highlights the pivotal role played by speedway's 'entangled peripheries' on both sides of the Iron Curtain.<sup>7</sup> However, such a broad sweep did not permit a detailed examination of any one of

<sup>2</sup> 'Ipswich 2023', SGB Premiership, Speedway Forum, 26 February 2023, 149, [www.speedway-forum.co.uk/forums/index.php?/topic/92000-ipswich-2023/&page=149](http://www.speedway-forum.co.uk/forums/index.php?/topic/92000-ipswich-2023/&page=149) (Accessed July 2024).

<sup>3</sup> 'Rosyjski sportowiec w apelu przeciw wojnie pisze do Ukraińców: Jesteśmy braćmi', *Wyborcza*, 24 February 2022, <https://bydgoszcz.wyborcza.pl/bydgoszcz/7,48722,28151143,rosyjski-sportowiec-w-apelu-przeciw-wojnie-pisze-do-ukraincow.html> (Accessed July 2024).

<sup>4</sup> *Eastern Daily Press*, 29 May 2023; *Peterborough Telegraph*, 14 June 2023.

<sup>5</sup> P. Newsham, 'Encounters on the dirt track: Polish–British speedway from 1955', *International Journal of the History of Sport (IJHS)*, 34/10 (2017), pp. 866–79.

<sup>6</sup> R. Mills, "'The Russians are coming!' Entangled peripheries and Cold War competition in motorcycle speedway', *History Workshop Journal*, 97 (2024), pp. 149–73.

<sup>7</sup> The term 'entangled peripheries' was coined by scholars of Portuguese–Moroccan relations. F.J. Martínez, 'Introduction', in F.J. Martínez (ed.) *Entangled Peripheries: New Contributions to the History of Portugal and Morocco* (Évora, 2020), <https://books.openedition.org/cidehus/12448> (Accessed July 2024).

the far-flung regions in question. An exploration of any of speedway's provincial heartlands—from England's Black Country to Bulawayo in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe—would pay dividends.

This article concentrates on characteristically rural and provincial East Anglia to show how a largely working-class sport that thrived at the so-called geographical margins serves to capture some of the complexities and nuances of transnational and transsystemic flows. A representative case study, East Anglia displays speedway's capacity to forge deep relationships between individuals, institutions and regions that often stood in contrast to the prevailing trends of international politics. The sport brought villagers from remote Scandinavian and Soviet regions, world champions and teams from an array of provincial towns and innovative communist-built technology to the region. Simultaneously, East Anglia has exported talent in the opposite direction and transhipped world-beating Eastern Bloc machinery westward. Yet, while the Cold War left an indelible mark on twentieth-century speedway, the global ideological struggle was just one of many factors that shaped the sport. Not everything that happened *in* the Cold War was a result *of* it. Speedway therefore provides unique opportunities to give voice to regions written off as 'sleepy backwaters', rarely present in the historiography, which not only charted their own unique paths through the twentieth century's political landscape but also helped shape that landscape in distinct ways.

Recently, researchers have rekindled interest in the world's 'peripheries' in search of nuanced understandings of broad historical developments.<sup>8</sup> For Francisco Martínez, the term 'periphery' signifies 'the distance and dependence of a given society from historical processes in which others play a leading role'.<sup>9</sup> Anyone who spent an afternoon watching speedway's Mildenhall Fen Tigers—as motorcycle engines were suddenly drowned out by the runway approach of a US Air Force B-52 bomber overhead—might question East Anglia's peripheral Cold War status. In many respects the region constituted a frontline of the superpower rivalry; as a host of American and British airbases and considerable stockpiles of nuclear weapons, it was a prime target for Soviet strategists.<sup>10</sup> However, decisions to locate those facilities, to utilise their weapons and to target them were taken in distant metropolises and not in peripheral East Anglia. Ultimately then, the concept of 'entangled peripheries' can assist us adequately to chart the region's contribution to, and role in, broader political developments. Before, during and after the Cold War, speedway entangled the lives of its far-flung and politically diverse provincial heartlands. In this sense, it aligns with, supports and furthers valuable efforts to challenge notions of a simplistic Cold War divide.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> K. Kaps & A. Komlosy, 'Centers and peripheries revisited: Polycentric connections or entangled histories', *Review*, 36/3–4 (2013), pp. 237–64.

<sup>9</sup> F. Martínez, 'Introduction'.

<sup>10</sup> J. Wilson, *Cold War East Anglia* (Brimscombe Port, Stroud, 2014), pp. 11–13.

<sup>11</sup> S. Mikkonen & P. Koivunen (eds) *Beyond the Divide: Entangled Histories of Cold War Europe* (Oxford, 2015); Ó.J. Martín García, & R. Magnúsdóttir (eds) *Machineries of Persuasion: European*

Sport constitutes a suitable prism through which to understand the place of ‘peripheral’ areas in wider national and international contexts while shedding light on identity formation, deindustrialisation and deprivation at the so-called ‘margins’.<sup>12</sup> Beyond sport history, Cold War historians foreground a range of localities to examine ‘local consequences of the global Cold War’.<sup>13</sup> Elsewhere, Peder Anker’s striking research into Norway’s role as an environmental pioneer challenges stereotypical understandings of peripheries as ‘backwaters’ far from epicentres of progress and innovation. For Anker, Norway underlines the potential ‘power of the periphery’.<sup>14</sup> These studies point to the capacity for such approaches to sharpen understandings of diverse ‘peripheral’ regions and their complex transnational entanglements. Like East Anglia’s historic trade links with the Baltic world, its speedway scene worked around the impediments of national borders and the Iron Curtain.

The article emerges from fieldwork, analysis of archival material and the speedway press and conversations with riders and fans. As with any source, oral history is not without its limitations. Yet, semi-structured conversations with a range of individuals directly involved in the sport provided essential opportunities to contextualise and query speedway’s scant surviving records. Itinerant riders’ recollections of gruelling schedules, international travel and the often-bureaucratic realities of successful racing careers are indispensable in any attempt to reconstruct the complex dynamics of a sport that now rarely attracts attention beyond its hardcore fanbase. In combination, the rich array of sources points to three striking ways in which East Anglian speedway operated in an interconnected world: in terms of personnel, competition and machinery. Far from provincial, peripheral or isolated from global developments, the region consistently stood in the vanguard of transnational speedway. It was a provincial heartland that directly shaped the sport and played a pivotal role in its storied history.

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*Soft Power and Public Diplomacy during the Cold War* (Berlin, 2019); L. Szabolcs, ‘Trans-systemic mobility, travel reports and knowledge acquisition in Cold War Hungary in the 1960s and 1970s’, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire*, 30/2 (2023), pp. 204–33; M. Neumann, ‘“Peace and friendship”: Overcoming the Cold War in the children’s world of the Pioneer Camp ArteK’, *Diplomatic History*, 46/3 (2022), pp. 505–26. Work to complicate the Cold War narrative includes groundbreaking research on motorsport in the Eastern Bloc: M. Keck-Szajbel, ‘Motocross mayhem: Racing as transnational phenomenon in socialist Czechoslovakia’, in P. Babiracki & A. Jersild (eds) *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War: Exploring the Second World* (Cham, 2016), pp. 197–217; C. Fricke, ‘Getting off track in East Germany: Adolescent motorcycle fans and Honecker’s consumer socialism’, in C.M. Giustino, J. Plum, & A. Vari (eds) *Socialist Escapes: Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (New York, 2013), pp. 213–31.

<sup>12</sup> A.J. Arnold, ‘Football at the “end of the line”: Economic decline, cross-subsidies and football league membership in the NW Steel District of England’, *Sport in History*, 36/1 (2016), pp. 47–72; P. Newsham, ‘Encounters on the dirt track’, pp. 866–79; M. Kurkowska-Budzan, M. Stasiak & P. Newsham, ‘Introduction: Sporting Peripheries’, *IJHS*, 34/10 (2017), pp. 863–5; C. Little, ‘Football, place, and community in a New Zealand mining town, 1877–1939’, *IJHS*, 34/10 (2017), pp. 915–34.

<sup>13</sup> J.A. Engel (ed.) *Local Consequences of the Global Cold War* (Washington, D.C., 2007).

<sup>14</sup> P. Anker, *Power of the Periphery: How Norway Became an Environmental Pioneer for the World* (Cambridge, 2020).



## II

Born in provincial Australia, speedway swiftly captured the attention of millions of spectators in the imperial metropole. As an exhilarating form of motorcycle racing that pits broadsiding riders against each other to tackle the dangers of a loose cinder or shale surface, speedway's tight oval tracks were laid in stadiums across Britain. A glance at the pioneering promoters and riders who brought speedway to East Anglia underlines its transnational credentials. What is widely considered the United Kingdom's first dirt track, or speedway meeting took place at High Beech in Essex in 1928 and featured trailblazing Australian icons.<sup>15</sup> When the Norwich Stars entered competitive speedway in 1937, it was a venture undertaken by Australian rider-turned-promoter Max Grosskreutz (Proserpine, Queensland, 1906).<sup>16</sup> He brought other Australians to The Firs Stadium, where crowds approached 20,000 by 1946.<sup>17</sup> The 1952 Norwich team that gained promotion to speedway's highest division featured a pair of Australian riders.<sup>18</sup>

In 1955, with the post-war boom well and truly over and British speedway in the doldrums, the Stars secured the services of rising Swedish talent Ove Fundin. He had been persuaded to sign for Norwich during a winter tour to Australia and stayed with the Stars until the track's closure a decade later. Fundin—from the small rural town of Tranås (born 1933)—spoke little English on arrival and learned the language through frequent cinema visits. He recalls that, in a city with few foreigners (with the exception of US servicemen), teammates amused themselves by teaching him swear words. Initially, the local crowd were not enamoured with this foreign import, but track success accelerated his integration: 'after half a season I proved myself, and after that everybody was so friendly to me. And supported me very, very much, you know. Much more than I thought was possible as a foreigner'.<sup>19</sup> Norwich supporter Richard Edmonds, a regular at The Firs in the 1950s, recalls that, for a region that did not experience significant immigration in the mid-twentieth century, speedway's 'rather exotic' foreign stars added extra kudos to the sport.<sup>20</sup> During an illustrious decade in Norfolk, Fundin won the prestigious individual World Final four times, before adding a fifth after the track's closure. As the first crowned continental rider, he brought glory to himself, his country and his adopted British home.<sup>21</sup> Special trains and buses left Norfolk packed with supporters to witness

<sup>15</sup> M. Rogers, *The Illustrated History of Speedway* (Ipswich, 1978), pp. 13–15.

<sup>16</sup> A. Smith, *Speedway at The Firs: From Grass to Grosskreutz* (Norwich, 2004), p. 25.

<sup>17</sup> N. Jacobs, *Speedway in East Anglia* (Brimscombe Port, Stroud, 2000), pp. 13–14, 18.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Ove Fundin in conversation with author, Tranås, Sweden, 20 and 21 January 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Edmonds, Norwich Stars supporter, in conversation with author, telephone, 8 February 2018.

<sup>21</sup> J. Chaplin, *Ove Fundin: Speedway Superstar* (Brimscombe Port, Stroud, 2006).

his Wembley triumphs.<sup>22</sup> Stars fan Robin Kett, who religiously attended Wembley showpieces throughout his childhood, remembers there were almost always Norwich riders in contention, particularly his ‘big hero’ Fundin. He recalls the excitement after one world title victory, when thousands of fans gathered below the balcony of Fundin’s Boundary Road flat to welcome his victorious return ‘home’.<sup>23</sup> Hence, long before English football opened its doors to talented foreign imports—which, due to the Football Association’s 1931 implementation of a two-year residency rule, did not occur until 1978<sup>24</sup>—East Anglian speedway success was underpinned by an idol from rural Sweden (Figure 2).

By the early 1960s, Fundin had been joined at the Stars by fellow countryman Olle Nygren (Stockholm, 1929) and the Hungarian refugee Sándor Lévai (Debrecen, Hungary, 1935), who fled in the aftermath of the failed 1956 Uprising. Both had raced elsewhere in the United Kingdom before arriving in East Anglia, with Nygren—who rose to stardom with the Vargarna club of Norrköping—having been one of the Swedish pioneers who broke the ice in British speedway. He appeared for Haringay in 1951 and New Cross in 1953. Both these early stints were controversial, with the sport’s trade union—the Speedway Riders’ Association—refusing to sanction the foreign Nygren’s presence at New Cross as anything other than a short-term injury replacement. This played a direct part in the promoter’s decision to close the club mid-season and sparked a tense three-way wrangle over foreign work permits between the riders’ union, the sport’s promoters and the Ministry of Labour.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Nygren remained a regular performer on British shores in subsequent years. He was impressed upon his arrival in early 1960s’ Norwich:

That was the best, I think, for atmosphere and how good they were, and how lovely their ground was ... and the supporters... Because they were farming supporters weren’t they! ... big crowds, and they were knowledgeable ... It was just like a football crowd today in those days, at Norwich speedway.

<sup>22</sup> Ove Fundin in conversation with author, Tranås, Sweden, 20 and 21 January 2020. Robin Kett, Norwich Stars supporter, in conversation with author, Needham Market, Suffolk, 13 February 2018; Doris Leader, Norwich Stars supporter, in conversation with author, Stradbroke, Suffolk, 14 January 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Robin Kett, Norwich Stars supporter, in conversation with author, Needham Market, Suffolk, 13 February 2018.

<sup>24</sup> P. Millward, ‘Spatial mobilities, football players and the World Cup: Evidence from the English Premier League’, *Soccer & Society*, 14/1 (2013), p. 22; P. Lanfranchi & M. Taylor, *Moving with the Ball: The Migration of Professional Footballers* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 50–1. Even in football, East Anglia was a frontrunner. Ipswich Town were among the first English clubs to welcome foreign stars, signing Dutch pair Arnold Mühren and Frans Thijssen in the 1978–9 season. *East Anglian Daily Times*, 19 March 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Olle Nygren in conversation with author, Felixstowe, Suffolk, 31 January 2020; T. Rander, *Varg-Olle: Mannen, Tiden, Livet* (Göteborg, 2015), pp. 100–1; Chaplin, *Ove Fundin*, p. 52; ‘Note of a meeting ... on the issue of Ministry of Labour permits for foreign speedway riders as members of British teams’, 10 June 1953, The National Archives of the UK (TNA): LAB 8/1935 (Speedway Riders: Admission Policy, 1952–9).



**Figure 2** Norwich's Swedish Stars, Olle Nygren, Göte Nordin (Hofors, 1935) and Ove Fundin (courtesy of the John Somerville Collection).

And the management were very good. They were all, you know... some of them were farming people...<sup>26</sup>

While in full agreement about the warm support from Norwich's packed terraces, co-national Ove Fundin has less fond memories of the club's management. Mourning the fact that, despite healthy crowds, its directors sold the stadium for housing in 1964, Fundin recalls some of them could be quite mean. Despite the unparalleled glory and financial rewards garnered by the Swede's successes, he was never allowed to rise above his position as paid performer:

They had the directors' box, the directors' room, where they sat. I don't think they ever watched the speedway. They sat there drinking whiskeys and smoking cigars I guess. I was not once invited in there. Not once. Aub Lawson [Warialda, New South Wales, 1914], being team captain, was the only one ever invited in. The kind of people... they were so mean, so when they got a good offer for the ground, everybody wanted their share I suppose. But they made good money out of the speedway. ... We had average crowds of about 8500.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Olle Nygren in conversation with author, Felixstowe, Suffolk, 31 January 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Ove Fundin in conversation with author, Tranås, Sweden, 20 and 21 January 2020.





**Figure 3** Hungarian refugee and former Norwich rider Sándor Lévai donned the Ipswich Witches race jacket in the 1970s (courtesy of the John Somerville Collection). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-220X.13414)]

Having witnessed Swedish successes, by the late-1950s the Polish authorities sought to benefit from sending talented young riders on apprenticeships at British clubs.<sup>28</sup> Though these early Eastern Bloc arrivals did not sign for East Anglian teams, the region's spectators witnessed their progress during league visits to local tracks. Alongside sanctioned arrivals from the Eastern Bloc, speedway also provided opportunities for those fleeing communist rule. Norwich's own defector, Sándor Lévai, who rode for the Stars in 1964, subsequently raced for fellow East Anglian club Ipswich Witches in the 1970s (Figure 3). Both Lévai and Swindon Robins' Polish defector Tadeusz Teodorowicz (born in then-Polish Vilnius in 1931) eventually obtained British citizenship

<sup>28</sup> Newsham, 'Encounters on the dirt track', pp. 871–2.

through naturalisation, a route that Nygren also pursued in the 1960s.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of legal status, foreign imports from provincial settings across northern and eastern Europe joined forces with such local talents as Geoff Pymar (Eye, Suffolk, 1912), Billy Bales (Norwich, 1929) and Trevor Hedge (Diss, Norfolk, 1943).

Elsewhere in the region, speedway teams were often packed with overseas stars. The Yarmouth Bloaters—evocatively named after the port's famous cold-smoked and ungutted herring—employed several Australians, one of whom was killed in a racing incident in 1948, the team's first competitive season.<sup>30</sup> Ipswich also became a speedway stronghold, with its Witches performing before crowds of c.20,000 in the 1950s. In addition to the customary Australians, in 1957 the Witches welcomed Norwegian star Aage Hansen (born in the village of Skreia, Innlandet, 1935) and gave a trial to a young Austrian rider. The Witches' early ventures into the foreign rider pool met with disapproval at the Speedway Riders' Association, which complained directly to the Ministry of Labour.<sup>31</sup> Regardless, other continental riders followed in Hansen's footsteps in subsequent decades.<sup>32</sup> Ipswich relied heavily on the allure of foreigners when the track was at a low ebb in 1959. With the sport enduring tough times nationwide, the Witches had withdrawn from the National League in the face of poor results and shrinking crowds. The Australian and former Norwich rider Aub Lawson took over as a promoter and organised a series of attractive meetings to encourage supporters to return. The first was an international event involving riders from eleven different countries. When this proved successful, Lawson arranged for Sweden's elite to serve as a 'home team' for three matches against Britain, Australasia and 'The Rest'. Fundin was the star rider in three victories that drew good crowds and laid the foundation for the Witches to secure a bright future.<sup>33</sup>

As we have seen, the foreign presence was not without controversy, though it should be noted that, as in football, 'Commonwealth' riders were treated as British by promoters, the riders' trade union and—until the United Kingdom joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973—the Department of Employment.<sup>34</sup> Since the interwar years, the powerful Speedway Riders' Association had made periodic attempts to

<sup>29</sup> *Great Britain vs. Soviet Russia: International Speedway Test Match Series 1964: Official Souvenir Programme*, London, 4 July 1964; Naturalisation Certificate: Sandor Levai, 12 June 1963, TNA: HO 334/863/76203.

<sup>30</sup> Jacobs, *Speedway in East Anglia*, pp. 44–50.

<sup>31</sup> Speedway Riders' Association to Speedway Control Board, 13 March 1958; Ministry of Labour to Speedway Control Board, 21 March 1958; Speedway Riders' Association to Ministry of Labour, 25 March 1958, TNA: LAB 8/1935.

<sup>32</sup> Jacobs, *Speedway in East Anglia*, pp. 72–6.

<sup>33</sup> D. Feakes & C. Barber, *Ipswich Speedway: The First 50 Years* (Lavenham, 2001), pp. 57–60.

<sup>34</sup> British Speedway Promoters' Association Circular to All Promoters, 'Work Permits', 9 January 1974; Speedway Riders' Association to Department of Employment, Overseas Labour Section, 6 March 1977, TNA: LAB 8/2978 (Policy Governing the Admission of Speedway Riders to the UK, 1964–79).

impose restrictions, caps and even outright bans on non-British riders. They argued that imported talent threatened the livelihoods of British riders and reduced opportunities for young domestic talent.<sup>35</sup> Fundin recalls that, with some notable exceptions, teammates gave him a frosty reception when he first arrived in Norwich: ‘Of course! I came there and pushed some other rider out of the game... I took their money... A foreigner! A bloody foreigner comes in and takes my place, you know...’<sup>36</sup> While he swiftly achieved legendary status with Norwich supporters, he was booed and subjected to intense hostility at other tracks. John Chaplin’s biography contains a chapter entitled ‘The man they loved to hate’. The abuse was so disruptive that Fundin considered abandoning Britain. At Wimbledon, where fans took a particular dislike, Fundin’s Mercedes was vandalised, and the police had to intervene to ensure he could leave the stadium safely.<sup>37</sup> The Speedway Riders’ Association had opposed Fundin’s arrival from the outset, given the sport’s perilous state and the fact that track closures left many riders unemployed.<sup>38</sup> Hostility to the few foreigners in the British leagues boiled over regularly, and the sport’s governing body faced periodic calls to ban them. In the face of fierce lobbying from the riders’ union, the sport’s promoters argued that a small number of elite foreigners were needed to halt the alarming decline in attendances. In 1953, the Ministry of Labour had ruled that a maximum of five foreigners would be permitted in Britain’s First Division, and the Speedway Riders’ Association had accepted. Still, this union continued to press for a reduction in labour permits in subsequent years.<sup>39</sup> When the sport’s promoters succumbed, announcing a ban on foreigners in 1962, it thrust clubs dependent upon imported talent into crisis.<sup>40</sup>

Unsurprisingly, given their Swedish poster boy, the Norwich Stars and their supporters were among the most vocal opponents of a ban. It was such an existential issue that Norwich considered withdrawal from the league should the Speedway Control Board proceed with the plan.<sup>41</sup> In the previous, 1961 season, the Stars had enjoyed the highest average crowds in the National League, and Fundin was key to their appeal.<sup>42</sup> While many top riders unaffected by the ban joined fans in speaking out against it, National League clubs did little to protect foreigners, as *Speedway Star*’s John Hyam noted:

<sup>35</sup> J. Williams, ‘“A wild orgy of speed”: Responses to speedway in Britain before the Second World War’, *The Sports Historian*, 19/1 (1999), pp. 1–15, at p. 5; M. Taylor, ‘Trade unionism in British sport, 1920–1964’, *Labor History*, 55/5 (2014), pp. 622–37, at pp. 629, 631; ‘Note of a meeting ... on the issue of Ministry of Labour permits for foreign speedway riders as members of British teams’, 10 June 1953, TNA: LAB 8/1935.

<sup>36</sup> Ove Fundin in conversation with author, Tranås, Sweden, 20 and 21 January 2020. See also: Chaplin, *Ove Fundin*, pp. 76–7, 91.

<sup>37</sup> Chaplin, *Ove Fundin*, pp. 211–25.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60–2.

<sup>39</sup> Olle Nygren in conversation with author, Felixstowe, Suffolk, 31 January 2020; Overseas Department, Foreign Labour Division to Speedway Control Board, 3 July 1953, TNA: LAB 8/1935.

<sup>40</sup> Feakes & Barber, *Ipswich Speedway*, pp. 65–8.

<sup>41</sup> *Speedway Star & News*, 27 January 1962.

<sup>42</sup> *Daily Mail*, 3 August 1961.

Norwich alone to my knowledge have shown their annoyance. They make no secret of the fact that they want Fundin in their team. And why not? Mr. Perpetual Motion is the biggest draw in the history of the sport and his absence from The Firs is going to have an adverse effect on the attendances.<sup>43</sup>

Echoing the promoters' earlier pleas to the Ministry of Labour, this commentator joined others in predicting that the expulsion of continental stars would prove terminal for British speedway:

One can readily understand the indignation of the fans. The biggest crowd drawers in the game had been banned. Speedway in this country has cut itself away from internationalism, a trend that has boosted such sports as football, boxing, rugby, wrestling. It has become an exclusive refuge for English riders. ... I liken the promoters' decision to ban foreign riders to that of a doctor cutting the heart out of a patient with the obvious result the patient died.<sup>44</sup>

When the prohibition was announced, fan letters with Norfolk postmarks flooded into the speedway press. Mr and Mrs Hendry of King's Lynn, who thanked the foreign riders for providing wonderful entertainment, were typical: 'We need these riders here, and their absence in the new season will prove this. We in Norfolk will never forget how much Ove Fundin has done for Norwich'.<sup>45</sup> Another reader described the ban as 'suicidal' for British speedway, while the *Speedway Star* asked: 'Who wants to see Norwich minus Fundin?'<sup>46</sup> Indeed, in the view of many, the introduction of foreigners had saved insular British speedway from extinction. Readers called for a boycott, and one Norwich-based fan highlighted the hypocrisy of banning continental riders while continuing to allow Commonwealth talent:

I never thought the day would come when the Control Board and the Puddin' Headed Promoters would Ban Foreigners. Is it that they are too good for British boys and everyone is upset at the way the Swedes take their job so seriously. If they had been Aussies or Kiwis, they would have welcomed them with open arms. Let's be fair. If we are going to ban foreign riders, throw out the Aussies, Kiwis and South Africans as well.<sup>47</sup>

There were also rare expressions of support for the ban. Yet, even these tended to approach the issue through the prism of Norwich's star import: 'Would they rather see Fundin... & Co. win the World Championship every year instead of the kid next door. Sure they are great riders, but why not have more British stars to match them. ... By the way, I'm not a Fundin hater by any means, I think he is the greatest rider on the track today'.<sup>48</sup> Conscious of the strength of opposition, the magazine

<sup>43</sup> *Speedway Star & News*, 3 February 1962.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 February 1962.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 February 1962.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 February 1962.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 February 1962.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 17 February 1962.

forwarded readers' letters to the Speedway Control Board. Then, at a hastily arranged meeting, promoters reversed their decision and shelved the ban on the eve of the 1962 season.<sup>49</sup> Norwich Stars added more Swedes to their line-up in that year. A ban was mooted again in 1963, but when it did not materialise, Norwich's top two riders—both Swedes—powered the Stars to their best-ever season while prized asset Fundin won the individual world title.

The governing bodies of other countries also stepped into the foreign rider debate. Fearful of losing their finest talent, the Swedish Motorsport Association (*Svenska Motorsportförbundet*, SVEMO) had rejected British attempts to sign their nationals in 1951.<sup>50</sup> When they permitted Nygren to guest for Harringay in September of that year, it ended in scandal. The Swedish authorities had agreed to allow Nygren to race in London on a Thursday evening on the strict understanding he would fly home to represent his Swedish club on the Friday. Instead, the trailblazer flouted the agreement and again raced for Harringay.<sup>51</sup> Nygren was hauled in front of a Stockholm Court of Inquiry and received a six-month ban, while the dispute over compensation for contravening the original agreement dragged on between Harringay and SVEMO into the summer of 1953.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the Swedes subsequently relaxed their stance, permitting riders to compete in the United Kingdom as long as they committed simultaneously to participate in the Swedish league. This turned Nygren, Fundin and their compatriots into inveterate travellers at a time when international air travel was complex and expensive. On occasion, Fundin had to be rushed to Cambridge airfield after Norwich meetings so as to be conveyed via light aircraft to Heathrow in order to make his onward flight.<sup>53</sup> Riders who refused to live this lifestyle, such as Ipswich's Birger Forsberg (Skellefteå, 1930), had their licences revoked and were sometimes lost to the sport forever.<sup>54</sup>

The foreign import question resurfaced regularly. In 1965, speedway's promoters decided to exclude 'commuting' foreigners. The category encompassed those who combined British obligations with team places in continental leagues.<sup>55</sup> This was part of attempts to resolve a bitter rift in British speedway. The establishment, topflight National League had favoured the retention of foreign riders, while the breakaway—and blacklisted—Provincial League and the Speedway Riders' Association strove to operate without them if at all possible.<sup>56</sup> Following external mediation by the Royal Automobile Club, the two competitions were

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 24 February 1962.

<sup>50</sup> *Speedway World*, 11 April 1951; *Rekord-Magasinet*, Göteborg, 15 November 1951.

<sup>51</sup> *Speedway World*, 19 and 26 September 1951.

<sup>52</sup> Rander, *Varg-Olle*, pp. 78–9, 172.

<sup>53</sup> Ove Fundin in conversation with author, Tranås, Sweden, 20 and 21 January 2020.

<sup>54</sup> Jacobs, *Speedway in East Anglia*, pp. 75–6.

<sup>55</sup> Rogers, *Illustrated History of Speedway*, pp. 50, 92.

<sup>56</sup> *The Speedway Years, Issue 48 – 1964* (Greenhalgh, 2019), p. 2; Provincial Speedway Promoters' Association to Ministry of Labour, 19 March 1964, TNA: LAB 8/2978.



amalgamated to form a single British League in 1965.<sup>57</sup> The merger came with the compromise ‘no commuters’ solution, which permitted such British-based riders as Olle Nygren to continue to compete. Once again, however, this ruling proved short-lived. Abandoned, it was briefly resurrected in 1974.<sup>58</sup> Yet, clubs in East Anglia and beyond subsequently invested heavily in foreign talent. In 1976, the King’s Lynn promotion chose to market itself as ‘The Speedway with the International Accent’.<sup>59</sup> Two years later, there were 59 non-EEC riders in the British leagues, including fourteen from the Commonwealth, fourteen Swedes, ten Poles and eight Czechoslovaks.<sup>60</sup>

As the twentieth century ended, Ipswich could boast of having employed Americans, Czechs, South Africans and Poles.<sup>61</sup> After the fall of the Iron Curtain, riders from the former Eastern Bloc—who had trickled into the British speedway throughout the Cold War—continued to come in large numbers, now hailing from a broader geographical area. The King’s Lynn Stars—which had also employed various Swedes throughout their history—imported their first Czechoslovak in 1982. Two Czechs established themselves as King’s Lynn favourites in the early 1990s, while the 2002 Stars team was packed with central and east European (Polish, Russian and Slovene) and Scandinavian talent.<sup>62</sup> At the same time, top British riders—including homegrown East Anglians attracted by the growing financial confidence of the Polish leagues—began to move in the opposite direction. Ipswich-born multiple British champion Scott Nicholls (1978) has combined his UK racing with team berths in a string of provincial Polish and Swedish clubs throughout his career.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, long after the Fundin glory years, East Anglian teams revelled in the individual successes of contracted riders. King’s Lynn could boast the 1980 world title win of homegrown talent Michael Lee (Cambridge, 1958), but also the 1999 victory of their Swedish rider Tony Rickardsson (Grytås, 1970), in a year when Ipswich’s Polish ace Tomasz Gollob (Bydgoszcz, 1971) finished second.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>57</sup> ‘Minutes of the Tenth Meeting (1964 Session) of the Competitions Committee held at the Royal Automobile Club’, 14 January 1965, Minute Book, February 1964–February 1965, Auto-Cycle Union, Modern Records Centre (MRC): 660/1/1/25; Lord Shawcross, et al. ‘Report of the Royal Automobile Club Board of Enquiry on Speedway’, Royal Automobile Club, 29 January 1965. <https://www.speedwayresearcher.org.uk/1965shawcross.pdf> (Accessed July 2024).

<sup>58</sup> Feakes & Barber, *Ipswich Speedway*, p. 102.

<sup>59</sup> *King’s Lynn v Hackney: Spring Gold Cup: Official Programme*, 3 April 1976.

<sup>60</sup> ‘Permits Issued for Speedway Riders in 1978’, n.d., TNA: LAB 8/2978.

<sup>61</sup> Jacobs, *Speedway in East Anglia*, pp. 76, 85, 100.

<sup>62</sup> M. Rogers, with C. Hornby, *Forty Years On: King’s Lynn Speedway* (Ayr, 2005), pp. 219–23, 230–4.

<sup>63</sup> <https://nichollsracing.com/career/> (Accessed July 2024).

<sup>64</sup> This was Rickardsson’s second successive title, with his 1998 win coming during his spell with British Elite League champions Ipswich. Gollob won the title in 2010. Feakes & Barber, *Ipswich Speedway*, pp. 227–36; J. Lahner & M. Straka, *Motocykly z Divišova: Historie značek ESO a JAWA* (Prague, 2011), pp. 145–7; Rogers, *Forty Years On*, p. 215.

## III

Alongside the foreign imports embraced by East Anglian fans, competitive international encounters brought the region into regular contact with speedway's other peripheral heartlands. At the dawn of the 1950s, Great Yarmouth hosted World Championship qualifying rounds and a Second Division Test Match between Britain and a team billed as 'Overseas'.<sup>65</sup> In 1953, the full Australian Test Team raced against England at Norwich's Firs before a crowd of 27,051, with another Test against 'Australasia' following in 1955.<sup>66</sup> Three years later, Sweden raced England at the same venue, with a full Test between Great Britain—including the Commonwealth's Australasian stars—and Sweden following in 1961.<sup>67</sup> Leading clubs from provincial Swedish towns were regular visitors to East Anglia throughout the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>68</sup> These visits often put riders in the unusual position of representing one of 'their' clubs against another, as the United Kingdom's itinerant Swedes were also obligated to ride for Swedish teams. When Vargarna toured National League tracks in 1964, the press initially assumed that Nygren would ride against his British club Norwich. On the night, however, Nygren rode for the Stars.<sup>69</sup> In 1969, King's Lynn hosted new Scandinavian opposition, as the supporters' club extended 'a warm welcome to our visitors from Norway on behalf of every East Anglian speedway supporter'. The hosts ran out comfortable winners, even though local Swede Nygren guested for the Norwegian visitors due to the absence of one of their riders.<sup>70</sup>

Visitors from the Eastern Bloc, where speedway rapidly took root and thrived from the 1940s onwards, were an intriguing prospect for Cold War-era spectators. Nikita Khrushchev's 'Thaw' brought an increase in East–West sporting interactions. Manchester's Belle Vue Aces were pioneers in this regard, travelling to Poland in 1955 and inviting the Poles for a reciprocal tour the following season.<sup>71</sup> These ventures attracted high praise from British diplomats and paved the way for frequent interactions,

<sup>65</sup> Jacobs, *Speedway in East Anglia*, pp. 49–50.

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.internationalspeedway.co.uk/engvaus2.htm> (Accessed July 2024).

<sup>67</sup> <http://www.internationalspeedway.co.uk/engvswe.htm> (Accessed July 2024); <http://www.internationalspeedway.co.uk/gbvsw.htm> (Accessed July 2024).

<sup>68</sup> *Norwich v. Vargarna: Swedish Tour Match: Official Programme*, 22 July 1964; *King's Lynn v. Vargarna: Anglo-Swedish Grand Challenge Match: Official Programme*, 8 April 1972. During Vargarna's 1972 tour, Olle Nygren, then a member of Ipswich Witches—rode for Vargarna in the King's Lynn fixture but against the Swedish side on their visit to Ipswich. [www.speedwayresearcher.org.uk/ipswich1972.pdf](http://www.speedwayresearcher.org.uk/ipswich1972.pdf) (Accessed July 2024). *Peterborough versus Vetlanda: Challenge Match: Official Programme*, 2 April 1976; *Mildenhall v. Vetlanda: International Challenge Match: Official Programme*, 28 March 1976; R. Brazier, *Mildenhall Fen Tigers: Volume II: The Record Years* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>69</sup> *Speedway Post*, 1/3, July 1964; *Norwich v. Vargarna: Swedish Tour Match: Official Programme*, 22 July 1964.

<sup>70</sup> *King's Lynn v. Norway: Official Souvenir Programme*, 27 September 1969.

<sup>71</sup> Mills, "'The Russians are coming!'", pp. 157–58; Newsham, 'Encounters on the dirt track'; British Embassy, Warsaw to Northern Department, Foreign Office, 'Comments on the visit to Poland of the Manchester Bellevue Speedway Team', 25 October 1955, TNA: FO 371/116563 (Visits to Poland by UK Sports Teams).

with East Anglian clubs later hosting Polish riders on a regular basis. Yet, East Anglian-based riders already had intimate knowledge of conditions on the other side of the Iron Curtain: Prior to his arrival at The Firs, Nygren had spent time during the 1950s training Polish riders in Bydgoszcz; Nygren and Fundin featured in early Swedish touring sides to Poland; and Fundin regularly encountered Soviet riders in the closely related discipline of ice racing.<sup>72</sup> Both were keenly aware that their stays in the communist east were subject to close state surveillance and that the westward tours of their Eastern Bloc counterparts unfolded before the watchful eyes of accompanying *politruks* (political officers).<sup>73</sup>

When Polish club Sparta Wrocław visited Norwich in 1957, local promoters were keen to emphasise the occasion's novelty. The encounter was billed as a 'Special visit from behind the Iron Curtain', which would pit 'NORWICH (including World Champion Ove Fundin) v. POLAND (including Polish Champions... [Włodzimierz Szwendrowski, Lublin, 1931, Edward Kupczyński, then-Polish Lviv, 1929])'.<sup>74</sup> The meeting attracted a crowd of 9000 spectators, who were treated to 'speedway at its best'. Although the hosts won comfortably, the mysterious Poles—whose 'full-throttle riding was of a type Norwich supporters are not used to'—provided stiff opposition. Teodorowicz impressed when he beat Fundin in Heat Nine, coming 'from behind to sweep past the world champion with almost contemptuous ease'.<sup>75</sup> The following year, Suffolk was treated to an official Test between England and Poland. Hosted by Ipswich, the 9000-strong crowd witnessed an easy England victory.<sup>76</sup> The ever-improving Poles continued to include the region on subsequent itineraries: reigning Polish champions Stal Gorzów, hailing from one of Polish speedway's most important provincial heartlands, visited Norfolk in 1970 (Figure 4); Ipswich hosted another England versus Poland Test in 1974; and the Polish Under-23 representation raced at new Suffolk track Mildenhall in 1979.<sup>77</sup>

The visit of the Soviet Test Team to Norwich was undoubtedly East Anglia's most significant meeting from a Cold War perspective. A chance to see the overarching ideological rivalry contested on the track generated substantial media coverage, and the novelty of encountering Soviet citizens in the flesh captured the general public's imagination. The Soviets were relative latecomers to speedway but thrust onto the international stage as a new force in the early 1960s. From the outset,

<sup>72</sup> Olle Nygren in conversation with author, Felixstowe, Suffolk, 31 January 2020; R. Noga, *Żużel w PRL-u: Sport żużlowy w Polsce w latach 1948–1989* (Toruń, 2016), p. 79; Mills, "'The Russians are coming!'", pp. 153–6.

<sup>73</sup> Mills, "'The Russians are coming!'", pp. 154–6.

<sup>74</sup> *Eastern Daily Press*, 22 April 1957.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 23 April 1957. Teodorowicz would use a subsequent tour to defect to the West, where he became a fan favourite at Swindon Robins.

<sup>76</sup> <http://www.internationalspeedway.co.uk/engvpol.htm> (Accessed July 2024).

<sup>77</sup> *England v. Poland, Presented by King's Lynn Speedway on behalf of the B.S.P.A.*, 14 July 1974; R. Brazier, *Mildenhall Fen Tigers: The Early Years* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 27.



Figure 4 Stal Gorzów visit King's Lynn in 1970 (courtesy of the John Somerville Collection).

the sport thrived in remote provincial settings, with Bashkortostan—on the southern fringes of European Russia—emerging as a key heartland. That republic dominated the sport for much of the USSR's existence and produced many of the Soviet Union's international-standard riders.<sup>78</sup> Emil Sayfutdinov, the contemporary Witches rider we encountered at the beginning, continues this rich tradition. In 1964, the Soviets were sufficiently confident to embark on their inaugural tour of Britain. By then, Soviet riders Igor Plekhanov (Ufa, 1933) and Boris Samorodov (Rybinsk, 1931) had already qualified for the sport's Wembley World Final, whetting public appetites. Yet, aside from these two, little was known about Soviet speedway, and there was an air of mystique about the visitors. Due to his extensive competitive travels, which included a 1962 visit to Bashkortostan to race ice speedway, Norwich's Ove Fundin knew more than most and was able to brief teammates and the press. The Soviet visitors of 1964 raced three official Tests against Great Britain and appeared in a number of other events across the country (Figure 5).

The Soviets performed well but were comfortably beaten in the three Tests. By contrast, the tour's pinnacle came in Norwich. The East Anglian

<sup>78</sup> Mills, "The Russians are coming!", p. 160.





**Figure 5** The 1964 'Soviet Russia' team take to Manchester's Belle Vue track, prior to their visit to Norwich (courtesy of the John Somerville Collection).

crowd had been promised an evening of racing against the full Soviet side, but the Speedway Control Board—eager to capitalise on Soviet allure—made a late decision to dispatch two of the visiting riders to a meeting in Swindon. Consequently, the 'Soviet Russia' that took to the track in Norfolk to face a strong multinational Norwich septet consisted of just four riders. The Soviets, obliged to race twice the number of heats as their hosts, still emerged victorious. Captain Igor Plekhanov outscored East Anglia's Swedish duo in the only Soviet win of the tour.<sup>79</sup> Over fifty years later, Fundin and Nygren were full of praise for Plekhanov, with both remembering his legendary visit to Norwich.<sup>80</sup> At the time, the performance earned praise from local and national media outlets. Norwich's *Eastern Daily Press* emphatically stated: 'the night belonged to the courageous battling foursome from the U.S.S.R'.<sup>81</sup> *Speedway Star* declared that the 'fantastic Russians won the hearts of all East Anglia with an endurance test that can hardly have been equalled in speedway

<sup>79</sup> *Norwich v. Soviet Russia: Official Programme*, 10 July 1964.

<sup>80</sup> Ove Fundin in conversation with author, Tranås, Sweden, 20 and 21 January 2020; Olle Nygren in conversation with author, Felixstowe, Suffolk, 31 January 2020.

<sup>81</sup> *Eastern Daily Press*, 11 July 1964.



history'.<sup>82</sup> In general, the tour presented the visitors in a very positive light. Such glowing reports stood in stark contrast to coverage of Soviet political developments. Days after the Norwich encounter, the *Eastern Daily Press* reported on Soviet threats of nuclear war should the West reararm West Germany.<sup>83</sup>

Like their Polish counterparts, Soviet representations returned regularly to Britain after this initial visit. Their tours encompassed the sport's 'entangled peripheries' across the United Kingdom and included a highly anticipated England versus USSR international at Ipswich in 1973, allocated to the Suffolk track as part of the *Daily Mirror* International Speedway Tournament. A year earlier, the Ipswich crowd had witnessed the Witches take on visiting Neva Leningrad.<sup>84</sup> While the novelty of Soviet visits provided lucrative pay days for British speedway promoters, in sporting terms, the tours appear to have been a far higher priority for the Soviets than the British; a British Test side never ventured to the USSR, and club tours were extremely rare.

Czechoslovak teams were regular visitors to East Anglia from 1967 onwards. King's Lynn Stars—which opened after the demise of the synonymous Norwich side—welcomed 'Prague' in 1967 and 1968, during their tours of British League tracks. Promoter Maurice Littlechild underscored the first occasion's magnitude in his programme address:

What a great pleasure it is ... to welcome our first-ever foreign team to King's Lynn – the Czechoslovakian side, Prague. This team, having only their second match in England, are certainly a 'mystery' side .... But for their captain, [Luboš Tomíček, Pardubice, 1934], no Czechoslovakian riders have ever been seen on the speedway tracks of England prior to this tour.<sup>85</sup>

It was also an occasion to familiarise the local crowd with the delights of their opponents' homeland. The state-owned Czechoslovak travel bureau, Čedok, took out a programme advert to extol the virtues and proximity of historic Prague and encouraged British motorists to tour the country. At the same time, Wimbledon rider Alan Cowland (St. Austell, Cornwall, 1941) wrote of previous visits to Czechoslovakia to participate in the prestigious Czech Golden Helmet. In the process, he gave a glowing review of this communist-run state and its inhabitants:

Czechoslovakia is a beautiful country and if you get the opportunity of saying Hello to her riders, you'll find that her people are just as nice. ... If you've still to plan this year's holiday you'll have to go a long way to better a

<sup>82</sup> *Speedway Star & News*, 17 July 1964.

<sup>83</sup> *Eastern Daily Press*, 13 July 1964.

<sup>84</sup> *England versus Russia: Official Magazine and Scorechart*, Ipswich, 5 July 1973. The enclosed scorecard correctly defines the visitors as 'U.S.S.R.'; *Ipswich Witches versus Leningrad Neva: International Challenge Match: Official Programme*, 15 June 1972.

<sup>85</sup> *King's Lynn v. Prague: Official Programme*, 5 August 1967.

speedway visit to Czechoslovakia. It's a wonderful country, and you'll find the Czechoslovakians good hosts.<sup>86</sup>

Such international relations reached far beyond the sport's elite. Peterborough hosted a Division Two international between England and Czechoslovakia in 1974, and before that 'Young Czechoslovakia' were regular guests at King's Lynn and Ipswich (1969, 1970 and 1971). Elsewhere, Red Star Prague (twice) and a touring Italy side were among the visitors to face second-tier Mildenhall Fen Tigers between 1978 and 1980.<sup>87</sup>

As Cowland's experience demonstrates, events such as the Golden Helmet—held in the provincial Czech town of Pardubice—as well as the tours of national representations and clubs, gave British riders opportunities to experience conditions behind the Iron Curtain. Since the early 1950s, Swedish and British riders had ventured to compete in the Eastern Bloc, and several Western riders with East Anglian ties enjoyed success in the communist world's most prestigious event: Ove Fundin competed in his first Golden Helmet as a Norwich rider in 1964 and won the event three years later; American Dennis Sigalos (Garden Grove, California, 1959), won the Golden Helmet as an Ipswich Witches rider in 1983; Tony Rickardsson captured two of his three Czechoslovak successes as an Ipswich team member in the 1990s; and another Witch, Jeremy Doncaster (Grimsby, Lincolnshire, 1961), won the first of two Golden Helmets while with the club in 1989.<sup>88</sup>

A highlight of the speedway calendar, both regionally and nationally, was the prestigious 'Pride of the East' individual event. Initially launched at Norwich in 1957, with the demise of the sport in Norfolk's capital, the event—like the Stars—was subsequently resurrected at King's Lynn (as speedway was pushed ever-further to the margins, with King's Lynn constituting a Norfolk 'internal periphery' in contrast to the county 'centre' that was Norwich<sup>89</sup>). The Pride of the East regularly attracted a strong field, but in the early 1970s the Norfolk promoters worked to elevate the event further. Their tactic was to attract as many of the world's best riders as possible. In seasons when commuting foreigners were banned from the British League, such as in 1974, the Pride of the East had additional allure. On that occasion, Swedish world champion Anders Michanek (Stockholm, 1943) was flown in especially, affording a

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. For Čedok, see: P. Mücke, 'Hidden, yet visible workers of Czechoslovak international tourism: Macro and micro-historical views of ČEDOK's branches abroad and tour guides during the period of late socialism (1968–1989)', *Journal of Tourism History*, 13/1 (2021), pp. 75–94.

<sup>87</sup> *England v Czechoslovakia: Official Programme*, Peterborough, 19 April 1974; international speedway.co.uk/yengvyczsl.htm (Accessed July 2024); Brazier, *Mildenhall Fen Tigers: The Early Years*, pp. 20, 40–1; *Mildenhall Speedway: Official Programme: International Challenge: Italy*, 30 March 1980.

<sup>88</sup> P. Dufek, *Sedmdesátkrát Zlatá přilba* (Prague, 2018), pp. 312–20.

<sup>89</sup> For 'internal peripheries', see: H.-H. Nolte (ed.) *Internal Peripheries in European History* (Göttingen, 1991).

large crowd a rare opportunity to see him in action.<sup>90</sup> Michanek was one of multiple world champions to add this title to their list of achievements. Among them was three-time world champion and seven-time winner of the Czech Golden Helmet, Ole Olsen (Haderslev, Denmark, 1946), who lifted the Pride of the East trophy on five occasions.<sup>91</sup>

The 1973 edition of the Pride of the East was arguably the event's crowning moment, as an all-star line-up enthralled a club record crowd of 14,100. Scandinavians Michanek and Olsen were the top two on that occasion, but the event had been highly anticipated and lived long in the memory due to the participation of two Eastern Bloc riders.<sup>92</sup> The King's Lynn promoters used their programme notes to bask in the moment: 'A galaxy of world stars are here. Champions galore, internationals by the handful – all assembled for a truly gala occasion'. The coup they were especially proud to pull off turned 'one of the acknowledged classics in the speedway calendar' into a history-making meeting:

This is the first domestic meeting staged in Great Britain to rate an international licence for many years; reason being the inclusion in this star-crammed field of [Pole] Zenon Plech [Zwierzyn, 1953], third in the 1973 World Final and at 20 rated the world's most exciting young rider, and his fellow countryman Edward Jancarz [Gorzów Wielkopolski, 1946], another who has climbed on to a World Final rostrum. These two superb competitors – literally the Pride of the eastern bloc – are in England specially for this event and that gives you an idea of the glamour and prestige this East Anglian big night now holds. The Polish Motor Federation [*Polski Związek Motorowy*, PZM] does us great honour by permitting these riders to appear...<sup>93</sup>

Polish speedway was in the ascendancy in 1973, with the country having hosted the Eastern Bloc's first World Final—the first to be won by a Pole—a few weeks before this showpiece. The Poles did not disappoint the East Anglian crowd, as Plech—who, having suffered a puncture, was forced to settle for third place—'provided some of the most thrilling and determined riding'.<sup>94</sup> Another local journalist who witnessed the Poles' performance recalled that '[t]hey were sensational – the brain could not quite get the hang of where these men had come from and why we hadn't seen them before. Plech seemed more like a wall of death rider'.<sup>95</sup> In fact, King's Lynn's spectators had seen Jancarz before, during the aforementioned visit of Stal Gorzów, and the Stars had made an unsuccessful attempt to sign Plech in the summer of 1973 (Figure 6).<sup>96</sup>

Alongside the attractions of Scandinavian and Eastern Bloc riders, on occasion, local talent overcame stiff external opposition and retained the

<sup>90</sup> Rogers, *Forty Years On*, p. 240.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 238–9.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240–1.

<sup>93</sup> *Pride of the East 1973: Official Souvenir Programme*, King's Lynn, 27 October 1973.

<sup>94</sup> *Eastern Daily Press*, 29 October 1973.

<sup>95</sup> Paul Watson, cited in: Rogers, *Forty Years On*, p. 241.

<sup>96</sup> *Eastern Daily Press*, 29 October 1973.

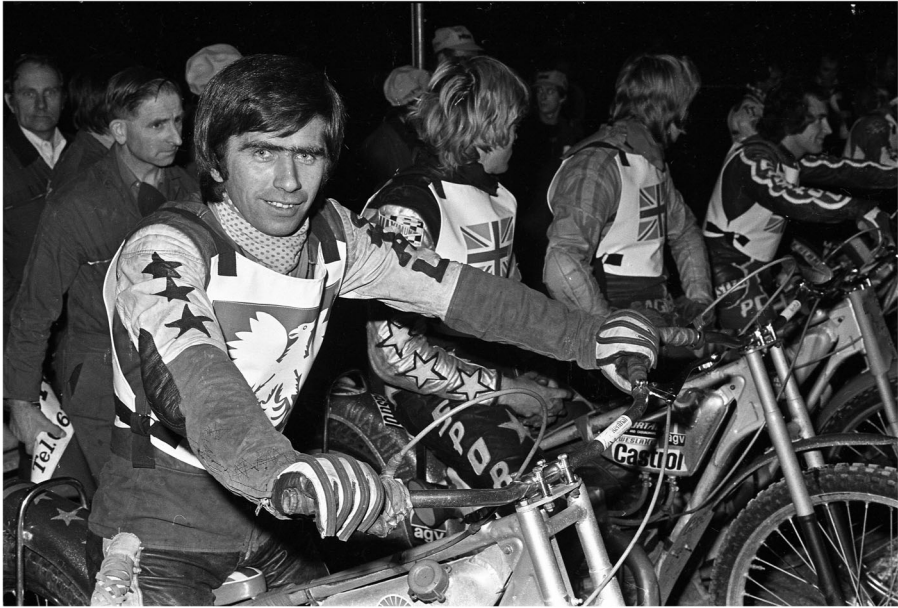


Figure 6 Edward Jancarz, sporting his Polish race jacket, takes to the track for the 1977 Pride of the East (courtesy of the John Somerville Collection).

trophy for the region. The Stars' own Terry Betts (Harlow, Essex, 1943) won the title in 1968, with Ipswich Witches' John Louis (Ipswich, 1941) taking the spoils to Suffolk in 1975.<sup>97</sup>

Such encounters, and the positive coverage they generated, cast Cold War tensions in a rather different light. Moreover, in the months after the Berlin Wall was breached, East Anglians were among the first to experience conditions in the new post-communist Europe. Ipswich Witches ventured to Poland in 1990, while three of the club's star youngsters participated in the first major international final to be hosted in the Soviet Union, with Ipswich-born Chris Louis—son of John Louis—winning the Under-21 World Championship in Lviv, Ukraine.<sup>98</sup>

#### IV

In the realm of machinery, speedway briefly challenged Western technological supremacy.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, a cursory glance at the technology that fuelled so many international triumphs highlights East Anglia's direct role in bringing the best of Eastern Bloc manufactures to British

<sup>97</sup> Rogers, *Forty Years On*, p. 286.

<sup>98</sup> Feakes & Barber, *Ipswich Speedway*, p. 187.

<sup>99</sup> Mills, "'The Russians are coming!'", pp. 158–61.

shores while also underlining the relative frequency with which precision-engineered goods were traded through the Iron Curtain.

In the immediate post-war years, Polish and Czechoslovak speedway enthusiasts imported British-built JAP (J.A. Prestwich) motorcycles at considerable expense. By the early 1950s, Polish and Czech factories were building copies of the JAP, but in 1953, the ESO factory in the Czech town of Divišov unveiled its own effective and affordable engine. These machines, subsequently produced under the Jawa name, powered the Eastern Bloc's challenge on the international stage. The first competitors from Europe's communist states to qualify for the Wembley World Final did so on ESO motorcycles, and the distinctive blue machines—which British journalists and spectators 'regarded as something from the dark side of the moon'—were an indispensable aspect of the visiting Soviet team's allure in 1964.<sup>100</sup> In subsequent years, the ESO/Jawa would power victories for sporting stars hailing from both Cold War blocs.<sup>101</sup> Ove Fundin played a direct role in bringing Czechoslovak technology to Western markets. The Divišov factory gave the world champion an ESO in 1961, which Fundin brought to Norwich. Having already courted controversy as a foreigner, the Swede now enraged his opponents in a new way:

I brought one to England. And that wasn't very popular .... Because, ever since speedway started almost, there'd only been one engine, and that was the JAP. The riders had a sort of union [the Speedway Riders' Association], and at the time Peter Craven [Liverpool, 1934] was the chairman. And Peter came up to me, and he said: 'Ove...'. I had used the engine, the bike, a few times then. By the way, I had beaten Peter Craven on it... And he came to me, and he said: 'Ove, please do not use that bike..., because times are so bad here for us speedway riders, so... a handful of us would have no problem buying a couple of those bikes as well, you know, because we make enough money, but the others couldn't. And if this engine is outstanding, so anyone can win just because of an engine, it's no good.' So, I promised him I wouldn't use it.<sup>102</sup>

With British-based riders lobbying the Swede to abandon the exotic bike, at one point Fundin announced his intention to ship it off to Sweden. He was at pains to avoid a dispute with the Speedway Riders' Association, not least because of their role in the annual jostle to secure foreign labour permits. Nevertheless, Fundin used the bike on a number of occasions in 1962 and 1963 and also lent it to promising Norwich youngster Trevor Hedge for use in league racing.<sup>103</sup> The Swede recalls a later visit to the factory, during the prestigious Czech Golden Helmet of 1964. While there, the Czechs offered him a contract to perform as a factory rider, with machines and spare parts for the new season. They also promised

<sup>100</sup> Journalist Dave Lanning, cited in: Chaplin, *Ove Fundin*, p. 177.

<sup>101</sup> Lahner & Straka, *Motocykly z Divišova*, pp. 128–200.

<sup>102</sup> Ove Fundin in conversation with author, Tranås, Sweden, 20 and 21 January 2020.

<sup>103</sup> Chaplin, *Ove Fundin*, pp. 227–33.





Figure 7 Ove Fundin stands over an ESO machine (courtesy of the John Somerville Collection).

a reward should he win the World Championship on a Czechoslovak machine. Fundin signed this agreement but ultimately relied on other engines.<sup>104</sup> Still, this was the beginning of Jawa's assault on Western markets (Figure 7).

New Zealander Barry Briggs (Christchurch, Canterbury Region, 1934) would win the World Final on a Jawa in 1966 and also became the factory's UK import agent.<sup>105</sup> The bikes swiftly gained respect, and Eastern Bloc touring teams did much to showcase these sought-after machines. When the aforementioned 'Young Czechoslovakia' rode at King's Lynn in 1969, the programme noted that '[t]heir machinery, certainly, should be second to none – after all, Czechoslovakia is the home of the Jawa-ESO. Add to this, the extra romance of an East meets West occasion and you have – a tour not to be missed!<sup>106</sup> Norwich Swede Olle Nygren recalls that the majority of riders eventually abandoned British-built JAPs in favour of Jawas. Czechoslovak motorcycles briefly dominated elite speedway and

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>105</sup> B. Briggs, *Briggo: Barry Briggs Speedway Champion: His Own Story* (London, 1972), pp. 131–5; Lahner & Straka, *Motocykly z Divišova*, pp. 111, 122.

<sup>106</sup> *Young England v Young Czechoslovakia: Official Souvenir Programme*, King's Lynn, 24 August 1969.

ice racing, as well as various categories of motocross and enduro. When King's Lynn Stars' Michael Lee won the 1980 World Championship, he achieved the feat astride a Jawa as a factory works rider.<sup>107</sup>

There is another East Anglian angle to this Cold War technological struggle. As Jawa cornered the international market, the region became an entry point for these sought-after racing bikes. For centuries, the Norfolk port of King's Lynn—a Hanseatic League trading post—has enjoyed profitable relations with the Baltic.<sup>108</sup> While these ties have been periodically disrupted, not least by the onset of the Cold War, by the 1960s, traditional trade routes thrived once again. In 1966, regular loads of pig iron, timber, fertiliser and aluminium arrived from the Eastern Bloc ports of Wismar (German Democratic Republic), Szczecin (Poland) and Umba (USSR). They often embarked on the return voyage laden with grain.<sup>109</sup> In the late 1960s, King's Lynn substantially increased its dealings with the East. Individual dealers had been importing Czechoslovak vehicles to the United Kingdom in small numbers throughout the decade, but in 1968, the state-owned enterprise Motokov, responsible for the export of all products emerging from the motor vehicle industry, moved to concentrate the operations of its UK subsidiary 'Skoda [sic.] (Great Britain) Limited'.<sup>110</sup> The result was a new four-acre depot on a site adjacent to King's Lynn docks, opened in a grand ceremony by the Czechoslovak ambassador and capable of handling 6000 vehicles annually.<sup>111</sup> The first shipment of 90 Zetor tractors arrived from Wismar in December 1968, while the first Škoda cars and vans arrived in the same month via the Washbay Linie's regular roll-on, roll-off Hamburg–Lynn service.<sup>112</sup> Over the following decades, thousands of Škoda cars, Zetor tractors, Jawa and ČZ motorcycles, along with shipments of Barum tyres, passed through this bridgehead for the Czechoslovak assault on the British market. Despite strained diplomatic relations in the aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, elite speedway machines were a small but highly visible element of burgeoning East–West trade.

With the establishment of Motokov's King's Lynn operation, the specialist trade in sought-after Czechoslovak racing machinery eventually

<sup>107</sup> Lahner & Straka, *Motocykly z Divišova*, pp. 145–7.

<sup>108</sup> R. Richards, *King's Lynn* (Chichester, 1990), pp. 22–7.

<sup>109</sup> 'K.L.C.B. Harbour Master's Daily Log Book–1966', Norfolk Record Office (NRO): KLCB3/5/22 (King's Lynn Conservancy Board).

<sup>110</sup> For Motokov, see: J. Rohlik, 'Trading with socialist partners', *Georgia Journal of International and Comparative Law*, 4/2 (1974), pp. 362–86.

<sup>111</sup> Press release: 'Opening of Skoda/Zetor Depot, King's Lynn', News from Škoda, 18 March 1969, Skoda Depot, King's Lynn, NRO: ACC1997/146/17/17 PN 59D (Part); Press release: 'Speech by Mr. G. Vladyka, Chairman of Skoda (G.B.) Ltd. at the opening of the Skoda Depot, King's Lynn, 18<sup>th</sup> March 1969', News from Škoda, 18 March 1969, Skoda Depot, King's Lynn, NRO: ACC1997/146/17/17 PN 59D (Part); *Eastern Evening News*, 19 March 1969. Soviet cars, tractors and motorcycles were sold on the UK market in a similar fashion, with the Satra Motor Car Importation and Preparation Centre at Carnaby processing cars imported through Hull. Lada Owners' Club, 'UK Lada History', <https://www.lada-owners-club.co.uk/uk-lada-history/> (Accessed July 2024).

<sup>112</sup> *Eastern Daily Press*, Lynn Edition, 3 December 1968.

shifted to East Anglia. At the same time as the ESO/Jawa charm offensive to attract Fundin and Briggs as elite factory riders and agents, the ČZ factory succeeded in luring talented Suffolk-born motocross rider Dave Bickers (Coddendam, Suffolk, 1938). Bickers had won the European Motocross Championships twice in the early 1960s, and in the middle of the decade ČZ persuaded him to switch to their machines. From 1966, Bickers' Ipswich-based business became the official importer of ČZ motocross bikes. A year later, the Czechoslovaks enabled Bickers to expand imports to encompass Jawa/ČZ road motorcycles as well. In 1974, Bickers sold 11,000 Czechoslovak-made bikes in the United Kingdom, after which Skoda (Great Britain) Limited took bike sales in-house at their King's Lynn base.<sup>113</sup> This was not the end of local company involvement however, as 'Alan Bellham Speedway Service'—based at the nearby Norfolk village of Terrington St. Clement—became a long-term agent for Jawa speedway machines.<sup>114</sup>

Agricultural East Anglia also worked closely with other Eastern Bloc vehicle and machinery enterprises. From 1973, Thetford-based Bonhill Engineering acted as sole UK concessionaires for Fortschritt and Weimar agricultural machinery from the GDR, as well as Komplex tillage equipment from Hungary.<sup>115</sup> Like the Czechoslovak imports, these products were shipped through King's Lynn. Malcolm Nebbett, who worked as a mechanical fitter for Bonhill, recalls the trade brought German and Hungarian mechanical engineers to East Anglia, while he and his Bonhill colleagues ventured to the GDR for training in the workings and repair of imported technology. The relatively low cost and functional design of Eastern Bloc machinery were the principal attractions for British buyers, though imports needed to be upgraded prior to sale to comply with customer expectations and safety legislation.<sup>116</sup> Such extensive trade challenges notions of an impenetrable 'Iron Curtain'. Moreover, this was a two-way process. While the front pages of the local press carried stories about the risk of nuclear Armageddon, speedway riders graced tracks in both ideological camps on communist-built motorcycles, and East Anglian firms fulfilled lucrative contracts for export to the Eastern Bloc. As early as 1953, Lowestoft-based Brooke Marine signed a multi-million-pound deal to supply the Soviet Union with twenty fishing trawlers. A delegation of Soviet officials attended the Suffolk launch of the inaugural vessel in 1955, and the order was completed on schedule three years later.<sup>117</sup> In the year of the

<sup>113</sup> I. Berry, *Dave Bickers Unscrambled* (Suffolk, 2023), pp. 97–100, 118–19; *Motor Cycle*, 16 February 1967.

<sup>114</sup> Lahner & Straka, *Motocykly z Divišova*, pp. 125–6; Advertisement: 'Alan Bellham Speedway Service', *Speedway Star*, 6 April 1985; Advertisement: 'JAWA Choice of Champions', *Chamber of Trade Gala-Programme*, King's Lynn, 27 October 1985.

<sup>115</sup> *Bonhill Progress* (House Journal of Bonhill Engineering Company Limited), Thetford, No.1 (June 1977), p. 2.

<sup>116</sup> Malcolm Nebbett in conversation with author, East Harling, Norfolk, 8 March 2023.

<sup>117</sup> M.R. White, *Brooke of Lowestoft: The First Eighty Years* (Lowestoft, 2018), pp. 69–72, 134–5.



Figure 8 Race jackets of the Peterborough Skoda Panthers and the King's Lynn Zetor Stars (Author, 2023). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-220X.13414)]

memorable Soviet speedway tour of Britain, Norwich engineering firm Laurence Scott partook in a lucrative deal to export electrical motors to Siberian factories.<sup>118</sup> Four years later, as the first Škodas and Zetors rolled onto the King's Lynn dock, Crane Fruehauf Trailers completed an order for forty refrigeration vehicles at its Norfolk works. Made for Hungarocamion, these trailers departed UK shores for Budapest fully loaded with frozen food.<sup>119</sup>

In order to capture a portion of the lucrative British market, Eastern Bloc enterprises realised the need to promote their goods to

<sup>118</sup> *Eastern Daily Press*, 8 September 1964.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 December 1968.





**Figure 9** A fleet of ageing Zetors is still in service at the Norfolk Arena (Author, 2023). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-220X.13414)]

would-be consumers. The Czechoslovaks were in the vanguard in this respect, harnessing glossy adverts and promotional materials to attract attention.<sup>120</sup> Skoda (Great Britain) Limited also expanded its marketing activities into the sponsorship of British sports teams. The company's Norfolk base concluded a deal with a nearby speedway team: From 1984 until the early 1990s, the newly christened Peterborough Skoda Panthers carried the iconic logo on their race jackets in the then second-tier National League.<sup>121</sup> This practice replicated an earlier deal that saw Hull's team renamed the Lada Vikings between 1979 and 1981, thanks to the Humber port's role in importing Soviet-built cars, tractors and motorcycles.<sup>122</sup> In 1990, in a post-Cold War world, King's Lynn's Czechoslovak operation expanded its marketing campaign to encompass the town's flagship team. In the top-tier British League, the renamed King's Lynn Zetor Stars promoted tractors for two seasons (Figure 8). Then, rebranded as the Barum Stars, the club navigated Czechoslovakia's

<sup>120</sup> V. Fava, 'Motor vehicles vs. Dollars: Selling socialist cars in neutral markets. Some evidence from ŠKODA Auto case', *EUI Working Paper MWP*, 36 (2007), pp. 1–22.

<sup>121</sup> *Speedway Star*, 6 April 1985.

<sup>122</sup> Lada Owners' Club, 'UK Lada History', <https://www.lada-owners-club.co.uk/uk-lada-history/> (Accessed July 2024). Newcastle Diamonds also carried the Lada name during this period.





Figure 10 A bowser pulled by a Zetor tractor waters the King's Lynn race track (Author, 2023). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-229X.13414)]

peaceful dissolution into its two constituent parts in 1992, carrying the name of the Czech-made tyre brand until 1995.<sup>123</sup>

Glossy adverts in race meeting programmes promoted the whole Czech product range, including the 'winning partnership' that was Jawa speedway bikes fitted with Barum tyres.<sup>124</sup> A fleet of standard red-and-white livery Zetor tractors was—and at the time of writing remains—an integral element of King's Lynn speedway meetings, pulling rakes and water bowzers to prepare the shale track between heats (Figures 9 and 10). A programme advert made maximum use of these sluggish cameo appearances:

Our speedway stars might seem a little on the slow side... ..but when it comes to selling them to Britain's farmers they're extremely fast movers. As well as keeping the Stars' track in great shape Zetor Tractors are engineered

<sup>123</sup> Rogers, *Forty Years On*, pp. 230–1; *King's Lynn Zetor Stars v Belle Vue Piccadilly Aces*, 14 July 1990; *King's Lynn Barum Stars v Coventry Bees*, 4 October 1992.

<sup>124</sup> *King's Lynn Barum Stars v Coventry Bees*, 4 October 1992.



Figure 11 Joe Screen (Chesterfield, Derbyshire, 1972) poses with the Barum Trophy and a new Jawa engine at the 1991 edition of the King's Lynn individual event (courtesy of the John Somerville Collection). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

to cope with the most testing farming conditions worldwide. ... Value is the key word to describe what we build into Zetor tractors.<sup>125</sup>

On track, speedway riders competed in meetings for the Zetor Cup and Barum Trophy, with the winner of the latter individual meeting carrying

<sup>125</sup> *King's Lynn Zetor Stars v Belle Vue Piccadilly Aces*, 14 July 1990. Some 36,000 Zetor tractors were exported to the UK between 1946 and 2015. A. Nutbey, *Zetor Tractors: Revised and Updated* (Alphen aan den Rijn, 2015), pp. 73–6.



Figure 12 Fans of Peterborough's speedway club, the former 'Skoda Panthers', gather in the city centre to fight for the sport's survival (Author, 2023). [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-220X.13414)]

off a Jawa racing engine (Figure 11).<sup>126</sup> So, by the 1990s, the commercial operations of major Czech enterprises were inextricably entwined with East Anglian speedway.

## V

East Anglia's multifaceted speedway experiences add weight to the growing body of research seeking to establish a more nuanced understanding of twentieth-century entanglements, especially those of the Cold War period. Recent studies have drawn attention to transnational and transsystemic flows that were a feature of the Cold War era, adding nuance to a complex picture by exploring the mobility of political, intellectual and cultural actors, human rights activists, youth, tourists, athletes and others who experienced both sides of the systemic divide. This article has moved into unfamiliar territory to shine a light on perpetual encounters between far-flung provincial heartlands, involving inhabitants far from the levers of power, to demonstrate the rich diversity of individual experiences, relationships and human and technological flows.

<sup>126</sup> <https://www.speedwayresearcher.org.uk/1990fixtures.pdf> (Accessed July 2024); *The Fourth Annual Barum Trophy: Programme*, King's Lynn, 28 June 1992.



Contemporary speedway continues to serve a role in nurturing ties between East Anglia and the wider world. In addition to the aforementioned Russian-born riders, the 2023 King's Lynn Stars and Ipswich Witches featured riders from Poland, Germany, Denmark and Australia, while the Mildenhall Fen Tigers counted New Zealand's reigning champion among their number. Moreover, in a region that has witnessed significant labour migration from central and eastern Europe in recent decades, it is not uncommon to hear Polish spoken on the terraces of East Anglia's surviving speedway clubs. Yet, while speedway endures in provincial settings around the world, from Patagonia to Vladivostok, in other ways, the sport's geography has shifted enormously since the end of the Cold War. As British football rose to the status of an economic juggernaut capable of luring the world's top talent and deepest pockets, British speedway declined at an alarming rate, albeit punctuated with periodic booms. The demolition of Norwich speedway in 1964 proved typical, with many other tracks sacrificed to highly profitable housing developments in the decades since. Peterborough closed its doors in 2023, and at the time of writing, Panthers fans are fighting a rearguard action against the loss of their East of England Showground home (Figure 12).<sup>127</sup>

Surviving clubs—including Ipswich and King's Lynn—work relentlessly to tempt crowds of a few thousand through turnstiles that once welcomed multiple times more visitors. British teams have struggled to attract some of the sport's biggest talents in recent years. Post-socialist Poland stands as the undisputed centre of global speedway in the twenty-first century. Its slickly marketed leagues are broadcast around the world, and its clubs perform in modern stadiums packed with spectators.<sup>128</sup> In the Cold War era, the most talented riders used to gravitate towards a Great Britain viewed as speedway's mecca. Now, the Polish leagues—and, to a lesser extent, their Swedish counterparts—are the glamorous destination. At the time of writing, Norwich-born Robert Lambert (1998) no longer rides regularly in the United Kingdom, focusing his energies on the riches of Poland, Sweden and the international Grand Prix series. In the process, he has swapped King's Lynn for the provincial towns of Polish Toruń and Swedish Västervik.<sup>129</sup> As has so often been the case, while speedway refuses to conform to convention, it continues to nurture links between its long-established provincial heartlands.

<sup>127</sup> *Peterborough Telegraph*, 20 November 2023.

<sup>128</sup> <https://ekstraliga.pl/en> (Accessed July 2024).

<sup>129</sup> <https://robertlamberttracing.com/about/> (Accessed July 2024).