

SPEEDWAY 74 DVD

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IT is more than 50 years ago but many of us still remember the early 70s – speedway's last golden era – with great enduring affection.

Abba, Suzi Quatro, Mud, Alvin Stardust, George McCrae, The Rubettes, and The Osmonds were just some of those vying to top the singles chart, while The Godfather II, Man With the Golden Gun and Blazing Saddles were among the big screen hits of the year, but Terry Jacks might have been singing about our sport with Seasons in the Sun.

Following the recent success of SPEEDWAY 73, the first in Retro Speedway's popular Classic Years DVD series, a double-disc set focusing on just one memorable season, they have now released their latest nostalgic offering, SPEEDWAY 74.

The 1974 season saw England (not Great Britain – the Commonwealth stars of yesteryear were pushed aside in favour of home-grown heroes from now on) claim its historic first World Team Cup on foreign soil triumph thanks to a brilliant performance in Slaski Stadium, Chorzow, Poland.

On the domestic front, commuting Swedish riders were banned from racing in British League Division One as the promoters embarked upon cost-cutting measures (sound familiar). But that didn't stop Anders Michanek from emphatically winning his one and only individual World Championship with a faultless maximum in front of home fans in Gothenburg.

Although 1973 BL1 champions Reading took a year out while their new Smallmead stadium was being built, the top-flight still boasted 17 teams after Hull – up from Division Two – swapped places with Coatbridge.

Inspired by Ivan Mauger, Exeter won their first senior league title, while Sheffield took the Speedway Star Knockout Cup after beating Ipswich home and away in the final. It's good to hear the views of Tigers Reg Wilson and Craig Pendlebury, along with Doug Wyer, who provides a candid reflection on team joker, and Foxhall match-winner, Arnie Haley.

BL2, boosted to 19 teams by the return of Weymouth, was dominated by league and KO Cup double winners Birmingham.

As with Speedway 73, this package leans heavily on its Oxford and Workington sources for very rare, mostly previously unseen, 8mm colour cine footage, so you'll see a fair few Rebels and Comets flying around. But it's good to see some of the less fashionable clubs feature in the 'Around the Tracks' (ATT) tour, including Weymouth Wizards at Radipole Lane, Barrow Bombers at Holker Street and a clip of Brian Collins and John Wilson winning for Coatbridge at Cliftonhill.

New BL1 additions to the ATT section are Hull, Halifax, Sheffield, Cradley, Hackney, Wimbledon and Swindon. In one incredible race at Blunsdon, Robins' No. 1 Martin Ashby navigates his way through the pack for a ridiculous last-to-first victory against Sheffield. The Abbey Stadium images will doubtless tug at the heartstrings of all Robins fans still wondering if and when their beloved team will reappear.

A year before the four-valve revolution, you watch the close racing produced on two-valve Jawas (and one or two JAPs) and have to ask, 'who needs expensive, highly-tuned four-valve laydowns to produce exciting racing?'

One who features prominently is Australia's emerging star Phil Crump. Apart from delightful clips of him at Swindon and Ipswich, his victory in Hull's big individual meeting, the Yorkshire TV Trophy, is covered here extensively. At the end, ever-modest Crumpie blushed at presenter Fred Dineage's comment that, according to Barry Briggs, he was a future World Champion in the making. There are even rare clips of Phil's father-in-law Neil Street racing for the same Newport Wasps team.

In fact, the top Aussies all figure strongly on the DVD. There's John Boulger leading for Cradley United at Dudley Wood and Bob Valentine showing why he was Sheffield's No. 1 that year.

After taking a year out of BL1 while his badly injured hand healed, Briggo returned in 1974 and it's a delight to see the maestro leading the way for Wimbledon Dons as well as in the prestigious Internationale on his home track.

Nostalgia is a double-edged sword, though; reminding us of the great shared times we enjoyed but also what we've lost in terms of defunct tracks and colourful characters. Like The Shay, Halifax, with its steeply-banked bends and grey granite surface. No self-respecting Dukes fan will want to miss seeing Eric Boocock in full flow on the West Yorkshire bowl, nor his hilarious, insightful filmed interview in which he recalls the distinction of being British speedway's first testimonial recipient.

You couldn't get a fag paper between the fans – at least 10,000 of them? – crammed onto the Shay terraces on that July Sunday afternoon. We're treated to pre-meeting introductions and racing clips but Eric's candid story-telling, laced with typical Yorkshire wit, is always good value. There's the serious side, too, Booey admitting a pang of guilt over the world class rider he declined to invite to his special big day – and why.

About a month before his testimonial meeting, the younger Boocock enjoyed the greatest night of his career, his shock British Final victory. And no-one was more surprised that the Grand Old Duke of Wakefield led the World Championship qualifiers – in a class field that included Mauger, Briggs, the best of the Aussies and the cream of English talent – than the man himself.

He reveals how, on the morning of the Wednesday night meeting at Brandon, he had to drive to Hull for a court appearance after being caught speeding in the fast lane of a motorway while pulling a trailer to a meeting. He lost the case, got fined £200 and was in such a filthy mood that, to make up for lost time, he took just one bike to Coventry (no need for a trailer, just put it on a rack and strap it to the car boot) and admits he had no thoughts of winning. He didn't even bother to change a tyre edge.

But he scored 14 points, beat his brother in a barnstorming sibling scrap, and became British Champion when it was still a devilishly difficult meeting to qualify from, let alone win. Eric was so matter of fact about his triumph, he didn't even tell his wife Diane that he'd won when he got home – she found out from her sister-in-law, Nigel's wife Cynthia!

There are also filmed interviews with BLRC winner Peter Collins, recalling how around 20,000-plus from all over Britain would flock to Hyde Road for the end of season classic, British Final runner-up Terry Betts and World Team Cup maximum man John Louis. All three of those England stars of the 70s are prominent throughout both the 'Internationals' and 'World Championship' segments on disc two of this four-hour production.

PC, Bettsy and Tiger, as well as Dave Jessup, Ray Wilson, Malcolm Simmons, Chris Pusey and the rest of that dominant England Lions side, are seen beating Australia, New Zealand (including Ronnie Moore in one of his last UK track appearances) and Scotland in the World Team Cup round at

Ipswich. The cameraman chose an ideal elevated vantage point on the Foxhall terraces overlooking the apex of the first turn and the 51-year-old footage is of unfeasibly good quality.

In a clearly emotional parting comment that sums up not only his outstanding performance in the WTC final at Chorzow, but also this excellent timeless DVD, Louis said: "Super moments and memories."