

# MINORITY REPORT

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## » WE ARE A MINORITY SPORT, WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT, SO WE NEED TO MAKE SURE THAT WE HAVE THE BEST POSSIBLE STRUCTURE – LOOK AT WHAT THAT'S DONE FOR BRITISH CYCLING IN THE LAST DECADE

Car racing always had a fairly good structure, with Formula First feeding into Formula Ford, then on to Formula 3 and – hopefully Formula One. That structure has become a bit frayed at the edges in recent years, so something had to be done to restore that middle tier. MSVR (Motorsport Visions Racing division) and the BRDC (owners of Silverstone) got together to insert the BRDC Formula 4 championship into that vital stepping stone and it looks as though it is going to be very successful. So you might wonder why that same structure isn't seen as important in bikes. Well it is, we're just perhaps not quite as good at getting the message out.

I always wanted Thundersport GB to take up that vacant space in the marketplace below BSB and above Club Racing, which in 4 wheeled motorsport is occupied by Formula 3 / British GT racing. That is to say:- not having as big a following as Touring Cars, but with much more interesting racing, better youth opportunities and with a bigger variety of classes.

Having recently looked at a British GT meeting at Rockingham Motor Speedway, I can see that I may have set my sights a little too low, as we seem to be above that level already. There is still no real acknowledgement out there though that Thundersport GB is in all but title the "British National Cup" for bikes. We need to change that and we won't be able to fully do that until the circuits really understand what we

are. This is a significant and essential part of the supply chain to the top of our sport. We're not BSB and we don't want to be, but already nearly half the riders in the BSB support paddock have made their way through our series, which is a situation we are very content with.

Where venues are willing to work with us, we can already generate far bigger audiences than the F3/GT package. In 2012 the second largest spectator attendance behind British Touring Cars at Rockingham was..... Thundersport GB. Three of the senior members of staff at Rockingham had never seen any live bike racing other than MotoGP and they all thought that the Aprilia RRV450GP and Superteen races were better and more exciting than anything they'd ever seen. They also loved the variety and quality of the other races, so our package is definitely promotable, even to the uninitiated.

So it's hard to understand why it doesn't happen.

The answer lies in the marketing strategy of each venue, or group of venues and whilst it might appear to be an odd choice, the venues don't actually have the time or resources to promote every event. Venues that are lucky enough to host many major



events, like Brands Hatch, Oulton Park, Donington Park and Silverstone have to concentrate their efforts on making the best return on their investment in those meetings. That is why you get website information on their sites about pretty much all non-promoted events that just says "Club Bike Championships" or "Clubmans Cars" making absolutely no distinction between the vast difference in quality between progressive organisers like us and the real Sunday league stuff. This is perhaps why we have come to think of a crowd of 2,000 spectators being an excellent turnout. This figure is something that any 4th division football team owner would be crying in his beer at the post match dinner about if his crowd fell that low.

It does seem as though Football is the sport to which all others are compared, from Formula 1 right through to Wednesday night pub darts. Have you ever thought about why that might be?

I don't think it's a case of mass participation, because most of the salad dodgers that populate the terraces look to me to be pretty unlikely to take part in any sport that requires any movement more complex than lifting a pie at half time. More people



probably go to the gym than actively play football, yet gymnastics is not a sport that generates over 2 million paying spectators every Saturday of the season.

Football is all about marketing and money. They are very good at it too and they have a set ladder of progression that the big teams all invest heavily in. They know that the better the structure is below the Premier League, the better quality players it will produce and those players will pretty soon be wearing their shirts and playing in front of their grandstands. It's easy to understand the structure and the progression in football and that is one of its major strengths.

Motorcycle racing is a minority sport, with a minority following in comparison to football. If we get a genuine paying crowd of 60,000 people to the British Moto-GP, we are ecstatic almost beyond measure. The fact that this only just covers the cost of putting the event on, seems to be a minor point that we don't really want to talk about. The key thing is that we think it has widened the appeal and reach of our sport to a bigger audience.

If someone is enthused enough to want to get into bike racing though, there are a bewildering array of options for them to start off with. A clearer path that was agreed by everyone, would make this a lot easier, but putting something like that in place would be like persuading the turkeys to vote for an early Christmas.

In the absence of strong leadership from the governing bodies, generating a bigger pool of fans to draw on seems to be the only

viable way forward. There are numerous bike enthusiasts out there who don't even know that any of the non-promoted events even exist. If you think about it, you actually have to go looking for information on club bike racing, it doesn't jump out at you.

How do you actually generate a greater following though? If you ask 20 people that same question, you'll get 20 different answers. They'll inevitably include advertising, bike shows, trade stands, leaflet drops, mail shots, Twitter and Facebook. The truth is, it isn't easy and you have to target not only the right audience, but also the right events.

It might be better to ask what the optimum number of spectators might be for any particular event. A really successful event, is one that the staff managed to cope with – but only just. If everyone gets the job done and no one notices that the place is stretching just a little at the edges, that is a great event. Most venues are set up and staffed to be able to cope with around 3,000 people on site for a normal event, any more than that and more staff are required (in some instances more facilities too). An event like a Thundersport GB meeting already soaks up almost half of that capacity just with the riders, mechanics, teams and paddock support. So in theory we hit a glass ceiling at around 1,750 spectators per event dependant on the venue, unless extra staff / facilities are budgeted for. No venue wants to budget for those extra things, only to find that nobody actually turns up. The larger and better organised venues do have more scope than the small independent

venues in this respect, but it's not an unlimited amount of elbow room.

Therefore if you do manage to get an unexpected crowd of 3,000 people turning up at an event where the venue just isn't prepared for it, you could easily have a PR disaster on your hands. Nobody wants to strive to get all those people along to finally see

what it's all about, only to be disappointed with the service they get. If that happens, you'll never see them again and that completely defeats the object of the exercise.

Events are much better if they are built year on year in an incremental fashion and that is what we have been trying to achieve with our five selected venues over the past three seasons. Cadwell Park has got better and better for us each year and the venue staff there are extremely flexible as they only really have BSB as a major headline event and are keen to build around other regular events such as ours. Anyone who was at Cadwell Park with us last month will know what a great meeting it was and the number of spectators who have contacted us since then has been amazing.

We think that by targeting six of our meetings each season as Super-weekenders, we can build up a following not only for us, but also for the venues, the competitors and local business.

Last year we had a genuine spectator attendance of 2,300 at Rockingham through a strategy of working with the venue and two different magazines. Next month our plan is to grow that by another 25% and continue that trend year on year.

All of our supporters can help us to do this by spreading the positive word about the good things that are going on here. I spoke to a gentleman at Cadwell Park who had in his hand a programme from one of my old events at Mallory Park on 19th March 2000. He had 5 signatures in that programme, one was Peter Goddard, one was John McGuinness and the other three were what he thought were talents for the future who were racing in the Aprilia Superteen Challenge – Chaz Davis – Cal Crutchlow – Casey Stoner. That man had an eye for talent! The competitors here are racing in the most progressive championship in the land and they should be proud of their achievements. The spectators should be proud that they saw them here first – and should maybe start collecting a few signatures.....

Thundersport GB – The home of Sportsman Racing

