

## » I HAVE RECENTLY READ SEVERAL INTERNET ARTICLES ASKING WHAT IS BEING DONE BY THE ACU (AUTO CYCLE UNION) TO INJECT SOME FORM OF RECOVERY INTO MOTORCYCLE RACING. I'VE ALSO BEEN TO SOME OTHER MOTORSPORT EVENTS AND BEEN ASKED THE SAME QUESTION. I'M NOT REALLY SURE WHAT PEOPLE THINK THE ACU'S ROLE ACTUALLY IS...

There seems to be some resentment that there is a £43 per annum 'tax' on every rider in the form of a licence fee and they see nothing tangible for it. For what it's worth, I'm not exactly known for being a fan of the ACU, but it isn't quite as clear cut as that. So I thought it might be interesting to examine what exactly is wrong if anything and who is capable of doing what about it.

Sometimes we are guilty of just looking at our own championship and seeing something that is still very healthy, happy and growing steadily, which can give a false impression of how things are in the wider sport. However, our series was launched in 2008 whilst the economy was already entering a financial meltdown, so we were forced to examine every single aspect of a race meetings operation and build in a resilience that would be able to ride out what we thought might be a lengthy recession. Our goal was never set out to win business on price, as I have always believed that people remember quality long after price is forgotten. Our aim was always to provide the best quality events at a price that matched the industry standard for a normal 'club'

weekend at the time. We also wanted to ensure that our quality grew year on year, as the price remained static and we have achieved exactly that.

We know we were extremely fortunate, as we had no baggage and a clean sheet of paper to work with. That meant we could tailor our series to the modern climate and not worry about what had always been considered to be 'normal' as a class structure. I am aware that other organisers were not so fortunate, so please don't think that there is any element of smugness here. I know how difficult it can be to try and be fair when dealing with ailing championships that have contributed to your clubs profits for many years, but have now become a drain on precious resources. It comes down to the simple question – If it was a horse, would it be kinder to shoot it? Sometimes the answer is yes, but that's not always easy to implement.

The Auto Cycle Union is a union of clubs and some of them are struggling quite badly in the current crisis. Back in the 1990s there used to be over 35 active clubs organising road race championships. That has now

dwindled so that there are only really 14 left and two of those only cater for historic bikes. So when you see clubs cancelling events at late notice because of a lack of entries, is that something that the ACU could be doing something about or is it simply a matter for the clubs concerned? I can't really see what they could be expected to do other than to help the clubs avoid repeating the same mistakes again at the permit application stage.

Firstly, it might be best to have a look at the effects of cancelling meetings, before we have a look at the cause of the lack of entries.

No circuit wants to see events cancelled, take that as a given, but an event where they are charging spectators a fee to come in and watch needs to attain certain minimum standards. Organisers putting on poorly supported events or events with mis-matched classes that produce boring racing, are likely to find themselves a long way down the pecking order when dates are being booked. In earlier/better times such organisers wouldn't have been offered dates at all, but because the car clubs are also contracting in the current climate, there is an



oversupply of dates and no real demand to fill them.

So whereas in the past an organiser that cancelled dates or put on poor events would have found themselves frozen out of the marketplace, what are the circuits supposed to do with those dates now? Running track days or corporate days at weekends used to be unheard of, but it has now become quite commonplace as there are no clubs, car or bike, queuing up to hire those venues.

However, that has had a knock on effect on the bookings for mid-week days at those same venues, as there are only a finite number of people wanting to do a track day and if you give those customers the option of doing a track day at a weekend that decreases demand for mid-week places and they become less viable. Therefore circuits end up with empty days mid-week that used to be sold to track day operators. The net result is that every venue is selling less days each year and that leaves a hole in their income stream that has to be filled by increased prices for the days they can sell, or they have to run their own track days on those empty days. The problem with doing that of course is that they then end up competing for the same end users (track day riders) as their own customers (the track day operators) and that brings about an uneasy relationship between vendor and purchaser in the long run.

A bizarre way of looking at this leads some to think that we – the clubs – could possibly even be better off agreeing to pay more for circuit hire, if (and only if) there was a severe

restriction on the number of days where any motorcycle activity took place at all venues. We are told that would not necessarily mean that the price would increase to the end user, but it would mean less choice and I'm not sure people would consider that to be an acceptable price to pay. Take an example of a circuit that has a grid capacity of 40 solos and a layout that allows an 18 race format – 9 classes with 2 races each per day. The capacity entry is therefore 360 entries.

Organisers like ourselves set our budgets on being able to attract 200 entries, because that is realistically what we believe we can get in the current climate. So our budgeted income at £245 per weekend is roughly £49,000.- which I have to say is not actually enough to cover all of the costs. So all organisers have two choices - they can increase the entry fee, or go out and find the money somewhere else in order to make up the shortfall of around £8,000.- to £10,000.- per round.

We at Thundersport think that increasing entry fees means you lose even more riders and that appears to be borne out by entry levels at events where organisers charge more than the average £125 per day, so we (or rather Syd to be more precise) go out and find sponsors to help us keep a lid on costs. If you go back to the theoretical capacity though, there is another possibility. If dates were restricted in order to increase demand, 360 riders could cover those same costs and leave enough room in the budget to DECREASE entry fees to around £175 per weekend. Sound attractive? – Have a think

about it before you answer.

There's nothing wrong with striving to lower entry fees and we constantly look at that, but is introducing restrictive practices the right thing to do? That view is taken on the basis of fewer organisers getting a bigger slice of the cake and as attractive as it may look in its simplicity, it is not a view that I like or that I would be prepared to support. I prefer the other way and here you get to the heart of the problem. I don't think that having a bigger slice of the existing cake is a very ambitious target. I personally think the answer is to have a bigger cake, a much bigger cake.

All of which brings us back to looking at the cause for a lack of entries and the lack of available competitors. Over the past 4 years the number of ACU Road Race licence holders has fallen from nearly 7,000 to a current low of just over 4,000, which is a pretty onerous statistic. In order to understand how we can get more licence holders, therefore more active competitors, therefore more entries, we have to try and understand why the trend is so sharply downwards.

The thing that makes people want a race licence is the desire to race and if that isn't deemed to be affordable or attractive enough, riders won't go through the process knowing that the licence only lasts for 12 months before you have to buy another one.

There must be thousands of riders out there who want to be racers and a lot of them have probably even taken the first step of going along to one of their local club meetings to have a look. Hopefully that will



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have been a positive experience and spur them into making the leap into racing, but I have visited a few meetings in the course of the past couple of seasons that would have almost certainly have had exactly the opposite effect.

As organisers we need to make sure we do all we can to create a positive impression and make the whole experience of going racing as attractive and rewarding as possible. Having a professional looking and informative website, results service, timed qualifying, good race day structure and decent length races - is the bare minimum. Having an interesting and diverse range of classes designed to span the whole range of budgets and interest is also important. To round it off trophies need to be something that are worth having and the presentation of awards should be worthy of the winners efforts. Podium presentations that involve everyone build respect and affinity among competitors and supporters alike. A printed race day programme should be nicely laid out, interesting and represent value for money, if it also has articles in it that make it something worth keeping so much the better. TV coverage is nice, but not essential and it needs to be funded by outside sources and not simply skimmed off of competitor entry fees.

The circuits also need to have a good long look at how they market events in their pre-event literature and on their websites. Far too many of them list all non-BSB motorcycle meetings simply as "Club Bike Championships" – have a look at your ticket and you'll see what I mean. There is a world of difference between a Thundersport GB event and an Auto-66 event, even at the

same venue, yet the circuit promote them both in exactly the same manner – which is actually pretty much not at all. Go back to our prospective racer who comes along to look and just happens to pick the wrong event – because the venues literature gives no clue that there are differences – he/she is bound to go away thinking that there are better things to spend their money on.

Some of the criticism levelled at the ACU may seem to be valid, but what can they really do? The clubs would not appreciate the governing body trying to interfere in their day to day affairs and they would not accept the ACU trying to restrict their right to operate, even if it was for their own good. The ACU Road Race Committee currently financially support the NG 250 GP class, the Derby Phoenix 1300 Open class and the FSRA F2 Sidecar Championship, but I see no evidence that would indicate that those classes are any more successful for that support, given the average entry numbers. So perhaps financing existing series is just a waste of money.

BSB has not been immune from the downturn either, as top level racing is absolutely and totally dependant on the health of the lower levels of the sport. There needs to be an abundance of talent waiting to move up to that level in order to maintain the quality. When the standard slips below a certain level and you begin to rely on newly qualified riders from club racing to make up the numbers that doesn't actually provide what the audience at British Championship level are paying to see and it is harmful to the whole sport. It is harmful to the riders, as they can't do themselves justice. It is harmful to their sponsors, as they perceive themselves to have been conned. It does

nothing for progressing to the levels beyond that, as those riders lose their support. Riders only get one chance to make a first impression at that level and if the first impression is one of riders being out of their depth and struggling to qualify, it is self-defeating.

I think we have to accept that the solution lies in our own hands and we need to continue to innovate and to make entry level racing as affordable and accessible as possible. We (Thundersport GB & Stewart Events) are currently planning to start working in the earlier levels of youth racing, as it has a lot of scope for improvements and investment. Mini-bike and Junior GP 50, 70 and 100cc have been neglected and lacked funding for some years now and the 2013 season will see us begin to organise completely separate events for 7 – 16 year olds on those machines at various karting circuits.

At the same time we will be re-introducing "Veteran" championships within a couple of our mainstream classes such as the Bridgestone Thundersport 500s and HEL Performance Streetfighters. We already have a very good Combined Services Military Championship that has brought over 50 new road racers into the sport this year alone and that series will be expanded and improved next season as well. Both of those initiatives acknowledge that although the future is about youth riders, the present and the future must include a rewarding experience for riders of all ages.

We are extremely active in promoting our events and the sport in general, but the best element of our sales-force is you – our riders and customers. Yes, we do think of you as

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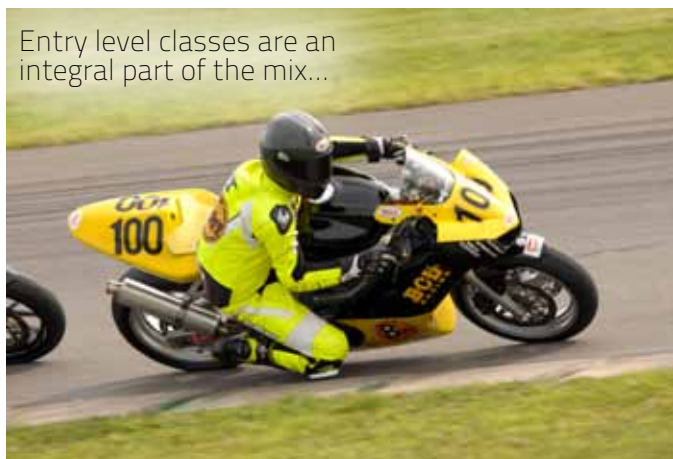
customers, as well as friends and members. Customer service is very high on our agenda. If you add up your weekends racing costs, (entry fees, fuel, testing, tyres and time off work etc) you'll find that you're spending somewhere between £600.- & £2,000.- by the time you're back home on Sunday night.

What kind of service would you expect at a top hotel for that kind of money? (NOT that kind of hotel Syd!)

We hope we don't disappoint you and that you feel that you are getting the best 'bang for your buck' as the Americans say (.....back to Syds hotel again?). So, if we agree that

you are our best sales resource, please be receptive to anyone who shows an interest and tell anyone you meet just how great our sport is. The more of you there are, the easier it is for us to keep a lid on your costs.

Entry level classes are an integral part of the mix...



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