

Bullets eye track success this term

The new-look Berwick Bullets can call upon a wealth of inside knowledge during their weekend road trip to Belle Vue and Leicester, writes George Dodds.

Their third season in the National Development League begins with a Good Friday trip to the National Speedway Stadium (1pm) to face Belle Vue followed by Saturday evening's clash with 2022 and 2019 double winners Leicester Lion Cubs in the East Midlands (7pm).

It's a challenging start for last year's beaten play-off semi-finalists but the GHT Bullets, powered by STS, can call on the experience of teenager Archie Freeman who returns to Manchester following a successful 2022 in Colts' colours. Josh Embleton was a member of that 2019 Leicester double-winning side.

A third new signing, Connor Coles, rode for Leicester in their all-conquering 2022 campaign and also enjoyed a year with the Colts while Jamie Halder was a member of the Coventry side was based at the East Midlands circuit in 2018 and was named in the 2021 Cubs' side.

He then missed the whole season after suffering a broken ankle in a fall at his home while the fifth new signing, Danny Phillips, rode for Belle Vue in 2019.

Embleton said: "You couldn't have asked for two tougher

opening fixtures. Having said that, the 2023 Bullets are probably less experienced around our home circuit than on some of the away tracks, especially Leicester, where four of us have spent some time.”

He added: “I jumped at the chance to sign for Berwick and even with just the press and practice and launch night behind us, you can feel that there is a really good buzz about Bullets.

“Having raced against them I know just how much help and support the management and riders give each other and I’m looking forward to having the advantage of that guidance.”

Embleton’s preparations for the new season were given a £500 boost last weekend thanks to a generous donation towards his costs by the Newcastle Speedway Supporters’ Association.

He said: “That was a really nice surprise. They might not have their own team to follow this season, but are still looking to support the city’s riders and I am very grateful for that backing.”

Freeman, who like Embleton is Newcastle-born, added: “Belle Vue is seen around the world as one of the best speedway racetracks and I really enjoyed my season with them last year.

“The opportunity to join Berwick was a real no-brainer. There’s a really good mix of experience and potential in the team and this is going to be a really good opportunity to get the season off to a flying start.”

Both of this weekend’s opponents have brought in new faces for the 2023 campaign. Jack Smith, son of multiple British champion Andy, and highly-rated teenager Freddy Hodder, are joined by 2022 Oxford man Sam Hagon and Australian-Brit Matt Marson plus Luke Muff from Mildenhall and British Speedway Network pundit, Paul Bowen, has come out of retirement.

Belle Vue have also taken advantage of new rules allowing

teams to track one Commonwealth rider this season by naming asset James Pearson who will also race for Birmingham in the Championship.

Defending champions Leicester are again built around the Thompson twins, Dan and Joe, and have a youthful look with Vinnie Foord and Max Perry also returning to the fold while a pair of 17-year olds, Max James and Norfolk whizz-kid Ashton Boughen, are handed regular team places.

Greg Blair, Bullets' Jedburgh-based skipper, who along with Berwick-born Mason Watson (picture courtesy of Berwick Bandits) is the only other surviving member of the 2022 Bullets squad, added: "Look around the league and there are no weak teams.

"The focus is on developing riders for the Championship and Premiership and there is no better way than making every ride in every meeting competitive."

He added: "It's been a long time since we were together as a team, more so for me as I couldn't ride in the play-off at Mildenhall due to suffering dizzy spells.

"Most people know that my links to Berwick stretch back to my grandparents, Danny and Liz Taylor, who brought the sport here in 1968 and it will be something special to lead a Berwick team out as captain. We're not here just to take part. We plan to make a serious statement to the rest of the league this weekend.

"With the new scoring system this season it is important to battle for every point and look to collect aggregate bonus points as well as meeting wins."