

Flint inspired Bandits blast into BSN qualification mix

A perfect, five-star weekend against Edinburgh has set up a real grandstand finish for the BSN Series Scottish qualifying section, writes George Dodds.

From nowhere FTS Berwick have drawn level with Glasgow Tigers at the top of the mini section with the teams meeting in what has become a winner-takes-all clash at Ashfield on Friday night.

And there is also the consolation prize of the “best second” place which will complete the semi-final line-up of the new competition.

It's all very much a contrast from just seven days ago when the FTS Bandits, powered by Keenwood Karpets, were licking their wounds following a 13-point home defeat at the hands of the Tigers.

But they made amends by winning 49-41 at Edinburgh on Friday and followed that up with a comfortable 51-39 win over the Stellar Omada Monarchs at Shielfield Park 24-hours later.

Skipper Leon Flint (pictured by **Taz MaDougall**, courtesy of Berwick Bandits) stormed to the second paid maximum of his career while Australian Rory Schlein dropped one point to an opponent, Edinburgh's top scorer Craig Cook.

The visitors' cause was not helped by a heat one crash which ruled their No 1, Josh Pickering, out of the meeting with a

damaged shoulder.

In his absence, Edinburgh still managed to keep the scores within two points only for the home side to pull clear in the second half of the meeting.

Flint and Jye Etheridge set the tone by subjecting the previously unbeaten Cook to a 5-1 and only a damaged fuel line for Thomas Jorgensen while well clear prevented him doubling that up with fellow Dane Jonas Knudsen in the next heat.

Castagna and Fredriksen hit the front in 11 but Schlein then produced a delicious one-two, rounding the Norwegian on the second bend before cutting inside the Italian down the fourth bend banking before roaring off into the distance.

Connor Coles threw everything at tactical substitute Fredriksen in 12 in a bid to back up his imperious skipper and the Norwegian was in the thick of the action again in 13, leading the Berwick pair only for Schlein to produce another sublime fourth bend cutback, Jorgensen making an almost identical move stick a lap later before the battling Norwegian took a heavy spill.

In the final heat the Berwick pairing was again outgated – this time by Paco Castagna but first Flint and then Schlein powered past the local hero clinching the win and being given the traditional “bumps” by his team-mates and management at the pits’ gate.

While the heat 15 pairing deservedly took the cheers of the crowd the fact that three of their team-mates each scored six points – and Coles just one less – underlined what a solid team performance this was.

Gary Flint, Berwick’s team manager and co-promoter, said: “It’s a massive turnaround from last week. Management were very disappointed, more with the performance rather than the actual result against Glasgow. This weekend we could not be

prouder of the riders.

“To be honest, it wasn’t a case of reading them the riot act. The riders knew that they had not performed well and took it upon themselves to put things right.

“During the week on the group chat and then when they arrived at Armadale you could sense something special was on the cards, a togetherness and real teamwork.

“They were rewarded by that hard work – and it was hard work as Edinburgh gave us problems in both meetings – with five points out of five. Effectively we control our destiny at Ashfield on Friday.”

Leading the way all season has been Australian ace Schlein who allayed any fears that he might take time to recover ground during his one-year retirement with a string of fine performances.

While his double figure haul at Armadale was a gating masterclass, he looked ultra-fast on Saturday and pulled off a string of sublime passes on a track he is still getting used to.

Even red-hot Rory had to take second billing on Saturday as on-fire Flint put a frustrating start to the season behind him and produced the kind of fence-hugging blasts which have become his trademark at Shielfield.

A big week has seen him get a tiny taste of Polish speedway with his new club Ostrow and before leading his home town club to glory and the local hero admitted: “There have been some disappointing moments in the opening few weeks of the season but everything clicked tonight,” he admitted.

“While I’m delighted with my own maximum, it was also a fantastic performance from the team and the backing of the fans tonight was great too. A big thank you to them.

"I still think we have a lot more to give and we now go into next weekend on a high and with a lot to play for."

Bandits: Thomas Jorgensen 6+1, Jonas Knudsen 6+3, Leon Flint 14+1, Jye Etheridge 6+1, Rory Schlein 13+1, Connor Coles 5, Luke Killeen 1

Monarchs: Josh Pickering w/d due to injury, Lasse Fredriksen 6+1, Kye Thomson 8+1, Paco Castagna 7+1, Craig Cook 11, Kyle Bickley 3, Jacob Hook 3+1