

Murphy's law – octogenarians keep on cycling

Joppa's grand old man of cycle speedway is heading to Australia where he will celebrate his 80th birthday at the world championships, which begin on 19 November.

For the most poignant of reasons John Murphy missed the entry date for his age-group due to the death of Diane, his wife of 55 years, in August. But was persuaded to travel anyway by fellow members of his Edinburgh Falcons club, notably Steve Gilroy and George Swanson.

John said: "Some time ago I was privileged to be made an honorary member of the Salisbury cycle speedway club, near Adelaide, where the world championships are being held so I have connections 'down under and on one occasion while there spoke with Joan Young, wife of Jack who won a world speedway title out of Edinburgh Monarchs in the 1950s.

"I won't be racing but I have been asked to provide an exhibition; I'll maybe show off a bit with my trick of riding a bike backwards, something I learned when I was about eight years old and a team mascot."

The Australian audience won't have to worry about John, a former taxi driver, being rusty in the saddle as, last month, he turned out as a guest for the Northumbria Vikings when they arrived a rider short. It was a winning appearance in the

North and Scottish League too for a man who simply insists “cycle speedway is in my blood”.

Dubbed “The Master” by Steve Gilroy, in his heyday, when he wasn’t travelling to Las Vegas to attend four Elvis Presley ‘live’ concerts John ventured around the world on two wheels although his “claim to fame” occurred closer to home at the Jack Kane Centre.

There a Danderhall BMX racing club challenged John’s cycle speedway outfit to a match.

“I found myself racing against a young lad by the name of Chris Hoy – beat him too!”

Another notable experience occurred while racing in Poland.

John said: “A bus promoting the event displayed some really attractive posters and I fancied bringing one home to Edinburgh.

“A young local girl could only have read my mind and climbed aboard the bus and handed the poster to me.”

That young girl turned out to be Anita Włodarczyk who has gone on to become Olympic hammer champion in 2012, 2016 and 2020.

“Every Christmas Anita sends me a calendar” said John, whose own experience of multi-sports gathering extends to running with the Queen’s Baton message along Portobello prom in the build up to the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games.

John’s eventful career extends to racing for TWO countries and – typically – there is an intriguing story behind his selection for Northern Ireland after a Scotland racing career went into remission.

“The Cycle Speedway Council noticed I wasn’t in the Scotland team and for them to get Sports Council funding they needed a home international tournament involving four home countries.

The missing link was Ireland.

“Somebody reckoned with a name like Murphy I had to have some Irish blood so I checked things out to discover there was a grandad from Enniskillen I never knew I had.”

Over the years titles and honours have piled up but there was one that eluded John in bizarre fashion.

“Back in 1987 the first British over-40s championship was held and I drove to Norwich to find that even maximum points from my races wasn't good enough for the title.

“When I queried this I was told that there was somebody older than me in the field and a rule provided bonus points according to age so I lost out. That rule was never used again.”

A year later though John was selected for Great Britain and he is pictured wearing that team's blazer as well as in action.



