



The Fitz Files

DEVON'S TREASURED BROADCASTING LEGEND DAVID FITZGERALD SHARES STORIES OLD AND NEW WITH READERS

Speedway thrills followed by meal of deep-fried fat. Deadly pastimes in equal measure

I HAVE not really recovered from a near fatal man flu outbreak at Christmas and thus have been moping around the house looking for but not getting... sympathy.

However, I did get the old line... "If you are looking for something to do, you can always tidy the office."

Reluctantly I started to sift through the paperwork, photographs and magic memories or 'tut' as my wife calls it, when I came across nostalgia gold.

The first thing I found was a car sticker from the Exeter Falcons speedway team from the early 1980s emblazoned with the sponsorship from Devonair Radio, the local station I started with.

I had been a speedway fan for some time but now found myself in the middle of the County Ground as the announcer.

I never got to meet the legend Scott Autrey but did see him clock up many a lap. The names of Bob Kilby, Nigel Boocock and Vaclav Verner slide by in my mind in a cloud of gravel, dust and unfulfilled health and safety reports.

It is a lunatic sport, no brakes, no suspension and one gear controlling a 500cc engine. Many an evening I would return home with my hair full of grit and stinking of methanol having finished the evening at a fish and chip shop with a bag of 'gribbles'.

If you are not over 50, not from the West Country and do not have underlying health issues, you will not know what 'gribbles' are... or were? Classified as a super food in my world, they were mainly deep-fried batter bits in partially hydrogenated oil, exuding so much grease you had to eat them quickly as they made eight layers of newspaper translucent in four minutes. After four minutes, the paper leaked, and they had the same effect on the crotch of your trousers.

If you were lucky and had some change left over, you could wash them down with a bottle of Panda Pops.

It was a great time to be alive; the memories come flooding back as I look at my prescription for amlodipine, bisoprolol and statins.

I also came across my very first

publicity photograph in my swallow dive of a career which clearly shows that at one point I was a light middleweight boxer by the looks of the nose.

I can clearly remember that the picture was taken by the scaffold poles holding up the sagging back wall of the radio station extension.

About three years later, things finally gave way and took out the main drain, which promptly backed up a lot of unmentionables which then overflowed into the school cellars next door.

I remember the caretaker squelching into our reception with two tone dungarees, the bottom half dark, damp and attracting flies, the top part, light blue and free of pool!

The problem had been running for some time, building an underground reservoir, fertilising the entire area, now clearly indicated by the growth of six-foot thistles and a lush border of stinging nettles in the car park.

When contractors were brought in to start digging down, the problem was found and confirmed by the arrival of every bluebottle in Devon.

The radio station was a twin, in fact the first in the UK with two studios, one operating in St David's Hill, Exeter and the other in Torquay. Harbour Point was quite the most lavish radio studio ever built, with stunning views out over the bay and beyond.

The original plans had used specialist metalwork to take the weight of the construction on top of the building, high spec sound dampening had been brought in and the two 'on air' areas were so large they could hold a grand piano, a backing quintet and several members of a chorus line if need be. Today, a shipping container with egg boxes on the walls produces the same effect.

In 1988 Harbour Point was at the centre of the coverage of the visit of Her Majesty The Queen to Torquay to mark the anniversary of the landing of William of Orange.

We obviously had the best seats in the house with our own private balcony from which we could view everything, even the Royal Yacht Britannia which was anchored off Broadsands.



A young Fitz during his Devonair days, when the station backed Exeter Falcons



Fitz had bruising encounters with boxing legends Frank Bruno and Barry McGuigan while at Sky News. Below: he was an announcer at the County Ground in Exeter, home of the Exeter Falcons speedway team



Fitz writes of speedway: "It is a lunatic sport, no brakes, no suspension and one gear controlling a 500cc engine"

It was as Her Majesty passed underneath us that several members of staff leant over the balustrade to watch the Rolls Royce and that's when it happened.

A large piece of masonry became dislodged and plummeted... five floors. By the grace of God, the pavement was clear, as was the royal motorcade and for once my conscience as I had my nose in the programme notes reading out the schedule of events and was not involved in the gawping.

On that point, just to reiterate the nose issue in the photograph, I can confirm that I never got into the pugilist's ring and for several reasons.

One, it is difficult to use an inhaler with boxing gloves on and two, I am quite heavy for the average stretch-er. Apparently, according to a fanatical boxing mate of mine, I am too heavy 'full stop'.

He worked out that at my record weight, I was two stone more than Mike Tyson in his prime. That was an eye opener and since then I have lost two and half stone but still cannot get a crack at the WBC title.

One night (early morning) on duty at Sky News, the phone rang. It was a producer in Sky Sports.

"Have you got any make-up?"

I had... and offered to take it across to their main studio. I walked in with a light bronze powder and applicator puff. I had also brought some eyeliner.

"Who wants it?" There in front of me was Lennox Lewis, Frank Bruno and Gary Mason. Heavyweight Gary had become a friend over the Sky tele years and had a great sense of humour. He looked at the powder, then at the line-up and then back at me.

"Go on, I dare you!"

I didn't...

Sadly, that night was to be the last time I saw Gary. He was killed in a road accident in 2011.

However, still to this day I think I hold the record for hitting Frank Bruno the hardest.

One evening I was running late for the news bulletin and burst into the make-up room. The door stopped suddenly with a fibrous crunch. I stuck my head around the heavy reinforced panels and there stood Frank holding the back of his head, the metal soundproofing strip had caught him right on the nape.

"I am so sorry," I said, stepping into the room. He looked a bit dazed but said he was alright.

I grabbed my make-up bag and decided to powder myself down in the studio. Frank was coming round. In my haste to leave the room I wrenched open the door and there was a squeal of pain from the other side. I had nearly broken the fingers of Barry McGuigan who had been holding the handle.

The make-up artist glared at me and said: "I think you have done enough damage for one night, go and read the news."

I did what I was told.