

Cycling Gold Rush - Written by Ian Emmerson

What a great time it has been for British cycling and in particular the superb haul of medals at the recent World Track Championships held at the Manchester Velodrome.

I was involved with the realisation of the velodrome which was part of the 2000 Olympic Bid by Manchester and provided a much needed facility. At that time I was the President of the British Cycling Federation and knew that the British climate never looked kindly on track racing which until then had been held on outdoor tracks. I have lost count of the number of major events, some with television coverage planned, which were lost to the elements. Fortunately Manchester recognised our dilemma and in 1994 the dream of a world class indoor velodrome came true. No longer were we to be the also-rans of world cycling where the sound of our National Anthem and the Union Flag on the centre pole were a rarity in a sport then dominated by Australia, Germany, Italy, France and the Eastern Europeans.

Everything changed and supported by the funding from the National Lottery coming on stream British Cycling seized the opportunity to develop a coaching system now envied by the rest of the world. It is now seen as one of Britain's most successful sports and almost certain to bring back major medals from the Beijing Olympics.

But all this did not happen overnight and it has taken a while to build up a team of talented riders, coaches, sports scientists, cycle technicians and equipment developments to make all this happen. It can only be likened to a Formula One type operation with carbon fibre and lightweight alloys playing a major role in the development of the ultimate racing machine, so much so that the world governing body had to step in and implement regulations governing measurements and minimum weights of these thoroughbreds.

The riders themselves benefited from the best possible advice on training methods and realised these benefits in a massive haul of 9 gold and 2 silver medals from the 18 championship events to add to the 7 Gold's won last year in Majorca.

The main contributors to this impressive result, in front of a full house every day and coupled with superb television coverage from the BBC and Eurosport, have become household names. Bradley Wiggins, with three gold medals in the individual pursuit, team pursuit and in the madison with Mark Cavendish; Chris Hoy, who won the individual sprint and the keirin; Victoria Pendleton, first in the sprint and in the team sprint with Shanaze Read; and Rebecca Romero, who dominated the individual pursuit, before taking the first world title in the history of the women's team pursuit with Wendy Houvenhagel and Joanna Roswell. It

could have been 10 Gold's but for the unexpected narrow defeat of Victoria Pendleton in the women's keirin, the last race of the Championships.

Chris Hoy has now become the only rider to win all four sprint style events, the individual sprint, keirin, kilometre time trial and team sprint and you have to look back 54 years to find a previous British Individual Sprint winner and that was the late, great Reg Harris in 1954. A full size bronze statue of Reg now looks down on the finish straight at Manchester and I am sure that he would have been proud to witness these achievements, half a century later.

It was a World Championships which saw the Australians, Germans and Russians leave Manchester without a single title. These countries have dominated track cycling for the past couple of decades and will certainly be going home for a bit of a rethink prior to Beijing.

This has shown what correct coaching can do and the Lincolnshire Sports Partnership has a major part to play in encouraging youngsters to take part in sport and to ensure that the appropriate coaching systems are available to them, be it in the schools or within the sports and recreation centres. Once talent has been recognised there are national systems they can progress to which will take them on to the highest levels. This system has served Lincolnshire particularly well and the success of sports like swimming are a testament to what we can do in our county.

I started this column with the Lincoln Grand Prix which will enjoy its 53rd year on May 11th when Britain's best road cyclists take on foreign challengers in the country's favourite one day race. The nature of this event brings top class racing right to your doorstep and within inches of your footstep if you join the huge crowd of supporters who gather in Lincoln for the 86 mile race.

The race is hugely popular with the riders who regard it as the event to aim for and with its road closures and traffic controls allows them the benefit of an experience they are only likely to see again in a World Championship or Olympic Games where a traffic free circuit is mandatory.

Naturally I am conscious that this does cause an element of inconvenience on the day but I am sure that most Lincolnians would accept and agree that a four hour interruption to the normal traffic flow is a small price to pay to have such a great event in the City. Not only does it bring a large number of visitors for the weekend but the publicity gained through the televised coverage on Eurosport and the thousands of words and pictures to be seen in the media and on web sites show our City off to the world.

The Lincolnshire Sports Partnership will also use the race as a platform to launch its 'Lincolnshire Elite Athlete Programme' (LEAP) LEAP is a programme designed to support talented sportspeople from Lincolnshire to develop and deliver on their ability. It will form part of 'Lincolnshire 2012' aiming

to support Lincolnshire performers make the London 2012 Games and provide a legacy in supporting athletes being selected future Games.

The East Midlands Development Agency (EMDA) will also support the race as part of their strategy to maximise the benefits of the 2012 Games. Its ambition is to engage a new generation in sport, the arts and learning and welcome teams and visitors from across the world to the East Midlands.