

Interview with Tony Coupland - The Voice of Oliver's Mount - 22 September 2023

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Tony Coupland started watching racing at Oliver's Mount when he was 4 years old. Now in his eighties, his love of this unique racing circuit is undiminished and is reflected in this interview in which he looks back with fondness at his involvement in its history.

Today I'm at Oliver's Mount as the circuit prepares for the most important racing event of this year, the Gold Cup. I'm talking to Tony Coupland. He's taking a few minutes out of his own preparations to talk to me. Tony was the main commentator at the motor racing events at Oliver's Mount for over 40 years and has been known as the voice of Oliver's Mount. In that time, he has seen the race circuit go through some magical moments, but also a few challenging times. Can I ask you why this racing circuit has such a special place in the hearts, not only of the fans, but also of the competitors who have flocked here in such numbers?

Well, you've only got to look at the hillsides, the beauty of the place. It's very, very different to anything else in the UK. The atmosphere that is generated in the paddock and in fact amongst the spectators, some of whom have been coming for many, many years, is wonderful. I was just 4 years old when I first saw motor racing here at Oliver's Mount and that was me hooked from day one. We don't get the smells of the caster based oils now but the effect of the exhausts as the bikes climbed up Shane's Rise to the top of Quarry Hill was an awesome experience. There's nowhere just like it in the whole of the UK, perhaps with the exception of the Isle of Man.

The spectators are very, very close to the riders. Many circuits like Silverstone, Donnington and to a lesser degree, Oulton Park they're so far away from the riders that you almost need binoculars to see them but here they're within touching distance.

And in terms of those young riders who come here for the first time, how is it for them in terms of their career training?

For first timers we always nominate an experienced rider to show them the way around. The practice session tomorrow will be with three laps under the control of a rider who leads the way and shows them the lines to take and hopefully that will give them more than an inkling. Many of them walk the circuit beforehand, or cycle it, which is a good thing and it helps them get to grips with it. For others it's a really daunting experience and they don't like it because it's so narrow and you're so close to trees and some of them may need a visit to the laundrette on Monday morning. For those guys we may not see them here again. But the majority of newcomers really take to it. We've got the very experienced riders in the field here who, like Dean Harrison, is the star man here this weekend. Dean on his first race here at Oliver's Mount which was back in the Gold Cup 1989 crashed at the cafe on the approach to Memorial and took the handles off the cafe doors. But he has since developed into a first class rider, very much in demand. He's won the Isle of Man TTs. The circuit takes a grip on you. You can't explain it, it doesn't happen at other circuits in the same way. Oliver's mount is just so special.

For the very many years that you've been visiting and then commentating on racing at Oliver's Mount, tell us a little bit about your standout moments during that time.

Well, I used to be a great fan of the late Denis Parkinson back in the 1950s. Denis was a head down, backside up sort of rider, a motor bike dealer from Huddersfield and he won several Manx Grand Prix and he was a star man. And Geoff Duke, multiple world champion riding Norton and Galerias bikes. He likened this to a mini TT and he was instrumental in attracting foreign riders to come here for the first time. I think we've only got one, Chris Meyer, this weekend. He's from Reinsdorf in Germany and he'd tried to get here but couldn't get permission from his federation. But he finally got it earlier this year and where he lives he has a repair shop for motorbikes and cars and he was just near to the MZ factory where Walter Carton produced some very quick machinery and he brought one with him last time he was here, on display. An interesting guy and great to welcome back once again. Other standout moments like Carl Fogarty, Jamie Whittam and let's see, who else has gone on to do great things? There are so many by now and Scarborough has been an intrinsic part of them learning their craft. Here you've got to have your wits about you. Nowhere are there three hairpin bends like those here at Scarborough. That is very different from any other circuit in the UK. If you could master that you're a very good rider indeed.

One of the big names, of course, was Barry Sheene.

Barry loved the place. He had some of his first rides with the Auto 66 Club at Elvington near York which is a flat circuit. He was lauded to come in to Scarborough. He had a look, and well, I can't use the words that Barry used; his language tended to be rather colourful. The gist of it was, "I don't know whether I should be riding somewhere like this", but he came and he loved it from the word go and as he got better machinery of course being at world level and being world champion in 1976 and 1977, whenever he could persuade Suzuki, or Yamaha at one stage, to give him a bike to undertake non world championship events he would be here like a shot right up until his move to Australia, but we flew him back to parade on some of the bikes he had ridden.

How difficult has it been to keep the circuit operational over the years in the light of evolving safety issues and as you say, the geometry of the course?

Well, the body of the sport, the ACU or Auto Cycle Union did the circuit inspection and insisted on the use of a Recticell Fence which is very, very expensive indeed and there were several areas of the circuit where they demanded that Recticell be used. Peter Hillarby who had run Oliver's Mount since the mid-70s virtually, was not in good health, didn't see the need for it and didn't do it. This caused a report back to the ACU who contacted Scarborough Council and Peter was refused permission to continue running Oliver's Mount which was sad in many ways. He was his own man. You either got on with him or you didn't. I suspect it didn't do his pocket any good in keeping the place running. When we got bad press from the media and several newspapers, which linked us with the Isle of Man. Some said racing should be banned here because sadly one or two people had lost their lives. But he battled along until the end of 2017 and there was no racing here in 2018. But a rescue attempt came with the two riders involved, Mick Grant and Eddie Roberts.

What of the future? At the start of every race, the whole of Scarborough gets a buzz when we hear the roar of the bikes. For how long do you think will we carry on experiencing that and providing that enjoyment to the fans who come here in their thousands?

Since Andy Hays took over he was hit with all sorts of misfortune with COVID being the biggest one, which meant he couldn't get any revenue, but he still had the expenditure, the rental of the circuit and everything else. It was a difficult time but he and his wife, Wendy, had this determination to make Oliver's Mount work and they've done a first class job. They've got a great team, part of the team that he had originally, departed, I think at the end of 2022, but he's built up another Marshall squad and it's actually working better in many respects. I don't know how Andy and Wendy can get any sleep because both of them have so much on their plate but they have such a determination to see Oliver's Mount continue into the foreseeable future.

The only thing that may change, you may lose the roar as electric bikes are developed. I think it's quite a way away yet and I think we've got a good number of years with traditionally powered bikes, but I can see electric bikes making inroads when the battery situation gets sorted out. The problem with electric bikes is that the batteries are so heavy that riders need to develop a different riding style. I think the time will come when we've got to go down that route but I think it's a lot of years away. I think Oliver's Mount will thrive and continue into the next century, hopefully.

Tony, I know you're a busy man today making all the preparations for the Gold Cup. Thank you very much for taking time out of your schedule and thank you for being the voice of Oliver's Mount for all those years.

Huw, you're more than welcome and it's great that we've got a mention on the sea wall. I intend to walk down this weekend to have a look at that.