

BMCC South Midlands Region invited Hugh Chambers, CEO of Motorsport UK, to join us in a Virtual Noggin & Natter on 12th October 2021. It was presented as a Q&A session hosted by Chris Whitlock (BMCC South Midlands Regional Chair), and what follows is a summary of the occasion.

Chris Whitlock welcomed Hugh to the event, and explained that the attendees had sent in some questions for him. Hugh thanked the BMCC team for the invitation and was looking forward to the evening.

Chris (CW) said that the first question had come in following the tragic circumstances at Brands Hatch in July 2021 when Robert Foote had lost his life in an incident. The marshalling community wanted to know what was being done to improve both circuit safety and driving standards.

Hugh (HC) opened his comments by expressing deep concern for all who had been affected by the events at Brands Hatch. Everyone at Motorsport UK is conscious that motor sport has the potential to be extremely dangerous and Motorsport UK, as the governing body, has the mandate and responsibility to ensure the safety of everyone involved in the sport. Our mantra is “safe, fair and fun”. We have a lot of volunteers in our sport and we need to keep them safe. If we think back to the early days, sadly nearly every week there would have been a tragic incident with loss of life or life-changing burn injuries from the horrific fires. We have over 120,000 individual competition starts across all our disciplines in the course of a year, and the number of serious incidents is thankfully relatively small. However, as Jean Todt said, we must have “an objective of zero”. The whole community has done a great job of reducing the likelihood of a predictable incident resulting in something significant, but we still see unusual cases which had not been predicted. Referring to the incident at Brands Hatch, there must have been tens of thousands of competition vehicles passing that post since it was moved to its current location, yet when a car touches another car and is catapulted in to the sleepers at the exact angle for it to take off and strike the marshals post then a tragedy occurs. We must all learn from this and a Motorsport UK investigation is underway analysing the exact reasons and causes of the incident. This will recommend changes, not only to that piece of track, but to any other fixed circuit across the country that may have the same possible configuration. We are working tirelessly to make sure everyone’s safety is our top priority and we do all we can to protect everyone in our sport.

CW: Are you able to give us an update on the investigation?

HC: it is still the subject of an enquiry by the government authorities, so I cannot make any public comment at this time.

CW: We understand. What about the subject of driving standards?

HC: I have written about driving standards in the motorsport press, in Motorsport UK “Revolution” magazine and it was a topic in the officials’ webinars in January. Last year a number of people raised with Motorsport UK their sense that some drivers were not behaving in a way that was conducive to safety, and that they had either experienced or witnessed behaviours, primarily within circuit racing, that were simply unacceptable. Motorsport UK surveyed 10,000 circuit racing license holders, and a significant percentage confirmed that there has been a significant decline in driving standards in recent years, including being forced off the circuit on a regular basis, having the car damaged and feeling vulnerable to personal injury. A working group of the Race Committee is looking at what can be done. The report has not been published yet, but there needs to be a mix of approaches, with one being education. Whether it is newcomers who do not understand the rules and regulations, or long-standing drivers having forgotten them or thinking they no longer apply to them, we have to get a mindset change to one of respect for one’s fellow competitors and away from a “what can I get away with” attitude.

We are looking at the judicial processes, where there is a lack of clarity on what actions can be penalised, how those actions can be spotted and reported, and what penalties can be imposed. There are the basic actions of lack of respect for the fellow competitor, such as car-on-car contact, but also those actions that are indicative of a lack of respect for the rules such as track limit violations. It is unfortunate that circuits cannot decide where the track limits are, let alone how to police them, and it is these grey areas which will prevent the drivers and the officials from clearly understanding what is and is not acceptable. We are working hard to remove the differences in

interpretation between circuits and racing categories, and ensuring our officials are properly trained, educated and empowered to take action against people who do not behave correctly.

Not everyone agrees on what “good looks like” and what “bad looks like”, so we are assembling a library of videos with examples, explaining who was at fault and why, which we will roll out to the community. One discussion is around whether drivers will have to pass a training module in order to renew their race license, and we are already talking with the ARDS and ARKS Boards about enhanced levels of questions and education around driver discipline for new drivers. We are also discussing whether drivers who have been penalised for driving behaviours should have to attend a course, a bit like the Speed Awareness course on the road.

CW: I agree that track limits are open to interpretation, and, as a marshal, I need help on what and how to report.

HC: Yes, it comes back to the fundamental understanding that if you go over the line you will get a penalty. If the white line was a concrete wall then no-one would drive over it, and we need to return to that mindset. We also need to look at ways of making the reporting easier and in real-time, such as apps which allow the spotter to automatically send penalties to the Race Director in Race Control rather than use radio and paper and pen.

CW: How much is the media contributing to this problem?

HC: There is also an element from the media, where TV coverage of events such as Touring Cars give role models which undermine the fundamental rules and regulation of the sport. I think there has been a creeping acceptance across the community that contact is acceptable, and we must reverse that. As I said, it goes back to education and resetting the standards of what is acceptable.

CW: What about the introduction of light panels at circuits. Will flag marshals be made redundant?

HC: Firstly, a light panel is not a replacement for a marshal, it is an additional signalling tool for the marshal to use. Light panels will be in a better place for the driver to see, and marshals will stand in a safer place. I understand the scepticism in the marshalling community, but marshals will still be needed to operate the panels, and to use flags if the panels were to fail. All of what marshals do track-side cannot be substituted by someone in Race Control monitoring the track through cameras.

CW: My concern is around the difficulty of seeing the circuit if marshals’ posts are moved away from the circuit, and so not knowing where the non-overtaking point starts from to report any infringements. We saw at Silverstone that the FIA panels for F1 were not ideally placed for good visibility or reporting from the flag posts.

HC: I know what you mean, and we may see that at some circuits and in some corners there may need to be an additional “spotter” to report on infringements who is in better line of sight to the light panel and in a different place to the marshal operating the light panel.

CW: The lights are not yet incorporated into the 2022 Regulations, how are both lights and flags going to be used? If they are not in the same place which will take priority?

HC: Supplementary Regulations will be used to cover the short term, in the same way that they are used now when FIA races use their light panels. For those the priority is given to the first signal that the driver reaches, regardless of whether it is a flag or a light panel.

CW: Given the talk about fast response vehicles, how do you see the future of marshalling? Can we really expect the smaller clubs to be able to afford these types of expenditures?

HC: My personal view is that things will not change much in the near future. We need to start from the premise of what is safe and what is prudent. Whilst we continue to have a large volunteer community who want to remain involved in the sport then it will not be redesigned to remove their involvement. If we didn’t have enough marshals then we would be forced to look at alternatives, such as technology or other intervention techniques, but that is not the case today. We have about 8900 marshals registered with Motorsport UK for 2022, and the marshalling community is not aging, as younger people continue to come into the sport. The problem we have will be pinch-points, where there are insufficient numbers to run some events adequately because they are competing for marshal numbers with other more popular events. Every year there are attempts to co-ordinate the championship calendars so that major clashes do not happen, but there are so many championships, competing for the same drivers, and so many circuits this has not yet been successful. The financial risks rests with the clubs, and they need to have the freedom to organise

and make money where they can. Fortunately, we have not yet been in a position where an event has had to be cancelled because there are not enough marshals to run it.

CW: In my experience the problem is more subtle than simply not enough numbers, it is also having the right level of experience for the role. At Silverstone we often have insufficient trained and qualified flag marshals or Post Chiefs, so trainees with little experience are put on a flag post on their own to both flag and report infringements. This is not fair on the marshals who are expected to work beyond their training, and in some cases is putting them off marshalling. It also results in a lower quality of reporting, which goes back to the earlier discussion about judicial measures for driving standards.

HC: If what you have described is happening on a regular basis then we have a problem and it needs to be reported and addressed, but these types of systemic failures are not being reported to us. We should not be forcing people into this position. Equally if posts are not manned in sufficient numbers in compliance with the Track License this must be reported as well.

CW: Is there anything planned to centralise volunteering across all disciplines through Motorsport UK?

HC: The organisation of the marshalling community is not centralised, but is split between all the participating clubs. We are promoting Motorsport UK registration for all marshals, which is important now there are DBS requirements for some of the discipline and roles. A unified volunteering system would be a "holy grail", but it is not in the pipeline at present as the current system is not broken.

CW: what is your view on the introduction into classic and historic motorsport of the "second generation" or "continuation" cars which by their very nature will be more reliable and robust than in-period constructed cars? Is it dangerous to mix the two?

HC: In practice very few of the originally-constructed cars are still the same as they came out of the factory, and safety requirements around seat belts, brakes, fuel tank construction and the like mean that they often cannot race if they are still original. Many of the truly original cars are now worth so much their owners will never risk putting them on a race track in case they get damaged.

CW: Today is "International Woman's Day". How do you see the future of women in motorsport, and what proportion of competitors are women?

HC: We have been celebrating in social media posts today. My father was an advocate of women in motorsport, and gave Pat Moss her first competitive drive in the RAC Rally. It seems a tragedy that, in one of the few sports where men and women can compete on an equal playing field, we are doing so badly at equality - given that women are 51% of the population we have done a lousy job of making them feel welcome! We have been pushing Girls On Track with school-aged kids so that children can see that motor sport is for them, not just driving but in engineering, in logistics, in project management and all the support activities as well.

The same is the case with racial diversity, and we seem to have put ourselves into an environment where the overwhelming population is white and male, and that not only puts non-white, non-males into an uncomfortable position but also does not give them role models to aspire to. We are working hard to be more representative of the country as a whole. Our challenge as a sport over the next 10 or 20 years is to remain viable when young people of today may not be car owners, and will have a fundamentally different relationship with cars than we older generation had.

CW: What is your view on the sustainability of motorsport given the decline in fossil fuels?

HC: I have spoken about this many times. In my view electric propulsion is not the universal solution to all our future transportation needs, and we shall need a mixture of systems. Electric is the answer in some circumstances, for example for cars in urban areas where zero emissions at point of use are required, and the emissions from building the vehicle and creating the electricity can be accommodated elsewhere, but it will not be the answer for long-distance freight or aircraft. There are 2.3 billion Internal Combustion Engine (ICE) vehicles in the world, and in my opinion the smarter move is to sustain the life of them using alternative synthetic fuels which are not nett-zero at point of use but use recycled carbon so are carbon neutral. The Dakar race used this fuel, and historic motorsport will benefit from this development, and even though it may require some minor modifications to the ICE, it is not expected to be any worse than the move to lead-free.

CW: How will circuits provide charging for EVs if they are raced?

HC: We did a news feature in the last week that there had been 10 EVs in an Auto Solo at Brands Hatch, which was a new UK record as far as we know. The problem will come when we get a significant number of EVs wanting to compete at fixed venues, and wanting charging points. Installing them will be an up-front infrastructure cost for the venues, which they will have to look at very carefully, although they may also get revenue from trackday cars as well.

CW: How do we future-proof motorsport without it becoming a rich person's sport?

HC: We will be promoting "Street Car" this summer, which includes all the forms of motorsport that you can take part in with your road car without PPE and without modifying your car – 12 car Navigation Rallies, Auto Tests, Auto Solos, Production Car Trials – all for the price of the entry fee and the fuel. We have not done a good job of promoting these, and only a relatively small proportion of the 720 or so motor clubs actually hold these sorts of competitions, so there's plenty we can do to promote these grass-roots forms of motor sport. You can start in some of them at 14 years old, so it's a good inter-generational sport as well.

CW: How can we encourage drivers to marshal for a day?

HC: I was fortunate to do a Taster Day at Silverstone in November, one of a dozen people on the event, but some had had to wait over a year, partly due to Covid restrictions. If we try to get drivers in the queue as well it may prove too much, but I guess the question is more about getting drivers to understand better what marshalling is all about. To get your driver upgrade you need 6 signatures, one of which can be a day's marshalling.

Comment from a Northern Ireland attendee that it is a condition of entry to the sprint and Hillclimb championship that all drivers marshal at least once a year.

CW: We find drivers get a much better appreciation of marshalling if they spend a day with us, and in turn the marshals get a drivers-view of racing. I wouldn't like it to be a penalty – say £1000 fine and 6 days marshalling – as that would put us in the wrong light, but more encouragement to join us for a day would be useful. On your Taster Day how did you find your trip to Race Control?

HC: The day I was marshalling was very cold, wet and windy, but Race Control was warm and dry. It was very interesting to do the outside visits before the inside, to get an understanding of the track-side perspective and then go into Race Control and appreciate just how busy they are and how reliant they are on the live feedback from the circuit. It really brought home the marriage between all the volunteers and officials and how dependent they are on each other to do their jobs properly. Goodness only knows how it all happened before the cameras and the radios!

CW: You compete yourself, what are you currently driving?

HC: I've sold my FIA-spec MGB race car, but I'll continue sharing classic cars if I get any invitations. I have recently made the fatal step of taking my two boys karting, and now they have the bug so I suspect my racing days will be suspended whilst I become a "karting Dad"!

CW: How do we encourage new marshals into karting, as there is a lack of them? On the one hand some clubs are short but on the other some clubs don't want any more because they pay them.

HC: Unfortunately, Kart Clubs are currently the victims of history. Previously a lack of marshals drove the clubs to pay them, but now they can't afford to have too many volunteering. That is a decision for the clubs to sort out.

CW: What is your daily routine like?

HC: No two days are ever the same. We are just about settled in to our new headquarters at Bicester and have just on 70 people now. We have the Sporting Team, the Safety Group, the Technical Team, the Commercial Team, the Licensing Team, the Learning and Development Team, the Officials Team, the teams who run the British Championships in F4, Rallying and Karting, the team who look after Regions and Clubs, the Girls On Track team, the Academy and the Elite Pathway Teams, the Safeguarding Team, the Marketing Team, plus the support infrastructure for legal, HR and so on. My job is to keep everything in line with our strategy, and to keep up with progress on the 53 projects approved by the board for 2022. It is very varied but the common thread is working together to nurture and sustain the long-term future of motorsport in the UK. I really enjoy my job, who wouldn't like to spend all day messing around with cars?

CW: Thank you very much for joining us, it has been an interesting evening.

HC: Thank you for inviting me, I've enjoyed it.