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**D**RIVING home from Sheffield Park to Hesketh Bank on Merseyside must seem awfully mundane for new Berwick signing Bevan Compton.

Until now, he's divided his time between touring America with ice racers, commuting from Austria to Poland for the entire summer season, being held up at gunpoint and abducted to a South Africa township, and being threatened with jail after what he thought was a harmless joke misfired!

But the 25-year-old racer is ready to settle down and says: "The idea now is to live here a few years, make money and then go back to South Africa."

"You can buy a mansion house, four bedrooms, swimming pool, everything, for £30,000 and if you can make good money in England, you can live like a king in South Africa."

A year ago, Bevan was content to wind down his racing career. He'd had enough of travelling the world but when Bandits boss Peter Waite heard that he was marrying fiancée Joanna, he suddenly realised that he could bring Bevan into his line-up on a three-point average because he no longer needed a work permit.

And that's how Compton came to end up at the Border Country circuit – a long way from Corobrik, South Africa, where he first started racing the oval circuits when he was still at school.

He recalls: "I was doing motocross at the time but because my school marks weren't up to scratch, I was stopped from riding. My Mum and Dad, who were quite strict, said I could ride again when I got them up to scratch and I ended up doing speedway instead when I was about 16."

"Two of the best South African riders were Gary Prommel and Alan Simpson. They were family friends and I went with them around the speedway tracks as their mechanic. When they retired, I was given their bikes."

"Basically, in South Africa, there's no juniors, it's just open class and when they had international riders like Gary Havelock and Chris Manchester come over, I was riding against them and progressed quite a lot."

He then was picked to race for his country on an unofficial tour to Poland and was so impressive that he had a couple of seasons racing in the Polish League at Czestochowa and Leszno.

**You'd think blasting around the wide banking at Sheffield would be adventure enough. But it almost pales into insignificance compared to some of the antics Berwick's new South African signing has got up to!**

He admits: "The Polish Federation took me under their wing and took me to the different clubs. We had a Test series against them for South Africa and because I got some good results and beat some of their top riders, they took me over there and I spent two years there."

"I did think about England but, at the time, it wasn't convenient because I was living with the Austrian rider Franz Leitner (he had a short spell at Ipswich in 1994) and it was just too expensive to come across to England all the time. That's where I was based, in Austria."

"I would have liked to have come here a couple of years ago but I just sort of quit speedway completely, and just did it for fun back home."

And he might have settled for a new life, working as a brewmaster with a major South African company, had it not been for an extraordinary incident.

He explained: "I got hi-jacked in my car in South Africa! It was a Sunday afternoon and nothing happening. These black guys give out leaflets at the traffic lights, I just wound down my window to get a leaflet and he had a gun and stuck it straight to my head."

"They took me to Soweto, which is a township about 40 minutes from Johannesburg, and they stripped me to my boxers and left me there and took my car and all my money. It happened three weeks later again when my car broke down on the motorway and they came out from the bush."

"They couldn't get my car this time, they just took my watch, my wallet. It was the sort of thing that happened quite regularly although they have calmed down but there was a stage when it was happening all the time."

"I thought I was going to be dead. They beat you up to provoke you to hit them. If you hit them, they are going to shoot you! If they

don't kill you, they leave you in the middle of nowhere. I walked around, I didn't know where I was or anybody and obviously being a white man they just look at you."

"Eventually some guy gave me a lift to the police station and they took me home. I was 22 at the time, it was about three years ago, and I got fed up with that sort of thing so I went to America and rode on the ice circuits."

"When you are on the ice circuit, you travel around, going to all the states although I also stayed with another friend in Reno in Nevada."

Compton became a regular in what was dubbed the World Ice



picture GRAHAM PLATTEN

**"I HAVE DONE MY TRAVELLING, I THINK I HAVE GOT OVER THAT. BASICALLY I'M A BIT OF AN ADVENTURER, IF YOU DON'T TRY YOU WILL NEVER KNOW"**

**- Bevan Compton**

Speedway Championships, a touring party that included Englishman Anthony Barlow, who had spells in the Premier League with Glasgow, Newcastle, Oxford, the Isle of Wight, Arena-Essex and Newcastle before joining the American ice adventure.

That meeting would, even though Bevan didn't know it at the time, lead to romance – and his eventual move to the Bandits.

He said: "I met his younger sister Joanna in America and we got married in Mauritius this year. She's been in South Africa for the last year with me and we got married last month."

"I met her in the States when she went over there to see her

brother and she came out again to see me and it went from there."

"We both went back to South Africa but it was natural that we would come over to England. I wasn't going to do speedway here, though, I had a job lined up. I was selling Jameson's Irish whiskey in South Africa and I had a job opportunity to be transferred but Peter Waite called one day and after listening to him, I decided to give it another go and that's how it all started again."

"I was a salesman going to what we call bottle stores (off licences) selling the whiskey and they were prepared to give me a job from South Africa to England because they knew I was going over. But then that went when Peter Waite called but if I had to quit speedway, probably I could still go up and do that."

"I'd worked for South Africa Breweries when I was a bit younger as a brewmaster, that's basically someone who checks samples of the beer, to make sure it comes out the right batch, the right case. You test, but you don't test every batch. If something looks faulty, you have to test it

and, unlike wine tasting, you actually do swallow it because you have got to check it is okay. But it's not like drinking a pint at a time, you basically have about a cup a day!"

It may be hard for people in this country to accept that someone could just switch on and off as far as racing is concerned. But speedway in South Africa is far, far different to this country.

There are now four tracks in the Johannesburg environs but they are all principally stock-car circuits and probably stage only about 20 meetings between them each year.

Bevan recounts: "I was riding just as a hobby back home and did maybe 10 meetings after

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returning from the States. It's not competitive, it's fun, everyone does it as a hobby purely.

"I have never competed properly in the South African Championship. They run it for a full year and I was only there for half a year because I was somewhere else - Poland or America - the rest of the time.

"This year, I won the last two rounds I rode in but the way speedway is, it's purely a hobby and guys like Denzil Kent or Deon Prinsloo - both of whom rode regularly in this country - don't participate in each meeting of the championship because it costs you money to ride. Most do a few meetings a year when it suits them and that's what I was doing.

"If everyone took it seriously, the championship would be a lot different but because speedway's only a hobby, it costs quite a bit of money to do it properly. They have some rounds in Natal and that's six or seven hours from my house. It would cost money to stay over, get tyres, things like that.

"There's no prize money at all, only for the international tours, that's the only time there would be prize money and they've not had them the last year or two. You don't even get anything towards your travel expenses!

"Corobrik has closed down now but there's tracks at Walkerville, Wembley Stadium, Brakpan and Klerkesdorp now. Most of the tracks are clay-based, they are stock-car tracks, and if you want a tyre you have got to bring it in from Europe.

"You can't go in any shop to buy a bike, no-one imports them, so you are always lending bits and bobs to each other. There's no general store, there's no importer and until that happens it will always stay at the same level.

"Some of the guys are riding real old equipment, you still see the odd guys riding Weslakes, you would never see that in England. That's the problem in South Africa and until that changes speedway is never going to be that big over there."

Now he's looking forward to a lengthy career in this country and is currently based at Joanna's parents, although he and his wife have made an offer on a new house in Maghull, where he will become neighbours to former England Test star and Belle Vue favourite Chris Pusey, although he probably doesn't know that!

His wife works at a mental hospital where infamous inmates include Moors murderer Ian Brady and by moving to Maghull she will be only a couple of minutes away from work.

Bevan went on: "I have done my travelling, I think I have got over that. I have done my fair share. Basically I'm a bit of an adventurer, if you don't try you will never know.

"But now I want to give racing in England a go and it's gone better than I expected so far. It's a little bit harder financially than I expected, it's not as easy to get sponsors as what I thought it would have been.

"It's relatively easy in South Africa, it's a smaller community, everyone knows you, everyone gives you a bit here and a bit there. I have come over here and I have got absolutely nothing really, it's been quite hard.

"It was an ambition to ride in England when I was younger and we had internationals over in South Africa every year. When the British lads were coming over, it was at that stage that I thought about it but Polish speedway was a lot bigger and I decided to go there before England.

"But this isn't the first time I've been here. I'd been out three times before - I came in 1994, 1996 and 1997 and every time I have come out, I have stayed with riders like Carl Stonehewer or Paul Thorp. I came out for a week and once I came over to watch the British Grand Prix."

Life has certainly been eventful for the 25-year-old and even his trip across this time wasn't without incident!

He revealed: "I almost got arrested on the way here! Every time I come out of South Africa, I carry an engine as hand luggage and every time I go through the screens they always ask what it is. In the past in Johannesburg, I've always told them it was a racing engine and basically they have wanted to strip the whole thing.

"This time they asked 'what is it?' and I knew they were going to check so I joked it was a bomb! They took it a lot more serious than I thought they would. I told them I was just kidding but they put me in a room and wanted to arrest me. They gave me a real warning that the next time they would lock me up! I didn't realise they would take it as far as they did."

feature: PETER OAKES

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