

Riders to Remember....Roger Abel

By Tracy Holmes



Roger Abel

In the early 70s, young Roger would go to the Templeton Speedway in his home town of Christchurch and very quickly "got the bug". He saved hard and bought a JAP from local ace, the now late Graeme Stewart. But he had to hide it from his parents because "they hated motorbikes!"

His first season was 73/74 and after quickly getting the hang of it, he starts winning races and gets his name in the paper. So the cat was out of the bag.

The next season saw Roger in the A-grade and on a Jawa. Regular jousts with the boys like Stewart, Paul Fewings, Denis Sincock, Tom Black, Alan and Max Brown fuelled his appetite for more adventure which led to his UK trip in 76.

He got to Eastbourne where being the only foreigner in the team didn't go down too well with everyone. And it was an eye-opener, arriving with his bike in the boot, seeing kids arrive in BMWs with 2 bikes on a trailer! Unfazed, Roger got on with the job backed by his personal ambition to "have fun and see the world". Eastbourne finished 8th in the league, 2nd division, and Roger's 5.2 average from 26 matches meant he could stay on next season.

Wintering in the UK, working on building sites, Roger prepared for 77 and what a year that turned out to be. Eastbourne won the league and the K.O Cup. Roger rode in 46 matches with an average of 7.3. And he was now known as the "anchor man". Also that year he got to ride one match each for first division Reading and White City, scoring 1 point in each but what an eye-opener and experience!

He also got to represent Australasia in 2 Tests, scoring 10 points at Weymouth (England 67 - Australasia 41) and 14 points at Canterbury (Australasia 63 - England

44). Flying high on all of this excitement, Roger returns to NZ and thrills the Templeton crowds with his cavalier style.

He was third in the qualifying round for a new car behind Larry Ross and Roger Wright. Qualifying for the NZ Final, he chose not to ride for personal reasons.

Back to the UK for another big year. 1978, Eastbourne finished 4th, Roger riding in 45 matches for another 7.3 average. And they retained the K.O Cup. He also rode for Reading in 14 matches and averaged 4 points. 'Speedway Star' magazine voted Roger 'Mr Bonus King' for his "all out team efforts". This award is still hugely prized by him today.

Also in 78, another two for Australasia saw 13 points at Milton Keynes in '54 all' draw. Then 7 points at Crayford in a meeting that finished England 84 Australasia 24, OUCH!!

The biggest honour that season saw him ride for NZ in the World Cup qualifying round at Reading. The final score that day was defending Champions England 43, Australia 21, U.S.A 20, NZ 12. The Kiwi scores were Bruce Cribb 4, Mitch Shirra 4, Larry Ross 2, Roger 2 and Cliff Anderson 0.

Returning to NZ for the 78/79 season, Roger decides not to enter the local rounds of the World Championship. He really wasn't sure that returning to the UK would be such a good idea either. Eastbourne were joining the 1st division and he saw it like this, "2nd division was all about comradeship and teamwork. The 1st division was where your own team-mates could run you over to maintain an average. Not fun and not for me!".

His decision to return was backed by a request to stay in the 2nd division. However this was denied as his contribution to Eastbourne was valued way too high. Well, he accepted this and got on with it. As it turned out, he got to do both. 28 matches for 1st division Eastbourne, a 3.9 average and 28 matches for 2nd division Canterbury, an average of 5 points.

Again, he got to represent NZ in the World Cup. Ivan Mauger was back in the squad so Roger was reserve. The Kiwis stunned the home favourites England by winning the 1st round from the U.S.A. This knocked the Poms out of the competition! Then they won the 2nd round in Sweden from the defending Champions Denmark. The Cup Final was at White City back in London and Roger found himself in some controversy as he was the only Weslake rider in the Kiwi team. So what? Certain others, loyal to the Jawa company weren't happy. What a shame!

It is well documented how NZ won that day from Denmark, CZ and Poland and while Roger never got to ride in the whole competition, his efforts as reserve in always being ready to go and helping everyone who needed it meant that his Gold Medal was as hard earned as anyone's!

Roger Abel, World Champion, with a Gold Medal to prove it! What a year!! And what a way to end his career.

Yes, for Roger it was all over. He returned to NZ to set himself up for the rest of his life. Buying Kenny McKinna's bike, he did a few meetings at Templeton but the spark was gone.

However, in the last few years at Moore Park near Christchurch, he has been back on the track a number of times and he has enjoyed that!! Today at 53 years of age, Roger is happy with life, his job as foreman at a boat builders, his collection of Vintage motorcycles, speedway bikes included and his wife and family. Nearly all grown and gone, not quite. When you ask him about his World Cup triumph, he looks uneasy because, "being remembered for my team efforts means more to me than any champion tag".

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