

Riders to Remember....Roger Wright

By Tracy Holmes



Roger Wright

Roger loved motorbikes from a kid and he would tear around his Dad's property with great joy. As a teenager, he rode to High School with "no warrant, no registration, no licence, no nothing!"

The late fifties saw a proper 'biker' haunting the local watering holes and enjoying the thrills of the Aranui Speedway. A few years after that closed Templeton Speedway was opened and Roger took his first riders in 1963, on a stock-bike he made to look like the real thing.

The 1964 season saw his solo debut and he finished that year at the top of the second division. The next seasons were in the A-grade alongside Murray Burt, Allan Brown, Trevor Mauger, Tom Black, Bernie LaGrosse etc.

In 1967 he won the South Island Champinoship and he gained his first cap for New Zealand the following year. It was in the 5th Test between British Lions and New Zealand. The Lions won 60-47, Roger scored score points.

After regaining the South Island title in '69, and after hearing stories from his friends about the excitement of British League racing, Roger paid his fare to the UK and with a recommendation from Ronnie Moore, spent the season with Rayleigh. He thoroughly enjoyed the life and this was reflected in his 7.2 average from 28 matches.

He was also selected to ride for Australasia against England in five tests in which he returned scores of 11, 0, 3, 3 and 6. At the season's end, Roger returned to NZ with a shipmate, one Chris Bailey, "a real nice bloke" who stunned this country winning the 1970 NZ Champs!

With no real thought of returning to the UK, Roger spent the next few seasons enjoying the local racing scene, made all the more exciting by the emergence of Graeme Stapleton. Roger would twice win the NZ Grass Track Championship and in 1971 was third in the NZ Speedway Championship behind Frank Shuter and Allan Brown.

In 1972 he won the South Island champs again and had a night at Templeton he would never forget. The World Champion, Ole Olsen was visiting and playing around with Ivan Mauger, Ronnie Moore and Barry Briggs in some exhibition riding. Anyway, Roger won the A-grade Final and that gave him a crack at the 'Superstars'. To the delight of his home crowd, Roger flew from the gate to lead Olsen and Mauger for three and a half laps. While these guys had been paid to put on a show all night, Roger was really racing.

He takes up the story:

"Olsen then got serious and dived underneath me at 100 miles per hour. He took me right out so Mauger went by as well. But to get third was something real special!"

Sweden toured NZ that year and in the third test Roger scored 10 points helping NZ to win 74-33. He would have also ridden against the U.S.A but the test was rained-off. Well, that's the 'official' reason!

The NZ Championships saw Roger finish second behind Bruce Cribb, pushing Graeme Stapleton down to third. After all of this, phonecalls and telegrams (you will have to explain to the cell-phone generation what those were) kept coming from the UK. Roger signed for Hackney and went on loan to Teeside. His 14 matches for Hackney saw a four point average while 22 matches for Teeside saw an average of 8.5. He found the 1st division too tough and a tangle with John Titman resulting in foot injuries didn't help. But a good living was made and he also tuned motors.

This would set Roger up in a lifestyle that would see him commute back and forth for the next nine years, doing what most of us could only dream of.

His British League stats are as follows:

1973 Teeside, 33 matches, 7.4 av.
1974 Teeside, 38 matches, 7.1 av.
1975 11 matches for Teeside, 7.6 av & 25 matches for Workington, 6.2 av.
1976 Workington, 31 matches, 6.5 av.
1977 Workington, 26 matches, 5.6 av.
1978 Berwick, 30 matches, 7.6 av.
1979 Berwick, 39 matches, 6.1 av.
1980 Berwick, 25 matches, 7.4 av.
1981 Berwick, 23 matches, 4.9 av.

He also rode for Australasia against England and Scotland while and was a regular test cap.

The Australasian Final was, for 6 years, THE biggest meeting in the Southern Hemisphere and Roger qualified in '77, '78, '79 and was reserve for '80.

In the '78 Final at Western Springs, his deat-heat with Mick McKeon will never be forgotten by all who saw it. In the '79 NZ Championship he was 3rd equal with Ivan Mauger behind Larry Ross and Mitch Shirra. For a guy in his mid 30s, with youngsters like David Bargh and Tony Briggs snapping at his heels, NOT BAD!!

1982 saw a second place in the South Island Final behind Larry Ross, pushing Alan Mason into 3rd.

He returned to Berwick in '83 for what turned out to be an ill fated trip. Just two meetings in and a crash ended it all. Back to Kiwiland and at the age of 40, he delighted yet again his hometown fans with a thrid place finish in the 1985 NZ Final behind Larry Ross and Alan Mason.

How does he sum-up this wonderful career?

"The fun, the friends, even the injuries, it was a ball!"

Today, still in Christchurch, Roger at 64 years young remains happily married and his son and daughter are grown and gone, if there ever is such a thing. He is a maintenance engineer with the 'Firestone Tyre' company where he's been now for 23 years. The love of motorbikes continues with restoring and riding 'Ariels'.

No speedway meeting at Moore Park is complete without Roger and friends enjoying a few drinks and even more laughs. Larry Ross used to sit with them, now he's back on the track! But that's another story!

Roger is a speedway legend in New Zealand and a true example to the next generation, one that certainly had the 'Wright' stuff.

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