

Kork Ballington

WORLD CHAMPION for Kawasaki in 250 and 350cc Grands Prix, Kork Ballington is the quiet man of road racing. Only the 'green meanie' leathers select Kork from the crowd in any race paddock.

Over the past few decades, Southern Africa has produced several road racers of outstanding talents; stars of the calibre of Ray Amm, Jim Redman, Paddy Driver, Gary Hocking, and one who could become the greatest of them all — Kork Ballington.

Although both Redman and Hocking were born in the UK, they grew up and began their racing careers in Rhodesia. Paradoxically Ballington, who was born in 1955 in Salisbury, capital of Rhodesia and birthplace of Ray Amm, emigrated to South Africa when he was barely three years old. It was there, amongst the green, rolling hills of Natal, that young Kork developed the talents that were to take him to a double World Championship many years later.

Kork ("If someone called out Hugh I wouldn't think they were talking to me") believes his unusual nickname stems from the word Cookie, a term used by his father to Kork's older sister, Lynn.

Third member of the Ballington brood is Kork's chief mentor and disciple, Dozy. Like Kork, brother Derek — senior by nearly six years — responds only to the nickname given to him when he was a toddler. His reputation as a brilliant tuner and mechanic, is only surpassed by his career as a highly qualified computer technician with the giant NCR concern.

It was the patient and ever-tolerant Dozy who set the wheels in motion, if you'll pardon the pun, when he straightened out and made presentable the step-through Jawa moped that his younger brother cum would-be World Champion illicitly borrowed for a few laps of the garden behind the family home in Pinetown, near Durban.

The bike was left there every day by a friend of Dozy's, who parked it en-route for the city. The temptation eventually proved too much for the adventurous nine-year-old Kork, who enlivened most days with a Jim Redman act when no-one was looking. After a few weeks, during which the Jawa unaccountable to its owner suffered a strange increase in petrol consumption, the inevitable happened — he pranged it. After telling his brother, young Kork disappeared for the day!

Thus began an association that years later was to reap success on the grand prix circuits of the world. There's an old saying: "If you can't beat 'em — join 'em!" and Kork's father, who had owned, but never raced a Velo KTT and a Harley-Davidson sidecar outfit, wisely bought Kork a 50cc Yamaha for his 16th birthday.



The sweet taste of success for Kork as champagne corks pop at the Austrian GP

On these machines he completed many hair-raising (and skin removing) laps of an improvised circuit of the streets surrounding his house. The association was simple; Kork bent 'em — Dozy fixed 'em! Kork pays great tribute to the tolerance and understanding of his brother at this time, who never lost his cool whenever Junior bent and scratched his most treasured possessions.

"Friends of mine used to nearly get beaten to death by their elder brothers, for just the slightest thing," recalls Kork. "They wouldn't even give them the time of day, but old Dozy always went out of his way to make Junior's life — he still calls me Junior — more pleasant. He used to lend me his motorcycles and even his car when I didn't have a licence.

Repaying

"In later years, he lent me his car for six months when I was on military call-up, just so's I could get home at weekends from Pretoria. The guy has done so much for me, it's unbelievable. Right now I'm trying my hardest to sort of repay him as much as possible, winning World Championships is the best way I know how."

Shortly after his 16th birthday, the family moved inland to Pietermaritzburg, where Kork became increasingly aware of a young lady who walked home from school at the same time. Her name was Bronwyn and it wasn't long before she was riding home on the pillion. In a way, she's still riding pillion — as his wife around the Grand Prix circuits, as

Kork's number one fan and strategist.

Meanwhile brother Dozy, on the pretext that he could no longer afford the oil bills, swapped his beloved Matchless for a pair of Honda fifties, the ones with a pressed-steel spine frame and leading-link front forks. He retained one himself for commuting and gave the other to his little brother to build as a racer on which to enter for the popular 50cc class.

The little Honda was painstakingly prepared and, with the aid of a 'demon' camshaft made up by Kork's cousin 'Gabby' Galbraith, the little bike absolutely flew, gaining Kork a third place in his very first race at the Roy Hesketh circuit early in 1967.

Kork has nothing but praise for the value of 50cc racing and attributes the current pre-eminence of many South African riders to the experience they gained in this class.

"We used to cut our street fifties to pieces, you know, which used to give us technical know-how as well. If you cut too much off the frame it broke in half, so you learned a bit about stress and where not to cut — and you learned how to tune your motors because we couldn't get conversion kits to begin with."

"You really had to think about what you were doing; I reckon it's the best grounding you can get for motorcycle racing. I mean, you've got to learn to run before you can walk, I reckon that half the trouble with guys in England these days is that they're coming to the line in club racing with brand-new TZ Yamahas and have never raced anything in their lives before."

To make a fifty go quickly entails meticulous preparation and getting lower, braking later and opening-up sooner than the next rider. Certainly, when examining the progress of current South African riders — Ballington, North, Ekerold, Crammond and Van Breda, Kork's assertions begin to make sense. It's certainly not the amount of competition they get over there, for often they're lucky if they have a meeting more than once a fortnight, and then it's against the same old crowd. Overseas competition is a rarity.

The years that followed Kork's debut in the 500cc class saw him win just about every award that the sport had to offer in his home country, demonstrating his extraordinary versatility by riding in almost every class from 50cc to 750cc racing and production classes.

He achieved his most notable successes aboard a Kawasaki, one of the early Mach 1 versions of the redoubtable 500cc three-cylinder two-strokes, in the production classes.

Dozy and the fervent hopes of every motorcycle enthusiast in South Africa.

"I brought my life savings, which wasn't a hell of a lot; Bronwyn brought hers, which was even less and Dozy brought all his, which was a substantial amount and we just pooled it, you know. How many guys would do that for their younger brother? We all ended up as broke as you can get, but somehow, thanks to Dozy's ability, there did seem a light at the end of the tunnel and we stuck it out, even starting to achieve a few places before the end of the season."

1973 was indeed a difficult year. Like the Innocents Abroad that they undoubtedly were, the three of them lived under canvas, at least they did until the night in France when a storm blew the tent out of their lives forever! Somehow they eked out an existence, scraping together enough to eat and pay for the racing out of Kork's meagre pickings.

This was a period that Kork considers an invaluable part of his Grand Prix apprenticeship: learning the hard way what

was the breakthrough that Kork so desperately needed and from then on the future became decidedly more rosy. In addition to the support from Sid, Kork secured the services of Birmingham's Fred Hadley, who worked on Kork's machinery to such good effect that he had the quickest pair of TZ Yamahas in the country.

In 1976 Kork made his bid to hit the big-time back in the Continental Circus equipped with a brace of new Yamaha twins and a second-hand 750. What a year that was! First time out on the 250 he won at Rouen, virtually setting them up for the season for, as Kork points out: "I think in terms of start and prize money I came away with more than I would have earned in half-a-dozen meetings in England."

The year proved to be enormously successful, with Kork winning five International races, crowning it all with his first Grand Prix win in Barcelona. "It was a magic year," says Kork. "And I'm really grateful to Sid Griffiths, because basically he gave me the tools to start doing the job properly."

When writing of Kork Ballington it is difficult to confine one's comments to the singular. Bronwyn Ballington is so inextricably interwoven in the fortunes of her man. "We are so close," says Kork, "that recently, when some Italian journalist asked me to complete a questionnaire, to the question 'Who is your best friend?' I automatically wrote down 'wife' without even a second thought."

Stability

Kork is adamant that the wife or girl of any rider has an important role to play in providing the so-necessary stability on the demanding Grand Prix circus.

Undoubtedly, with such a devoted team as Bronwyn and his brother Dozy, Kork Ballington is not lacking in this essential ingredient and perhaps this is in no small way responsible for his extraordinary reputation for being a 'cool customer' amongst a fraternity perhaps more notable for its share of prima donnas than Cool Hand Lukes.

Kork's progress in 1976 was such that his meteoric rise couldn't but fail to be noticed by the factory teams and it was Kawasaki who got in with the first sensible offer for the use of his talents.

They weren't disappointed, with Kork collecting not only the expected 250cc title the following year but bringing home the 350cc Championship as well.

The events of the last two seasons are perhaps too fresh in the minds of the average enthusiast to warrant re-telling, but at the time of writing, Kork Ballington looks to be well on the way to his second consecutive double World Championship. This brings us to the inevitable question, where to now?

Although since coming to Europe, Kork may have die-cast himself into the role of a 250/350cc campaigner, he quite forcibly points out that he has ridden the big ones with no small measure of success. The prospect of campaigning in the 500cc class does not daunt him in the least, neither does the nature of the opposition, having beaten both Roberts and Sheene on 250s and 750s on different occasions in the past.

Much has been speculated about the existence of a Kawasaki 500. If and when it appears, will it be competitive from the drop of the flag, or will it require a period of development like that of the little twins? But as Kork himself says: "If Kawasaki do bring out a 500 they know it's going to be a serious business; I have nothing but admiration for the technical guys at Kawasaki and believe they do have the capabilities of producing a machine to live with the Suzukis and Yamahas."

And if they don't? I think that either way the fans are in for a treat in 1980 when the Flying Springbok gets in amongst the established stars in what is, and always has been, the 'Blue Riband' of motorcycling racing — the 500cc World's Championship. — J.H.



Kork relaxes at home with his number one fan and wife, Bronwyn

"That's when I learned I had the courage to match my ability," smiles Kork. "It weaved horribly, but nevertheless I managed to weave my way to quite a few victories. It had no suspension, no brakes and lots of power." The Mach 1 was followed by one of the first H1R Kawasaki racers, a machine which produced a string of victories.

Although aware he was at the point where he could progress very little in South Africa, Kork was undecided as to whether to try his luck in Europe. He asked the advice of the seasoned Grand Prix tuner Nobby Clark, also a Rhodesian and former top works' mechanic in the hey-day of the Honda Grand Prix effort. "It's a jungle," said Nobby. "You'll never make headway."

Sponsored

The matter was resolved when Kork won a race sponsored by the Natal Mercury, a local newspaper, which offered as first prize a trip to Europe plus freightage for a race machine and about £175 pocket money. The pocket money was a pittance, but it was a start . . .

Shortly before he was due to leave for England, Kork dropped his Seeley-framed Kawasaki in a big way and the bike was all but a complete write-off. It seemed as if the "Great Adventure" would be ill-fated, when the Natal Mercury, hearing of his plight, launched an appeal fund. The response was absolutely fantastic. The bike was completely restored and Kork embarked for Europe early in 1973, complete with girl-friend Bronwyn, brother

life on the famed 'Continental Circus' was all about . . . getting to know who pulled what strings that led to entries and start money. He firmly believes that his unusual nickname proved of value in helping establish himself in the minds of race promoters.

"My nickname has come in handy, you know, I'm basically a very quiet person, especially when I first came to Europe, and was too shy to push myself. But people couldn't forget the name Kork, it sort of stuck in their minds — even if my personality didn't."

Kork and Bronwyn came back for more in 1974; Dozy decided to try and recoup some of his losses with a spell working back for NCR in South Africa. Kork fettled his own machinery that year, although he maintains that Dozy had set the bikes up so well prior to his departure they needed very little attention throughout the whole of that season. That year was a year of consolidation, with Kork firmly establishing himself as one of the sport's top privateers, gaining many wins both on the Continent and England, where one notable victory was in the Thruxton 500 miler, riding a Kawasaki shared with Barry Ditchburn.

Kork and Bronwyn dug in their heels and braved out their first English winter at the end of that season. After starting off the 1975 season under their own steam, they attracted the attention of arch enthusiast Sid Griffiths, who provided Kork with sorely-needed new machinery, plus a van and financial help. It