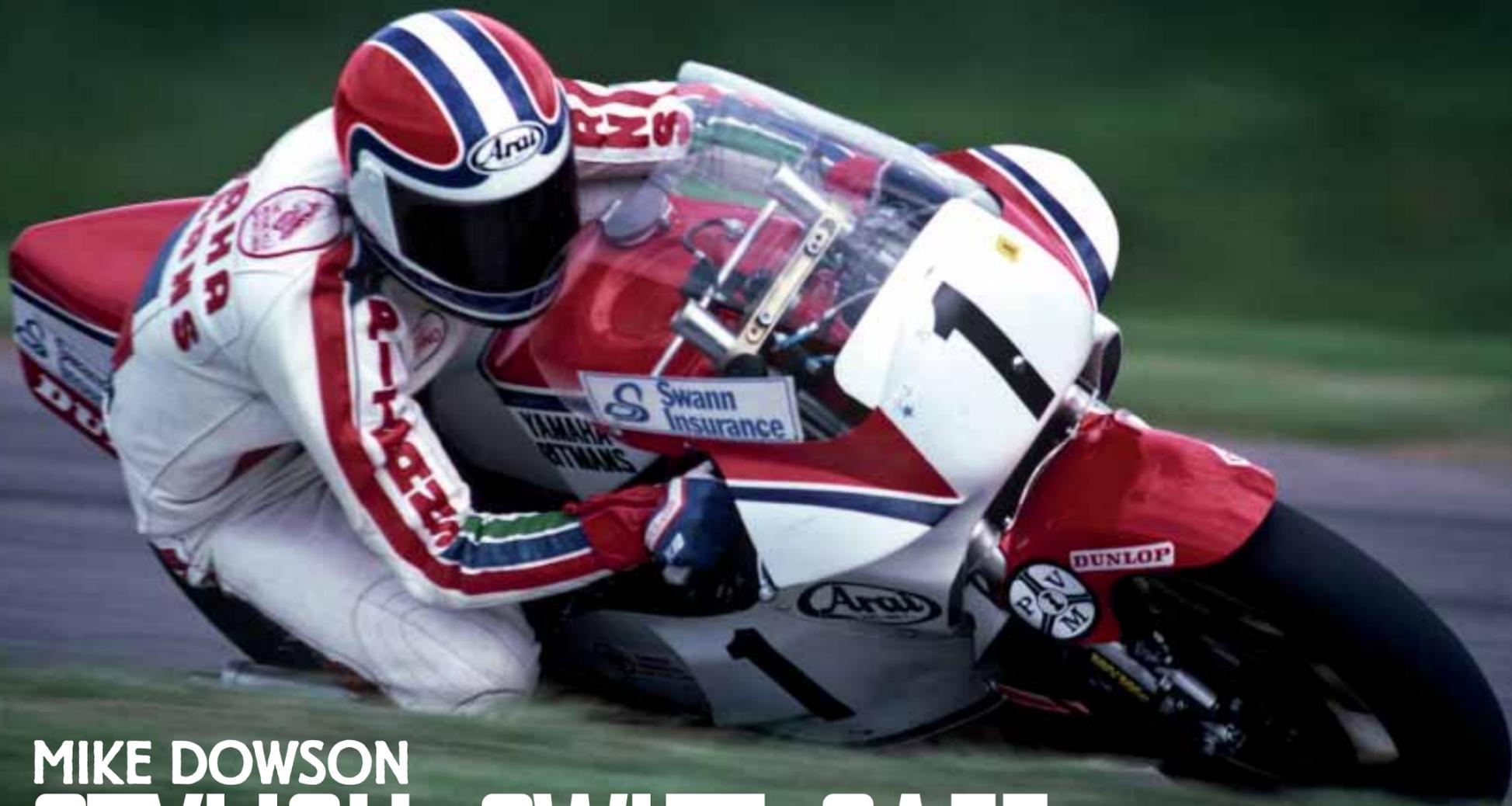


MIKE DOWSON

Dowson made his presence felt in the 1984 Swann Series on the out-dated Pitman's TZ750 which was fitted with a FJ1100 front end.



MIKE DOWSON STYLISH, SWIFT, SAFE.

Mike Dowson stood at the top of the podium at Tsukuba Circuit in Japan, having just ridden the race of his life. He looked down at the huge crowd that had gathered for the presentation. This should have been a highlight for Dowson. He'd just blown away the top international Superbike riders, including recently crowned 1991 World Champion, Doug Polen, in his first outing on a bike he'd led the development of for Kawasaki.

Story Des Lewis Photos John Ford, Mal Pitman, OBA archives.

MIKE DOWSON



Instead of feeling euphoric, he was exhausted. Not from the day's race, but from enduring the most frustrating two years of his career where he felt hamstrung by mismanagement, unfulfilled promises and lack of commitment by the parent company. Sure, he'd made an emphatic point to Kawasaki Heavy Industries after developing the bike with his own satellite team, but the taste in his mouth was bitter. He felt it was time to part.

He peeled off his leathers and riding gear, and threw them all into the crowd. On the way out, he walked over to the team manager and said, "see you later, I'm out of here". This effectively closed the chapter on Mike Dowson's international motorcycling career. One that had promised so much but fell short, just when he was on the brink of international success. Mike was one of Australia's most gifted and successful riders. He was up with the best of them.

He'd been in the winner's circle nationally with achievements that included the record for the most wins in the Castrol 6-Hour (which he shares with Ken Blake). He also scored eleven victories in nine years at Mount Panorama, Bathurst, including a double win in his first year there, 1980. Immediately before his time with Kawasaki, he was contracted with the successful Yamaha Racing Team in Japan where he had two good seasons in >

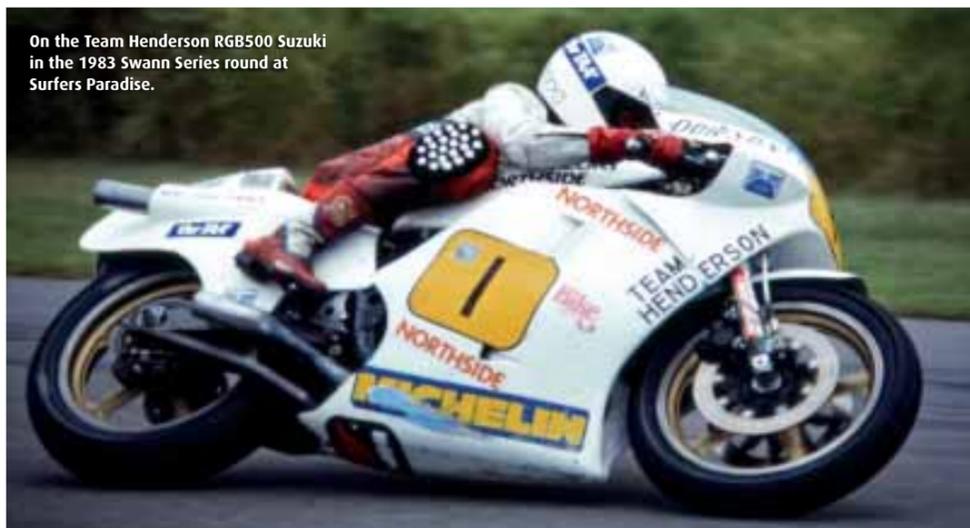
MIKE DOWSON

the development classes. But at the end of '89, he jumped ship from Yamaha in an ill-thought-out decision that likely put paid to prospects of success at the highest level. How Mike got to this point is a captivating story and a classic case of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

Like most successful motorcycle racers, Mike cut his teeth in the sport as a kid. He and his young brother, Anthony, started competing in motocross at the Shrubland Park Motocross track outside Bunbury in WA's south west. The family's involvement in motorcycling was extensive and went beyond motocross competition. His father, Rex, was a mechanic and had moved the family to Bunbury to start up a Yamaha dealership for Ken George.

"My first ride was around 1973 on a trail bike that Dad converted into a motocross bike, based on the Yamaha LT2 MX. I was just a kid and didn't take things too seriously," says Mike. "I do remember watching the likes of Glen Britza, Ray Buck, Phil Bruce and Wayne Patterson, who were all successful in motocross and raced at the track. But really, I was more concerned about having my turn. I don't think I was ever that good at Motocross", he reflected. "We'd also go to Wanneroo to watch the WA round of the Australian Road Racing Championships. It was mind-blowing stuff. While dad was in the pits helping George Scott and the other locals, I'd head to the back of the track where I could watch all the big guys come out of the basin, up and over a crest and then down the long straight. I remember the likes of Warren Willing, Greg Pretty, Murray and Jeff Sayle, riding TZ700s, Kawasaki triples, etc. Those bikes were awesome and it just blew me away."

Mike says one rider who really set an impression was Gregg Hansford. "The guys would come out of the basin lighting the back wheel up. They'd be wrestling with their bikes while on the gas, before straightening for the crest, where the bikes would want to wheel stand. Then they'd be rolling the throttle off to keep the front wheel down, losing momentum, before getting back on the gas. Gregg would come out of the basin and as he got to the hill, instead of going straight, he'd take a turn and swing back again to go around the crest, effectively turning it into a bend. By getting the bike on its side, it would reduce the gearing, so he could stay powered up and maintain momentum. He was the



On the Team Henderson R6B500 Suzuki in the 1983 Swann Series round at Surfers Paradise.

only one to do this and it was the most technical and exhilarating thing I remember as a young bloke. It still blows me away thinking about."

These visits saw the Dowson boys and their father turn to road racing. "Dad was influenced by the guys from Ken George, and Anthony was becoming really keen on road racing. Dad built a replica TA125 road racer with the motor from the old YZ125 motocross bike mounted in a road bike frame and running on methanol. While Anthony was the driving force, he was too young to ride at Wanneroo. So, I got the first ride. We progressed with an RD250, where I

'this kid's pretty good, you need to get him on the east coast.'

started running in both the 250 and 350 events. We'd contest both classes on the one bike with Dad working feverishly between races to replace the barrels, re-jet the carbies, change the pipes and switch external sprockets to get the gearing right. Dad's a legend when it comes to mechanics, so between him doing the work on the bike and mum praying, I had it pretty well sorted," he laughs.

Between 1976 and 1979, Mike honed his skills at a state level, contesting track events at Wanneroo and round the house events throughout WA. This bore fruit and in the 1981/82 seasons he met with success, winning most of the state titles. "At the time, production races were popular. Andrew (Ajay)

Johnson came to Wanneroo for the 3 Hour Unlimited Production race. He also rode in the 250 event in the morning, and I beat him.

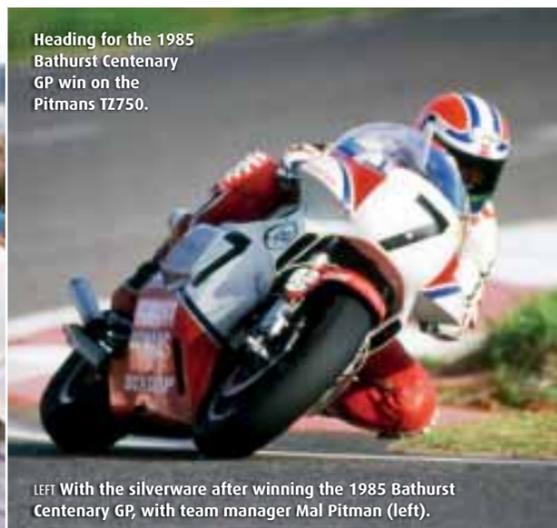
After the race he went up to mum and dad and said, 'this kid's pretty good, you need to get him on the east coast'."

"In 1980 we ventured east and took a new RD250LC to Bathurst. I won the 250 Production race. The bike hadn't yet been released for sale in WA and the win was controversial, with some accusing us of cheating as they felt the bike was a prototype, even though it had been released over east. I don't really remember much about this though as the folks dealt with it. I was just focused on my riding, the mechanics and the bike; it was just about going quicker."

So, to take his racing to the next level, the family uprooted in 1983 and moved to Brisbane. Mike recalls they were helped a lot by Rob Assink from Gaythorne Yamaha in Brisbane. Rob gave his father a job in the workshop and also found work for Mike. "1983 was mainly about gaining momentum. I was racing against the likes of Paul Lewis, Chris Oldfield, Jeff Sayle, and many others who were at the fore of the 250 and 350 leagues," recounted Mike. "I wasn't really knocking at their door, but learnt heaps."

1984 was a big year as his racing stepped up a cog. He had a lot of fun as he started cutting it in the big league.

"We went to Bathurst at Easter in '84 on a TZ 750 that Mal Pitman had built. It was insane and I had a frigging ball. It was 300km/h stuff, doing wheelies down Conrod straight and putting down just before



Heading for the 1985 Bathurst Centenary GP win on the Pitmans TZ750.

LEFT With the silverware after winning the 1985 Bathurst Centenary GP, with team manager Mal Pitman (left).

the braking zone. On one lap, I had the front wheel up so long it stopped spinning and when it put down, it just flicked onto full lock. In that split second, I somehow caught it, put the brakes on, shat myself and thanked mum for her prayers. It was a bucket load of fun. Here I was, a young guy from country WA, mixing it with all my legends. It was very, very cool!"

While contesting the Australian Championship rounds, Mike was approached by a group of businessmen who'd formed Team Camo. They asked him to scout a young rider for them. "So, while I was travelling, I'd often seen Mick Doohan out there in different places. He'd be getting around in this old Holden ute with his German Shepherd. Even as a young bloke, he was fast and very impressive. I tracked him down to the Gold Coast, took him to Brisbane, got him a haircut, and introduced him to Team Camo. And really, the rest is history. He became the best rider I've ever seen."

But for Mike, 1984 was a big year and he hit the spotlight with production endurance racing. "A number of new production bikes had come out, including the GPZ900 from Kawasaki, Honda's V4 1000R and the GSX R750 Suzuki. Yamaha rushed three of the new RZ500s into the country just in time for the start of the '84 production endurance season. I was lucky enough to get a ride on one. The Hub 300 was one of the early endurance races in the year, ahead of the Winton 500 and the big one, the Castrol 6-Hour at Oran Park. So, I got this ride through Rob Assink, up against this top field, on the little RZ500." And with a big grin he says, "And I won it. That put the focus on me nationally for the first time as all the guns were there, including Rob Phillis and Malcolm Campbell.

After this, Mike was contracted with (Dunlop distributor) Emerson Sport to compete in the Castrol 6-Hour, teamed up with Geoff McNaughton. The Castrol 6-Hour really was a really big thing and it was being televised live. The manufacturers were throwing everything at it. Wayne Gardner, who was already a household name internationally, was the main drawcard and had come across to compete with John Pace on the Honda. The lead entry for Yamaha was the Toshiba team with Richard Scott and Steven Gall. But in the lead up to the race, it became apparent my times and Richard Scott's



On the Yamaha Dealer team FZ750 at Bathurst, 1986.



At Bathurst, 1986 where he scored a 250/350 GP double.

were comparable, as were Geoff with Steven's. A decision was made the day before the race that the two teams would join forces. I'd ride with Scotty, and Geoff and Gally would team up."

The 1984 6-Hour went down as one of the most tightly contested in the race's history. The circuit had been changed from Amaroo to Oran Park and

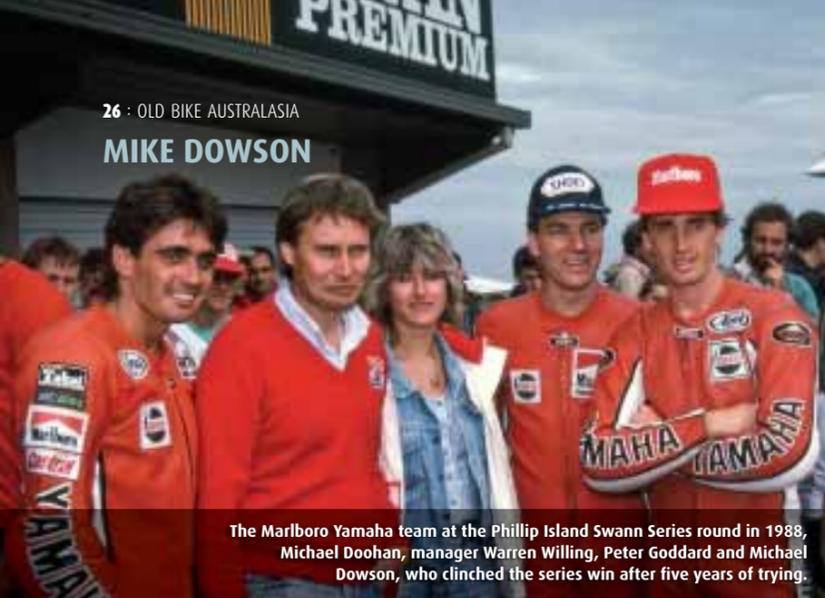
consensus was the RZ would struggle against its bigger and more powerful rivals on this circuit. The pace was furious and Mike rode his heart out during the first stint to set them up for the rest of the race. He worked his way past the leaders, which included a tough battle with Wayne Gardner and a brilliant overtake of the race favourite, Rob Phillis, to take >



ABOVE Mike teamed with Kevin Magee to win the 1985 Denso 500 at Winton on the Yamaha Dealer team FZ750. RIGHT Collecting the 1985 Denso 500 trophy with teammate Kevin Magee.



MIKE DOWSON



The Marlboro Yamaha team at the Phillip Island Swann Series round in 1988, Michael Doohan, manager Warren Willing, Peter Goddard and Michael Dowson, who clinched the series win after five years of trying.



Heading for a pair of second places behind teammate Mick Doohan at the first Australian World Superbike round, Oran Park in 1988.



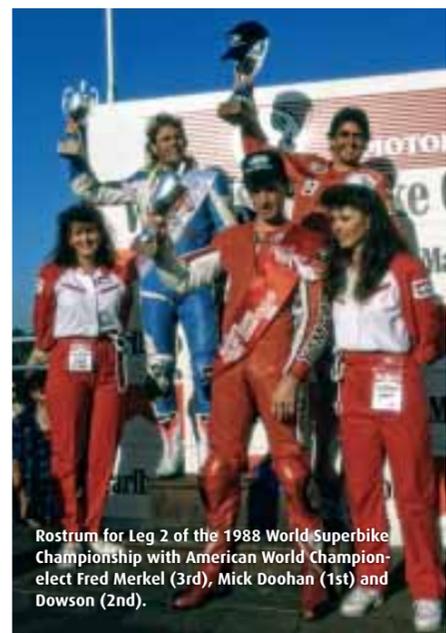
TOP On his way to winning the 1988 Arai 500 at Bathurst, teamed with Michael Doohan. ABOVE Arai importer Jim Cran-Crombie presents the 1988 Arai 500 trophy to Dowson and Doohan.

the lead ahead of the first stop. The frenetic pace continued all through the race and, as it drew to a close, Richard Scott was in the lead, peddling hard to fend off a challenge from John Pace. Richard managed to hold on and take the chequered flag.

After this highlight, Mike continued to enjoy the rest of the season. Even though they didn't win, he recalls with particular amusement the international Swann Series. Suzuki and Honda were in fierce competition with their new breed of ultra-light 500cc Grand Prix machines; the four cylinder Skoal Bandit RGB Suzuki 500, and the RSV500V3 from Honda. Riders included Rob McElnea and Wayne Gardner, who were continuing their battle from Europe, as well as the likes of Glenn Middlemiss, Andrew Johnson, Malcolm Campbell, Rob Phillis and John Pace. "Mal Pitman built up the old TZ 750 for me to contest the series. By then, it was getting pretty long in the tooth. Will Hagon, commentating for the ABC, took the micky out the bike calling it 'the old man's axe'. There I was on Mal Pitman's homebuilt TZ750, lining up against the factory sponsored Grand Prix racers."

The series of six races over different circuits was hotly contested, with wins by a number of different riders. Mike was right in the mix on this bike that had no right to be so competitive. "I think we finished around 4th or 5th over the series, which surprised many. And we got great TV coverage," he says reflecting on the series. "Toward the end of the season we were told we had the Toshiba sponsorship for the '85 season, which meant we were directly linked with Yamaha Australia. We had a reasonable year, winning a few endurance races including the Denso 500 at Winton, where I teamed with Kevin Magee."

One of the highlights for 1985 was the Bathurst Centenary Grand Prix. "During the year, Mal Pitman produced another TZ750, did it up in the Toshiba Yamaha colours and we took it to the Bathurst Centenary GP. It was basically an unlimited event and everyone was there. Johnny Pace was probably my main competitor, riding the RGB500 Suzuki. The field also included a whole bunch of guys on superbikes, which were just starting to take off. "Johnny and I managed to take off and gap everyone, and for the whole race we were all over each other. On the



Rostrum for Leg 2 of the 1988 World Superbike Championship with American World Champion-elect Fred Merkel (3rd), Mick Doohan (1st) and Dowson (2nd).

last lap he came off at Forrest's Elbow and I just closed for home to take the win. "Unfortunately, Johnny hurt himself in that fall and didn't come good for a while. But one thing that was amusing was the lead up where I remember trying to get the gearing right. The bike's maximum revs through the gears was 8,500 and I wanted that down Conrod. We were fiddling with the aerodynamics and other tweaks to get it right, but the bike was only pulling 7,900 and I was getting frustrated. Unbeknown to me, they'd set up speed sensors down Conrod and the media had announced the speeds we were doing. I came into the pits frustrated at not getting the revs. Mal came up, slapped me on the back and said, 'how's that?' I turned and said, 'I'm only pulling 7,900'. And he said 'your never bloody happy, I don't know what I have to do to keep you happy! You've just done 305. No one's been that fast before and you're still not happy'. "The set-up must have been good because, apart from winning the race, Mike also set a new lap record for the class, which was no mean feat given the bike's age.

"During '85, Kevin and I were pretty much hot favourites for the Castrol 6-Hour. It was a dry/wet race and we were changing rear tyres and rider each hour. We had soft and hard tyres and the only way to tell them was a little coloured spot on the tyre. On one stint though, where I was to have a soft tyre, I just didn't seem have any grip and couldn't hold the thing up. Eventually I went down. To this day I'm convinced I had the wrong tyre for that hour. I say that because both before and after, Kevin and I were doing the same times. It was just the one stint where I struggled, and I reckon it cost us the race. We finished third. We're good mates and he still >

MIKE DOWSON

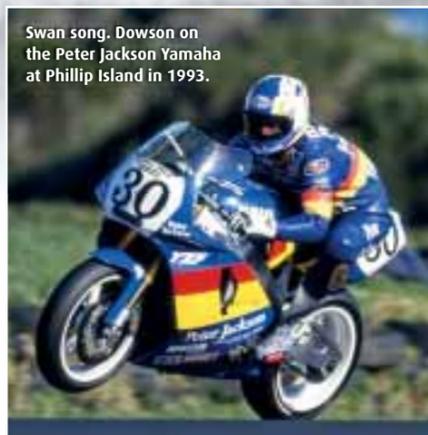


ABOVE In his only Grand Prix start, Dowson dices with Randy Mamola's works Cagiva at Phillip Island in 1989. The Yamaha was a works 1988 engine in a 1989 chassis and Mike brought it home a creditable ninth in the 500cc GP.

rips me on how I cost him his first Castrol 6-Hour. It would have been my second, but that's racing." Redemption is sweet though and Mike went on to win the 6-Hour for the next two consecutive years. This meant, in the four years prior to the race being dropped, he won three and came third in the other. In 1986 Warren Willing took over the Yamaha team management and started the Marlboro Yamaha team. Mike and Kevin continued as team mates and Mike is full of praise for Warren's "genius" and how he helped all those he worked with. "1986 and '87 were good years for us under Warren's guidance. Once we hit our straps, we were pretty well winning everything and it was a time of real dominance. We didn't contest the 250 and 350 Grand Prix championship events and focused on the Superbikes. When the Marlboro Yamaha thing happened, it was almost surreal for us. We were both just country lads and here we were in the most high-profile team in Australia. We were a bit shell shocked to be honest." But the '86 season started with a wake-up call for them. "We'd both flown in to Calder for the first race of the season. A good friend, Trevor Flood, who'd sponsored Kevin previously, came to our hotel on the Saturday evening after qualifying. "Trevor says,

"Why don't we go out and celebrate this thing you guys are doing'. Not a problem we think, so we hop in his BMW and he drags us off to his favourite bar in Melbourne. We didn't get back until around three in the morning. I'm not much of a drinker and was in a hell of a mess. Sunday morning and I'm in the pits with a hangover. George Pyne, who'd put this whole thing together for Yamaha Australia, had flown in to watch. We didn't know, but he was staying at the same hotel. In the morning, he says to us, 'Can you boys come over here, I want to have a bit of a talk to you both?' I'm crapping myself thinking he knew what we got up to. And then he says, 'I'd just like to say I'm so impressed with you two young blokes. I got into the hotel at about 8:00 last night and saw your cars in the bays and that your lights were out.' And thinking we'd turned in early, he said 'I would like to say it is a great thing that you guys are on this team and I'm sure we'll do well.' "We never did that again. And it was all Trevor Flood's fault," Mike says with a laugh.

Success riding in the Marlboro Team also opened the doors for both riders internationally. "Kevin had done the Suzuka 8-Hour the year before and said we 'gotta do it again'. So, it was in our contract and in July we rocked up to do the race." The field included Kenny Roberts teamed with Mike Baldwin, Wayne Gardner with Dominique Sarron, and Kevin Shwartz with Sotoshi Tsujimoto. "At that time Yamaha had three tiers in its motorsport division. MS1 was the highest end, with bikes ridden by the likes of Kenny Roberts. Then they had MS2, which was the development class and down a notch, on the lowest performance rung, was MS3, the production bikes. We got our chance on a production bike, an FZ750. Gardner and Sarron won the race and Kevin and I got second. That blew us away. There were more than 100,000 spectators and it was like achieving rock star status. Second was unreal, especially as we were on a production machine. And we won \$50k prize money. Once again, a couple of kids from country Australia exceeding their wildest dreams. After that, while we had commitments in Australia during 1987, we signed up for a lot of races in Japan. It was a pretty good time."



Swan song. Dowson on the Peter Jackson Yamaha at Phillip Island in 1993.

Throughout 1988 and 1989, Mike continued with the Yamaha Racing Team in Japan, competing mainly in Japan and Malaysia. Most of his racing was in the International superbike series and he was posting some reasonable results. He was also riding back home and in 1988 was teamed with Mick Doohan in the Marlboro Yamaha team. They had a good season, although Mike found he was always running second to Doohan. "I couldn't beat the bugger", he laughs. "As the '89 season drew to a close, I got approached by Peter Doyle. He and his father Neville had run the Kawasaki racing team in Australia for years. Peter was the main guy behind Rob Phillis and Aaron Slight. They'd been travelling to Japan for some racing and we'd got to know each other."

"Peter called and said Kawasaki were looking for a rider. 'Your name's been mentioned and they're keen for you to do the Formula One stuff.' He said they were also developing a 250 Grand Prix bike to go back into the world championships, which particularly interested me as I still considered myself a Grand Prix rider and harboured ambitions in the 250 and 350 classes. At the time Yamaha had such a depth of talent and no approach had been made to me about the next season. Even though I'd had a good year, I was feeling a bit insecure. Given Kawasaki were wanting to get back into Grand Prix, I thought, 'I'm in'. It seemed a no brainer. And, no sooner than I'd made my mind up, I was back in Bunbury and got a call from Maikawai, who was



From bikes to boats: Mike and Jo Dowson at their charter boat base.

Head of Yamaha Racing's MS1 division. He says to me, 'Mike san, what do you want to do next year?'

"I was confused as normally they'd just tell you what you'd ride, so I misread the situation. Like an idiot I thought this was a signal I was on my way out and told him I'd taken up an offer from Kawasaki. But what became clear to me afterwards was I was being offered a great opportunity; that I could effectively take my pick. If I'd realised what he was saying, I'd have pulled out of the Kawasaki agreement and put all my efforts into a Grand Prix bike in the Japanese championship, because that's what was being offered."

The move to Kawasaki proved to be a train wreck from Mike's perspective and, worse still, they soon dropped development of the 250 Grand Prix bike, which had been a major incentive. "I hadn't realised how badly Kawasaki had lost its way and what was happening. Appointment as Engineer in Charge of the team was largely a prize for an engineer from another division within Kawasaki Industries who'd exceeded targets. They didn't need any motorcycle racing experience. The Engineer in Charge during my first year had actually come from the power products section. Each year they'd have a new guy in charge. They were going around in circles and it just got worse.

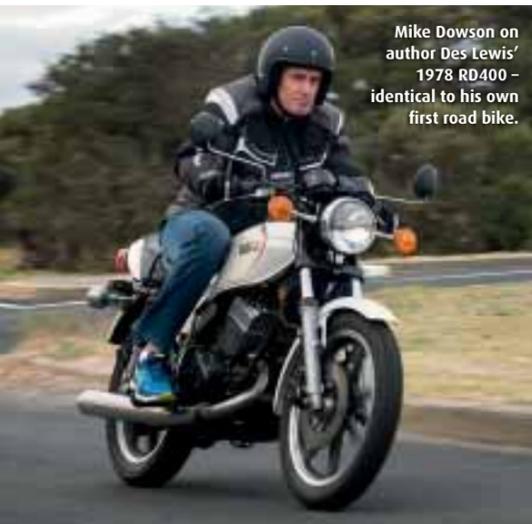
"At the end of the first season, I was fed up. It was a nightmare. I'd never crashed so much in all my career. I wasn't a crasher and here I was crashing all the time and breaking bones. At one stage I couldn't ride for two broken arms. Aaron Slight was my teammate and he was having the same problems. So, at the end of the year, I flew to Japan with an interpreter and said, 'I either want out of the contract or you give me my own team and we'll build a machine'. They said 'yes, no problem, we can do that for you'.

"Two weeks later I was home and my interpreter rang and said 'I've got good news and bad news. They are going to build the bike you want but it won't be ready until the end of the season'. There was that much to change. This did my head in. I'd gotten nowhere in the past twelve months and my reputation had hit rock bottom. I persevered through that second season. Eventually, the bike was ready for its first race, which happened to be the last race of '91 at Tsukuba. Most of the world superbike guys came together as this was a fairly prestigious international meeting and the last of the Japanese series. And I managed to blow them away on this new bike in its first outing. I felt vindicated and had proven a point. It was then I walked away."

Tsukuba was the closing chapter in Mike's international career. After a break, he did some national events over the following couple of seasons, riding cameo for Mal Pitman in the Peter Jackson Yamaha team. He also rode in the Suzuka 8-Hour for Yoshimura Suzuki. But the disappointment of the final two years in Japan had sapped his passion and he stepped out of racing after '93 to pursue his other love; boating.

Mike now works in the charter boat business. He recently re-married and, with his wife Jo, runs a charter boat business. Each year they head north for tours around the Kimberley region.

It's not a bad life after all, despite his regrets. ■



Mike Dowson on author Des Lewis' 1978 RD400 - identical to his own first road bike.



SCHUBERTH

CLASSIC FULL-FACE
STATE-OF-THE-ART
TECHNOLOGY

RIGHT FOR ANY HEAD
AND ANY BIKE



Integrated Communication
German Quality
5 Year Guarantee
Maximum Safety
Multi-Channel Ventilation
Free Tinted Visor

AVAILABLE NOW

PROCYCLES

148 George St, Hornsby • 02 9910 9500
140 Princes Hwy, St Peters • 02 9564 8000
www.procycles.com.au