

Barry Sheene - 1950-2003

A true champion - long may we remember him



From an Aussie paper last year....in retrospect, Barry did it his way, sadly he lost the battle 9 March 2003

Bazza's biggest race
September 15 2002

For Barry Sheene, cancer is just another opponent to thrash. Sue Mott reports. (The Age Newspaper)

The last time I had seen Barry Sheene he was selling Brut aftershave to the masses on television in the early 1980s. I know. I bought some. "Pungent", my mother called it with visible restraint. The world 500cc motorcycling champion (twice) was the perfect advertising vehicle. Machismo on hot wheels with irresistible cheek. Men loved him for his sprockets (etc) and travelling at 200 mph. Women loved him, often going beyond the metaphysical boundary to prove it. He lost his virginity, he once claimed, at the age of 14 on a snooker table in the crypt of St Martin-in-the-Fields in London.

This time I am seeing Barry Sheene as a cancer patient. Not that "patient" is the word. He was 52 on September 11. You wouldn't think so. He looks exactly the same, chirpiness personified on two oft-reassembled legs. Only thinner, due to a recent diet that consisted entirely of beetroot, Chinese cabbage, carrot and radish juice. He is fighting this disease the "natural" way.

"I don't want to have chemotherapy. Anybody I've ever known who's had it has been, basically, completely destroyed. I can't let someone put an IV drip in my arm and inject me with poison. I've seen friends of mine after chemo. They look like dead people who can still talk."

He is saying this amicably, reasonably, vehemently in the car taking him to Heathrow. Back to his home in Australia, via Los Angeles, with his wife, Stephanie, to continue the fight he has no intention of losing. "I am not prepared to entertain the thought that it's going to kill me."

Typical of a man who danced with danger on two wheels and broke, famously, almost every bone in his skeletal arrangement. "Nah, I didn't," he said modestly, while telling the driver to "nip up right, mate, where that little Golf's going" and asking: "Could you turn the blower down to one, please? Luvly. Thanks pal." He is not a natural passenger.

All right, he didn't break every bone. There must be the odd bit of unadulterated calcium in his small, sharp, lively frame. But in 1975, a blown rear tyre caused him to crash at 280kmh during practice for the Daytona 200 in Florida, shattering his left leg, smashing a thigh, breaking six ribs, fracturing a wrist, and wrecking his collarbone. He woke up in hospital and asked the nurse for "a fag".

His favourite story is of the properly spoken BBC interviewer who asked him what was going through his mind at the moment of impact. "Your arse, if you're going fast enough," said Sheene delightedly into the microphone.

In 1982, already the double world champion, he crashed at Silverstone during practice for the British Grand Prix ("Wasn't my fault; came over a hill and there was a wreck right in front of me") and turned his legs into a "jigsaw puzzle" for a surgeon to spend eight hours realigning. Two 18-centimetre pillars of stainless steel, two 13-centimetre plates and 26 steel screws later, he had a pair of legs again. They told him it would take three months to bend his knees to an angle of 90 degrees. It took him two weeks and four days to manage 110 degrees.

This is the willpower he takes into his forthcoming battle. I told him that he seemed fearless. "What, me? No. I'm a right old Mary. But I've no respect for this shifty disease. I'm not going to give it any space in my life. I am going to do everything in my power to get rid of it the natural way.

"I've refused the operation. I don't want to be opened up and have the best part of my stomach cut away and my oesophagus removed so that forever more, if ever I bent over to tie my shoelaces, everything I'd just eaten would end up all over the floor. That's not quality of life. I don't want my children to see me in that state."

His two children, Sidonie, 17, and Freddie, 13, are at boarding school in Melbourne. Telling them about the disease was the hardest part. "I took them out of school and they bounced in saying, 'How great is this, Dad!' Then I had to sit down and tell them. It was horrible. I was a little economical with the truth but I did tell them basically what was happening. At times like this, you suddenly realise how much you mean to your children. Usually it's, 'Oh, Dad, you're such a dork!' It was terrible and incredibly touching at the same time."

Sheene discovered he had cancer of the stomach and the oesophagus earlier this year, after the British Grand Prix at Donington Park (where he won previously), when he had trouble swallowing his food. "I got home to Australia and my mate sent me to a doctor. I had an endoscopy. I came round from the anaesthetic, got dressed and then Steph and I went into the doctor's office. 'Bloody 'ell, Baz, it's cancer,' he said. Best way to tell me. Straight out with it," Sheene said.

"He can't do anything simple. He has to go the full monty," observed Stephanie, a former model, with affectionate exasperation from the front seat. She met him when he was on crutches in 1975. She was with her first husband at the time, ironically a huge Sheene fan. "He wasn't too impressed, actually," she said.

She and Sheene had a trial separation once, about five years ago. But it was hopeless. She only moved round the corner from the home they had built together in Surfers Paradise. Going back to one of nature's charismatics wasn't that difficult a decision.

At every age Sheene seems to have been blessed with courage, audacity and the humility to see through the distorting veil of fame. "All I was doing was racing a bloody motorbike," he said. "I can't stand people who are legends in their own lunchtime. I'm the sort of bloke who, if you've got time for me, I've got time for you. I remember in the old days, after I'd won the world title, I'd sit on the end of a lorry at some race meeting talking for an hour to a 10-year-old if he wanted to."

He loved that life. Racing, winning, clubbing, drinking, smoking, especially Gauloises. "And before I met Steph, it was great for crumpet."

He was friends with James Hunt, Ringo Starr and George Harrison, who persuaded him to try Australia, a place he had never countenanced on the grounds that it was where his mechanics came from, "and I never wanted to go near the place that made them".

Sheene saw through the gimmick of status before he was old enough for secondary school. His father Frank was an engineer at the Royal College of Surgeons in London and, as young as 10, little Barry was parking the Jaguars and Rolls-Royces of the eminent consultants. He remembers the one old curmudgeon who wouldn't let a mere kid near his expensive machine - then promptly tore off its wing mirror himself.

"Sir Somebody-or-other walked up to him and said, 'That kid's been parking my car for years,' " Sheene grinned. Demolishing pomposity has been the sub-plot of his life.

Sheene's father was a fine mechanic who dabbled in racing himself and gave Barry a Ducati 50cc bike when he was just five. Sheene entered his first race at 17 at Brands Hatch. Crashed. Entered again the next weekend. And won. The pattern was set.

Contrary to his image (and X-rays), he has always considered himself a careful driver. I must admit I cracked up at that one as we proceeded in a stately fashion down the M4. He looked puzzled. How could I doubt him? Well, it must be the noise he makes when you shake him. All clanking plates and loosened joints, he must rattle like a tin of ball bearings.

"No," he said impatiently. "I just broke a lot of bones all in a big hurry. My problem was, I had the fastest crashes in the history of motorbike racing. It made it look worse than it was. I once went three years and never fell off at all. And I used to race about 50 times a year." He paused for dramatic effect. "Actually, I am a very safe driver."

He told me what he drives these days. A Mercedes when he is in London. And this year, he achieved a lifetime ambition, of buying himself an Agusta 109C eight-seater helicopter, which he pilots himself.

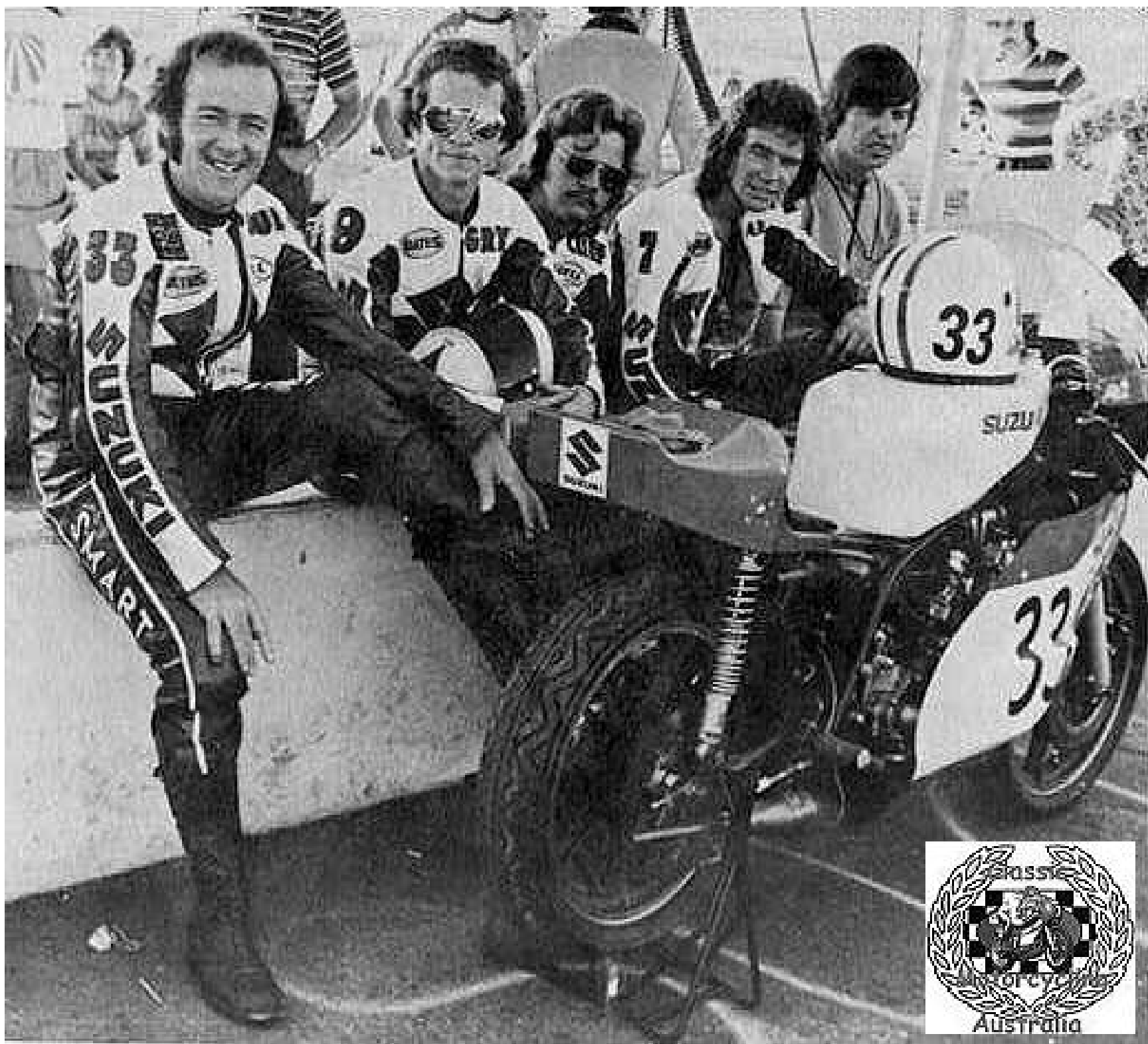
"It's lovely," he said with the same misty-eyed wistfulness that mothers reserve for their newborn babies.

His mood alters when he remembers alleged injustice. At his sudden discovery of cancer. That, he acknowledges, could be anyone's fate. His ire is currently focused on the Royal Bank of Scotland, which, he alleges, has cost him £50,000 (\$140,000) in missing interest after a money transfer that took over-long to take place between Britain and Australia. He is after the culprits and keen for them to know that his current illness will have no bearing on his effectiveness. As yet, they have not returned his calls.

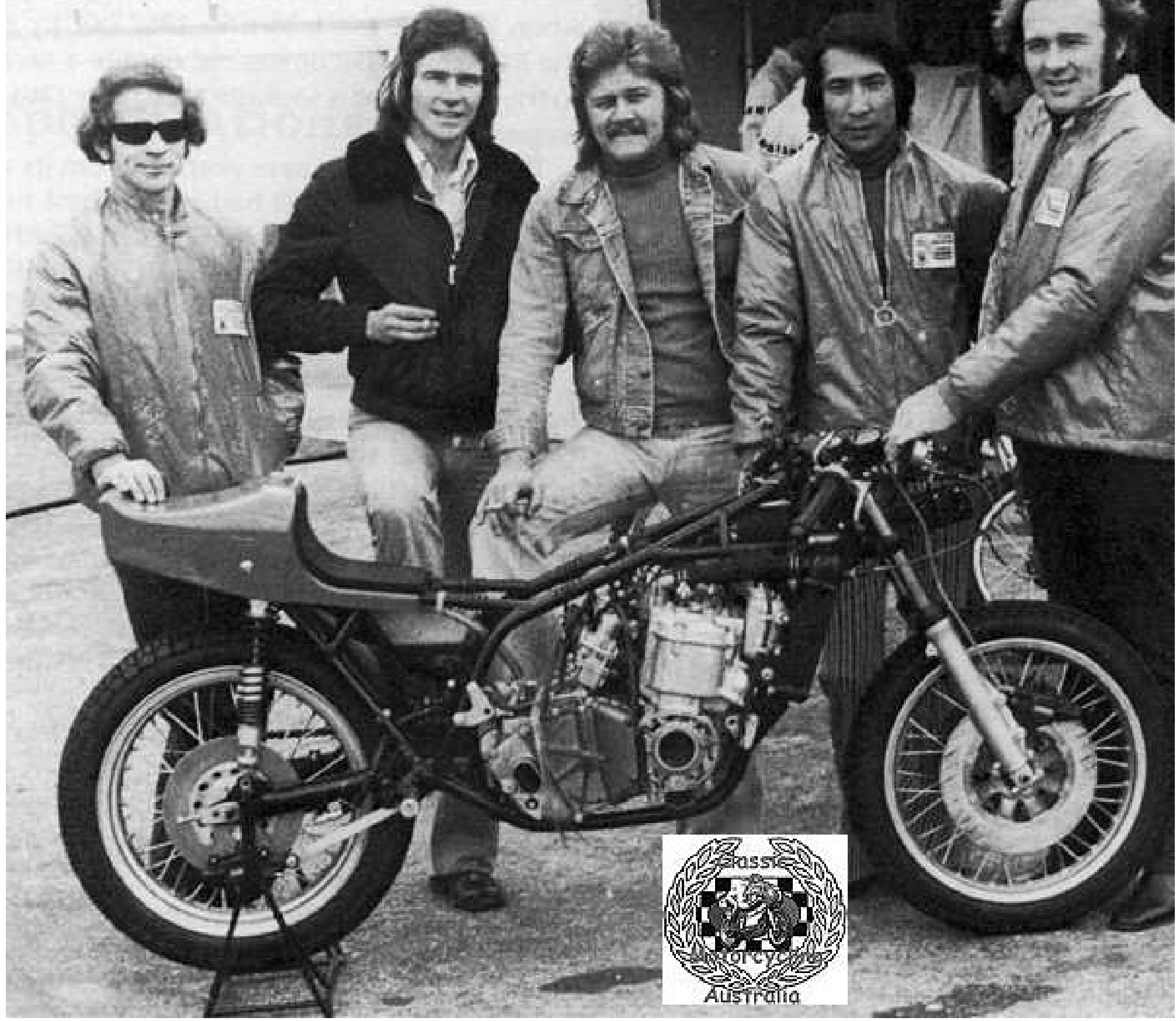
His positive attitude imbues every thought and every sinew. His weight has dropped from nearly 70 kilograms to 62 kilograms. Ten centimetres have gone from his chest measurement, such was his devotion to his vegetable juice diet to boost his immune system. Despite that, when he rode at the Goodwood Festival last weekend, he won one race and finished second to Wayne Gardner. "By," he told me with vehemence, "one one-thousandth of a second."

I am looking at an indefatigable winner with a '70s haircut. He believes he will survive this illness. "I don't wave a Bible around but I've always believed in God. He's looked after me in the past, I reckon he'll look after me again. I'm not ready to go. I'm afraid I might miss something. And when I do get better I'm going to spend my money going round the world telling people there is an alternative way to recover. You don't have to be cut open or poisoned to survive."

He walked through departures at Heathrow, with a smile and a jaunty wave. It made you think of the line the Queen used when she presented him with his MBE in 1978. "Now you be careful, young man," she said.



Bazza with No. 7 on his leathers - Daytona 1974



Gary Nixon and Barry Sheene 1974



Blowout on the Daytona banking 1975



1975

"Bazza's death this week was a real bummer, I first met him in 1971 at meeting at Croft Autodrome UK. I was a marshal on the course and we had a good natter in the pits after practice. The thing I remember about the meeting was his ride on the 125, where he was left pushing at the start, whilst the rest were already at the first corner. However by the time he got to my position, approx half way round the circuit he was in the lead, to top that off he broke the bloody lap record on the first lap also. Says so much about the man, I for one will never forget him and will campaign for something to be erected in his image at say Silverstone or one of the UK GP circuits. I know he wasn't much on pomp but I think he deserves more recognition for his achievements and contribution to the sport."