

A Tribute to Bernie LaGrosse By Tracy Holmes



Bernie LaGrosse

Tracy Holmes pays tribute to Bernie LaGrosse (aka Roy Williams) who has sadly died in his New Zealand homeland.

Bernie started riding at the Aranui track in Christchurch doing the last two seasons of the track, 57-58 and 58-59. In the last ever meeting, he was one of the last ever race winners. With Aranui closed, he went with his friends, the two Ivans - Crozier and Mauger - to Australia and was based at Adelaide. Bernie once told me, "Ivan had only one ambition, to be World Champion. I had only one ambition, to have as much fun as I could. I reckon we both made it!" Some of his favourite memories were the hours he spent fishing with Jack Young.

Returning to NZ in 62, he helped the throng of volunteers to build Templeton Speedway, Christchurch. Riding in that first season, he represented Canterbury and the South Island.

It was 1965 that saw Bernie travel to the UK and he joined Glasgow as reserve. But with just one point from 16 races over 4 matches, his confidence was smashed. "I just didn't click and had no opportunity to practice. In hindsight, I should have stuck it out."

He got a job driving for Belle Vue and got to ride in second halves around the country. "I won nine second half finals which I really enjoyed."

Bernie returned to NZ and settled in New Plymouth. The 1966 NZ final was held at the local track, the Waiwakaiho Speedway and Bernie finished 6th behind Bob Andrews, Murray Burt, Bryce Subritsky, Dave Gifford and Bob Duckworth.

Over the next couple of years, Bernie rode around the country "just for fun".

Looking for more adventure, Bernie went back to the UK in 1968 and rode for Berwick under the name of Roy Williams. There are a few stories as to why that was but Bernie said it like this - "Trevor Redmond took us to Wales and said if anyone volunteered to be a Welshman for the night, there would be a bonus in it. I said OK and Roy Williams was born."

Roy did 19 matches for the Bandits and had a 7.8 average. He even rode in West Germany, driving his and Ivan's bikes over, collecting Ivan from the airport and doing the Golden Key of Bremen. Ivan was unbeaten, Bernie scored just 2 points. Then it was getting Ivan back to the airport and driving their bikes back again. "What a weekend that was!!"

At season's end, Bernie headed for the USA. "I didn't like Costa Mesa but I did enjoy Palm Springs, Ascot and Bakersfield. Earning enough to make it all worthwhile and enjoyable."

The '69 season saw Roy back at Berwick. He did 30 matches for a 6.8 average. He also rode for Australasia in four Tests against England, scoring 10 points in the third match. Again, the USA beckoned and Bernie enjoyed another Yankee experience.

1970, Roy at Berwick rides in 34 matches for a 6 point average. It turned out to be his last year in the British League. Back to the States where Bernie even lines up for Great Britain alongside Ivan, Briggo, Jim Airey, Bert Harkins and Dave Gifford. How's that for Britain, 4 Kiwis, an Ozzie and a lone Scot!!

Bernie returned to NZ in '72 to New Plymouth and helped out at the track but not riding. He remembers befriending Gary Peterson, "a hell of a nice guy but just would not listen to anyone. He was so intent on emulating his mates Ivan [Mauger] and Ole [Olsen] that he just lost the plot. He was either going to be World Champion or die trying!"

Eventually, Bernie returned to Christchurch and for a time was a bus driver. For the last few years, Bernie has been a regular spectator at Moore Park. Illness would sadly dominate his life. He too was a 'hell of a nice guy' and will be sadly missed. Bernie leaves behind his wife, Evelyn. He was 67.

We always welcome and value any feedback from our visitors. If you'd like to comment on this article then please fill in our feedback form at <http://www.speedwayplus.com/BernieTribute.shtml#feedback>