

Sir Jack Brabham. Motorcyclist

Three times World Formula One Champion, but still a confirmed motorcycle enthusiast and active rider.

As well as being one of the all time great Grand Prix drivers and a successful constructor of winning cars for all sorts of formulae, John Arthur Brabham, now Sir Jack Brabham, OBE, has a deep-rooted association with motorcycles.

When he is not in the air, travelling between his business interests in England, or to appear in yet another historic car event somewhere in the world, Sir Jack can frequently be seen scooting around the streets of Queensland's Gold Coast on a powerful motorcycle.

He obtained his motorcycle licence at sixteen, and each Saturday morning, would rise at 5am to make sure of being at the door to his local newsagency when it opened. Parting with his two-pence and departing with his copy of the Sydney Morning Herald, he would turn straight for the 'Motorcycles and Sidecars' for sale section, and make a few selections, usually Velocettes;

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“I was a Velocette specialist,” Jack recalls. “All sorts of Velos, I used to buy them out of the paper, do them up, usually paint the tanks and so on. There was a fellow out at Wiley Park (an inner western suburb of Sydney) who made replacement mufflers in the right (Brooklands) shape, but they sounded a lot better.. that helped to sell them I reckon. My first bike cost me about £68, of which I had managed to save £40; the rest my dad lent me.”

By this time he was working at Harry Ferguson's garage in Hurstville as a trainee mechanic, gathering the mechanical skills that would serve him so well in later years. In fact, there was little time for anything other than work. After putting in a full day at the garage, and attending night school to learn automotive engineering, Jack would spend any other available time fettling his bikes.

With the Second World War well underway, Jack enlisted the Royal Australian Airforce in 1944. That put a stop to his weekend trading, but not before he purchased a machine for which he still holds great affection.

“It was a Manx Norton. I can't remember exactly what year model it was, but I just bought it out of the paper. I was like new, it had hardly been used. There was no racing then because of the war, so I put lights on it and rode it on the road. I ran it on Methylated Spirit. I just put bigger jets in and changed the compression a bit... it was still fairly high...but it used to go well on Metho”.

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With reluctance the Manx was sold, aspirations of racing put aside, and Jack changed into uniform, and it seemed, a complete break from motorcycles. But as it turned out, Jack's Commanding Officer was something of a motorcyclist himself; multi Australian TT winner Don Bain. Pre-war, Bain was one of the country's very top road racers. Like Jack, Don was especially keen on Velocettes, and achieved most of his victories on the Hall Green marque.

At the cessation of hostilities, Jack was once again a civilian, and took up where he had left off, buying and selling the odd Velo, and at the same time setting up his own engineering shop at Penshurst in Sydney's southern suburbs. There was even time for the odd sporting outing. At the long-defunct Lansdowne Scrambles circuit Jack pounded a MAC Velocette around the rugged the course that was unique in crossing the main road twice during the course of its lap. With a change of tyres, the machine would be off to the only tarred venue in Sydney, an ex-wartime airstrip near Castlereagh. It was only up-and-down the strip stuff, but it was better than nothing. In fact, Castlereagh was as much about proving workshop theories as riding, and there some damn quick bikes there, fettled by some of the smartest men in the business; Harry Hinton, Ted Carey, Sid Willis, Art Senior...and Jack Brabham.

"If it hadn't been for the war, I reckon I would have been a motorcycle racer." Jack says with some conviction. "But a few things changed, so that didn't happen"

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After being discharged from the RAAF, Jack had visions of setting up his own workshop, and was in the process of fitting out a shed in the rear of his grandparent's home in Hurstville when he met Johnny Schonberg – an American who had served with the US navy and taken his discharge in Sydney. Schonberg suggested that the pair of them take a DC3 flight to Darwin, via Brisbane, to attend a war-disposal auction. It was in Brisbane that fate took a hand.

Schonberg, a midget speedcar driver in the US, spotted an advertisement for a speedway meeting which had been rained off from the previous Saturday night, and was to be restaged on that evening, Monday. Although Jack professed to be little interested, they took in the meeting and Johnny was instantly bitten by the racing bug again.

Pressing on to Darwin, they bought a couple of trucks, loaded them with tools and equipment, and set off on the trek back to Sydney. Along the way, the American talked of nothing but midget speedcars, and by the time they got back home, Jack was more than a little interested himself. Within a few weeks, they had started work on construction of their own speedcar, using a 1000cc JAP 8/80 as the powerplant. The plan was for Johnny to drive and Jack to act as mechanic, but Mrs Schonberg eventually put her foot down and Johnny decided to hand up his helmet. With a considerable investment in the car, Jack decided to have a crack at the driving himself, and this was to spell the end of his motorcycling career.

“I had bought a new KSS Velocette off Don Bain at Enfield. I was actually looking for a (racing) KTT but there was none around. The KSS was a rigid frame model with Dowty air forks which used to go flat, and I entered it for Bathurst on Easter Saturday in 1948 in the Junior Clubmans race. I never made it unfortunately, because when I started driving the speedcar I qualified for the Australian titles in Adelaide on the same weekend, so I went over there. I won, and that was sort of the end of the bikes.”

Looking for more power for the speedcar, Jack decided to build his own engine in his workshop. “The bottom end was based on a Harley Davidson, although we cast our own crankcases. The only Harley parts we used were the timing case and the cams. We made our own flywheels, barrels, heads, and used JAP rocker gear. It was 1360 cc and it went very well.”

“Eventually when I started road racing I bought a Cooper Mark IV which was complete less engine. I thought a Velocette engine might go well in it and bought a complete MSS, but changed my mind when a Vincent HRD that had been crashed became available. To finance the HRD I sold the Velocette to a bloke called Ron Tauranac, who became not just a close friend but my partner in the business that ultimately constructed the Brabham racing cars in England. Ron’s still in England, working as a consultant for Honda these days.”

Naturally Brabham’s life continues to revolve around motor racing, but he has never lost his enthusiasm for motorcycling. As he approaches his 80th year, he is still a keen and active rider. At his Gold Coast home he keeps a Honda VFR 800, a machine that he says you have to treat with respect. “It’s fuel injected and is incredibly responsive on the throttle. In traffic I have to really watch it because the slightest opening of the throttle and it just wants to take off.” When on his frequent trips to Sydney, Jack usually heads straight for Cycle City at Blakehurst, who always provide him with a bike (currently a Honda CBR 600) to negotiate the city traffic. The Honda connection is strong and enduring. It was Brabham who effectively brought Honda into big-time car racing through the incredibly successful Formula Two Ralt Hondas which utterly dominated the class in the mid-1960s in the hands of Jack and the late Denny Hulme.

Jack also has a close association with the now-hibernating Hunwick Harrop project – the 1500 V-twin that was years in the development, reached the prototype stage, then when very quiet. It was Sir Jack who gave the scarlet 1500 its public debut with a lap of the Albert Park circuit at the Australian Formula One Grand Prix. In front of 100,000 people, it seems timely that Sir Jack was aboard the mode of machinery that actually launched his appetite for horsepower in the first place.

Once a motorcyclist, always a motorcyclist it seems.

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