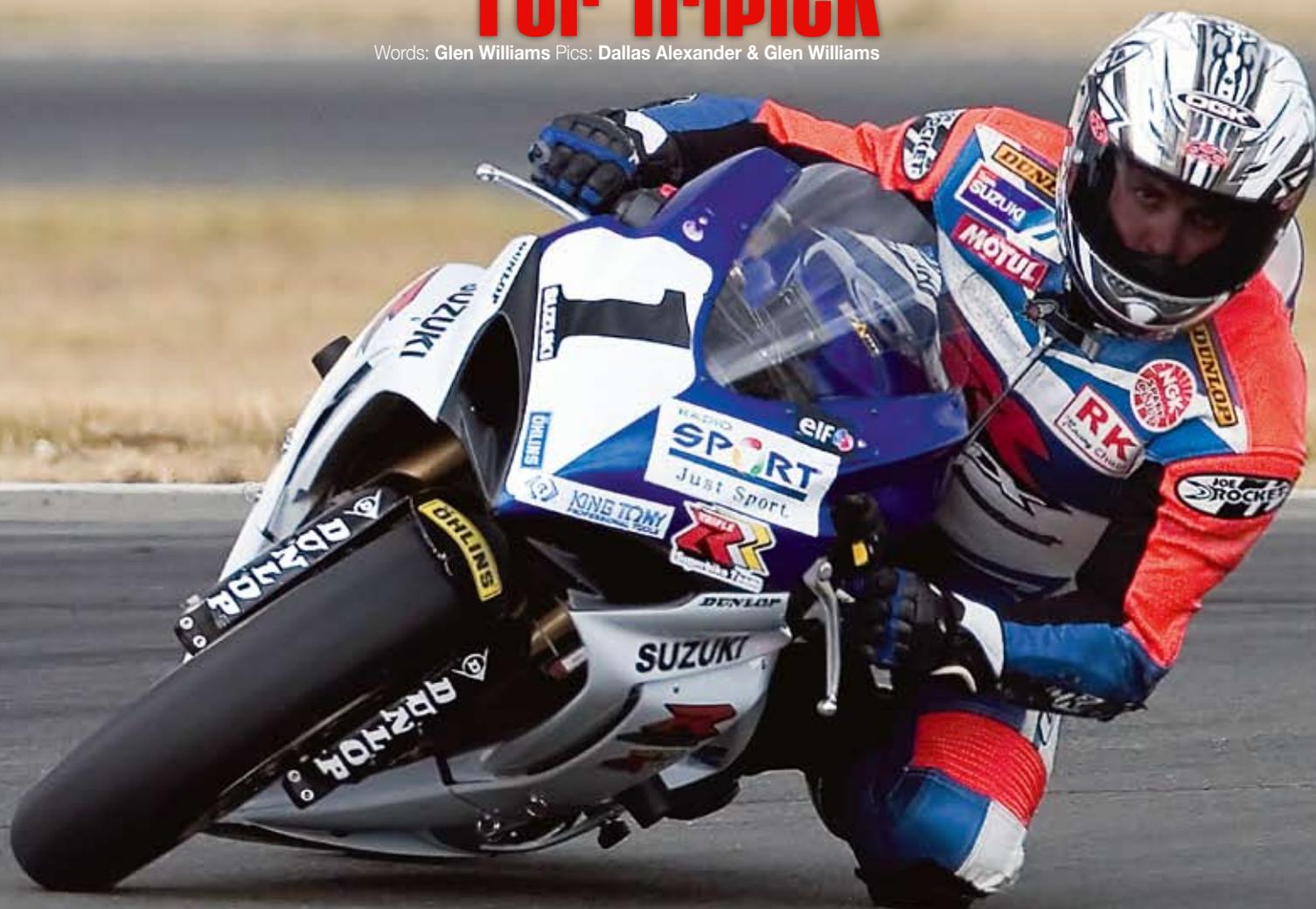


CROWN CROWNS

For TripleR

Words: Glen Williams Pics: Dallas Alexander & Glen Williams



For the past few years Peter (Red) Fenton has been making quite an impact on the New Zealand national road racing scene. He is the man behind the TripleR road race team, which is directly responsible for managing the spectacular talents of Australian Robbie Bugden. He also has strong opinions on the sport as it stands in New Zealand and our intrepid racer-come-reporter Glen Williams recently caught up with Red for the lowdown on the man, his philosophies, and his dreams.

Red Fenton is your typical motorhead, having a keen interest in most things that have an engine and go fast. This includes vehicles with four wheels too as his E48 RT Charger, Pickup trucks and HSV Commodore show. His love of road bikes and road-racing got into his blood relatively recently, but since then he has either been riding bikes himself on the road or race track and has embarked on the development of a top-level road race team, which he hopes eventually to take to the world scene.

Red is an ex Navy man and recently retired as a senior fire fighter to run his motorcycle dyno workshop and Öhlins suspension tuning business in Christchurch. On top of this he manages the TripleR road racing team, which all-in-all keeps the 42 year old pretty busy.

His involvement with road racing began in 1999 when he took to riding his Suzuki TL1000R at track days in addition to some club racing days. This quickly developed into establishing a semi-professional road race team with his mates Vaughn Patterson and Brendon Marshall who were both riding early model Suzuki GSX-R1000s.

Dipping His Promoter's Toes

In 2002 whilst catching up with Andrew Stroud over in the UK, Red discussed the idea of organising a showpiece road-race meeting for 2004 in New Zealand. This resulted in the inaugural John Britten Memorial event, held at Ruapuna in Christchurch. "I really enjoyed putting the

John Britten Memorial together and it gave me some insight into what it takes to promote and organise a successful road-race event," says Red. He backed the John Britten meeting with his own money and he ran it pretty much as he envisaged. "One of the best things I did was to supply plenty of 'off track' entertainment, such as playgrounds for the kids and trade displays which were housed in a well laid out marquee. This added to the spectacle of the actual bike racing and also made it a bit more of a family affair, which tied in well with how we promoted the event." Over 7,000 spectators came through the gate and there would have been more – had it not clashed with the very popular South Island Wild Food Festival held the same weekend.

"I had hoped for more spectators as we had invested almost \$50K in pre-event promotion – however considering it was our first effort we were still reasonably pleased with the turnout. The rider support wasn't too bad either and part of this was due to the \$75,000 prize pool package that we made available. Other simple things that helped make this event enjoyable were having good food (Subway) and good coffee present at the track, plus also bringing in extra toilets and having shade cover for families."

Unfortunately the event wasn't continued for the following year. "We didn't manage to break even on the event (in fact it cost Red a fair sum of money) the first time around and we weren't in a position to fully finance a second even bigger and better event of this size."

Nationally Speaking

Red does have some thoughts on how a meeting like this might be able to run in conjunction with a national level road race event. "You could make it into quite a spectacle for the local community and of course television." Amalgamating an event of this size and making it a 'Big Show' might work he feels and pooling the efforts and funds of the organising club, the local council and MNZ, plus traditional trade and private sponsors may well prove to be good for everyone involved and maybe even return a profit.

"A feature event (as part of the series) might be a good start. A feature event may be the season finale or possibly one could be held in each island. These 'feature' rounds might have extended television coverage and may consume a little more of the series promotional budget, however this would be in the hope of putting on a 'big show' for these particular rounds and obtaining a lot of media attention for the sport."

Non-traditional corporate sponsors would also be much more likely to get involved in an event like that Red says, as it is more likely to create a national spectacle and gives the opportunity for a high profile exposure of products and brands outside of the usual motorcycling fraternity.

Handing over the national series to a private promoter would be also worth considering says Red. "The promoter could be contracted to work under a clear set of MNZ guidelines. This type of arrangement may well be a win-win situation for MNZ, as the promoter will naturally take the sport along a com-



mercially viable path for themselves and the competitors, whilst MNZ would expect to get increased exposure and profile for the sport in general, closely followed by new riders and members coming in to grow the sport. No disrespect to MNZ but many of the key individuals involved are working on a voluntary basis and sometimes it is difficult to have a clear long term commercial vision when working this way. They are of course doing the best they can and at club level this works okay, but sometimes when it comes to larger national and international events their talents might be best kept to overseeing legislation, administration duties and keeping members interests at heart."

Another thought of Red's for the NZ national rounds is to maybe 'spice up' the Saturday qualifying portion of the weekend's race program by introducing a Super-pole single flying lap for the top ten riders or even a knockout style qualifying process. This he suggests may create an exciting spectacle for TV and the spectators. Retaining five rounds for the series is a minimum

in his opinion – mainly in the interest of rewarding competitors that get consistent results across a broad range of tracks and conditions.

The Bug Man Cometh

In 2005/6 Red continued with his local race team development and had some modest successes, however he was looking to take this a step further and build a national title winning team in the Superbike and 600 sports-production classes. He was inspired by what fellow Kiwi Brian Bernard was doing with the Bernard racing team. The opportunity to run something similar arose when Suzuki NZ's Tom Peck and Red got together and discussed the possibility of the TripleR team taking over the management of Aussie Superbike privateer Robbie Bugden in the NZ Superbike championship. Red grabbed the opportunity to set up this potential title winning road race team for 2007/8.

"I went into this with the sole intention of winning the NZ Superbike national title and that's exactly what happened."

Suzuki placed a lot of trust in Red and it appears to have paid off. "It was a team effort and the support from Suzuki NZ and Dunlop NZ plus other sponsors RK chains, AFAM sprockets, Shoei Helmets in those early years made the job that bit easier. This past year has also seen the addition of new team sponsors King Tony Tools, Radio Sport and Elf Oils, which is fantastic.

"I was really looking forward to working with Robbie (Bugden) as we got on pretty well when we met up the previous year when he was racing over here, plus I also knew that he would give us a real chance at winning the championship." This has now culminated in three straight superbike championships for Robbie, two under the TripleR team banner.

A 600cc championship with rider Dennis Charlette in 2008 was also secured. "The team gets on really well together and we all share a lot of information," Red says. Red runs a strategy of constant analysis for each rider at each track and this helps formulate winning strategies for the team.

"Suzuki NZ and all of our sponsors are very happy with the results thus far and we really enjoy giving something back to them with our successes." In fact the team approached the sponsors with a business perspective in mind. They ran the numbers for what it would take to run a three bike team of one Superbike and two 600 riders and at season end they calculated the value in advertising dollars received back from the television coverage of the series. Red has spent hours watching the television coverage and accurately logging the exposure that each of the team's sponsors received – he was then able to provide an accurate report to each sponsor showing them what their investment in the team had given them back. "Gone are the days of simply dropping a CV of results on a sponsor's desk and expecting support in return," he says. The team also employed the services of well-known racer and Auckland based engine builder Ray Clee from RCM performance to build their engines for them and this has paid off with Ray supplying fast reliable motors.

Winds Of Change

There has been a lot of recent talk in the sport with regard to machine specifications for the two premier classes and Red is hoping that New Zealand maintains a similar machine

"I went into this with the sole intention of winning the NZ Superbike national title and that's exactly what happened."

specification as the current rules, which are quite similar to those that are used overseas.

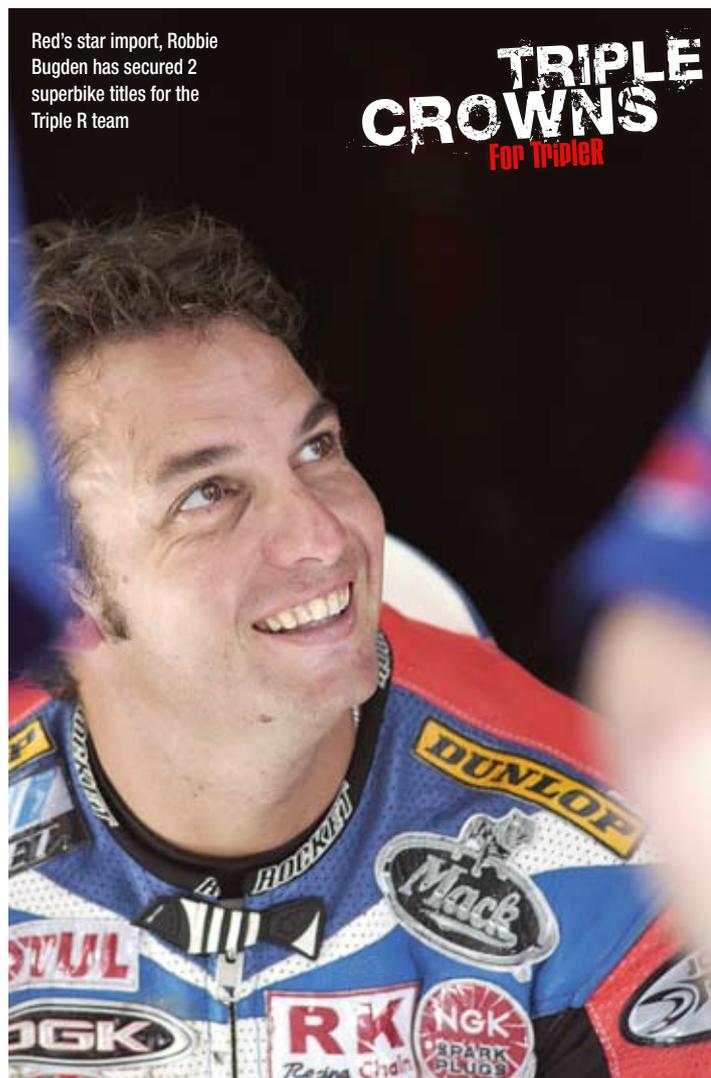
"People say that they need a change to the rules so that they will be able to compete against the faster riders like Robbie and Stroud (Andrew) etc. Some also suggest that rule changes are needed to make the sport cheaper and more accessible for competitors. Firstly - motorsport is expensive (in whatever form you take it) and in relative terms it costs money and time. Total cost will mainly depend on what you choose to race and how fast you want to go.

"Quite a few people think that if they had machinery like Robbie has, then they would be as fast as him or be able to be as competitive. Robbie does not have a 'special' bike as such. The parts that go into Robbie's bike are available to anyone 'off the shelf' and effectively anyone can build a machine as good as the one he rides (or better). But what Robbie does add to this is immense talent, drive, and determination to be successful. Any opportunities that come along, he grabs with both hands and makes the most he can out of them."

Robbie also has a good team around him that listens, and which spends hours fine-tuning all aspects of machine and man to make things work the best possible way to get a winning result.

"People sometimes think that they need the latest and greatest bike to compete on, however if they look at their lap times and ask themselves the question - are they really going to go much faster on their new bike? A good guideline for these riders might be to review the lap times that guys like Robbie, Andrew, Ray Clee, Craig Shirriffs, Hayden Fitzgerald (and others) were doing on bikes that were being raced a season or two ago and how these compare to the current riders times – this would offer some insight into the differences in skill factor that apply.

Red says that an example of this is shown by one of his own team riders James Smith. "His lap record around



Red's star import, Robbie Bugden has secured 2 superbike titles for the Triple R team

Ruapuna for the 600 class is a 1:32.4. Now this was done on a three-year old bike, which was putting out around the 120bhp DIN at the back wheel. The bike was of course fitted with the latest Dunlop tyres, and the most recent spec Öhlins suspension; however this example shows that a good chunk of the speed is actually tied up in the rider's ability – not machine speed." Red suggests that people really need to look at how they are spending their dollars. "Is it not better, to buy an older race bike and then upgrade the suspension etc on it to the point where you can achieve the lap times, that that bike model was able to do in the hands of someone like James etc. When that is achieved, it may be time to step up to the latest and greatest model, with all the fruit and compete head on with the front guys."



The man himself, Red Fenton in his workshop



BRM and myself attended the recent AGM held by the controlling body of road racing in New Zealand (MNZ) in Wellington and there was a suggestion that the rules for 600cc and 1000cc road race machines go to a lesser performance specification and bring them closer to a production level and reduce costs. I asked Red for his thoughts on this.

"I am not a great fan of going back to a basic production spec machine for a number of reasons. I believe that it would actually cost more money and take more time to build a strong performing motor 'within the rules' of a production based class. An example of this is the hours that we currently put into developing the team's 600cc bikes (which are almost stock) compared to the superbike. We spend probably six times the amount of time in dyno work eking out small gains from the 600 because that's how long it takes to find out what works – the superbike is comparatively cheap in this respect."

The other rule change being mooted is going to a more 'stock' suspension package on the machines, also in the interest of saving costs. Red feels that this may again be a self-defeating cost exercise. "Under the proposed new rules you would be able to re- valve the standard rear shock on the bikes - however the reality is that this work would take a lot longer to do (as it is specialist work) than doing the same work to say an Öhlins or White Power aftermarket performance shock (which offer a speedy exchange of valving components). "Most racers re- valve their shocks for each track in the interest of going as fast as possible, so ultimately this proposed rule effectively makes it more expensive to run the standard shock than the aftermarket item. And on top of that having less than ideal suspension will possibly add quite a bit of cost to the competitor in the form of the additional tyre wear that you would be reasonable to expect at some tracks."

As far as lifting the competitor

numbers at national level meetings, Red would like to maybe see a naked bike racing class considered. "This would offer a relatively low cost race class – yet still have the big bike appeal to many riders." Motards are another Fenton favourite for introducing new riders to the road race scene and I tend to agree with him. He see's the motard class as a natural progression for the thousands of motocross riders out there that might consider giving road racing a go.

"Maybe a clubman's class could also be considered at the national rounds also – I know that's where I started my own racing interest," he says. "And it is a good way to lift entry numbers and reduce some of the financial burdens on the organising clubs who have to run the event."

Running Control Tyres

Another item on the agenda is the proposal to consider running control tyres in the premier classes. "Personally I like the idea of having competition between the different tyre brands and from my experience the tyre companies also prefer this as well, a control tyre rule eliminates the involvement of potential industry supporters in our sport (tyre companies), and we can't really afford to lose that." The potential to limit the total amount of tyres per round (as is done in Aus-

tralia) may have some merit though he thinks. "The onus then is on the rider to control how they use up their allocated tyres – rather than be dictated to use a brand that may or may not suit their particular machine, their set-up or riding style."

Red On Juniors

Another sector that needs attention is the promotion of the starter classes like the 150 Streetstock and 250 four-stroke twins class for juniors. "MNZ need to do more than simply draft a set of rules, they need to get pro-active in establishing clear paths for juniors to come into the sport and stay there." Red is planning to assist indirectly some of the junior riders in these smaller classes and wants to try and 'do his bit' to keep the young talent in the sport. "We can't just let the young ones leave our sport, especially the ones that are really working hard at it and are keen – these kids are where the next lot of Strouds, Slight's and Crafars are coming from and we need our governing body, our fellow competitors and the various clubs to do everything possible to keep these juniors developing and involved. The Canterbury club are particularly pro-active in this regard and the dividends are only just now starting to shine through."

Part of the reason that Red actively supports guys like Robbie

Bugden in the NZ scene is to lift the sport's profile and also provide the young up-and-coming riders with a clear vision of what it is possible to achieve. "Having professional riders like Robbie and Gareth Jones in the paddock gives our own riders great motivation." TripleR team rider James Smith is a good example of this again he says. "I have absolutely no doubt in my mind that James lifted his game to a much higher level this year by simply having Gareth Jones competing in our championship. It makes riders push their own envelope and forces them to learn new techniques on how to ride consistently fast through an entire road race series. Without these top overseas (and local) riders we would be lost as to what level of riding is required on a world stage. I honestly believe that we have Kiwi riders currently racing that would be relatively competitive in a number of championships throughout the world."

We can already see an indication of this in new-to-the-sport riders like Sloan 'Choppa' Frost – who finished

sixth in our own National Superbike Championship last year – but who has recently had some great results racing in the Superstock 1000cc class in Australia. Red would like to see more young Kiwis pack up their bags in the off-season and get over to Australia to experience the 'next level' of road racing. He has taken this a step further by meeting with Australian Superbike promoter Yarrive Konsky, who says he is keen to let New Zealand riders into the Australian Superstock and Superbike Championship – so that they can test their skills and move up to the next level. We have seen riders like Aaron Slight, Tony Rees, Ray Clee, Craig Shirrifs and Sam Smith get over to Australia and strut their stuff over the years and Red strongly recommends that our young racers do everything they can to continue this trend.

Crystal Ball Gazing

So what does the future hold for TripleR? Firstly they are looking to take their youngest rider James Smith over to Australia in this year's off-season

to ride in a couple of the Superstock 1000cc rounds and then keep him on board for a full on assault on the New Zealand 600cc supersport for the 2010 title. "If James can get the job done in the 2010 600cc NZ Championship – we may well try to get him onto a Superbike the following year. It's also looking like Robbie Bugden will be back with the team for another season, so that's great and we will be pushing as hard as ever to keep Suzuki on top of the pile and grab another New Zealand Superbike and 600 Supersport Championship win.

"In the longer term I have a vision to establish a base for a World Superbike team in Italy - there's the minor issue of raising the 1.5 million Euro to do this, but it is high on my wish list to make happen." Red was part of the effort when Andrew Stroud went to the Phillip Island round of the World Superbikes in 2005 and says it was an awesome experience. "If I can get into the sport at that level, it will then be my firm intention to open as many doors and provide a path for as many Kiwi riders as possible to get into the world

"...it will then be my firm intention to open as many doors and provide a path for as many Kiwi riders as possible to get into the world scene."

scene. Another secondary option may be to consider becoming involved with the AMA Championship in the States, which could also be fun."

It wouldn't surprise me if Red Fenton and his TripleR team achieve these lofty goals – as he has pretty much achieved everything he has set out to do thus far locally. One thing is for sure though, it would be great to see racers wearing the Silver Fern out on the world stage once again. We wish you the best of luck Red. If you want to check out the TripleR website and their supporting sponsors, visit www.triple-r-superbike.co.nz **BRM**



Red with Stroudy on the top step of the podium at the Britten Memorial