

Barry Sheene

● BARRY SHEENE: he's the English fellow who survived a horrendous Daytona crash in 1975 and who came back to Daytona 1976 looking a wreck and walking even worse, thanks to crashing his pit bike in the UK. Despite the pain and the misery and the bungee cord which guided his foot around the footpeg/gear-pedal location, Sheene herded his Suzuki 750 into the top three before the chain began overriding the rear sprocket. Sheene's the man who returned to Europe and collected the 500cc World Championship on an RG500 Suzuki-4 which he raced to five first places and one second during the 1976 classic season. These facts are well known and documented on both sides of the Atlantic.

In Europe, Sheene is more than a racer who wins, loses and conquers adversity. He is public property with followings in most European countries. Youthful British supporters can be seen standing outside the Sheene paddock camp, looking at the machines and the mechanics at work, counting themselves fortunate when Sheene departs with a cheery nod or merry quip on his way to the starting line. And Sheene is receptive to adulation, as though possessing extrasensory perception for public relations. Rarely abrupt, even when under pressure, he acts to his public (and the spectators ultimately pay riders their wages) in a manner most race followers expect of all riders.

Out on the track Sheene is committed to winning, of course. But he also entertains, sometimes reserving his winning move for a final lap, last corner swoop when one suspects he could have moved ahead earlier. Then Sheene pays handsome tribute to the beaten opponent with: "Cor, that was tough!"

Not every race-goer is a Sheene hero-worshiper. There are detractors, ready with hostile receptions and willing to applaud mechanical breakdowns. It's a case of taking the rough with the smooth, a practice cheerfully undertaken by BS who knows the pro-Sheenes many times outnumber the antis. His fans dutifully await the annual opportunity to vote for him in "Man of Year" elections conducted by the motorcycling periodicals. Their apparently insatiable appetites for Sheene morsels are fed by Barry's column here and Barry's diary elsewhere. There are paperbacks in English and French, inevitably making free use of the "Super Sheene" expression, and a hard-cover biography ("The Story So Far") which projects Sheene in quotations as a somewhat humorless bloke totally unlike the real-life

version. But the majority of readers know little about that and care even less, while the Screw-Sheene campaigners are assured of finding some ammunition in the printed pages. And Sheene's activities provide much headline material in the weeklies, in and out of the racing season. If there're a lot of B. Sheene stories, and Phil Read supporters in particular think so, no one in publishing suggests the overkill point is near.

Outside the racing community's own literature, Sheene has made a highly significant breakthrough into the national press, demolishing the English sporting class barriers that segregated bike performers from the elite in cricket, golf and motor car racing—especially Formula One car racing. Superior Fleet Street columnists invariably welcomed national FI heroes with platitudinous ardor. They discarded their critical facilities, adopted attitudes of gushing servility and contracted malignant xenophobia. In comparison, the inferior bike racers were downright undesirables.

Identifying the reasons for bikes becoming almost respectable is difficult. Certainly the news editors could never be accused of failing memories when it came to equating two wheels with Hells Angels. Neither did the news of average bike events attracting higher spectator attendances than cars create much impression, even if the information filtered through to high quarters. Maybe it was a case of stumbling on bikes and Sheene (or the reverse order) by accident. In Sheene's favor there was a blood and guts attraction of a man smashing himself up and making a story-book comeback. And Sheene was never shy in pursuing publicity.

Appreciation of racing sprung from Silverstone's yearly bike meeting where John Player hospitality flowed, where competitors displayed remarkable talent for falling off in one race and winning the next, where Sheene was seen surrounded by an army of supporters. Suitably mellowed, the strangers in motorcycling's midst were intrigued by the hell-damn competitiveness of it all, and completely bowled over by a sportsman in the high-income bracket (BS) actually cultivating the media's attention in the middle of a race meeting. Subsequently a number of objective and perceptive Sheene/racing stories appeared in the "quality" papers, only to be matched by some dreadfully embarrassing stuff adorning the pages of the "populars." When Sheene admitted to swearing and drink-

ing and indulging in other things young people enjoy, the peddlers of mass-circulation trivia made great mileage from the free-loving inference. In turn, a considerable body of motorcyclists, happily basking in the glory of Sheene's good press, had their puritanical ire aroused by the bad. Why, they wondered aloud, didn't he have the good manners to shut up? Sheene answered the well-wishers by pointing out that by selling himself nationally he was not just promoting BS but relaying the racing message with every story which gave the sport a mention.

Promotion-minded Sheene is a national TV personality, sharing star billings on children's programs with the likes of Elton John, and going through the amiable grilling of late-night chat shows. With gain in mind, Sheene has moved into the product-endorsement field with a TV commercial for an international company producing men's toiletries, thereby adding a new dimension to his bank account. Money also comes from modeling clothes—non-motorcycle gear—and why not?

By expanding into commercial areas, Sheene has approached the point where 50 percent of his gross income will be from activities away from circuits and bikes. The precise sum is not for public consumption, but put it above anything one man picks up annually from AMA competition, and below the intake of the top two or three FI car aces. The trappings of success are there: a Rolls Royce, a country mansion, a London house. Sheene isn't ashamed of enjoying the good things of life.

Working to the principle that world champions are entitled to air strong opinions and to fuel controversy, Sheene is appropriately contentious. His comments concerning fellow riders sometimes provoke the others to cut up rough in return, though passions rarely run that high. In general, the champion's relations with his European contemporaries are easy-going and underpinned by mutual respect.

Sheene brands the gentlemen in control of the FIM as the major enemies of every true professional racer. Sheene rates the world championship meetings, controlled by a close association of FIM activists, as financial disasters since the rewards bear no comparison to crowd sizes and promoters' profits. Win a 500cc World Championship race watched by 130,000 people, and lose \$400, is the name of the game. Be in running for a world title, and the minimum rate-per-ride suddenly becomes the maximum. Sheene

(Continued on page 122)

Be an Aircraft Mechanic
... in 17 months!

SPARTAN School
of Aeronautics Dept EA027
International Airport, Tulsa, OK 74151

Name _____ Age _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Check here if eligible for GI Bill benefits. Approved for VETERANS

FREE BOOK YOUR FUTURE in AVIATION

Licensed by Private School Board of Oklahoma

PATCHES

Let them know who you are. Beautiful embroidered emblem sets or printed transfers for front or back of your jacket. Send sketch for free price. Send camera ready colored drawing and get one set free with order. Free catalog.

**EASTERN EMBLEM MFG. CORP., P. O. BOX 828 DEPT. CMM
UNION CITY, N. J. 07087**

USED PARTS

ALL MAKES - SAVE 1/2 OR MORE

EAST COAST'S LARGEST USED PARTS DEALER FOR

HONDA-KAWASAKI-YAMAHA
SUZUKI-TRIUMPH-BSA-NORTON
HARLEY-BMW-BULTACO-ETC.

ENGINES-TRANS.-FRAMES
FRONT ENDS-WHEELS-FENDERS
SEATS-TANKS-ELECTRICS-ETC.

Clinton Cycle & Salvage Inc.

FOR PARTS OR FREE PRICE LIST
Call TOLL FREE 800-638-0260
MARYLAND RES. CALL 301-297-8410
5726 SPRING ST. CLINTON, MD. 20735

Langlitz Leathers

The finest custom made leathers for the pleasure or sport rider. Factory direct only. Catalog available.

2443 S.E. DIVISION, PORTLAND, ORE. 97202

SUNDAY LTD. CHAIN BELTS

Sizes available up to 40 inches, add 75¢ for each additional inch.

#45 \$18.95

#54 \$21.95

#80 \$30.95

#74

#100

Send for your chain belt today care of Sunday Ltd., P. O. Box 111, Dept. 013, River Forest, Illinois 60305. Absolute satisfaction guaranteed, or your money back. Dealer Inquiries Invited

PIPELINE Continued from page 8

would revolt over the inequalities—but a one-man stand would achieve nothing.

To declare his disgust publicly Sheene missed the last three 1976 world championship rounds in the unfulfilled hope that other top riders might follow his example. They didn't and the meetings didn't fold from his absence, but the organizers of the final round did manage to offer a figure 10 times higher than anything mentioned previously. But although he had proved his point that organizers could pay if they wanted to, Sheene was able to resist temptation. At one Continental GP, Sheene went on the air, broadcasting to the host nation that the local organizers were the world's meanest. The outburst earned him a promise of instant expulsion should he ever dare to attempt re-entry, but at a later date came a \$10,000 offer to ride in an international race. Point proven again.

Sheene expresses great disappointment in the GP riders conducting themselves in a manner unbecoming to professionals by allowing the system of superficial payments to prevail. He bitterly regrets the failure of the top 10 GP riders to form an organization under one professional manager who would wheel and deal and put the screws to the organizers. In his estimation, self-interest, envy and fear of the system kayoed the scheme. And who does Mr. Sheene class as the true professionals willing and able to be counted? "Well, Ago and Johnny Cecotto, and Phil Read as an eighty-percenter, plus a few others with lower levels of professionalism." Obviously there are not enough real professionals to make a show of muscle.

Strongly advocating the principle of star riders receiving guaranteed big-buck payments for appearing, Sheene is content to putter around at home and let the meanly-monied meetings run their course. Sheene will miss Daytona, partly because there is no way a homologated F750 Suzuki would be competitive, and partly because Daytona offered zero dollars for expenses. The decision to miss the 200 was a simple case of accounting, nothing to do with a world champion feeling bigger than Daytona. Sheene knows Daytona can prosper without European riders and, thanks all the same, he's able to get along by ignoring Daytona's glittering prize. Assuming he won, his purse for the 200-mile thrash would, after deductions, approximately level with the net drawings from a 30-minute winning trip in Europe.

Sheene admires American professionalism: the dedication and the determination to win are pluses for America in Sheene's book. He's only amazed that the professionalism diminishes as Daytona nears: "The meeting can't do without the top Americans, so they should grab a fatter share of the Daytona dollars by sticking out for expenses." Thus speaks a

champion reared on European racing.

You may, of course, consider this fixation with guaranteed payments iniquitous, and that the start-money system has been evolved as a method of perpetuating big-money handouts for a rich-gets-richer minority. And you may believe a better breed of rider would be forthcoming if Europeans raced for big purses alone. But you will not change European attitudes. You may even wonder about the temptations and disincentives when riders know they cannot lose financially. Only don't blurt it out when Sheene is within earshot.

Again, it is a case of accounting on the organizer's side. Paying Sheene \$7000 to show up is no act of altruism but an assurance of profit. The payer knows a number of things. He knows that Sheene will add thousands to the gate, that Sheene will produce 100 per cent effort and will most likely succeed, that Sheene will forge rapport with the crowd.

If all this suggests a serene trip to glory littered with non-stop success, note please that Sheene has had a hard time on 750s. In fact, his European F750 endeavors produced a string of noughts in the championship table and a depressing number of retirements from the races.

Sheene shortlists the main opposition as Ken Roberts, Johnny Cecotto, Steve Baker and Barry Ditchburn. Roberts above Cecotto and Baker? "Sure, for at some point I feel that Johnny and Steve can be outridden and outsmarted, but Ken, he's *hard*." Ditchburn? "Well, given the right machinery, he'd be a real shaker." Ditchburn would be Sheene's choice in a Suzuki line-up. (In reality, Suzuki will be represented by Sheene and Pan Hennen in the GPs.)

Presumably you have read or heard something about Sheene's worsening relations with Suzuki-GB at the end of last year. How he fell out with team manager Mervin Wright; how accusations and counter-charges flew around; how Sheene claimed the proffered 1977 contract meant a 50 per cent cut in salary; how Suzuki-GB absolutely insisted that any Suzuki Sheene raced would be in Suzuki-GB colors.

As irrational as it seems for an organization to chase after a reluctant servant at the very time Sheene was firing off complaints in the press, Sheene will be riding for Suzuki-GB this year. The differences have been resolved, perhaps not amicably, but sufficiently to give Sheene the finest machines, and Suzuki the services of the world's official Number-One. Suzuki-GB remains in complete control of Suzuki's GP affairs. Ironically, it's going to be something of a shoestring effort, lacking a fleet of posh transporters and a large retinue of mechanics.

Reluctant servant Sheene, it seems, will remain pretty much his own boss—with heavy sponsorship and the best 500cc machines.

—Jim Greening