

In a world of motocross stars and superstars, whose every whim is met without question or comment, Willie Simpson stands alone. His career can best be described as a working man's guide to success. JACK BURNICLE delves into the Scotsman's character.

OVERSHADOWED by all the factory razzamattazz and lucratively rewarded works stars in world championship motocross, the privateer stands firm as the bedrock of the sport.

Resilient, hard-working and shrewd, he must be capable of handling all his own business affairs, travelling arrangements, mechanical problems and domestic chores. Sometimes the actual act of racing can seem something of an afterthought...

Willie Simpson is just such a bloke. A beefy Scot hailing from the glens. "Oor Wullie" has been treading the grand prix trail for the past two and a half years. But his Continental form has never quite matched British performances which have increasingly established him as a real threat to the factory front runners. Second place overall at Bootle, in Cumbria, edging out Heron Suzuki teammate Jem Whatley, was followed by a run of relatively disappointing GP results. But Simpson knows why...

"At Bootle I arrived pumped," he explains. "I'd prepared my 125 and 250 for the Hants while Vic Allan did my big bike. I picked it up from him, tried it out Thursday and went up there with everything perfect. Also, Bootle is my kind of course. Grassy, grippy, with lots of twists and turns. I feel good on it." Abroad it's a different story...

"Most of the time I'm on my own. Neale Taylor last year was my first real help; the only time I could ever walk away from my bikes and leave them. People like Dave

'Carla's my hero... He's the sort who would fix the caravan door...'

Watson and Kurt Nicoll need never even get their hands dirty. I'm too involved with the bikes, thinking I've got to change tyres, when I should be walking round the track. At British Championships I'm there in good time, 100 per cent prepared. GPs are always chaos, working like a donkey on the bike.

"And I don't get a penny for coming to the grands prix. No tyres, no nothing. I've got to spin everything out so I tend to scrimp and save too much, leave tyres on. 'They'll do'. Then I got a puncture in Switzerland when heading for my first good GP result of the year," Simpson chuckles. "But I love travelling and doing the GPs. Although I moan and carry on,

I'd be lost without it!"

The Scot's ferocious independence was inherited from a nomadic father. Willie senior roamed the glens from farm to farm; "no longer than a year at any place," recalls his son. The Old Man was a "doer" and Will junior, born early in December 1955 at Glenisla, followed suit. Never a scholar, the boy left school the moment he was 15 to become a mechanic. "A dirty job, but I enjoyed it."

He'd already saved up £8 raspberry and potato picking to buy his first motorcycle – an Ariel 350 Sport – which he raced round a track in the woods. Then he went to some motocross meetings with the owner of the garage where he worked, whose sons raced 150 Francis Barnetts. "I got a go on one," recalls Willie, his eyes lighting up even now. "She was trick. The forks were beautiful and the back-end went up and down."

He had a couple of races, just coming on to his sixteenth birthday, down in Consett, County Durham, the reward for welding up a broken headstock on one of the bikes. "But I got a hole in ma new jersey and Ma gave me a belt round the ear."

Willie attributes his fiery temperament to his mother. "I get upset if people don't do things right..."

It wasn't until half-way through the following year, however, that Simpson could afford a motocrosser of his own, a 250 AJS. "I was earning £5-03 pence for five days, two nights and Saturday mornings. A piston cost a fiver and I needed a fair few of them." The Ajay broke a lot during the next eighteen months. "She was always polished and gleaming but it made no odds, she still broke down! Mother and Father used to go and watch occasionally and see me pushing the bike back, snot hanging from the nose, and Ma would have a good cry!" He won one junior race, "with no teeth on the front sprocket and the chain yanked up tight."

A second AJS was no better, so for 1975 Simpson bought a Mark 8 Bultaco from Doug Hacking, "one of the best bikes I ever had." Never a thing went wrong with it. Will finished fourth in the Scottish Championship and won the Scottish Grass Track title!

A brief, disastrous spell with a Mark 9 – "it was crap" – precluded his first sponsorship deal from a recovery firm boss called Alf Ballie. Maicos were on the crest of a wave and Alf bought Will a 400 half-way through 1976. "From that day on I was unbeatable. I got on it and everything was so easy." He deposed multi-champion Norrie Lymburn in the last race of the series and went on to a hat-trick of Scottish motocross titles.

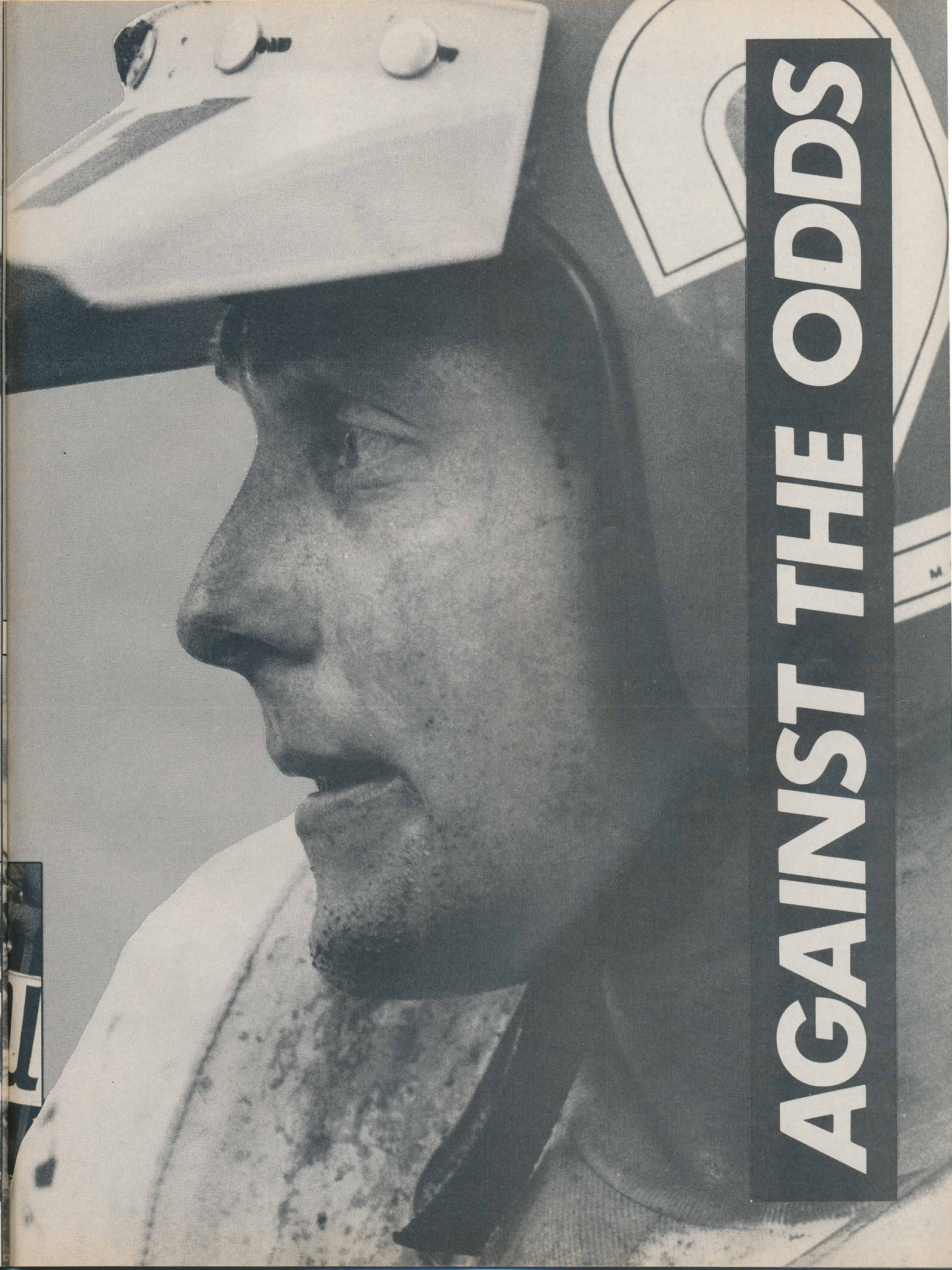
Venturing south, Willie obtained a deal from Badger Goss for the 1977 British Support series and finished second behind Steve How. Dave Watson and Jonathan Wright also graduated that year. "I was up and down that road every weekend. Earliest I ever got back home was two in the morning."

'Although I moan and carry on I'd be lost without the GPs'

When Alf had had enough in stepped a local man, Bill Thompson ("Bletherin' Bill") with another Maico, but 1978 was a hard year. "I was struggling for spares. At the end of the season Brian Leask suggested I tried a Husky on a bike and spares deal. I'd never had a spare wheel in ma life before."

He enjoyed three years on the Swedish machines, winning the Hawkstone New Year National in 1979 and turning professional later that season. "I was really fit and in good form, but a practice accident damaged my right ankle and I went off to lots of meetings in France, hurting the damn thing every week. People thought I was just riding badly. It took until the middle of 1980 before I was back in form again." He finished fourteenth in the British Championship, improving to eighth in 1981. Then it was back to Badger...





AGAINST THE ODDS

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"Old Vic Allan helped me a lot. I'm a terrible salesman. I'd never have bid enough. Vic made me ask for 'X' amount of pounds and I got my first half-decent wage, bike and spares, bonus and travelling expenses." He moved up to seventh in the British Championship and did a full season of 250 GPs at Vic's suggestion, scoring points in France.

New Husky importer Pro-Circuit stepped in with a better deal and grand prix expenses for 1983. He moved into the 500 GPs ("I love the pulling power of the big bikes") and edged into sixth place in the national series at the final race.

He also had a mechanic for the first and only time. "Neale was a good man. Always talked sense when things went wrong. I've always had to want for things. Neale would say 'let's put on a new tyre' and whoosh - it was done before I had time to change my mind!" But for 1984 his Heron Suzuki deal is a relatively poor one and Simpson is once more on his own, travelling with pretty wife Vanda. "It's back to bike and spares, though I'm very glad to be on Japanese bikes."

Willie's motocrossing heroes come as no surprise. "I went to a grass track when I was 14. Jimmy Aird wheeled the length of the straight. I was really impressed! I admired Heikki Mikkola. He would ride a 45 minute race then come in and fight with his mechanic, start last and come through to win. And Carla seems the sort of guy who would go and fix the caravan door. He's how I see myself.

BELOW: Willie the spannerman in France. His bikes are always immaculately prepared.

BOTTOM: French GP action at Brou and all the cut and thrust of grand prix racing as Simpson (Suzuki 24) shoves aside Henk Steppenwoolde (Honda 41) as Willie himself comes under pressure from ex-world 250 champ Danny LaPorte (Yamaha 70). Simpson's 11th place showed us a glimpse of his domestic form.



Travelling with the bikes and mucking in. Laurence (Spence) strikes me as that sort of guy as well."

He and the equally robust Irishman have often helped one another out, Simpson once towing Spence's stricken van from Koblenz, in Germany, back to Slough ... almost. Five miles from Slough Willie's van broke down and had to be towed home to Scotland!

On the track he fears nobody and doesn't begrudge today's kids their opportunities, but worries about the consequences. "Kids can put 100 per cent effort into it if they want to. They'll want for nothing. But if things come too easy do they give up when the going gets tough? If they hit a bad spell where things aren't given to them what then?"

"Look at Jonathan Wright. He packed in as soon as he wasn't being given what he was used to. But Rob Hooper and people like that can make do with a lesser deal. I've got a lesser deal but better machines. It's a question of survival."

But the manner of that survival still rankles. "People from the outside look in and say, 'Gee, that guy's got everything. Van kitted out, awning, everything.' They don't realise there's a lot gone into getting that - effort which should have gone into racing. I honestly think a full-time mechanic and better deal would clear my mind for better grand prix results."

