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# Still hungry at 30

Barry Sheene, British motorcycling's Man for all seasons, explains to Ian Beacham why he is far from finished

**T**HE ATMOSPHERE is heavy with pungent smoke as The Man snaps and crackles a fresh Gauloises. The cool blue eyes stare unblinkingly at the silent Yamaha by his side and you pluck up the courage to disturb his train of thought.

"So what's gone wrong, Barry?" is the line of questioning only the strong-willed, thick-skinned and folks with a macabre sense of humour should try to engage conversation with him.

But for those who have shared The Man's pride, marvelled at his skills, sympathised with his misfortune, scoffed at his critics and enjoyed his ten years in the big-time, it's the sort of opener he can comfortably deal with.

"Has it all gone wrong?" he queries. "So OK we've had some problems with the bikes now and again but when we've had them running properly, I've been up with the rest of them.

"Still, what's it matter? If I was given a pound for everyone who's written me off this season I could afford to put Triumph back in business.

"Yes, for sure I'm disappointed with results but I know it has been one of those unlucky seasons anyone can have. I know in my heart I'm riding as well and as fast as before but I knew perfectly well how tough it was going to be racing as a privateer. What has helped me no end has been the attitude of my sponsors who have emphasised they will share in my failures as well as my successes and still continue to give me their full support."

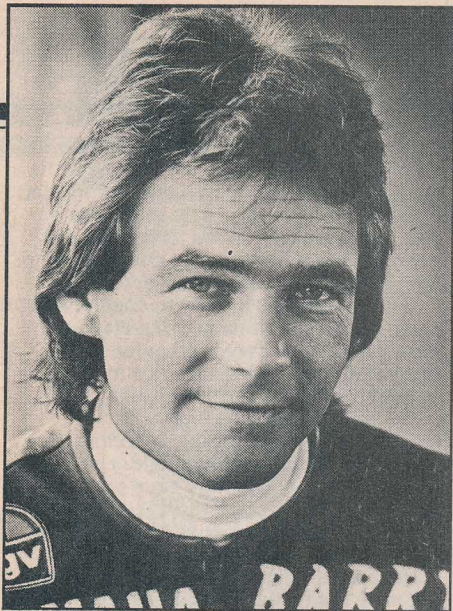
If you know The Man and have got down on bended knees in years gone by to thank him for giving road racing new horizons, his attitude to the non-believers who fancy he is over the top at 30 is one of bored indifference.

"You can spend your life trying to explain what went wrong and it will eventually sound like a gigantic excuse. So I've grown tired of trying to convince people there are genuine reasons. Why should I bother? Those people who really know me are aware of the facts, as happened in 1978 when I picked up the virus. But just look at the anti-Sheene mob who called it 'bull-shit'.

"Some will never want to listen to the truth

**Right: Racing well with no holds barred. Minimal ground clearance between corner-edging and troublesome right knee**  
➤ **Sheene and Yamaha strive forward.**





**Left: Barry Sheene at 30 — still hugely popular and continuing to be the most marketable motorcyclist in the world. Now can Britain find a successor?**

— so I cannot be bothered to outline the long list of niggling faults that occurred with the machines."

Push him harder and he will admit to disappointment over being unable to get on terms with the other giants of motorcycle racing on a regular basis — "But it's no use crying. We have just got to get it right and I know it will come right. That's why I have absolutely no regrets about leaving Suzuki to go on Yamahas."

For a professional to leave a proven 500cc world championship bike and the full backing of a works team for an over-the-counter machine that has characteristics largely unfamiliar to one who has spent six years on a Suzuki, it takes some fathoming out. Yet he could become his own boss, choose his own team — and earn more money. Perhaps they're the reasons.

The Man being the most charismatic, the most popular and the best-known name to race a motorcycle in modern times, easily found well-heeled sponsors in Akai and old friends in Texaco and Marlboro. His budget was colossal and, with a £35,000 Landcruiser mobile home in which to seek solace when away from the £¼ million country seat in Surrey, the term privateer became a misnomer.

But surely, came the vocal roar, he had little chance of winning the world title and here was a case of killing the fatted calf.

"You mean taking the money and running," he questions.

"No, I don't mean . . ." I inject.

"Look, I reckon if I stayed with Suzuki I'd more than likely have done very well. Life's full of ifs, isn't it? But Yamaha came into the 500cc race at the height of the battle and I was fairly confident a standard production Yamaha would hold its own once development work had been successful. I

still hold with that because Yamaha factory guys have got the brains to get it right.

"Back in '76, Johnny Cecotto was the only runner on a 500 Yamaha but I said they ought to switch the piston-port motor for a rotary-valve job. When they did, the bike went like a rocket.

"This year, my Yamahas have not been as good as people thought they'd be and, as some have discovered, if you try too hard on them, you fall off. As I'm still not keen on falling off and hurting myself, I'd sooner settle for the position I occupied in a race."

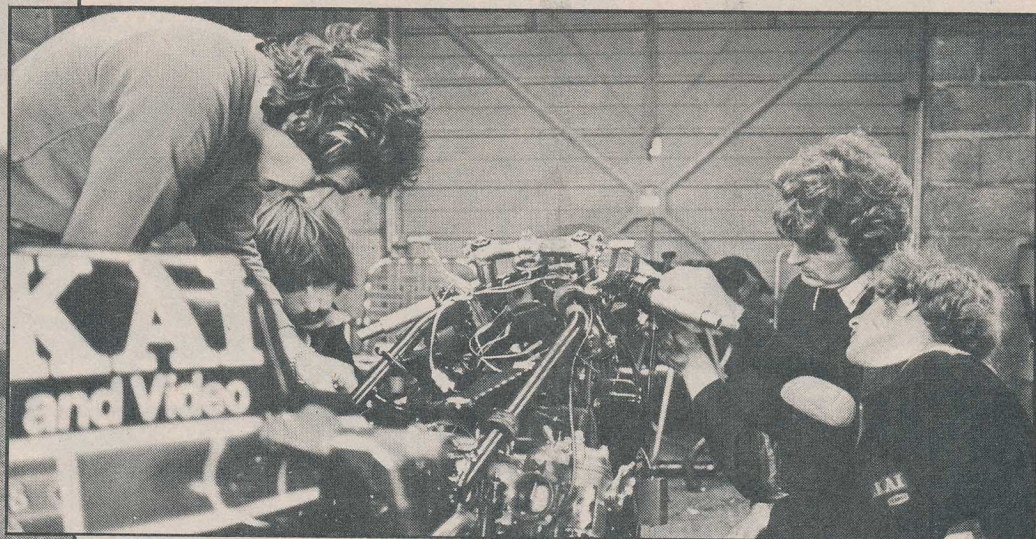
He insists he was never promised a works Yamaha at any stage and makes no complaint about getting the extra assistance that could have put him on a par with the factory Suzukis.

At Silverstone, however, Yamaha's keenness to clinch the all-important manufacturer's title led to him getting a pukka works engine with electronically-operated power valve and a factory rolling chassis. He kept their motor, for the big race, housed it in a specially-commissioned frame from Steve Harris but dropped out of the expected thriller when the bike developed one of those mystery power losses after a mere three miles.

"I'm a great believer in fate. If it's your turn to be dogged with bad luck, you'll get it. Apart from that third lap in the first practice session at Silverstone, it was problems there all the way with the bikes. Ten years ago I would have cried my eyes out. Now I realise the only sensible thing to do is to buckle down to work and sort it out.

"But in this game you have to depend an awful lot on good fortune. That's why I say I was lucky to win the world championships in 1976 and 1977 — lucky because the bikes did not break down."

TV viewers and observant spectators will have noticed the works Suzuki, as ridden by Randy Mamola and Graeme Crosby, easily tops The Man's Yamaha on engine power and handling. He agrees and says they even



**All hands to the pump. It's all deadly serious as Sheene and team attempt to iron out engine bugs with the 500-4 Yamaha in preparation for the Marlboro British Grand Prix.**

## Still hungry at 30

◀ go quicker than Roberts' Yamaha.  
"So I have to try everything I know to keep up and what happens at Paul Ricard when I attempt to get past Crosby's Suzuki — I come off and do the finger," he relates.

Amputation has left a short stub where his little finger was once attached to his right hand. But it gives him no bother, unlike his screwed-up right knee which has pained him for five years since the Daytona horror.

Failure to produce the fireworks at Silverstone again gave more ammunition to the 'anti' brigade but it matters not one little bit to him. "Listen, unlike what you might be led to believe by reading the motorcycle press, sponsors don't feel let down if you've had a bad year. They want the column inches win, draw or lose — and I think I've given them that. Still, I don't get wound up by press criticism anyway."

The Man appears bullet-proof. Where's that soft under-belly, the weak spot that can get him hot under the leathers? The nearest one gets to touching a nerve-end is to mention the organisation of racing.

"Has World Seri . . ."

"Don't even bother to mention it. People are sick to death of hearing about World



**Above: Forget his Rolls Royce, it's the Porsche 928S that Sheene prefers these days. The hand-made leather boots, French tailored jeans and expensive leisure shirt are now as familiar as his grin.**

**Below: The will-to-win is still very much there. It just seems the hardware can't match his desires.**

Series. And I know enough about the FIM to understand nothing will ever change," he barks. "Take the unity of riders. At the start of the season 40 riders said there was no way they would go to the Nurburgring for the final round of the world championship. Look what happened — 39 went.

"I didn't go. And if I only needed one point to clinch the championship, I still wouldn't have gone. Where's your dignity, your respectability when you decide to do something you publicly decried?"

His pride remains as high as his confidence — and absolutely nothing can deny his ambition to get back out front into the position that so many have profited from in years past — from motorcycling newspapers to race circuit owners. "I'll be there again," he enthuses.

He fancies he's good for a further five years on the track. "I know I said two years ago I wanted to switch to cars, but Formula One is the only class to be in," he remarks. "And that's such a machine-orientated competition that if you're not in the right car at the right time, you'll come nowhere."

The all-American candy kid Mamola trots past, a racing phenomenon whom The Man recognises as the next grand master of road racing. "I wasn't as good at 20 as he was — but there's no point in looking back. Only the future matters — and as far as I'm concerned, the future for me will be OK. When I was 20, they called me a flash-in-the-pan. Now at 30, they're saying I'm on the way out. Let's just see what happens . . ."

