

# dennis the menace – part two

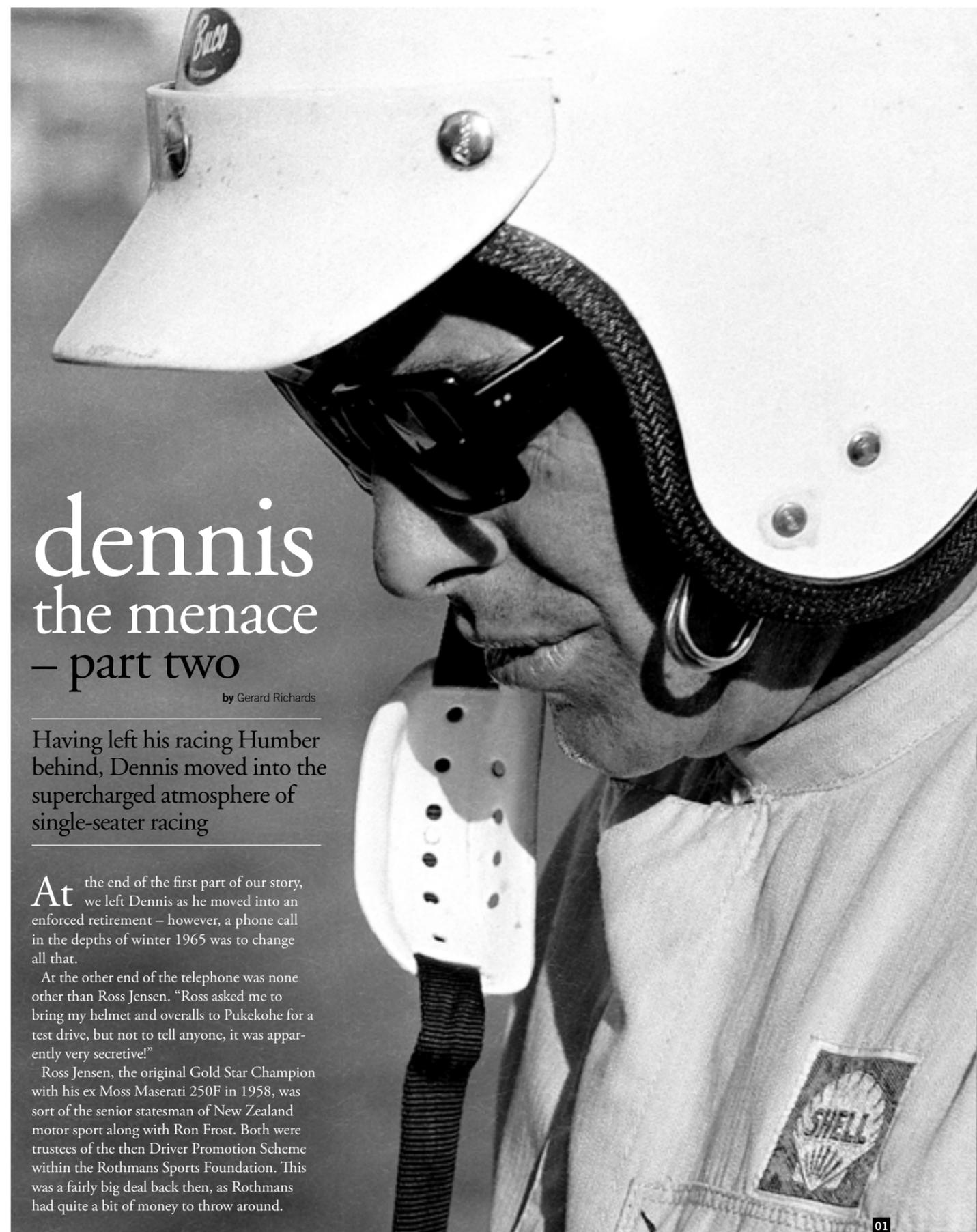
by Gerard Richards

Having left his racing Humber behind, Dennis moved into the supercharged atmosphere of single-seater racing

At the end of the first part of our story, we left Dennis as he moved into an enforced retirement – however, a phone call in the depths of winter 1965 was to change all that.

At the other end of the telephone was none other than Ross Jensen. “Ross asked me to bring my helmet and overalls to Pukekohe for a test drive, but not to tell anyone, it was apparently very secretive!”

Ross Jensen, the original Gold Star Champion with his ex Moss Maserati 250F in 1958, was sort of the senior statesman of New Zealand motor sport along with Ron Frost. Both were trustees of the then Driver Promotion Scheme within the Rothmans Sports Foundation. This was a fairly big deal back then, as Rothmans had quite a bit of money to throw around.



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Simply, what was at stake here was a paid-up drive in a relatively late model, large capacity, single-seater racing car – for two full seasons. In the New Zealand motor sport scene that existed during the mid '60s this deal was a big deal.

The car in question was an ex works Grand Prix Cooper T66 of 1963 vintage. Raced by Bruce McLaren during the 1963 Grand Prix season, the car passed to Phil Hill for 1964. At that year's Austrian Grand Prix, Hill crashed into the hay bales at the edge of the track and the resulting inferno burnt out the car. Fortunately, Hill escaped unharmed.

## Resurrection

It was then that Bruce Abernethy – a UK-based, New Zealand speedway rider – entered the story and the picture quickly became somewhat muddled.

What follows is one possible hypothesis. Rothmans, wanting to get involved in frontline local motor racing, contacted Ross Jensen, who knew Bruce McLaren well, to try and organise a car. Rothmans had funds to buy a car, but needed someone to coordinate the process of getting the racer prepared and shipped out. The damaged Hill car was lying around and needing a rebuild, and this is where Abernethy came in.

McLaren rebuilt the car, possibly with Abernethy's help, converting it from the 1.5-litre V8 form to the 2.5 FPF Climax motor in the process – this being required for down-under racing. Abernethy wanted to try open wheeler racing, and in return for his efforts he became the first designated driver of



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Ecurie Rothmans Cooper – the racing team's full title.

However, the ex-speedway rider didn't enjoy much success with the car during the 1964 '65 season, not really adapting his driving techniques from bikes to cars.

To maximise the car's potential, it was decided a new driver was required. However, it was then that a dispute regarding the ownership of the car reared its ugly head. Put simply, Abernethy felt that as a result of his efforts in organising the original acquisition of the car, he was entitled to co-ownership. Rothmans, which had paid for the car, saw the speedway rider's season of racing – no matter how lacklustre – as fair compensation. The

matter ended up in court, though no word of the dispute or any eventual settlement was publicly aired.

Speculation aside, what is not open to dispute is that in early 1965 Paul Fahey was given a run in the Cooper at a Pukekohe meeting, winning the feature race – the grandly titled Coupé di Vitesse – ahead of Johnny Riley's 2.5-litre Lotus 21 and Red Dawson's ex Palmer/ Hyslop 2.5 Lowline Cooper. Fahey was also nominated to drive the car on a one-off basis at the Lakeside circuit in Queensland, Australia, in 1965. As a result, Fahey was offered a full-time drive but decided against it, preferring the commercial viability of saloon racing. >



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01 Dennis – complete with trademark shades (Photo by Terry Marshall)

02 Red Dawson's Brabham BT7 Climax 2.5 leads Dennis' Rothmans' Cooper-Climax out of the hairpin at Pukekohe, 1965/66 season (Dennis Marwood Collection)

03 Andy Buchanan in the ex Palmer Brabham-Climax leading Dennis' Rothmans' Cooper-Climax. Teretonga Tasman races, Jan/Feb 1966 (Photo by Jack Inwood, Dennis Marwood Collection)



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04 Roly Levis in his Brabham Twin Cam just about to wave Dennis' Rothmans' Cooper through and thus lose fourth place at the tragic Tasman race at Teretonga, 1966 (Dennis Marwood Collection)  
05 Dennis at the wheel of the Rothmans' Cooper-Climax at the Timaru Trophy Gold Star race, early 1967 (Dennis Marwood Collection)

### The Marwood Plan

So, shortly after receiving that phone call from Ross Jensen, Dennis arrived at Pukekohe on a winter's day and was greeted with the prospect of competing with two other drivers for the coveted driver's seat in the Cooper. Also at the trackside were Bill Stone, and South Islander David Silcock.

A no-nonsense test had already been laid out. Each driver would be allowed five laps each in the morning (restricted to a rev limit of 5000rpm). Following a short lunch break another five laps would be undertaken by the drivers, this time being allowed a 6000rpm limit. By the end of the day, the Rothmans Cooper would have a new driver.

The Marwood plan was simple – "I made up

my mind from the outset that I would lower my lap times progressively and I managed to do that, though to this day I never saw the lap charts. I wanted to show consistency and a willingness to learn."

This was obviously the correct recipe, as Dennis won the drive, even though the Lakeside gearing wasn't suitable for Pukekohe. He recalled that "Bill Stone may have set some quicker laps than me, but then his times were more erratic with slower ones as well. Someone, possibly Dave Silcock, put the car in the fence during the last run of the day, but this didn't matter by then as we'd all had our second run!"

Becoming the Rothmans Cooper driver was a first in this country, in a sense Dennis was the first professional paid driver in New Zealand.

With all expenses paid on the car, Dennis reasoned with team management – Jensen and Frost.

"I convinced them that I would perform better if I was aware I would be rewarded in some way, and asked for 10 per cent of the prize money. This was agreed, which made me think I should have been braver and asked for 50 per cent!"

### First Outing

The serious Cooper campaign began effectively at the Renwick Gold Star opener in Marlborough on November 13, 1965. It was an encouraging start – Marwood was right on the pace in practice, clocking one minute, 14.8 seconds to Jim Palmer's one minute, 14 seconds for second spot on the grid.

and spun into the fence. And that was it, because I listened to Jimmy and allowed him to distract me and spoil my concentration.

"I've learned since then – and I've heard others say, never look around, use your mirrors if need be, but never look around!" The result of the race, for the record, was Jimmy Palmer (Lotus-Climax 32B) first, Roly Levis (Brabham Ford TC 1.5) second and Andy Buchanan (Brabham-Climax 2.5) third. Buchanan should have clinched second place but spun on oil during the closing stages of the race, losing his place to Levis.

Back on home turf at Pukekohe, Dennis put his indiscretion with the fence at Renwick behind him, and got his Gold Star campaign underway with a forceful and challenging

drive into second place, only eight seconds behind the eternal '60s champion, Jimmy Palmer. The Gold Star single-seater championship in these years ran in conjunction with the international Tasman Series.

The Pukekohe result was a confidence boosting shot in the arm for the team, and everything suddenly clicked at the best possible time, with legendary mechanic Bill Hannah and Dennis getting the car dialled into the groove. Hannah, a large man usually attired in formal tie and dress trousers, cut a very regal image while fettling the car. He was also a renowned mechanic/ car builder, remembered well for his previous work on the Angus Hyslop and Dick Langley Mini Cooper S racers. >



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01 Dennis in the Rothmans Coopers at Pukekohe's hairpin. The nosecone looks as though it might have involved in a minor shunt (Dennis Marwood Collection)

03 Dennis en-route to victory in the Timaru Trophy Gold Star race, March 1967. The road race was on a rough and bumpy circuit and Dennis drove a good race to stay out of trouble and preserve the car (Dennis Marwood Collection)

03 Dennis en-route to victory in the Timaru Trophy Gold Star race, March 1967. The road race was on a rough

went off into the bank – another one down. Geoghegan and Red Dawson both had spins on the wet track but recovered – however, Bill Stone was not so lucky and collected a fence post with his Cooper.

Through it all Dennis drove smoothly and quickly. "I always drove with some reserve, it wasn't my car and I endeavoured to look after the machinery, it was in my interests to get to the next race. I treated the car with respect and didn't push it past its limits, as we only had the one engine."

The only problem he encountered in the latter stages was a slightly sticking throttle. "The throttle stuck open slightly while down shifting for Stable Hairpin (The Elbow), so I elected to drive off the track briefly and blip the throttle to clear it. On returning to the circuit, I found the finish flag had been given to Hill and Stewart, who were chatting to each other on the slow down lap. I completed another lap to ensure a fourth place finish." Palmer was the first Kiwi home, finishing third behind Hill and Stewart.

For Dennis, this was a great result and he'd earned three Tasman points.

The shorter, 28-lap sprint race at the tight Levin track a week later netted Marwood a seventh place finish after a steady race. He just missed out on a Tasman point, but collected

three Gold Star points behind Levis, Palmer and Red Dawson.

A good sixth place at Wigram kept the momentum going before Marwood put up another tremendous drive in adverse circumstances at the tragic, drama-filled race at Teretonga.

### Tragedy at Teretonga

With Dickie Attwood standing in for Graham Hill in the number two BRM, Jackie Stewart led the field into the loop for the first time. Spencer Martin in the Scuderia Velcoe Brabham, at that time in third place, left his braking way too late and rammed the rear of the second-placed Brabham of Red Dawson. This ripped a rear wheel off the Dawson car, causing Attwood to take sudden evasive action, spinning the BRM into the scenery with the car inverting and trapping him underneath. A nasty accident, but fortunately the car didn't catch fire and Attwood emerged with only minor cuts and abrasions. However, worse was to come.

The field instantly backed off the gas as a result of this mêlée, and in the ensuing chaos Dennis, a little further back in the field, ran the nose-cone of the Cooper into the back of Frank Gardner's Brabham. A quick stop for team mechanic, Hannah, to tape down the loose body section saw him drop to 10th place, but he was back in seventh by lap 25.

Lap 33 saw the ninth-placed Bill Caldwell leave the track at high speed with a jammed throttle and hit a sheep transporter. He was killed instantly along with two teenage spectators. The race continued though – this was long before the era of pace cars. Dennis, driving with grim determination, continued to move up, and in the latter stages had closed in on Levis's fourth place.

Roly, thinking he was a lap up, waved Dennis through and gleefully he accepted the gesture. "Roly's pit thought I was a lap down, but I was on the same lap and I picked up fourth place! Roly later tried to make a protest that I'd passed him on the yellow flag – but I hadn't."

It had been another well judged fighting

drive, netting Dennis another three Tasman points for a total of seven scored in the Tasman Series. Flushed with this success, the Rothmans Team Cooper equipe decided to tackle the four Australian races in the series, which followed on from the Teretonga race.

Unfortunately, the team's venture to the sunburned land wasn't quite as fruitful as might have been hoped, but it did gather some amusing incidents along the way.

### Australian Interlude

Sydney was being battered by a heat wave at the time, and Warwick Farm was like the Sahara Desert – the asphalt was almost hot enough to fry an egg on. Without the dried ice advantage that most teams were using to cool their cockpits and fuel tanks, Dennis was forced to pace himself in the horrendous heat. "It was a terrible ordeal!" he recalled. Marwood dived with Bob Jane in his 1.5 Elfin Mono for much of the race, but had to slow up at times suffering from dehydration and seizing neck muscles. He finished though, in last place, just



### International Competition

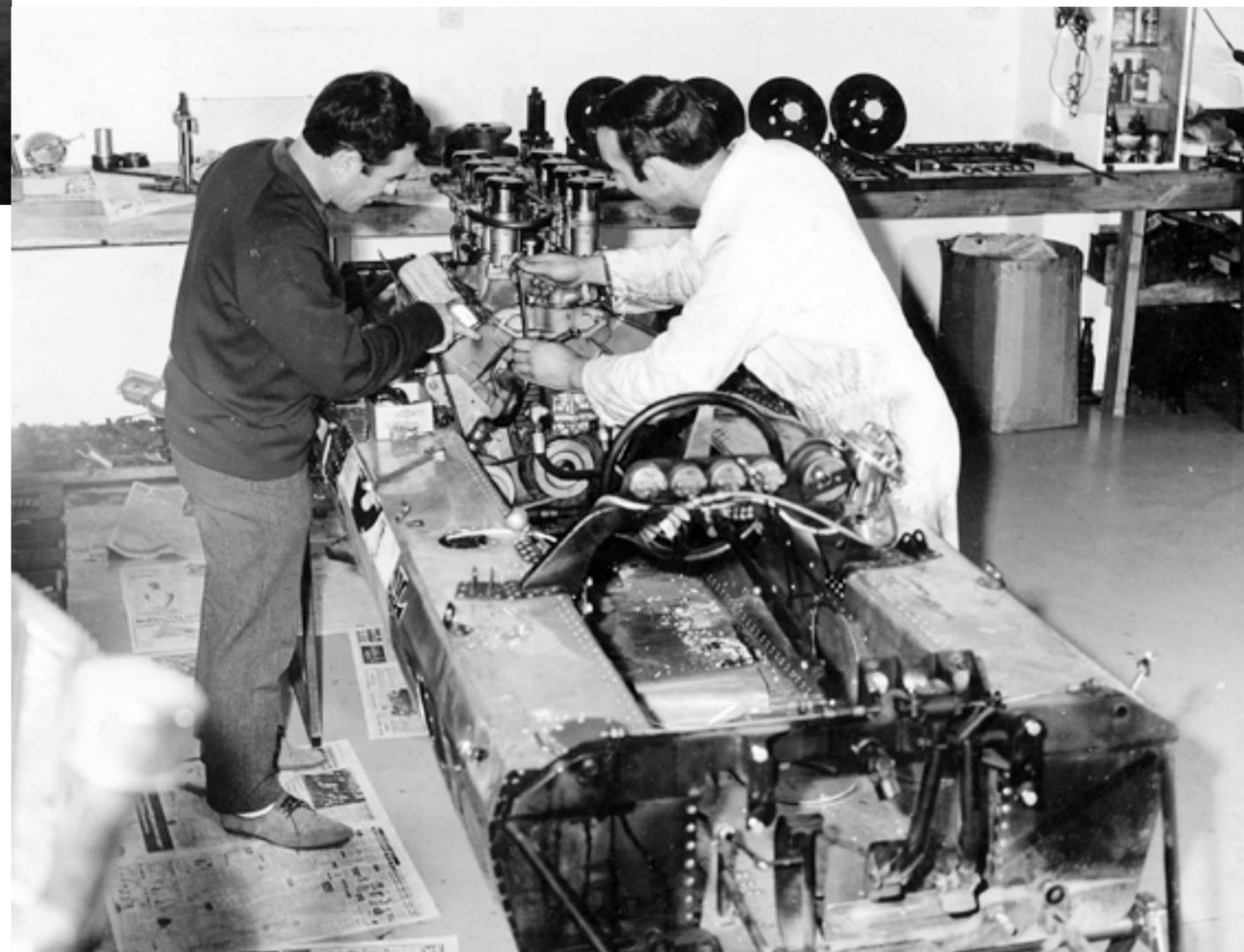
The 13th running of the NZIGP, held at Pukekohe on January 8, 1966, was run during intermittent showers, with a classy field which included works BRM V8s for Graham Hill and Jackie Stewart, Jim Clark in the works Lotus 39, plus Australian internationals Frank Gardner, Spencer Martin and Leo Geoghegan.

Dennis qualified fifth with a time of one minute, 29.8 seconds – second fastest Kiwi on the grid, the fastest being Jim Palmer. By comparison, Graham Hill snatched pole with a time of one minute, 25.2 seconds – equalling Bruce McLaren's unofficial track record. Still,

this was a great time for Marwood, who had the car really humming.

Due to the wet conditions, it was an incident packed race, one which typified the accident-prone '66 season. Clark's gearbox stripped first gear on the starting line and Gardner's Brabham swerved to avoid the stationary Lotus but, in doing so, collided with Buchanan's Brabham. Clark was able to get a push start – though he retired on lap seven with a broken gearbox – but the two Brabhams were both out of the race.

Spencer Martin's Brabham led the BRMs as far as Railway Corner (Castrol), where he



happy to bring the car home without expiring! Dennis remembers staggering to the Shell hospitality tent immediately after the race in a very disoriented state. Standing with race winner, Jackie Stewart, they downed several bottles of Fanta orange juice in a thirst-quenching burst; possibly not the best plan. Seconds later the wee Scot was behind the tent retching it all up again!

After Warwick Farm, the team was based at Arnold Glass's Sydney Datsun dealership to prepare the car for Lakeside (Brisbane). "Les Wiggart helped us prepare the car and he used his Falcon ute to tow us on the long haul."

Along with Marwood, the New Zealand contingent tackling the Aussie races were Palmer (Lotus 32B), Levis (Brabham 1.5) and Andy Buchanan in the ex-Palmer Brabham 2.5.

Lakeside saw the end of the trail for Marwood's Rothmans Cooper campaign. A good result in qualifying ended with the bearings run after eight laps. This, no doubt, could have been repaired for the last two races,

but it appears there was some controversy over starting money. The team had also run foul with the prehistoric CAMS legislation regarding advertising on race cars in the land of free enterprise!

Another intriguing piece of gamesmanship designed to sow seeds of doubt – courtesy of Jimmy Palmer – surfaced while on the

Lakeside dummy grid before practice.

"Jimmy turned to me and said with concern, 'Dennis, you're not going out on those tyres are you, they look pretty worn?'"

As a result of concern filtering through his mind, Dennis decided to confront the team patron about the car's tyres.

"I plucked up courage to broach the subject



09 On the left is a young Jimmy Palmer with Dennis, probably taken at Pukekohe. Two Hamilton lads – the fastest resident drivers in the country (Dennis Marwood Collection)

10 Let it all hang out! Dennis winds on as much oversteer as possible at Pukekohe's Castrol/Railway corner. Gold Star meeting, Pukekohe, 21st September 1969 (Dennis Marwood Collection)

11 Let it all hang out! Dennis winds on as much oversteer as possible at Pukekohe's Castrol/Railway corner. Gold Star meeting, Pukekohe, 21st September 1969 (Dennis Marwood Collection)

with Ross Jensen. 'Are those tyres good enough to race on out there?' I asked him. His answer – in the most school masterly way – was, 'Dennis you leave those matters to me, your job is just to drive the car!' So I was put in my place, that was one of my weaknesses as a racing driver, listening to other people."

Despite the occasional edge between Dennis and Ross during this era, on the whole the arrangement was fairly civil. In later years, Dennis and Ross became good friends and shared many family times.

After Lakeside, the team elected to drive back to Sydney (passing on the last two races) via the inland route and, of course, the two-car's two-stage auto gave up the ghost in a small, back of beyond town called Armadale. While waiting for repairs during a forced overnight stay, the crew took in the local theatre where Dennis had his first encounter with James Bond – Goldfinger.

The end of term report on Dennis's first season on Cooper Climax duty was highly commendable. Second place in the national Gold Star championship with 29 points behind Palmer's 50 was an excellent result. The Cooper couldn't be considered as effective a weapon as the extremely well resourced Palmer-equipped monocoque Lotus-Climax. The great Tasman race results were added icing to the cake.

### Second Season

The second Cooper season – 1966/67 – turned out to be a bit of a mixed bag. There had been plans to acquire a new car, and some

efforts were expended to buy one of the BRM V8s, but this came to nothing. Apparently, Robbie Francevic had also made a play in the same direction. Whatever, a new car wasn't forthcoming and the grandiose scheme of a two-car team, with Dennis moving into the latest projectile, fell by the wayside.

"One of the problems that did arise, which was fair enough, was that other drivers felt it was unfair to give all the resources (from Rothmans) to one driver. One of the ringleaders was Red Dawson, who complained to Ross Jensen about one driver getting a car; why not spread it around a bit more and support several."

Possibly as a consequence of this, no further funds were added for the 1966/67 season. As Dennis puts it, "The engine got tired and became more unreliable. The first year had been brilliant, but we were patching it up and treated it very carefully during the second summer."

That said, Dennis and the Cooper challenged very closely for the outright Gold Star Championship. With Palmer out of the equation until the Tasman races, Kerry Grant in the ex Buchanan Brabham and Roly Levis were his main rivals. At times Red Dawson and Lawrence Brownlie would also figure as well.

Dennis kicked off in the best possible way at the Pukekohe Gold Star opener on November 5, 1966. He qualified three seconds faster than Kerry Grant, then went on to win the preliminary 15-lapper by 10 seconds from Grant and Ken Smith's Lotus 22. In the 25-lap Gold Star race – run in deteriorating, wet con-

ditions – Dennis chased Grant for the first six laps. They then engaged in a duel which ended on lap nine when Grant spun at the hairpin.

From then on Marwood was in command and, despite a quick spin on lap 22, he was well clear of a decimated field. Next up were Ken Smith and Don McDonald when the flag fell.

The final Renwick 50, on November 12, was a race of unfinished business for Dennis. He was resolutely determined to make amends for the year before when he looked around for Roly. On the narrow hazard-rife, tricky circuit lined by telephone poles, ditches and fences, Dennis was to give possibly one of his best driving displays. Hannah presented him with a well-prepared machine and he was absolutely fired up in nailing pole (1m13.5s), to Grant (1m14.7s), Levis (1m15.1s) and Brownlie (1m15.2s).

From the start, Marwood poured on the pressure, charging harder than he had previously in the car. Screaming around the tight little circuit, he opened the gap from three seconds with a one-minute, 13.6-second lap to seven seconds. Shortly after he set a new lap record of one minute, 13.4, but then suddenly it became apparent that the race wasn't going to be a procession. Kerry Grant was digging deep, and with the bit firmly between his teeth was responding to the challenge. It was turning into a great if scary race. As the field rounded the 10th lap, the leading Cooper and Brabham were neck and neck. Dennis was unaware Kerry had closed so fast.

To quote Motorman's report: "Then in a frighteningly desperate move, Grant lunged >



Dennis with the restored Rothmans' Cooper-Climax, alongside the famous Maybach from Australia at Pukekohe 2008 (Dennis Marwood Collection)

down the inside of the Cooper, put the Brabham's wheels into the loose metal at the side of the narrow track at an estimated 125mph [201kph], as he slipped past the Cooper with only inches to spare and took the lead before the right hand corner."

Not surprisingly, Grant took the all-time lap record with one minute,

13 seconds with this lap (2.7 seconds faster than Palmer's record the previous year).

Dennis responded immediately and forced his way through a few seconds later, but Kerry's race was over a couple of laps after that with a split gearbox.

Dennis – "Kerry did the diff in with that manoeuvre. Very dodgy, it was a narrow road, he broke the gearbox because that's a big strain."

Marwood went on to a great victory, 28 seconds ahead of Red Dawson's 2.5 Brabham Climax which was 11 seconds clear of Levis.

This was the high point of the Cooper campaign. He was also to win the final Gold Star race of the season, the Timaru Trophy. This was at the one-off, rough and tough road circuit around the streets of Timaru. Later that year the new circuit at Levels would open, and this race was intended as stop-gap after the Waimate Street race had been cancelled after its final running the previous season.

It wasn't quite as comprehensive a win, as Palmer had led until he grounded the gearbox on one of the circuit's many bumps, lost all his

transmission oil and retired. Nevertheless, it was a faultless drive on a difficult, car-breaking circuit that brought Dennis home 20 seconds ahead of Levis, with Lawrence another five seconds back.

### Increasingly Fragile

Dennis almost won the Gold Star series, but the problem of the car's unreliability during the longer international Tasman races was a severe handicap. No amount of nursing could keep the increasingly fragile Climax motor and running gear together during the longer-distance races. Against the BRMs, Clark's Lotus-Climax V8 and the newer Brabhams, the Cooper was showing its age, and a lack of finance available to refurbish the tired mechanicals told the story.

Dennis won all three of the National Championship Gold Star rounds (separate from the Tasman Series), amassing 30 points, but was pipped by Roly Levis on 32. Roly admittedly drove aggressively well in the smaller car to win the laurels but, had fortune smiled on Dennis with at least a couple of finishes in the Tasman Series, he would most likely have been champion. But ifs and might-have-beens count for nothing in motor racing.

The only other major incident of note was at the November 26 Levin National meeting. In the Vic Hudson Memorial race, Dennis lost control of the Cooper from the start on cold tyres. He spun backwards into the bank

at Cabbage Tree corner while trying to catch the leaders. This caused major rear suspension damage and, in the process, Dene Hollier couldn't avoid hitting the front of the Cooper, which knocked the nose-cone off. To cap it all, Dennis copped some serious whiplash damage to his neck – something which still troubles him today. To add insult to injury, his charge from the rear of the grid, on cold tyres, had been precipitated by the timekeeper's failure to record his practice times.

It was the end of the Cooper saga. The aging ex Formula One car was sold to Peter Maloney, who ran the now fairly antiquated machine as effectively as he could for a couple of seasons, largely as a back marker.

In an astute move, Les McLaren (father of Bruce) and a couple of oil company executives bought the Cooper for \$1400 around 1971, and donated it to the Auckland Museum of Transport & Technology (MOTAT). For years the car languished there unloved, but recently it was completely restored.

The historic Cooper T66 now looks an absolute picture, and Dennis test drove the car in 2008. The Cooper is due to make a reappearance at a historic racing car demonstration at the opening of the new Hampton Downs circuit later this year.

Next month: in the third and final part of our story, we follow Dennis' move into the world of big-banger saloon racing, retirement, and his return to the track as a classic racer. ©