

01 Dennis with the legendary Humber 80, seen here in its Motordrome Racing Team colours – 1961/62 season (Dennis Marwood Collection)



It was into this arena that the young Dennis Marwood emerged, as part of a rich wellspring of talent which sprouted from the Waikato.

From the Cowshed to the Race Track

Dennis was born on July 25, 1933, on a farm close to Tahuna just north of Morrinsville, and his childhood centred on helping around the family's dairy operation. From early adolescence Dennis realised that cows just weren't going to dial his number. The automobile had hooked his imagination and desire. As the only son of a somewhat autocratic and uncompromising rural farmer, this diversion from the family farm suc-

cession was not viewed in an ecstatic manner. However the young Dennis would remain in the cowshed for some years to come, until he struck out on his own. But the difficulties with his father, who was a very tough task master of the old school, were to blight his youth. A complete lack of affirmation from his dad served as supreme motivation for Dennis, and he used this resolve to prove his father wrong when he finally hit the race-tracks of the country.

With his dislike of the farm, "I hated milking cows!" Dennis made good his escape whenever he could.

This period coincided beautifully with the

# dennis the menace – part one

by Gerard Richards

Three cars which performed a valued public service in wartime or peacetime, and one that didn't make the grade

**From** the heart of Mooloo country, that rich fertile dairy bowl of the Waikato, came a new force stirring in the mid to late '50s – and it had nothing to do with milk quotas or, for that matter, the obsessive passion of cow bell-clanking locals for the hard men of the rugby pitch.

It was a time when the children born around or shortly before the cataclysm of World War II were growing up in a new world of greater mechanisation. They were hungry to explore the limits of this new frontier after years of deprivation.

At the time, it seemed as if the automobile and young men were made for each other, attracted like a parched man stumbling across a pub in the desert. And, in the restrictive straightjacket of New Zealand's rural society of the '50s, the car symbolised power, freedom, speed and escape.

It seemed only natural that when young testosterone-charged men attained wheels, they parked in the main drag of towns up and down the country and formed tribes and fraternities. Friendships shaped on an underlying passion for improving their vehicles and the ultimate quest – hotting their cars up for more speed.

The '50s brought difficult economic times, with very little after market equipment available. As a result, it bred an era of innovative improvisation and developed some amazing talent.

emergence of a fertile Hamilton car club scene, much of it centred around Ivan Segedin's Esso gas station, The Motordrome, on the Te Rapa straight. It rapidly became a Mecca for local petrol-heads on weekends – many of whom were later to become racing drivers on the national and international stage.

A close-knit network of mates evolved, some linking to previous generations and earlier racers. These included the Palmers – George and son Jim – who were the elite force in the area and always running the best equipment. The young Howden Ganley and his father were also part of the burgeoning scene, along with Spinner Black, Ross Grenville, Bryan Innes and many others, including the young Marwood.

Dennis had got mobile initially with a Matchless 350 with swingarm suspension. It was not long before a local Morrinsville speedway rider, Speed Nola, talked Dennis into fitting a high-compression piston and knobbly tyres. Now he was able to go dirt track racing at Motomaho, Raglan and other venues. This was the forerunner of the motocross era, but Dennis only lasted about a year before cars took over. The first was an Austin 7 – almost a traditional rite of passage for aspiring Kiwi racers, remembering that an Austin 7 was Bruce McLaren's first wheels as well. Dennis didn't punt his 7 for long before buying an MG TD, which served as his dual road and race car, circa 1955-57.

## Lifeline

It was around this time – in the mid to late '50s – that Dennis's other lifeline from the farm emerged. The legendary engine guru, Ray Stone, was operating an engine tuning and modifying shop at Alfriston in South Auckland. Ray was at the sharp end of performance enhancing and race engine preparation, looking after Johnny Mansel's Maserati 250F among others. As Dennis commented, "He had an engine dynamometer in his workshop in the '50s and that wasn't common back then."

"After milking, I'd jump in my car and shoot up to Ray's workshop [80km away] and modify cylinder heads for him, simply because of my love of making engines go quicker. Ray was a master and taught me



02 Starting early – Dennis getting to grips with a racing pedal car on the roof of the Farmers' Building at a children's dodgem playground. Dennis' older sister standing alongside. c1940 (Dennis Marwood Collection)

03 Dennis hillclimbing his Humber 80, around 1959-60 (Dennis Marwood Collection)

how to do it the right way. Then I'd drive back in time for evening milking."

The weekend gatherings at the Segedin workshop became the place for tweaking cars and simply hanging out. It soon became the meeting place for the group before they headed out to competition events in the region or beyond.

The boys had some seriously hot runners now, and they embarked on the local hill climb and sprints circuit with gusto.

Favourite events were grass-track racing at the Wahahora airfield, the Rotorua hill climb and the local hill climb on the edge of Lake Karapiro. Denny Hulme turned up driving his MGTF at this event, and others drove in bare feet!

Dennis still owns a fascinating programme from

the NZ Hill Climbing Championships at Hora Hora, Cambridge, March 9, 1957, at which he ran his MG. Included in the programme were luminaries such as Tom Clark (Ferrari Super Squalo), Bruce McLaren (Cooper-Climax), George Smith (GeeCeeEss), John Mansel, Ron Roycroft, Ralph Watson and many others. Wonderful stuff.

Shortly after this epic event, Dennis sold the MG. The pressure was on him from the old man, to concentrate on his farming. This tug of war would play out over the next 10 years, with both parties gaining the upper hand at various stages.

During this period Dennis bought a Sunbeam Talbot for road use only, and endeavoured to focus his energies on the family farm.

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Class I—351 cc. to 500 cc.			
Cup donated by R. Hayes, Hamilton			
Car. No.	Driver	Make of Car	Cap. cc. Rating
2	J. Taylor (Paeroa)	J.B.S.	497
3	R. G. Levick (Hamilton)	Cooper	498
15	R. W. A. Frost (Levin)	Cooper	499
4	A. Stafford (Auckland)	Cooper	498
Class G—751 cc. to 1100 cc.			
Cup donated by Waikato Motor Racing Club			
25	W. J. Henwood (Auckland)	Cooper	998
5	G. P. Wells (Auckland)	Brookland Riley	1089
1	S. H. Jensen (Levin)	Cooper	1098
6	R. A. Gibbons (Wellington)	Cooper	1096
Class F—1101 cc. to 1500 cc.			
Cup donated by Country Inn Tea Rooms			
36	R. A. Levis (Putaruru)	R.A.L.	1172
54	M. C. Mayo (Auckland)	Buckler	1172
9	B. Tarr (Hamilton)	Ford 10	1172
81	D. J. Marwood (Morrisville)	M.G.T.D.	1328
11	J. C. N. Histed (Auckland)	M.G.T.A.	1492
12	A. C. J. Magon (Te Awamutu)	M.G.T.F.	1466
38	I. Stephenson (Auckland)	Riley	1496
14	B. McLaren (Auckland)	Cooper Climax	1500
Class E—1501 cc. to 2000 cc.			
Cup donated by Modern Car Sales, Hamilton			
15	W. R. Beasley (Auckland)	T.R.2	1991
16	S. W. Bern (Hamilton)	T.R.2	1991
8	G. Palmer (Hamilton)	Cooper Bristol	1971
Class D—2001 cc. to 3000 cc.			
Cup donated by R. Ellis, Te Awamutu			
17	D. J. Bransgrove (Stratford)	Wolseley Sports	2214
43	R. Hampton (Matamata)	Zephyr Special	2262
88	R. Roycroft (Glen Murray)	R.J.R. Special	2500
18	R. Jensen (Auckland)	Austin-Healey	2660
10	D. Caldwell (Glen Murray)	Alfa-Romeo	2900
Class C—3001 cc. to 5000 cc.			
Cup donated by G.S. Tyre Service Ltd.			
19	W. Grant (Ohaupo)	Ford V8	3621
20	W. Culver (Thames)	De Soto Special	3361
21	R. Ellis (Te Awamutu)	Ford Special	3600
7	R. McCutcheon (Hawkes Bay)	Normac Special	3870
23	R. Watson (Auckland)	Lycoming Special	4733
22	T. Clark (Auckland)	Ferrari	3500
Class B—5001 cc. to 8000 cc.			
Cup donated by Syd Brain, Hamilton			
52	J. Mansel (Glen Murray)	Ardun Special	5002
44	G. Smith (Auckland)	Gee-Cee-Ess	5400
67	V. L. Shuter (Hamilton)	J.2 Allard	5400
24	E. L. Avery (Hamilton)	H.W.M.	5500

04-05 1957 New Zealand Hill Climbing Championships programme for 1957 – competitor list shows Dennis in Class F in his MGTD. Other entrants at the same meeting included Syd Jensen, Ron Frost, Bruce McLaren, Ron Roycroft, Ross Jensen, Tom Clark and Johnny Mansel (Dennis Marwood Collection) 06 Renwick, November 1960. Dave Craw (Christchurch) leading Dennis' Humber 80 – unknown Porsche followed by Brian Innes' Zephyr and Doc Langley in the ex Harold Humber 80 (Photo Euan Sarginson – Dennis Marwood Collection)

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#### The Lure of the Circuit

It was a noble attempt to conform to paternal expectations, but rather unravelled when Dennis drove up to a Northern Sports Car Club meet at Ardmore in 1958. He planned just to spectate, but what actually transpired wasn't exactly rocket science – when a mate offered Dennis a helmet, his resolve collapsed and he was soon lining up for a start. "I borrowed a helmet, was given a favourable start in a handicap race and had a win."

The buzz of asphalt circuit racing electrified him, and there was no going back.

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knowledge had advanced considerably from their haphazard origins.

Apart from Ray Stone, Dennis cites Peter Kerr and Dick Bennetts, both of whom also played pivotal roles in the successful preparation of his race cars. Dick Bennetts appeared later in the picture, doing some work on the Eisert Chevy F5000 car, but in particular during the fabulous TransAm Camaro era. Both were amazingly innovative engineer/mechanics, whose skills would take them both to the rarefied realm of international racing in Europe. More about Dick Bennetts later.

#### Campaigning the Humber 80

Local Hamilton mate and club member, Peter Kerr, became Dennis' unofficial mechanic during the serious Humber 80 campaign years from 1959-'63.

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07 Dennis leading Bruce McLaren and Doc Langley, Wigram 1962 (Dennis Marwood Collection) 08 The Motordrome Racing Team 1961-62 – from left-to-right: Dennis Marwood (Humber 80), Ross Greenville (Lotus 18 FJ), Howden Ganley (Lotus-Climax 11) and Brian Innes (Ford Zephyr MkII) (Dennis Marwood Collection)

## classic kiwi racers: dennis marwood



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Ironically, Pete helped Dennis get into the pits on his first visit to Monaco in 1977 using someone else's ticket! Pete collected Dennis at Nice Airport and on the way to Monaco opened the glove box and gave him a pass, which his boss Jackie Oliver had intended for a friend. That friend, who had cancelled at the last minute, just happened to be the actor, Gene Hackman. Dennis carried the tag with Hackman's photo on it around his neck all weekend and was never confronted. High security indeed!

Back to the Humber 80. The new car debuted in the under 1500cc saloon handicap at the 1960 Ardmore Grand Prix meeting, and Dennis brought it home in an encouraging third place. Peter and Dennis had built a new inlet manifold, and mated it to a couple of 1.5-inch SU carbs with a modified cam. Together with a bit of suspension sorting the car was ready for motor racing.

They didn't tackle the rest of the circuits that summer, but continued to race competitively at Ardmore and at local hill climb and sprints.

Motor racing during this era was wonderfully basic and evocative of simpler times. Saloon racers were largely driven on the road to meetings, as were many sports cars. Only single-seaters were transported on a trailer. Drivers often wore T-shirts, while seat-belts and roll-bars were unheard of. The Humber 80 had a bench seat

— “To hold myself stable in the seat, I wedged my right hand elbow against the driver’s door, to stop from sliding around!”

### Racing Gets Serious

Dennis has great memories of early racing battles with the Hawkes Bay crew.

“Characters like Andy Buchanan, Angus Hyslop, Doc Dick Langley, Tony Gilbertson and Bill Hannah were great drivers, and a very friendly bunch. I always enjoyed competing against them.”

At an early '60s encounter, Dennis found himself parked up in the pits next to the very civilised Langley entourage. It just happened to be lunchtime, the sun umbrellas went up and next thing Dennis knew he was invited to join them for cucumber sandwiches. Doc Langley, a hard charging gentleman racer, was observed

09 Another view of the Motodrome Racing Team cars, 1961-62

10 Dennis and his Humber, 1963 NZIGP Ardmore, braking heavily for the tight elbow corner into the loop section. That looks like Francevic's orange and white Humber following. Huge crowd on the bank is impressive. (Photo courtesy Ken Buckingham, Auckland)

11 Dennis battling with Kerry Grant's quick Austin A40 at Wigram, 1963. On this occasion Dennis was the victor (Dennis Marwood Collection)

12 Dennis' Humber after his accident at Teretonga – caused by a rear axle breakage, January 1963 (Photo courtesy A S Bond, Christchurch)

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13 Dennis' Humber 80 – in Team Molyslip colours – leads and Anglia and Robbie Francevic's orange and white Humber out of the Elbow (Stable Hairpin) at Pukekohe, 1963/64 season (Dennis Marwood Collection)

14 The 1963-64 Molyslip Team – Dennis in the Humber to the left, and possibly Jack Nazer in the Anglia on the right

15 Dennis and Humber at the Wigram Tasman meeting in early 1964, his Humber carrying Team Molyslip livery (Dennis Marwood Collection)

16 Using all the road and a bit more on the stone strewn Mt Maunganui road circuit, 1963 (Photo Jack Inwood – Dennis Marwood Collection)

17 Dennis in the Humber passing Kerry Grant and Paul Fahey – up ahead the leaders appear to be Ray Archibald (Jaguar Mk2) and Ernie Sprague (Ford Zephyr MkIII). Wigram Tasman meeting, January 1964



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stripes and carrying the team insignia – very professional-looking for the time. The team included Bryan Innes, with the ex Segedin MkII Zephyr complete with Raymond Mays head, which would savage the V8 coupés which were, at the time, dominant in the big saloon class. Other members were Ross Greenville (Lotus Formula Junior), Howden Ganley (Lotus 11 Climax) and Dennis with the mighty Humber. While the team lasted only one season before Ganley and Greenville headed overseas, it was a resounding success and, later, would lead to other successful operations.

#### Developing the Humber

The catalyst for a complete makeover of the Marwood Humber was triggered by a newspaper report that Bruce McLaren was bringing two of the first Morris Mini-Cooper prototypes down-under to clean up the 1500 class. At the exact same time Peter Kerr was studying how tyres worked much better when fitted to wider rims. New tyres weren't required, as the original ones just spread a larger expanse of tread on the road. A sensational idea! And, as Dennis put it, "We started the wider tyres revolution!"

Dennis widened the Humber's rims by 25mm (one inch) at the local Tahuna Engineering workshops.

This, and other modifications, saw the creation of the seminal demon Humber 80 – what was to be the high water mark for the breed. Not content with the old tyres, they bought some used genuine Dunlop racing rubber from the Palmers' Lotus 11. Racing tyres on saloons was pretty much unheard of back then – most cars, including Dennis' previous Hillman Minx and all the cars he raced against, used Michelin X steel radials. Pete waved his magic wand on the motor, building a new advanced inlet manifold to fitted larger 1½-inch SU's, and he ground a wilder cam. The ultimate Humber 80 was set to take the country by storm.

At Ardmore for the Grand Prix in January 1962 – the same day that Stirling Moss gave a sublime



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performance in a torrential downpour to win the main race – Dennis destroyed the field in the 1500cc scratch saloon event.

"With no testing we drove it to the circuit, put it on pole and walked away with the race, to my surprise!"

In second place was Roger Redmayne (Wolsey 1500 with cross flow Derrington head and Weber carbs), third was Phil Ornstein (Humber 80 with twin Webers). Then came Bruce McLaren (Morris Mini-Cooper S) in fourth place followed by Ron Flockhart in the other Cooper S.

It was this event that rocketed Marwood's name to national attention. Jack Brabham, who had watched the race, described Dennis's car as, "The fastest Humber 80 in the world!"

The Auckland Car Club had set a timing system along the back straight and Dennis' car was timed at 90mph (145kph), Redmayne's at 87mph, Ornstein's 86mph and Bruce's 83mph. Dennis had comprehensively beaten the field, including the Formula One International Stars – that Humber was hot.

Dennis' diagnosis was simple – "We did not have any more power from our engine than

the other cars, but we had more speed up the straight because with the wider rims our tyres worked better!"

This win was critical in Dennis's track racing career, as it established him as a serious frontline competitor. While it didn't exactly crash open the floodgates of sponsorship support, assistance from oil company and tyre sources started to trickle his way.

He was now the fastest Humber 80 punter in the country, and the most feared and envied, particularly from the Auckland contingent.

"The rivalry with the Auckland racing crowd first crept in with the way they were so secretive and their view was, you really shouldn't be modifying or improving that if they weren't able to find a way to match it. The young Robbie Francevic, putting his hotrod up Humber, was always striving to find out why our car had so much speed."

#### Building on Success

Dennis and Pete attacked the full international tour that summer. They had some great racing, especially with Kerry Grant's Formula Junior BMC-powered Austin A40 at Levin and



Wigram. Dennis recalled an interesting aside at Wigram, which illustrated South Islanders' attitudes to the northern invaders. Used to the dummy grid format that the Levin Club had developed, Dennis asked the marshal where the grid positions were and where he should line up. The marshal pointed to the track – a 20 metre wide runaway – and said, “Just go out there and line up, two rows should do it!”

There were no specific up to 1500cc saloon

promoters’ eyes, wanted ‘real racing cars’ – read single-seater/ sports cars – and saloons were viewed only as a amusing diversion, often racing during the lunch break at international meetings.

With the arrival of the more professionally built tin-tops in the early to mid ’60s, this attitude began to change.

Racing into his third season in the Humber, Dennis was again vying for honours in the

exhausted, and against the lighter Fords and Minis its day was almost over. In his last season, ’63-’64, with the car running in Team Molyslip colours (an engine additive product and the first team with cars painted in the colours of a commercial product in the country), Dennis gave the front runners – Kerry Grant’s Willment Lotus-Cortina and Ernie Sprague’s Raymond Mays MkII Zephyr – some good stick, but had to give best to them in the end. The writing was on the wall.

By early 1964 Dennis was experiencing a distinct feeling of *déjà vu* – the heat was back on from the old man, and Dennis returned to the farm paddocks.

According to Marwood senior, it was time to stop wasting the farm’s surplus cash on such frivolous pursuits as motor racing. The farm badly needed attention, and to crank the herd up from 100 to 140 cows.

Dennis effectively retired from motor racing – for the moment, anyway.



races at these meetings, and Dennis’ Humber was thrust in amongst the Jaguar and Zephyr brigade of Ian Dow, Ray Archibald, Athol McBeath and Bryan Innes. While very quick and with good handling, the smaller Humber didn’t quite have the pace to foot it with the big-engined saloons.

In the smaller 1500cc capacity class, though, Dennis repeated his NZ Grand Prix results by dominating the group at the Levin and Wigram races. Unfortunately, at Teretonga a rear axle broke and the international series finished with a roll-over. “Although battered, we drove it home,” Dennis recalled with a laugh.

Dennis campaigned the Humber for two more seasons. These were the years when saloon racing was beginning to shed the popular view of the time of only being a sideshow attraction. The paying customers, in the media and

under 1500cc bracket. On occasions, he was also challenging for outright results with larger capacity machines, especially at the tighter tracks like Levin and Mt Maunganui road circuit.

While the Humber was a finely tuned and well developed race car, and still the quickest 80 in the country, there were signs that the power base in saloon car racing was shifting. By the 1963-’64 season the small Ford was moving into ascendancy in Cortina and Anglia form, and proving it had the ingredients, in racing tune, to be both a Jaguar and Humber vanquisher.

#### Retiring the Humber

The Humber 80 had been a great race car, and the Marwood car certainly evolved into the quickest example in the country. By late 1963 though, the development potential had been



**Next month: Dennis returns to the circuit, but in something rather more sophisticated than his old Humber 80.**

18 1963/64 season – Kerry Grant on the left with his Lesco Racing Willment Lotus-Cortina. Possibly at Wigram (Dennis Marwood Collection)

19 International Tasman Meeting, Levin 1963 – high fashion provided by Dennis’ check shirt. (Photo Jack Inwood – Dennis Marwood Collection)

20 In the pits at Levin, 1965/66 season – Andy Buchanan at left, with Dennis second from the right. Other two men unknown. (Photo Jack Inwood – Dennis Marwood Collection)