

# RACE FEATURE // WAYNE GARDNER //



## WOLLONGONG WONDER

We caught up with Wayne Gardner in Portimao to skim over his career, talk about the current state of racing, and discuss the mess that Honda are in

**W**ayne Gardner was from the golden era of GPs, an era when racing with enough metalwork holding your body together to substitute scaffolding a house was the norm. Pulling a sicky for a couple rounds wasn't an option. Gardner was as hard as they come, and one of very few to truly tame the beastly 500cc two-smokers. But the 1987 World Champ very nearly quit after his first GP. Wayne takes up the story.

"In 1983, I was racing an RS500 in the UK, and I asked Honda if I could do a wildcard at Assen. They said yes, but I had to pay. In the race, Franco Uncini had crashed ahead and I saw bikes avoiding him, but I hit him as he tried to run across the track. He span round and his helmet flew off, and Franco ended up coma. I went to visit him in hospital. He was just lying there on a steel bed, twitching. It was an ugly scene. I was going to retire then and there, especially because people were blaming me for his injuries, but I had some good people around me."

Thankfully, 'Digger' continued and was part of late 80's / early 90's GP showdown, avec Rainey, Lawson, Schwantz et al. The crew produced some of the best racing in history, but what were Wayne's favourite snippets?

"All the Phillip Island races were good, and Donington in 1992 was special: I just announced my retirement on the Saturday and

went out and won on Sunday. I wanted to show I wasn't giving up because I couldn't win anymore."

"Suzuka, 1992, was the final blow for me. I thought I could get away without any major injuries, and my greatest fear was ending up in a wheelchair. Snapping my leg was the next worse thing."

"I'd already crashed in the race and remounted, and was up to third. But I went down again. I remember skidding for ages and went feet-first into a gap in the air fence, hitting the wall and breaking my leg. The sound was like crushing a packet of crisps. I pulled my leg out, it was facing the wrong way and thought, 'fuck it, I can't carry on like this'. I knew I was done then."

"Perhaps my best race was at Paul Ricard in 1988. Coming into France, I'd won three on the trot and I had to win to catch Lawson. But we had big problems with the bike that year. They pushed the engine down and it wouldn't go round corners, it wouldn't steer. When we finally figured it out, we were unstoppable."

"With a few laps to go, I pulled a gap of a couple of seconds and really got my head down. On the last lap, on the back straight, the temperature gauge went through the roof, the water pump had broken and machined its way into the cases and oil was firing out of the breather and onto the rear tyre. It seized at the end of the





# RACE FEATURE // WAYNE GARDNER //

straight and nearly chucked me off. I managed to limp round with a cylinder gone and finished fourth, but I lost what would have been my second world title. It broke my heart; racing is such a cruel bitch.”

Just as Wayne's career was threatening to end, another Aussie

up. Eventually Honda got it sorted, and I wanted to keep using them. Doohan didn't. The bike felt stupidly slow, but the lap times were really good. The Japs didn't know what to do, but eventually went for my opinion, and the motors turned out to be

## “I LOST MY SECOND WORLD TITLE, RACING IS SUCH A CRUEL BITCH”

was starting to muscle in on his glory. Mick Doohan was Digger's team-mate at Rothmans Honda and, although compatriots, they didn't always wave the same flag.

Back then, high-sides were more common than underage pregnancies, and the pair were complaining about the lack of rear grip. Honda had been working on a big-bang engine as a solution, with an all-new crank and firing order.

“They brought along this new engine to Phillip Island for some testing but they kept blowing

unstoppable. There was so much traction, even in the wet, and it wasn't too long before other manufacturers were recording the engine sound in pit lane, and then slowing it down to work out the firing order.”

Gardner raced nothing but Hondas during his career. He was the dictionary definition of Rothmans Honda. Along with Doohan, and later Rossi, he gave



‘The Big H’ their prime-time in GPs.

But, with the exception of Nicky Hayden's somewhat debatable 2006 title, things haven't gone to plan since Valentino jumped to Yamaha. What's the deal? Even

Wayne has strong opinions on the current state of the Honda camp.

“Listen, I have no allegiance to any manufacturer now, and I can be as critical as I want. If I look at the Repsol Honda team, I can see they're in a real mess. It looks like the internals and team structure has fallen apart, and there's nobody at the wheel. A team being run by riders and their managers is a bad recipe.”

So is it the riders, the bikes, or are the poor results just down to team politics?

“The team is only as good as the riders, as feedback, and obviously

talent is a major ingredient. Talking to Pedrosa, he admits his time is running out. I've told him that unless this shit gets sorted and Honda find the right manager with the drive and personality, he ain't gonna win a championship. Taking nothing away from Dani and I don't know what he's like to work with, but it looks like they're lacking feedback. However bad the situation is, I hate seeing this dismal mess they're in.”

Time will tell if the mysterious relocation of Livio Suppo from Ducati to Honda will have a significant impact. The man who brought Casey Stoner to Bologna is sure to have an influence

on Stoner's colours for 2011. If Pedrosa's time does run out and he doesn't win next season, Stoner could be heading back to Honda and reunited with Suppo.

Talking of Stoner, Wayne, didn't you ride his Desmo GP9?

“Yeah, it was weird. You're twisting the throttle and it's as if it's not connected to the bike. The computer makes all the decisions. There's too much rider control taken away via electronics, and you don't have that connection with the rear wheel. It ain't right. The thing's popping and banging, and I'm like, ‘shit, is the pitlane limiter on?’ These days, riders are just slamming the throttle open

and holding on.”

So you're not a fan of 800s and all the electronic aids then?

“Dorna have made a few mistakes in the past, and the introduction of 800s was one of them. The concept was to reduce speed but they've just got faster. Plus, the corner speed has been upped which makes things even more dangerous, and the electronics have been brought in to control this. But everything is controlled via electronics. I think we should go back to the 990s and have a control ECU, where it's not the guy on the laptop winning races. We need that sideways-cornering and sliding back to add

## “COMPUTERS MAKE THE DECISIONS, TOO MUCH RIDER CONTROL IS TAKEN AWAY WITH ELECTRONICS”



to the excitement, and produce better racing. With these 800s, you can't afford to make a single mistake. They're so one-line.”

So, you suggest a similar route that Formula One has taken: ditch traction control, slash costs and boost grids?

“Exactly. Just look at F1. I mean, Jenson Button winning a championship? They've scrapped some electronics, and all of a sudden, there's no Ferrari or other one-team domination. The racing is so much better and any number of drivers could win. Before this year, when was the last time you saw an F1 car drifting sideways on the exit of a turn? It's the same for the bikes, and if the racing continues like it is, we'll have no spectators left.”

Having started his career on 250 GP bikes, Wayne isn't keen on the demise of the class, and the new chapter of Moto2.

“Of course, it's a massive step-down from 250s, but Aprilia have shot themselves in the foot. They're the only supplier of decent

### Career History



## WAYNE ‘DIGGER’ GARDNER

- 1983** - Honda Britain - NS 500
- 1984** - Honda Britain - NS 500 - 7th overall
- 1985** - Rothmans Honda - NSR 500 - 4th overall  
Winner - Suzuka 8-hour
- 1986** - Rothmans Honda - NSR 500 - 2nd overall  
Winner - Suzuka 8-hour
- 1987** - Rothmans Honda - NSR 500 - World Champion
- 1988** - Rothmans Honda - NSR 500 - 2nd overall
- 1989** - Rothmans Honda - NSR 500 - 10th overall
- 1990** - Rothmans Honda - NSR 500 - 5th overall
- 1991** - Rothmans Honda - NSR 500 - 5th overall  
Winner - Suzuka 8-hour
- 1992** - Rothmans Honda - NSR 500 - 6th overall  
Winner - Suzuka 8-hour

equipment unless you're factory-backed, and were asking for stupid money for the bikes. I mean, a million Euros? And you have to give the fucker back at the end of the year! They've driven the category out of existence.”

But it's going to reduce costs, increase grid sizes and open the class up, isn't it?

“Yeah, I guess. I wasn't a fan ➤





/// WAYNE GARDNER - HONDA NSR500, 1987 ///





# RACE FEATURE // WAYNE GARDNER //



initially, but I'm slowly coming round to it now I understand the concept a bit more. There's not just interest from the GP circus. There's a whole load of talk from the WSB paddock too. I think it's gonna be a big success and, if it brings more than 20 bikes to the grid, it can only be a good thing. It's still a shame though, the 250s were the purest form of racing. Everything happens in circles, they're not gone, I'm sure they've just been put on the shelf for a while."

Like most Aussie racers, Digger went on to race four-wheelers. He started out racing touring cars in Oz before going on to race in Japan for the factory Tom's Toyota team.

"My last year was 2002. They wanted me to go back but I couldn't do it any more. My kids were at the age where they wanted me at home, and flying out there every other weekend and living out of a shoe box wasn't fun. The novelty wore off. I was only racing the frickin' things to stop me from

going back to bikes, anyway."

So you don't have any desire to start a team or delve into the management side of things?

"No, my kids are dirt tracking, and that's about the depth of my involvement. I had a brief stint at rider management with Broc Parkes, but that didn't work out. I've had plenty of offers and I'm happy to give advice, but that's it, I'm retired. I'm just going to ride motorbikes on my farm."

But you're out here in Europe riding World Superbikes?

"Yeah, I've been doing a bit of journalism and writing for a mag in Oz, and was asked to come over here to ride these busses. The closest thing I've got to modern superbikes are the Suzuka 8-hour RC30s and alike. Then everybody remembers me from racing the Moriwaki 1100 in the UK. It's been a real eye-opener."

And what's your view on the WSB versus GP debate?

"Well, I wouldn't say that

Superbike riders are B-raters, but it's almost a whole different discipline. It's a bit like comparing touring cars with F1: they still go fast, but they move and they shake and they twist. They haven't got the precise stiffness of a GP chassis, and not a lot of GP riders can get used to that. With these busses, it's all about compromise."

It's refreshing to talk to an ex-racer who isn't still being paid by a factory, or forced to spout propaganda because they want their kid

on a particular bike. Wayne has always been a straight-talking, no-bullshit guy and it's a shame we can't set aside half the magazine for his anecdotes. Then again, we wouldn't have been able to print most of it. Digger, we salute you.

