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Head Candy

From a simple straw hat to a name that is trusted the world over – from GP stars to the man on the street. We meet Mr Arai and discover the story behind the most famous brand in crash helmets

My father, Hirotake Arai, was born the son of a hat maker," remembers Michio Arai, the current President of Arai Helmets and the driving force behind the company for the best part of 50 years. "His father had a hat shop in Tokyo and he took over running the business when my grandfather died. This was before World War II and my father was an inventor who loved to develop new things and he made a lot of new types of headgears. When the war broke out the office of the Japanese army asked him to develop various headgears for its soldiers as well as manufacture heat insulation helmets of his design as he was the only person in Japan who could do so. This work transformed his business from a small shop to a manufacturing company. After the war he continued to make helmets, but the helmets were not for soldiers, they were for the construction industry."

So what brought on the change to motorcycle helmets? "My father was a keen motorcyclist through the whole of his life," remembers Michio Arai. "You may have seen some pictures of him standing on the seat of a motorcycle, wearing a straw hat. The hat he was wearing could well have been one of the ones he was selling in those days! When he started to make the first fibreglass helmets in Japan in the late 1940s he thought it would be a good idea to make a helmet for when he was on his motorcycle. He modified a fibreglass construction helmet by cutting it into a



half-cap style and added an interior to create the first motorcycle crash helmet in Japan."

But it didn't stop there, Hirotake Arai saw the potential in new technology and after reading about Styrofoam in newspapers he decided to add this inside his helmet rather than rely on the more traditional cork lining.

"He was one of the first people to make what we now know as a modern style of crash helmet," says Michio Arai. "The only other people making fibreglass helmets with Styrofoam inners were Bell in America. I don't know who actually did it first but my father

was certainly one of the first in the world."

But these early helmets were not branded with the now legendary logo, instead Hirotake used his initials and the crown of his helmets carried the brand name HA.

"Soon we started to export to the United States. Japanese products were becoming popular with Americans, in much the same way as with China nowadays. We had an importer in New York and the owner was a great guy. We were talking once and he said to me 'Michio, HA is not a very good name, in America it is 'ha', like you are laughing, an insult, you need to come up with a new name.' We thought about it and came up with a few bad ideas but eventually decided to just use Arai as it doesn't sound specifically Japanese, like Kawasaki or Suzuki, but it doesn't sound European either. It sounds neutral."

With a name sorted, Arai now needed a logo. Considering the millions that companies spend now reinventing logos, you may imagine the famous image came at quite a cost. Nothing could be further from the truth.

"The American importer knew a 19-year-old schoolboy who was going to art college," remembers Mr Arai with more than a hint of amusement in his voice. "We offered to buy him a \$50 dinner if he could come up with a logo. The next day he came to us with the current logo! I bought him the meal and I actually paid him another \$50 so he could take his girlfriend to dinner, too!" ▶



Michio Arai has been at the coal face for nearly 50 years

IS MY HEAD NORMAL?

"Japanese people have very rounded heads while Europeans have very long heads! Basically the shell is the same but the Styrofoam inside is different. There are two different types of heads, European and Asian!"
- Michio Arai.

THE FUTURE?

"Of course there will be a lot of improvements in the future, but as far as the basic construction goes I don't think there will be many big changes. Think of a motorcycle, it hasn't changed much in 100 years - two wheels and an engine in the middle. The human being hasn't changed much either, but the helmet has improved in construction and materials, if not physical shape. Helmets can get lighter and offer more protection, but they will still look the same."
- Michio Arai.

SOME OF THE GREATEST ARAI DESIGNS EVER

- Freddie Spencer
- Joey Dunlop
- Mick Doohan
- Randy Mamola
- Luca Cadalora
- Kevin Schwantz 'Pepsi lid'



From mopeds to MotoGP, Arai make lids for everyone



An Arai's lid's insides looks like this, so we don't have to see our skull's insides

► But this was in the late 1970s and Michio's father, Hirotake, was still president of the company while Michio dealt with the design, sales and engineering side of the business. Arai was still relatively small, but Michio saw how it could expand.

"My father was happy with the way he was and wasn't eager to make the company bigger. Gradually the motorcycle helmet market started to grow and rivals emerged. There were occasions when a few of the employees walked away with his technologies and helped

established and turned to the racetrack to achieve this goal.

"When I took over a journalist came to interview me, she asked me what I intended to do with the company. She had arrived on a bike and was holding a Bell crash helmet, so I just said 'Arai will climb above Bell.' This was ambitious, if you opened any magazine all the riders and F1 drivers were wearing Bell helmets, Arai was nowhere. I didn't know how to get the name known but I knew where to start - make helmets that perform better than

IF A RACER ACKNOWLEDGED THE VALUE OF AN ARAI, ROAD RIDERS WOULD, TOO

a rival to make helmets in the same way as my father, but he was a very generous man and didn't mind very much. I wasn't that generous! I said to him 'we have to do something about this. Other people are making helmets the same way and are doing very well.' His reply was simple, he just said 'Well you take over then.' I did, in 1976."

By his own admission, Michio didn't know what to do at this point, however, he realised the importance of getting the Arai brand

Bell. I put in a lot of effort in R&D and quality control. After a year and a half I was convinced our helmet was better than Bell's. I just needed to get the public to know this, so I sought out high profile people who might wear them. I thought that if someone who really needed the true protection, such as a racer, acknowledged the value of our helmet it would convince road riders to also use it. I decided Arai would go racing!"

Having raced in Japan himself, Michio Arai

had the contacts in both the car and motorcycle world to get Arai out on track. Within a year or two the majority of Japanese riders and drivers were wearing Arai, but America was a new challenge.

"In those days America was the biggest motorcycle market. I asked a man who became the head of Arai America later. He happened to have a strong connection with the race scene. He took an Arai to Daytona only to realise how high and strong the wall was preventing entry into the market. He asked a few racers to try it out, but they saw ours as some cheap helmet from the Far East. I remember one of them even took our helmet and stood on it! But we didn't give up, we kept seeking a hole in the wall. Finally we found an 18-year-old kid named Ted Boody Jr who was number two in the AMA championship series that year. I explained the benefits of our lid for an hour and he simply said 'I'm a

racer, not an engineer, to be honest I have no idea what you are talking about but you seem an honest man so I'll try it.' He was our first rider and he won many AMA races. Then came another up-coming rider named Skip Aksland. He was small physically but had a big mouth. He asked for a substantial amount of money to wear our helmet, which I decided to pay, and he went to the Daytona Speedway with an Arai. During practice, he fell off and head butted the tarmac pretty hard. The last time he fell off like that he was knocked out for a couple of days but with our helmet he stood up and walked away with no concussion. He had a big mouth and told the whole paddock

how good his helmet was, his big mouth did us a lot of good as he kept showing off about his Arai. After that getting riders to use our helmet was very easy."

Despite these two fairly high profile racers, it was one young rider that Mr Arai spotted competing when he was just 14-years-old that went on to become an Arai legend.

"There was this kid racing at the Loudon race circuit in Connecticut, he was 14-years-old. During practice a dog ran across the track and while everyone else on track panicked and braked this kid just kept it pinned, he was so cool, he just estimated what the dog would do and dodged it. I thought 'that kid is something else.' I went over and offered him a free helmet, he was more than happy to take one. That's how I met Freddie Spencer."

Like so many of the leading brands in biking, racing is at the heart of Arai. "Racing has formed the basis of everything we have done. Actually that is also how we improved our quality control. ►

Our standards are set by the world's most qualified test team



But don't just take Shinya's word for it...

MY ARAI SAVED MY LIFE

In 2004 Kawasaki MotoGP rider Shinya Nakano suffered the fastest ever GP crash when his rear tyre exploded while he was flat out in top on lap 13 of the Mugello GP. Thrown down the road at over 200mph, Shinya is in no doubt about what saved his life. If you need any further proof of how hard an Arai is just look up the crash on YouTube. Richard Hammond was also wearing an Arai when he decided to try and dig a trench with his head at 288mph after a tyre exploded on the Vampire drag car he was driving/flying/crashing...

► We asked all of our 300 men and women in the factory to pay as much attention as possible to the creation of our crash helmets to make them as safe as possible. But on the race track the chances of a crash are far higher. One rule I have made is that we never make special helmets for racers, our workers do not know if they are making a helmet for Mick Doohan,

a lot of pressure, but also very motivating. Every Arai has the potential of being used in MotoGP, that is good for quality control," says Mr Arai proudly. "Racing has improved the culture of Arai. When I wear an Arai helmet I put my trust in who has made it and I want them to take as much care as possible making it. If we made special helmets for racers their

EVERY ARAI HAS THE POTENTIAL OF BEING USED IN MOTOGP

Kevin Schwantz or a normal road rider, they all come from the same production line. Our people don't know who they are making a lid for, so when they watch racing on TV they could very well have made that helmet. That is

attitude may be more relaxed." So, given the choice of a factory full of helmets with his name written on them, which helmet does Mr Arai favour?

"When I ride my Monster or Speed Triple I have an RX-7GP but when I ride R1200GS I have a Tour-X. Although I'm not good with paintings, I was probably the first guy in the industry to introduce painting helmets, I did it to give them character, to make people aware of the different models in the range. But think of a beautiful woman. Does she need cosmetics? A lady of true beauty looks beautiful without make-up. So, in 1990s while all the brands were busy with design paintings, I decided to make a shell design of true beauty for our helmets. I am confident that our bare shell looks good, so I stick with plain colours." □



And Arai's innovations just keep coming...



There's only one thing that could get these three into a room and in agreement - the use of an Arai lid

