



John Leffler

Historically speaking

Words by Craig Watson. Photos by Autopics.

John Leffler has always been stirred by speed, building and driving some of the fastest Minis in Australia.

John learned to ride a motorcycle when he was fourteen-years-old, as he recalls. "I learned to ride on an old Indian, and I think that's where this speed thing came from. I used to ride everywhere, at like 100mph. I bought myself an old Velocette, and you wouldn't think the dear old thing would do 100mph, but that's exactly what it did, every week."

Living at Dungog in NSW, speed limits were a thing of the future, and John got his thrills on the bike on country roads. He worked on a local dairy farm, but all that changed one day in 1959, at the age of 19, when riding near the Royal National Park, south of Sydney.

"I drove past a service station at Engadine that was owned by the Jemison brothers, and they were very big in motorsport, mainly motorbikes. They were into Velocette's, but they did cars too. They did Curly Bridon's MG in those days...and they had some input with Arnold Glass's BRM."

After pestering them for a job, John said one of the brothers, Billy, offered to give him a try. "I worked my backside off, because I just loved being involved...I just took a passion to it...but (when it came to race cars) I was allowed to look, but not touch."



Battling Don Holland - Oran Pk, 1968.



Stylish pit crew of (L to R) Dennis Green, Paul Knott & Quinton Knight - Oran Park, 1970.

"Then Billy bought this lightweight Sprite that had a Simca motor half-way fitted to it", John explains. "That was my bleeding into it, I suppose. My job was to get this thing going well. It was a potent little bit of gear for its day."

John worked tirelessly on the car, trying to solve a problem of it running bearings with alarming regularity. To repay him for his efforts, Billy offered John the car to drive at Oran Park's inaugural race meeting in early 1963. John stripped the engine completely and, after many hours' work, discovered the impeller for the oil pump was spinning on its shaft. With the problem solved, John fronted for his first race meeting.

"I had a second, a third, a fourth and a fifth, on that day. I wouldn't have cared what happened in the world, racing's what I was going to do. I was so involved, I was just so taken away with it, and it went on from there."

John bought a year-old Sports 850 Mini, and, after a handful of races as a Series Production car, began to modify it. "I was still working for Jemison's at this point. I had a couple of young fellows who ended up being apprentices to me later, and we prepared it as an 850 and we went everywhere. Anywhere there was a race meeting on in NSW, we went - Tarrawingee, Bathurst, you name it. It actually did 100mph at Bathurst - it just shows you how quick it was down hill."

"The amount of modification we did to it was enormous, but I had no money. I was flat-out trying to pay the thing off. I was probably getting about twelve-quid a week...and without the help from friends around me, I would never have gone anywhere."

"I really owe most of my success to the dedicated team of young men who put up with me, and worked very hard for very little return. They were brothers Paul and Steve Knott, Brad Heywood, Dennis Green and Quinton Knight - who we named Mr Sheens and Gleams. We took a lot of pride in the car, and we never went anywhere with it grubby or dirty."

John raced the car in the newly-formed Sports/Racing Closed category (which developed into Sports Sedans by 1969), where almost anything went, but he says cheating was totally against his philosophy. "I never once cheated in my life, because I motor race for my satisfaction, and to win by default is not my satisfaction. Anyone can win cheating, but you've got to win on your merits. (But) of course, if there were rules to be pushed around, we pushed them. Shove them right to the edge, but never break them."

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