

HARLEY HISTORY: FROM OFF-ROAD TO ROADRACING

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A CENTURY OF HISTORY THE QUAIL MOTORCYCLE GATHERING

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- + FEMALE VINTAGE RACER DOWN UNDER

AUGUST 2022

Bianca Bonner makes
a splash at Sellicks
Beach in 2021.



VINTAGE HARLEY RACING **DOWN UNDER**

BIANCA BONNER - RACING THE PAST INTO THE PRESENT



1. Bonner developed her moto aptitude on a PW50. 2. Bonner's dad built this YZ490-powered sidecar for her. 3. Bonner and the Jawa speedway bike she raced in junior classes when she was 15. 4. Bonner on an oiled dirt track at the helm of her sidecar at the Valley Junior Motocross Club Classic Meeting in 1994.

Words by **Uli Cloesen**

Photos by of **Uli Cloesen, Bonner Archive, Matt Welsby, SCE Photography**

Bianca Bonner makes her living as an electrician by day, but after hours and on weekends, she has oil in her blood.

"I have been brought up around motorcycles," said Bonner, a resident of Craigieburn in the Australian state of Victoria. "My dad has had motorbikes since I was born, specifically Indians (1929 101 Scout, 1947 Chief) and a 500cc Kawasaki Mach III, hence Indians and motorcycles became my passion too."

Bonner's love for motorcycles has been explored on all kinds of bikes, but it's the vintage iron that has more recently taken hold. From speedway competition to dragracing and roadracing, this ambitious

lady rider is always aiming for checkered flags.

WHERE IT BEGAN

Bonner learned to ride a Yamaha PW50 when she was 6 years old, inspired by her older brother who rode dirtbikes. This led to motocross racing for about 10 years on Yamaha minibikes.

"Dad and I once went to the city of Shepparton on the floodplain of the Goulburn River in northern Victoria to an oiled dirt track, and I loved it, so I started doing junior dirt-track racing on my YZ80," Bonner told us. "As a consequence, my dad built a couple of junior sidecars, and I raced one of them too. While I was racing dirt track,

the local senior club had a 'Come and Try Day' for junior speedway aspirants, which inspired me from the age of 16 to start racing a Jawa 500 speedway bike."

Bianca's dad, Rob Bonner, provided a YZ490 dirt-track sidecar and a Jawa 500 long-track bike for her to play with, which culminated in third place in the Victoria State dirt-track championship at the helm of a sidecar in 1996.

AMERICAN VINTAGE

When it was time to get her motorcycle road license, Bonner developed a greater interest in her dad's Indian motorcycles.

"I wanted to ride the 101 Scout, but Dad's rule was that I had to be able to kickstart the bike to ride it. It took me a couple of months to be able to start it, but one morning



I got the starting sequence and technique right, and the Scout fired up. All I could hear Dad saying was, 'Oh no, now I'm in trouble, I'll never get my bike back.' Over the next couple of years, I built up my own 1927 Police Special 750cc Indian with him, so I had my own Indian to ride and Dad could get his bike back."

A few years later, Bonner met some racers from the classic Harley scene. One of them asked if she wanted to race his 1942 WLA at the Barry Sheene race meeting at the Sydney Motorsport Park at Eastern Creek in New South Wales. Without a second thought, her answer was an immediate yes.

"Dad, Mum, and I had the best time that weekend," Bonner related. "I said to him afterward that we have to go hand-shift racing. I hadn't done road racing before, and his response was in his usual supportive way: 'We will have to find an Indian 741 basketcase to do up to go racing.'"

During this same weekend, Bonner also met classic racer Als Fortune, who in the end became her best mate. Fortune invited her to pit crew for him, to which she happily agreed. Bonner went to various race meetings with Fortune over the next few years while she was building her racebike. She says she learned a lot and loved every minute of it. Fortune passed away a few years ago, and Bonner was able to purchase his WLA from his family.

Left: Bonner and her dad working on his vintage Indian when she was 21. **Right:** Als Fortune with his beloved 1943 Harley-Davidson WLA (Bluey) at Echuca on the 75th Anniversary Rally for W-model Harleys.

The last few years have been a blast for her on Fortune's former bike, which she named "Al's 4 Racing" in honor of his memory. She has since taken her classic Harley racer to Wakefield Park in the New South Wales town of Goulburn, where historic motorcycles from all over Australia compete for the Australian Historic Road Racing Nationals.

Another event not to be missed on her racing calendar is the Sellicks Beach Races in South Australia, located about 30 miles from Adelaide.

Some of these races are part of the Australian Hand Shift Battle, a Harley vs. Indian challenge.

KIWI RACING

It is noteworthy that Bonner also ventured with nine of her HMRV club members in 2018 "across the ditch" (a slang phrase for the stretch of the Pacific Ocean between New Zealand and Australia) to compete against their neighbors at the largest race meeting in the Southern Hemisphere, the Burt



Als Fortune (#42) racing his WLA at Winton Motor Raceway in 2005.



1942 HARLEY-DAVIDSON WLA

Engine: 45ci (750cc) side-valve V-Twin

Exhaust Type: Straight-out open pipes

Transmission: 3-speed

Fork: H-D girder

Rear suspension: Rigid

Gas Tank: Factory race replica

Fenders: Narrow race replica

Seat: Unsprung

Wheels: Detachable star hubs

Special features: Previously raced at Daytona

Prizes/awards/placements: Two-time winner of the Australian Hand Shift Battle trophy



Above: Bonner's WLA parked up at the Broadford roadracing circuit. **Left:** Bianca Bonner in pitlane at Ruapuna racetrack outside Christchurch, New Zealand.

Munro Challenge race week in NZ's southernmost South Island city of Invercargill. Bonner wasn't sure what to expect, but the event turned out to be delightful.

"The hillclimb was so different to the one I had done at home," Bonner told us. "It was longer and felt steeper, but the thing that got me most was the crowd. There were people everywhere – watching on the side of the hill, at the bottom, and at the top – and how close they all were to you, it was like what you saw in photos back

in the 1920s. It was great how everyone was just coming up and talking to us about our bikes and just having a chat. I loved it."

Bonner also enjoyed dragracing her WLA. It was something she hadn't done before, making it another item ticked off her bucket list. Her Harley ran great and went through the quarter-mile in 16.481 seconds at a speed of 81 mph.

But most of all, Bonner couldn't believe she was at (for her) the most iconic event of the Burt Munro Challenge, namely the

beach racing at Invercargill's Oreti Beach. Munro, of course, earned international recognition for his speed records at Bonneville and as the subject of the epic film *The World's Fastest Indian* starring Anthony Hopkins.

"This was one of the things Burt was known for, and here I was getting ready to race on the same beach where Burt had raced his Indian previously."

The Australian contingent also headed to Christchurch, New Zealand, the former home of

Bonner bouncing over the sandy course at Sellicks Beach in 2021.



motorcycle pioneer and icon John Britten, to compete at the annual Sound of Thunder race meeting at Ruapuna Park (now called Mike Pero Motorsports Park) in a Harley vs. Indian battle, a Kiwi vs. Aussie grudge match.

"The Ruapuna track was great to ride but quite different to what I had ridden on in Australia," Bonner recalled. "The track was quite technical, with some corners having been tricky, especially the hairpin, which popped up at the end of the little straight at the back of the track. This hairpin, no matter which line you took, always sent you out wide at the exit. Going into the dipper was also very interesting. If you went too hot into the corner before, it was like, 'Holy shit, I nearly missed that corner,' but in spite of this, the dipper was still terrific fun. To race against the other hand-shift guys from NZ and to have had our own class for it was amazing – it tripled the fun we all had."

At the end of the race, the Aussies won and took the hand-shift trophy back to Australia. There wasn't



Left: Bonner proudly displaying the trophy she earned by winning the hand-shift class at Wakefield Park Raceway in Australia. **Middle:** Bonner was honored as the fastest female on Sellicks Beach in February 2019. **Right:** The BEARS Sound of Thunder event poster, including the International Hand Shift Challenge at Christchurch, NZ, in 2018.

much racing in 2020 in Australia due to Covid-related cancellations, but Bonner managed to do a few women's ride days. In 2021, she scored 3rd place at Sellicks Beach in the hand-shift class.

ADRENALINE JUNKIE

Bonner describes racing her Al's 4 Racing Harley as the best adrenaline rush ever.

"It can be very interesting at times, trying to change down gears before going into a corner, or down the main straight, when sometimes you miss a gear and go into a false gear. Also, it can be tricky when trying to pass someone before a corner – who is going to brake first, considering there are hardly any brakes at all, and you sometimes use your gear change to slow yourself down."

Bonner also enjoys the social aspect of racing.

"The camaraderie between everyone is great. There is a lot of banter



Left: Bonner named her racebike "Al's 4 Racing" in honor of Al's Fortune, the bike's former owner. **Right:** Bonner at a women's-only ride day at Broadford State Motorcycle Sports Complex in 2019.

that goes on with everyone in the pits between the races. What I love the most is our spectators' reactions, when they see and hear all the Harleys and Indians start up, before we go out to race and they see me jump on the Harley. They

are like, 'My goodness, it's a female racing that bike.' They usually expect that one of my male pit-crew members – my dad or my partner – is going to ride the bike.

"I also like when spectators come and ask questions about the bikes and then tell you stories about their dad, grandfather, or someone else they used to know, which had one of these bikes back in their days."

Bonner continues chasing her racing dreams on her Harley, competing in a variety of events in Australia.

In October, she will be taking part in the Australian Indian-Pacific Cannonball Classic, riding more than 2,500 miles. She credits her support network for her success.

"All my racing wouldn't have happened in the earlier years without my Mum (Lorraine Bonner) and Dad, especially when Mum did extra work to help pay for me to race. With my racing now, I wouldn't have done this much without the help of my pit crew: Dad, Laural, and my partner, Wayne Saunders." **AR**

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