



FROM left (left): Mauger, Briggs and Moore; (right) Moore, Briggs and Mauger in New Plymouth.



# Ronnie's dad and the wall of death

*For a generation, they led the world of speedway. Another generation later, Barry Briggs, Ronnie Moore and Ivan Mauger met up in New Plymouth for a reunion. **JIM and ROB TUCKER** talk to Briggs about Kiwis success, a dozen mates in wheelchairs, and that haunting smell of the speedway track:*

**S**ome call it the aphrodisiac of speedway. That smell. It drifted into the back of your nasal passages anywhere up to a mile (we're being nostalgic here) away from the action, hitting about the same time as the noise of racing bikes and frantic crowds.

Mention Castrol R to Barry Briggs and his face lights up with the memories of it.

It was generated from a few drops of castor oil in the fuel tanks of their Jawa bikes, in the days when speedway bike riders like Briggs and fellow Kiwi world champs Ivan Mauger and Ronnie Moore were rock stars at places like Wembley Stadium and 40-odd other tracks in the UK.

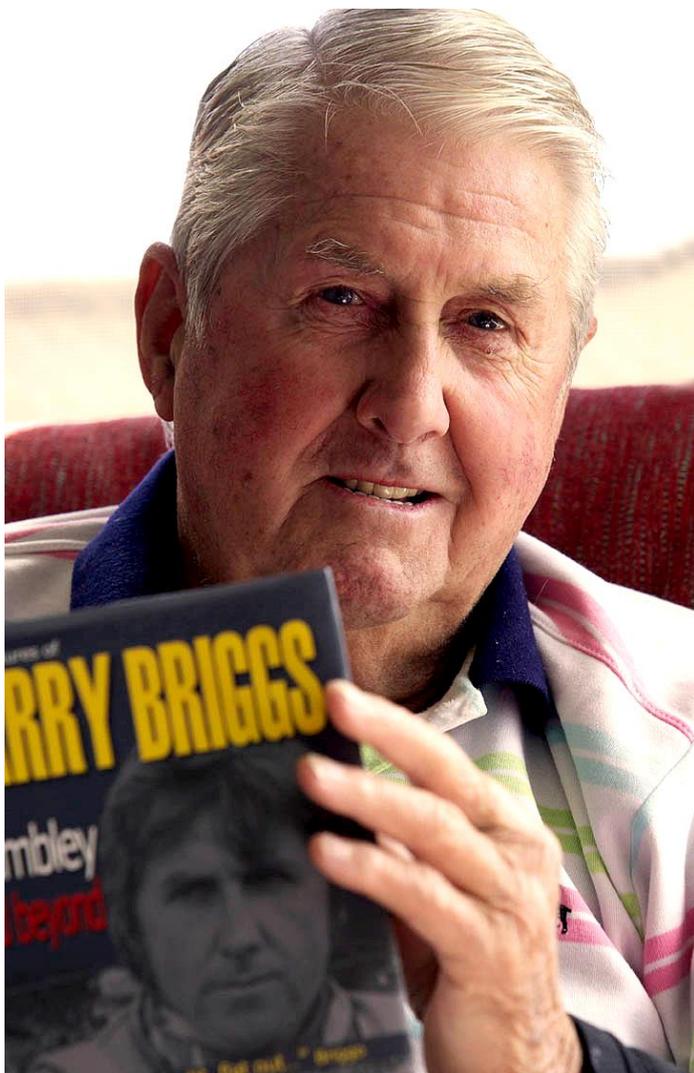
They can still smell it, the three of them, who got together for a rare reunion in New Plymouth recently for the New Zealand veteran Speedway Riders conference, hosted by New Plymouth track veterans like Dave Gifford and Max Rutherford.

Briggs is 78 now, but it doesn't take much reminiscing to light him up. He's a one-man talk-show, still living speedway, still on for a race: "If I was down to my last buck I'd race again."

He's not, so he doesn't. But just two years ago, he was astride a bike at a meeting in Invercargill, doing a demo round a horserace track, flat tack as always, when his front wheel hit a soft spot and he somersaulted.

Broke his ankle. Raced in the hill climb the next day, before getting it fixed. Didn't want to let the crowd down. "There's something about Invercargill. I raced there three times and crashed twice."

He's something of an enigma in that sense. He has some scars and his share of breaks, but he says he's in good nick. "I was big for a speedway rider, bigger than most. If I went over, I could chuck the bike away, keep clear."



The day before the conference, Briggs has just watched a race in the Kiwi-dominated America's Cup.

So first question: what is it with New Zealanders and winning? How come he and two others from this tiny country won 12 world speedway championships between 1954 and 1979?

But he has no startling revelations: "It's just a Kiwi thing. We don't give in." So how come we haven't been able to dominate world speedway again? Were he and fellow Christchurch riders Mauger and Moore special?

Maybe, but there were plenty of other examples of Kiwi global motor sport success from that era, says Briggs. Denny Hulme, Bruce McLaren, Graeme Crosby, Burt Munro.

"But you do want to have to do it. Generally, kids don't have that now [in speedway]. You also need someone to light it up for you. For me, it was Ronnie Moore, and then Ivan had me and Ronnie."

And you also need opportunity. Briggs doesn't see that now, either. In his day, he'd ride in front of 85,000 people, whereas today "you'd be lucky to get a hundred" watching a track meet in New Zealand.

The tracks these days are not well suited to speedway bikes, which need the right kind of surface for the non-stop wheel-spin and slide technique Briggs and his colleagues perfected back in the day.

The house where Briggs stayed in New Plymouth belongs to Joe Hicks, one of the city's two speedway bike restoration geniuses (the other being Gifford). There's two gleaming, 1960s era Jawas to greet visitors in the front hall, another in the lounge.

They're spotless, new-looking, and they're allowed in the house only because Joe has never started the engines, which would put oil through their systems.

They're strange-looking, the machines Briggs and co rode with such fury. Beautiful, deceptively frail-looking, precisely engineered in polished aluminum, giant tyre on the back and thin one up front. Handlebars as wide as the antlers on a 20-pointer stag. And like Barker reckons about his big cat, they're designed for full throttle all the time.

Briggs says it on the cover of his latest, and seventh, book, *Barry Briggs: Wembley and Beyond*: "When in doubt, flat out..." He did more than go flat out, though; he developed a way to go flatter out, by turning the vertically-mounted engine on his bike to a horizontal and lower position.

It's hard not to appreciate the importance of that advantage when he tells you 120 fellow speedway riders have been killed during his long career. Twelve still alive are in wheelchairs after crashes.

Briggs - who splits his time between England, where he has a factory producing one of his bike inventions (a mud deflector that hangs behind the rear wheel), California and New Zealand - did a tour of 30 UK speedway tracks a couple of years ago, carting a bucket round the crowds, demanding a quid from everyone.

He's nothing if not persuasive. They parted with £75,000 for the wheelchair boys.

Outwardly, Briggs seems to carry no obvious aftermath of all that risk-taking, although there is one thing, if you're observant.

He likes to obscure it most times, but if you look hard you'll notice he's minus the forefinger on one hand. "A Russian got that." Well, not directly. It was a crash, fingers jammed in the wrong place. Now he can give a three-fingered salute, and you can bet he would if it was required.

With that piece of Kiwi ingenuity, he could have won another world championship at the age of 50. He was four races from achieving it, but had trouble with the carburetor. The standard carb didn't like being on its side.

The problem was solved after it was too late for Briggs to win again, but he marvels at the cost. "You could buy a carburetor for £20 before that, but the new ones [needed for the engine reconfiguration] cost £800." Everyone went ahead and copied Brigg's innovation.

But there is more to speedway riding than sheer speed. There's a knack to it, he says, that thing about getting the back wheel spinning and doing the never-ending, impossible-looking slide.

Going round corners, riders balance with a leg outstretched and bent into the curve, one steel-capped boot performing like an outrigger. Briggs says if you're any good, that boot doesn't touch the track very often.

He was that good. After hanging round the pits as a kid in Christchurch, he gained a mentor in Ronnie Moore. Older Taranakians would have known Moore's father, although probably not recognise him in civvies.

When they saw him, he would have been in leathers and helmet, because he was the Wall of Death man.

The wall was a tight, deep, open-ended cylinder of wooden panels, built on its side, with a high, circular platform strung outside the top rim so spectators could climb up rickety stairs and look down into its bowel.

After a suitably suspenseful buildup, Ronnie's dad would emerge through a trapdoor in the wall, mount and rev up a race bike, then roar around a shallow ramp at the foot of the wall, before defying gravity and powering the machine round and round the wall horizontally in an unbelievable display of courage.

Or madness. People got killed doing it.

It enthralled us kids. We learned one of the laws of physics, to the tune of a howling bike exhaust and the whiff of Castrol R.

Ronnie rode the wall, too, before going on to race speedway bikes. Barry Briggs said it wasn't for him, but then Ronnie was a showman. He lit up Barry's world.

When we ask how Briggs rated the Taranaki speedway talent, he's straight into a yarn about Gifford: "He was a cheat, that Dave Gifford."

What!

"He must have had a tunnel under the track, straight from the starting tape to the first corner...uncanny. He always seemed to know when the starter was going to drop the tape."

Dave, known for his sense of humour on the UK circuit, gives an enigmatic chuckle when we rat Briggs out to him at the dinner.

Repartee and camaraderie aside, the get-together at the East End Bowling Club in New Plymouth wasn't necessarily an easy thing for the big three. Ivan (74) suffers a neurological disorder that affects his speech



TOP TEAM: The Kiwis in 1971, with New Plymouth's Dave Gifford second from left in the back row.

these days and Ronnie (80) is profoundly deaf.

Barry makes a good job of making light of the latter: "We all went deaf from it, especially from the long races. Bloody handy having a hearing aid you can turn off, though." Which he has.

Of the former, he says he can still have a good laugh with his old friend, the six-times world champ. "Get him laughing and it's all good."

They have more than most to laugh about, these guys.

### Champions of the world

Ivan Mauger - 1968, 1969, 1970, 1972, 1977, 1979

Barry Briggs - 1957, 1958, 1964, 1966

Ronnie Moore - 1954, 1959.