

TOURING CAR MASTERS!



With more than 50 starts and nine wins between them, there are very few drivers who know Mount Panorama as well as Jim Richards and John Bowe.

WORDS Liz Swanton
IMAGES ssMEDIA, Dirk Klynsmith Photography,
Glenis Lindley, inetpics.com

Most drivers say they dream of competing at Bathurst, but not 'Gentleman' Jim Richards.

"The dream had never been there because when I was in New Zealand, I was never going to be able to go – I had no money to do it," Richards says.

"I never really dreamed about anything I didn't think I could achieve. Faye and I were getting married/buying a house/having kids so the dream to go to Bathurst wasn't even a thought in my mind – and the types of cars that raced at Bathurst, I didn't have and New Zealand didn't have, so what chance was there? No chance."

Or so he thought. Then in 1974, Rod Coppins bought an L34 Torana, called his mate Jim and offered to pay for a weekend's racing at Bathurst. The pair finished third and the die was cast.

"I raced there every year until I retired from the main game in 2006, so I've probably done around 36 races altogether and I'm still racing there," says Richards.

"It's one of the best tracks in the world and it's really great to drive. You can't get away from the fact it's almost always a very important race because if, for instance, you've done nothing much during the year in terms of the championship and you win Bathurst, the championship is forgotten and you're the Bathurst winner, so that goes down in history."

John Bowe's first run at Mt Panorama was in 1985 in a Volvo with Robbie Francevic. While

he was excited about racing there, he doesn't believe he really appreciated the track back then.

"It's such an amazing circuit," he says. "It's just not your average racetrack. You don't realise when you first go there because you're caught up in the event, but it is truly something special. To be able to race there however many times I have – a lot, but not as much as Jimmy – it's actually a privilege."

"Last year I went to Laguna Seca to race. It's acclaimed around the world but while it's a fantastic track, compared to Bathurst it's a go-kart track. Bathurst is one of the last true remaining road-racing circuits in the whole world, and that in itself is quite important."

Asked about their favourite times at Bathurst and it is hardly surprising there is not much difference in their answers: the times they won!

"Any time you do well at Bathurst is a good one," laughs Bowe.

"It's such a challenging race and you can go well, or you can go really badly, and I've certainly experienced both. After you learn the track, it's a matter of making the car work."

"I don't have a favourite period, but I do have some favourite moments and obviously they are the times with Dick [Johnson] and what we achieved. But even when you don't win, making the podium or finishing well up there is a real achievement because it's so tough to get it all to come together."

For Richards, too, the wins are important but they are not necessarily the races he remembers as being his best.

"The best race I've ever had there – and I think I drove as well as I ever have – was in 2003, when I qualified third [driving with Tony Longhurst]. Not having driven the cars regularly, that was definitely a highlight. We were up against guys who drove them all year and we qualified ahead of them [finishing sixth]."

"It was Mark [Skaife] who got me into HRT and kept me on till 2006. He didn't have to do that but I was probably as good as any other co-driver he could have had."

