

WINNING WITH BMW IN NEW ZEALAND

—THE 1980s WITH NEVILLE CRICHTON

By Richard Bosselman

Neville Crichton is a guy who left school at 14, found his feet when he landed a job as an automotive salesman, and discovered he has a golden touch in business. By the late 1970s the biggest-volume used-car dealer in New Zealand, he went on to create, in Hawaii, the largest Mazda distributorship in the United States. Since 1982 he has been at the helm of Ateco Automotive, which holds Australasian distribution rights to brands including Alfa Romeo, Citroën, Fiat, Maserati, and Ferrari. But it has not all been plain sailing. In 1978, at age 32, Crichton was diagnosed with throat cancer. Subsequently, he underwent 30 operations in five years, and his oesophagus and voice box had to be removed. In what was then a landmark operation, he was fitted with an artificial voice box.

From the late 1970s until hanging up the helmet in 1990, Crichton was an avid and skilled motor-racer, coming into his own in saloons, first with Holden Commodores, then in the Group A era with a BMW 635CSi, a type he considers the finest racing car he has ever driven. Crichton will be reunited at the Festival with the very 1984 635CSi built up for him and co-driver Wayne Wilkinson by Frank Gardner's Team JPS (Australia). He explains why the car will always seem so special.

I chose a 635 because I'd looked at what was being raced in Europe and, at that stage, this was the car that was doing all the winning. I had a relationship with Frank Gardner and he agreed to build me a car. This was the first BMW I'd raced and I was impressed. The gearbox and braking were really 'natural', so it was immediately very easy to drive. It handled and stopped beautifully and it was very reliable. True, it didn't have the sheer brute power of the Commodore V8s — nothing like the torque, and I think we only ran 309 horsepower. But once you got it on the limit, you could drive it there all day long and it handled really well. Braking was good but the car was quite heavy, so you wouldn't be the last of the late-brakers! When the 3 Series came along it was a lot better. My best race in the BMW was also the most exciting one, the first Wellington



Above: Neville Crichton and Wayne Wilkinson — BMW 635CSi — Pukekohe, 1984

Left: Neville Crichton — 1986

street race in January 1985. We were leading massively — I think we were a lap and a half ahead — when co-driver Wayne Wilkinson put it into a fence. We should have won by a country mile; instead, Robbie Francevic won it in the Volvo. But we won at Pukekohe, and so won the series, which was great because all the top drivers — Brock and everyone — were competing. Wellington was still great. The car just got in the groove and was fantastic. We were racing against overseas BMWs and we were way quicker than them. Frank Sytner brought out a BMW 635CSi from England that had a big reputation. We out-qualified him and he never ever saw us in the race.

Wellington wasn't too hard to prepare for. We were pretty confident we had a good car, but there were people like [Tom] Walkinshaw down with the Rover SD1 V8. The Rover was more of a threat at Pukekohe than on the waterfront; the BMW just handled better. At Puke we weren't that much quicker — there were only seconds between us and Walkinshaw at the end — but I can't say how fast we were going, as I didn't have a speedo in the car. Wellington was a daunting circuit but I enjoyed it. The officials weren't that happy for me to compete, because, if you crashed, the chances were you'd end up in the water. Because I'd had a tracheotomy the officials at one stage weren't going to let me drive. I think I had to sign an indemnity. It was the last thing of my mind at the time — I figured if I did hit the water the last thing I'd be concerned with was suing them!

It was my best race car, absolutely. I was disappointed when we took the 635 to Australia. I drove two seasons with Jim Richards and Frank Gardner, but over there the car was unreliable. We never had a failure in New Zealand, but over there the car had quite a few electrical problems. I've not seen the car since Oran Park, the last round in the Australian championship, in 1986. I broke down — running second, and then it had electrical problems! That's how it goes. But of all the cars I've driven it was still the nicest. I retired from racing in 1990 and I've not sat in a race car since then. It'll bring back a lot of nice memories.

Left: Neville Crichton and Wayne Wilkinson; BMW635CSi — 2nd place, Benson and Hedges 500 — Pukekohe, November 1984