

WINNING WITH BMW IN NEW ZEALAND

— THE 1990s By Brett Riley

Having had 12 years single-seater racing, including six of those years in Europe, yielding six British/European Formula 3 victories, I concluded my Formula 1 dream was over. While still working in Europe, I was approached in 1986 by Toyota New Zealand, who were setting up a touring-car operation headed by Chris Amon — hence my entry to touring-car racing began. After a Class 2 championship victory in 1988 the opportunity arose to drive for Bill Bryce, whom I knew from Europe and who now had an ex-‘Cee Bee Emme’ BMW M3. I had the privilege of sharing this car with the great Denny Hulme at the Wellington and Pukekohe Nissan Mobil events, and later on at Bathurst with Ludwig Finauer. I also drove with the then-emerging talent of Craig Baird, who of course was to feature strongly later on with BMW. This car was also mine in the New Zealand national championships where I finished second in 1990 before taking the New Zealand Touring Car Championship (NZTCC) title in 1991. With regulations in New Zealand touring cars then changing to a more open class, I spent 1992 driving a variety of mostly Ford-backed cars for Mark Petch, including the famous ‘Peanut Slab’ Group A Sierra that I shared with Kayne Scott, and a Ford Falcon V8 which ran in an unofficial championship (which we won). At this point the family business that I operated with my father, John, was taking priority, so I quietly departed the New Zealand motor-racing scene.

After a season away, I received a call in 1993 from a good friend who suggested I call Lyall Williamson who was setting up a touring car team with the backing of BMW New Zealand. This idea had originally been centred on Denny Hulme, so when Denny passed away at Bathurst in 1992 the idea was shelved. Of course I was honoured to be accepted as the replacement driver for Denny in the BMW Motorsport NZ team — a team whose intent was to pair experience with new talent in order to further careers internationally. This was a great opportunity for me, too, especially as Lyall Williamson would be heading the operation and his preparation and attention to detail was legendary. And this proved to be the case, with the BMW touring-car operation setting new standards in New Zealand motorsport and sweeping successive championships from 1994 until 2000: Craig Baird took four titles 1994–1997, myself taking the title in 1998 when Craig



Brett Riley in BMW Motorsport NZ/International Motorsport BMW 320i Touring car — Pukekohe, December 1995. Photo: Jim Barclay

departed overseas, and then our previous junior BMW protégé Jason Richards taking 1999 and 2000.

Initially Lyall’s International BMW Motorsport team had built two BMW 325i Coupes for the 1993/94 season that took on the much larger Commodore /Falcon V8s. The racing was furious during this period, with a degree of dubious driving standards, but it proved to be popular with spectators and the press. With consecutive 1994 and 1995 championships taken by Craig in the 325i, a change in regulations saw a new 2-litre format and the BMW Motorsport NZ team changed their cars to the E36 320i Sedans. These cars were being built locally, but with input from the BMW factory, and once again Lyall’s cars set new standards in engineering and preparation. The 320i cars were truly state-of-the-art and would serve up championships for BMW for the next five consecutive years.

From my own perspective, the 1990s proved to be a rewarding but difficult time for me as I grappled to compete with my much younger teammates, firstly with Craig Baird whose relentless focus on success would deliver him multiple championships in New Zealand and Australia. After Craig came Jason Richards, whom Lyall and others, including myself, had favourably observed as he appeared to be able to do things with a Formula Ford single-seater that not many could. Yes, indeed, Jason had a huge degree of natural talent, and the BMW Motorsport NZ operation seemed a great place to hone his skills. After he won the 1999 and 2000 titles he did go on to win the title again in 2001 (now in a Team Kiwi Nissan), snatching the championship away from me at the last round after I made a cameo appearance for BMW that season. Jason then took his considerable talents to Australia.

Alas the 1996 E36 BMW 320i had finally met its match with Jason’s title in 2001. This very much concluded my time with BMW race cars, but I did go on to sell this great product for a number of years. I was fortunate to have been a part of this important era, as were many others, particularly the people who were privileged to have worked with Lyall Williamson and the BMW Motorsport NZ Team. Special mention to BMW chiefs Geoff Fletcher and Mark Gilbert, who had the vision to carry this through.



Brett Riley in Bill Bryce’s ex-‘Cee Bee Emme’ BMW M3 Group A — Pukekohe, February 1991. Photo: Jim Barclay