

Gerry O’Kane 1943 – 2009

When Gerry O’Kane died on the afternoon of Sunday, 15th February, despite the fact that the whole Classic family knew that he was suffering from a terminal illness, his death still came as a great shock to us. Gerry was one of those people who seem to have always been there and would go on for ever. In Gerry’s case, there doesn’t seem to be a circuit the length of Ireland, at which he had not raced, from the Mid- Antrim to Athea and Faugheen.

Gerry came to Classic Racing right at the very start in the mid-eighties when he raced a 350 BSA single before acquiring a 250 Honda. The bulk of his racing was on this machine which gained the nickname, ‘Smokey Joe,’ given to it because of the clouds of smoke which it blew out on the overrun. Around 2000, Gerry bought Ivor Holland’s Championship-winning 250 Suzuki and it was on this machine that he won all his 250 Championships. In addition, he rode a modern 125 Honda in the Clubmans’ Championship, for a couple of seasons. He was no mean competitor and was loved and respected by his fellow competitors as a sporting and fair rider.

The bald facts of his racing career really tell us nothing about Gerry, the man. The stories of his sense of humour and his generosity are legion and there can be very few people associated with the Classic scene, whether rider or supporter, who cannot add their own story to the collection. In my own case, I was on the receiving end of this generosity at Athea, a few years back. The 450 cracked the megaphone during the 500 race and Randal still had an outing in the single-cylinder race, which was to follow shortly. I asked Gerry if he would have a piece of tin with which I could wrap the cracked mega. He lifted the carpet of the van and produced a four-by-three sheet of aluminium, a pair of tinsnips and a cordless drill, complete with an eighth drill bit. ‘Here you are, young fella, away you go.’ Five minutes later he and Bertie Wright were over to help and between us all, Randal was able to ride in his race and finished in fourth place; just one small example of Gerry’s help. Other riders could repeat a hundred similar stories.

His sense of humour was as great as his generosity. During the twenty-plus years that I have known him, I never saw him angry or in bad humour. The ready quip came easily to his lips and the humour was often directed at himself. I'm told that at the Southern 100, which he attended every year, he emerged, one burning Twelfth of July and paraded up and down the Paddock complete with large drum and sash and soon had others following him in an impromptu parade. At the ICRA Dinner, a few years ago, Gerry spent the whole night wearing a jet-black Afro wig, which, he claimed made him look younger, and would help him to 'pass the doctor' to get his licence.

His black, OK Racing, Isuzu van had a life of its own. Invariably, it was parked beside Bertie Wright's similar, but navy blue-coloured, Isuzu and I'm doing him no disservice to say that the van was as disorganised as Bertie's was organised. On one occasion, Gerry's van was broken into and Bertie (it is claimed, and he doesn't deny it!) was heard to say to 'his wee mate,' 'Gerry, that mightn't be a bad thing, sure they would have to tidy up your van to find something to steal!' It was Gerry's race transport, his workshop, his bedroom, his dining room and where other riders gathered and Gerry held court! Again at the ICRA dinner, one year, he arrived in with the steering wheel in his hand as an anti-theft device!

He was a man of great faith and, when racing at Sunday meetings in the South, he faithfully attended Mass in the nearest church, prior to racing. At the wake, his older brother, Sean, told me that Gerry had known from August that his illness would be terminal and that he had faced the prospect of his death with faith, courage and calmness. His wake and funeral were huge and at the requiem mass, in The Church of St Patrick, Loup, the church was packed to capacity with mourners, half an hour before the scheduled time. There were as many mourners standing outside.

The Classic family has lost someone who is irreplaceable and the paddocks next season and the following seasons will be the lesser places for his passing. My own abiding memory of Gerry is of him leaning against the back door of the van, legs crossed at the ankle, arms tightly folded across his chest and a smile on his face. All we can do is to keep repeating the stories, keep reliving the memories for years to come, for it is in this way that Gerry will stay with us. To his wife, Elizabeth, his sons and daughters and to the extended O'Kane family I offer the sincere sympathy of the whole Classic family.

Today, he walks with the Lord. Rest in peace, Gerry.

Paddy Hoey