

DENZIL KENT | Exclusive interview

For years very few knew of the whereabouts of DENZIL KENT or what had become of him since the mid-80s. But we tracked him down in Johannesburg, where the former Canterbury favourite tells Tony McDonald about his all too brief racing career, his personal struggles away from the track and how he hopes to lead a South African speedway revival...



Kent in Kent... Denzil wearing Canterbury colours.

Kent revival

DENZIL Kent had his first speedway rides a year sooner than he should have done according to South African rules. "It was 1976 and I was still only 15," explained the former Canterbury star. "The authorities found out how young I was after my second meeting and they banned me from racing for a year."

"In South Africa at that time you needed to hold a full driving licence before you could ride speedway competitively and I was still too young to take my road test."

Although Denzil's first full season of British team racing was with Canterbury in 1980, he had spent a tough learning season here the previous year, second-halfing at Cradley Heath and Oxford under the Dan McCormick promotion.

"My dad (Ted) knew Alex Hughson, the former Edinburgh rider, and it was he who got in touch with Dan to get me over there. I rode regularly in the second-half at both of his tracks but it was tough. I would win one race and crash in the next."

"I lived with Peter Prinsloo and would go and watch him race at Exeter, a track that looked very daunting to me."

With only two official match appearances to his name in 1979, which yielded one point from a total of six rides, perhaps it was no surprise that McCormick was in no hurry to offer Kent a second bite at the cherry the following year. But his loss was certainly Canterbury's gain.

"I went home that winter and practiced as often as I could, riding for up to two hours every day on the track around the football pitch in Johannesburg. I rode there with an ex-rider, Scotsman Ronnie Ferguson, and was determined to get back to the UK."

In the winter of 1979-80 Kent rapidly emerged as South Africa's most outstanding prospect. He impressed so much against British tourists Pete Smith, Steve Wilcock and his best pairs-winning partner John Barker that Canterbury boss Wally Mawdsley moved in and made the appropriately named Kent his major pre-season signing. Canterbury already had South Africa's top rider, Mike Ferreira, as their No.1 and they were about to reap the benefit of another star from the Republic.

Although Denzil was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe in October 1961, his parents and two elder sisters returned to their Johannesburg roots in the early 70s.

"I think Mike Ferreira had something to do with me signing for Canterbury but I wouldn't say we were big mates," says Denzil. "He helped me in some ways but after a while he was more worried about his own job."

"By then I was lodging with a couple called Bob and Brenda, friends of my sister, in Dartford. Bob allowed me to drive around in his Austin Marina."

"Dad handled all the arrangements for me to return to England and Canterbury general manager Maurice Morley came down to Dartford to sign me on," Denzil recalled.

Having never seen Kent ride before signing him, Morley decided to leave him out of Crusaders' opening meeting of the 1980 season, an international challenge against the Italy touring side, but the 18-year-old didn't have to wait long for his big chance. Appearing from the reserve berth, he won his first race for the Crusaders and went on to score nine (paid 10) from four rides against Crayford in the Kent Cup at Kingsmead on Saturday, April 5.

"I'd never even seen the track before I rode on it," says the diminutive racer with the big heart who finished his first National League season with a creditable 6.64 average from 42 matches.

The Crusaders' heat leaders were Mike Ferreira, Barney Kennett and Ted Hubbard but they were pushed hard all the way by the young newcomer with the dark hair and boyish good looks whom the fans soon took to their hearts. "It was sink or swim when I came back to England and joined Canterbury and I loved being there."

"Wally (Mawdsley) had a word with Invicta Motors and I was soon driving one of their Cortinas. And then I moved to Canterbury and lived in the city with Paul and Vi Loram for a few years."

Denzil's tenacious riding, friendly demeneur and showmanship qualities made a big impression on the starry-eyed son of Paul and Vi. On his recently released DVD, *The People's Champion*, former World No.1 Mark Loram pays tribute to the one Canterbury rider, above all others, who



South Africa's pride, Mike Ferreira and Denzil brought the National League Pairs title to Canterbury in 1981.

inspired him to want to race on the shale after first shining in junior grass-track.

Loram, Crusaders' schoolboy mascot in the early 80s, says: "The first 500cc speedway bike I rode was Denzil's four-valve overhead cam Jawa that he let me use to practice on at Iwade after he'd returned to South Africa at the end of one season."

When Loram recently heard Backtrack was about to interview his boyhood hero Kent, he enthused: "Denzil was my first favourite speedway rider. There was something different about him. When he came out for a race, he didn't seem to bother to make practice starts. He virtually did a wheelie from the pits all the way to the starting gate and the supporters loved him for it. He was a great character and I hope he's doing OK now."

Kent repays the compliment, saying: "Mark was 11 going on 17. He was a brilliant, little grass-track rider and he just had to make it in speedway, too, because he had the passion and will to become successful."

"As for the wheelies, the supporters pay the riders' wages and if they like it, then play to the crowd. Part of the fight I had with Wally later was that I knew I was popular with the fans and deserved to be paid more."

After acquitting himself well in his first full NL season, Kent upped his average by more than a point in 1981 to leapfrog Barney Kennett and become the No.2 to fellow countryman Ferreira. And the South African duo brought Canterbury their first silverware since the 1978 NL championship season when they won the NL Pairs at Halifax. "I wish I could have contributed more on the night, though," says a modest Denzil, reflecting on the semi-final win over Wolverhampton and the final

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victory against Berwick in which he trailed last in both races but the title went to the Canterbury pair courtesy of Ferreira's race wins.

"My bike broke down in the last race but, fortunately, Mike won the race anyway, so we were the overall winners."

After treading water in 1982, when Ferreira moved up into the British League with parent club Swindon, where Mawdsley also held the reins, Kent succeeded Kennett as Crusaders' No.1 in the early part of 1983. But his elevation proved a double-edged sword for rider and management alike.

"I enjoyed the team camaraderie when we travelled together to and from away matches in a bus and I had an absolutely phenomenal time, on and off the track, but I was always drinking and enjoying life too much."

The death of his father during his first season with Canterbury did nothing to improve Denzil's focus on racing.

"My dad was very strict and he would have given me a couple of swipes across the face if he'd still been there with me. But when the cat's away, the mice play."

"Wally and Barney Kennett were very, very good to me. Barney would sit and talk to me for ages and he understood a lot more than he may have realised. He did try to keep me in line but after Dad died I was my own boss."

Kent's relationship with his promoter deteriorated when the youngster began to feel undervalued.

He says: "Basically, Wally and I had a massive bust-up over money. As the BSPA delegate responsible for dealing with the Czech authorities, he did help me out with Jewas but he was adamant that he

wouldn't pay me more than the standard rate. He'd been round the block a few times in speedway. I'm not quite sure what happened but in the end I refused to ride. I sat at home for about half-a-season, just going along to Crayford and Rye House to watch. I didn't think I was asking for too much - especially when I discovered our two reserves at the time were on better deals than me. It was a bit of a shock."

The impasse was broken when Bob Dugard, boss of senior league Eastbourne, moved in to snap up the disenchanted Kent. Denzil rode in nine matches (3.65 CMA) for the Eagles in the latter part of 1983 before spending a full season with the Sussex club the following year.

Dugard had gambled before on a young import who liked a drink or six and to party after meetings when he signed Kelly Moran in 1981, so maybe he viewed Kent as another challenge worth taking. In some ways, Denzil was South Africa's version of Kelly Moran.

He says: "I remember going to Eastbourne to watch a three team tournament when Bob saw me entering the pits and asked: 'Have you been drinking?' I told him I hadn't, so he said: 'Good, you're riding today'. I was a reserve for one of the teams, although I didn't get a ride on that particular day."

In listing small tracks Crayford, Rye House and Edinburgh's former Powderhall home as his favourites, the tight and tricky Arlington bowl would have held no fears but he admits the step up in class was difficult for him.

"I was happy to join Eastbourne but it was a really tough year for me," he says. "Colin Richardson and Paul Woods were always helpful to me but there was semi-

Denzil leading the Crusaders in 1983, his last season at Kingsmead. Left to right: Maurice Morley (general manager), Ian Clark, Barney Kennett, Daryl Simpson, Denzil, Keith Pritchard, Mark Martin, Nigel Couzens, Reg Luckhurst (team manager).



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animosity between the riders. They weren't looking to help with advice and it was a case of, 'my pocket or your pocket'.

"Having said that, we did mix socially and we'd all go to Deansland bar/restaurant and disco, in the nearby caravan park, for a drink and a laugh after home meetings. I stayed with my team-mate John Eskildsen in Eastbourne at first and then lodged with George Gray, who sponsored us with tyres, at his place in Hastings."

Kent now readily admits that he enjoyed himself too much and didn't apply himself enough to fulfil his undoubted potential in the top flight.

He says: "I wasn't putting 100 per cent into the racing and was too worried about having fun. I found it very tough in the British League but I should have persevered more and put more energy into my speedway."

"I can't blame Bob Dugard. He treated me well, I can't fault him."

As a work permit rider, Kent was unable to remain with Eastbourne for 1985, when Dugard decided the Eagles would do better to operate back in the second tier.

"So I decided to leave British speedway for a year and come home, with the idea of returning to England in 1986," Denzil explains. But for one reason or another, he never did race in Britain again.

Morag, his Zambian-born wife of Scottish descent, fell pregnant with their first son

and then the military finally caught up with him.

"I was called into the South African army at the age of 28. They had been serving me my call-up papers for years but I kept ignoring them, hoping they would eventually forget about me. After all, I was married with a young child and had started my own engineering shop in Edenvale, a town on the eastern side of Johannesburg."

"Then one day two military police officers turned up at my house in a van and arrested me. 'Are you Denzil William Kent?' they asked before I was handcuffed, driven away and sent to the Potchefstroom military training camp."

Despite his reluctance to join the army and the frustration he felt because it was the last year of conscription in his homeland, Kent admits his two-year service was no real hardship.

"I actually quite enjoyed the discipline of it, although not their 'hurry up and wait' attitude. I was, in fact, older than all of my senior officers, so they gave me a lot of latitude," recalls Denzil, a corporal in the artillery division of airborne gunners.

Having been skilled at throwing his 500cc Jawa and Godden machines into narrow bends with no brakes, the prospect of army life was never going to intimidate him.

"I went on patrol duty in the townships but there was no reason for me to be afraid



Denzil today, at home in Johannesburg

because I was driving an enclosed armoured vehicle.

"Army life wasn't too bad at all. I'd work hard there for two days but was allowed to return home on Wednesday mornings and didn't have to report back to base until the following Monday morning."

When Kent returned to civvy street full-time, he set about building up his engineering company and for a time enjoyed success. "I never really made money out of speedway," he says, "so I had to find work when I went back home."

"I started my own business and we were building chassis for Volvo, around 200-odd a month for a few years. At one stage I employed 14 people. But my earning power was cut when the Volvo contract came to an end. The business suffered and so I closed the production shop and for a while became an independent contractor."

"I became a bit of a recluse. I still worked hard but I also played too hard."

As well as business setbacks, Denzil has struggled to cope with anguish in his personal life. The death of his mother, Thurza, in 1998 came as a huge blow and his marriage to Morag – or 'Rusty' as Denzil and everyone else knew her – also fell apart.

The couple, who eventually divorced in 2007, have two sons – Kieran, now 24, and Tristan, 21 – but they now live with their mother in Scotland and Denzil has no contact with them.

With admirable candour, Denzil admits: "I wasn't a very good husband or father. I know it takes two to tango but if one person in the marriage is not putting in enough time and effort to make it work, then it will usually fail. The factory was going quite big by then and I was spending too many hours away from my family. We had no quality time together."

At his lowest ebb, Denzil admits he was drinking a case of beer and a bottle of rum on most days.

"That was about two-and-a-half to three years ago but I realised something had to

Looking for the opposition at Eastbourne in 1984.



change and I'm glad I changed that side of me. I asked myself, 'why be at the bottom of the barrel?' I knew I shouldn't be there and it was down to one person - me - to change it.

"It's been a long, uphill battle but drinking doesn't bother me anymore. I don't think about sitting in the garden drinking beer all day.

"I still enjoy having fun, though, but I seldom drink until the weekend, when I'll probably have a crate of 12 beers. I know now that there is a limit and that limit is not the floor."

Denzil now works as a cook for a small food business in Edenvale, Johannesburg from Sunday to Thursday, which also provides a roof over his head.

"My day begins at around six-ish, when I begin cooking and making all the fillings for the rolls that the owner sells during the day. I also do all the cleaning at the house I share with him and another man. My working day usually ends at 7.30pm.

"On Fridays I go to Shane Horn's place. Shane rides speedway occasionally and I help to maintain the 12 bikes that he has in his collection - there's a Wessie, two GMs, a Jawa and three or four laydowns. I also look after a couple of moto-cross bikes at weekends. I'm a general dogsbody really but at least it keeps me out of the pubs and what I get paid keeps the wolf from the door.

"Another person I'd like to thank is Bob Bulmer, who has a house at 43 Smith Street in nearby Edenglen, where I've met a lot of nice people, including the Wain family, who have gone out of their way to be a great help to me in tough times."

For so long a popular winter retreat for British-based riders in search of a busman's holiday, South African speedway has been in the wilderness for many years and Denzil is keen to help spark a revival of interest in the Republic where rugby and cricket are the leading national sports.

"There is only one track running speedway these days, at Walkerville, where they stage individual meetings once a month involving around 13 riders. I think the only South African riding in a British league today is Byron Bekker, who rides for Belle Vue Colts (National League), and there are maybe a couple more who are not in teams.

"We must try and do something about rekindling interest in speedway here, give it a shake-up and put bums on seats. It would be a wonderful experience for me if I could be part of a speedway revival."

Revival is a word that can be applied to Denzil Kent, too. He has become so far removed from British speedway that some of his supporters wondered if he was still alive.

Well, *Backtrack* is relieved and delighted to report that the articulate, cheerful-sounding South African on the other end of the phone is very much alive and well. "Things are definitely on the up," confirms Denzil, who now has a presence on Facebook, although he admits he is still trying to get to grips with the social

networking site on which he "sometimes presses the wrong buttons."

He is online and plans to reconnect with friends all over the world when he shortly adds Skype to his computer system.

And for the many Canterbury fans who would love to catch up with their former hero in person, the good news is that Denzil is eagerly looking forward to his first visit to England since he left Eastbourne at the end of 1984 when he returns here in October.

"As long as I'm granted a visa, and I'm sure I will be, I'll be coming over for six weeks and will be staying with Debbie and Kevin Howland, who was a team-mate of mine at Canterbury," he announces. "Debbie has been a very good friend. She came out here to visit me recently and brought with her copies of *Backtrack* and the Mark Loram DVD, which have brought back great memories of my time in England. She has dragged me to where I ought to be.

"It will be nice to see her and Kevin again, along with many others from my racing days with the Crusaders. The fans are the part of speedway I miss most."

Canterbury closed at the end of 1987, three years after the bikes were banished from Crayford. But there is a Kent revival in progress. While here, Denzil will celebrate his 50th birthday on October 26. It promises to be some party...

"Our special thanks to Debbie Howland for her help with this interview."



With his pet dog Bozo. Cleaning up... part of his weekend routine. Denzil washing the speedway bike that used to belong to Dean Prinsloo.

