



# Top Dog

JOHN PINNELL  
JOHN PINNELL, ANDY WIGAN, SIMON CUDBY, RAY ARCHER, NUNO LARANJEIRA

For ten years now, you could have been forgiven for thinking that Dean Ferris and Todd Waters hated each other's guts - both on and off the track. Admittedly, the fiercest rivalry in contemporary Aussie motocross has matured these days, but it's still built on one simple premise: two guys who can't stand being beaten by each other.

At Burleigh Beach on a mid-summer afternoon, Dean Ferris and Todd Waters are about as far from their 2015 lives as it's possible to be. Released from their roles with separate factory Husqvarna outfits, and some 15,000 kilometres away from the dreaded Belgian winter, the former Grand Prix racers are soaking up the Queensland sun, tempered by a perfect onshore breeze. With the tourist capital of the Gold Coast just off to the north, both look super-fit and healthy, and both are dressed in shorts and thongs and sport high-

quality suntans. Todd has claimed the early lead in looking chilled - he's travelled from his new base by skateboard.

Perfectly camouflaged among the holidaymakers, the pair fields the occasional contact call from team managers and sponsors - an appropriate illustration of a process that, behind the scenes, is already building momentum. Yes, Dean Ferris and Todd Waters - two long-time and fiercely competitive rivals - are about to lock horns all over again. This time, back on Aussie soil.

## BIRTH OF A RIVALRY

"I was just your average North Queensland Junior who raced on the weekend. I was no rider," says Todd with trademark modesty. "I could win the local stuff, but that was it. Dad then took us to nationals on what was basically a family holiday, and I won."

Todd's father, Steve, sees another dimension to what went down at that national title meet: "Todd's got this determination where something you say can change his whole day. I remember that we were standing on the line at those titles thinking, 'Jeez, we could get a top ten here' and Tye Simmonds' dad and another guy look over at Todd. One says, 'What's this young bloke gonna do?' and the other replies, 'He won't do anything'." Todd heard what they'd said, and then went on to win by half a lap on a stock bike with no more than a pipe and MPE-dialled suspension in it. Todd wasn't a good jumper, but he was fast into corners. He still is. Antti Pyrhönen, the Team Manager for Ice One Husqvarna, recently said he is the fastest cornerer in the world."

Several Australian Championships later, Todd was a member of the KTM junior program and a benchmark for other juniors, including one named Dean Ferris.

"How I noticed Dean in the first place," says Jon Hafey, Husqvarna Brand Manager and Dean's mentor of the past 10 years, "was that in his last year of juniors, Dean was running up there with a fully supported KTM rider, and giving him a real hot run at most tracks. And he was doing that on bikes he was borrowing from mates and cousins. Then in the Under 19s, the two of them got wildcards together at Echo Valley in the Pro Lites. Todd won the first and Dean

got second in the second – though, in typical Dean style, he crashed out of the first one and broke a radiator off the bike. It was a strong debut for both and a pivotal point, because here were two kids who were clearly very, very quick. And they'd proved it immediately."

## TARGET ACQUIRED

"There was no issue in juniors," says Dean. "Todd was just straight-up better than me, and it fuelled the fire in my gut. I remember training so hard just to beat Todd. I didn't think

the only kid that made it through, because he wanted to work hard and, like me, he had the right attitude. He wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth by any means. And he was the only one beating me. That lit the fire."

## FRIENDS, THEN...

The two became teammates on the Honda team in 2009, with Dean riding MX2 and Todd in the premier class. Initially, it was a cordial relationship and they sometimes practised together with the third

"I'd got burnt hard by the Honda team," says Ferris candidly. "Todd was still on there, but I wasn't jealous of that. I actually wanted out and I felt sorry that he had to ride in that team. Jon Hafey was helping me. I had a privateer set-up and was enjoying my bike, and all of a sudden I just didn't want to talk with anyone that I raced against. I think Todd took that the wrong way, and maybe was even influenced by someone else. So then it started."

Ferris conceded that, in hindsight, it's easy for a cocky teenager to overdo things. "I've got to say, I probably started rubbing it in his face a little bit," explains Ferris. "I started winning some pre-season races and I was a little bit cocky, always fist-pumping, no matter how small the race was that I won, and just making sure that everyone knew I was out to win and didn't give a shit what anyone thought. I was still 19."

## IT GETS BLOODY

"At Round 1 of the 2010 MX Nationals at Horsham in March," continues Ferris, "the relationship started getting bloody. We locked bars hard. We're talking like third gear, wide open up the straight. Todd went well out of his way, coming from inside to outside to push me like 10 metres out to the fence. It was a pretty good one. I passed him two corners later and was like, 'What the hell?' Me being a little bit cocky that year, I didn't see it coming. I probably should've though. It was Todd's way of saying, 'I'm here too'."

Directly involved in rider development, Honda legend Glen Bell had a bird's eye view of this evolving rivalry. "When Dean got on the 450s with Todd, they were racing each other for a championship," says Belly, himself a multiple national MX and SX champ. "Todd had all

*"Either you do it to them or they do it to you; that's how it is with some guys. That's just part of racing with Dean. But I knew that if I punched him, I'm suspended for 12 months."*

*-Todd Waters*

about anyone else. When we were 15, I had one bike with 200 hours on it while he had bikes coming out of his arse. I envied him, you know, because he was number one. I wouldn't have had it any other way because it shaped me. I was still really grateful that my mum was taking me to the races, because my friends weren't even allowed a bike.

"So when I saw the kids with all the stickers and all the gold rims and all the bling, it used to annoy me. At the same time, though, it was satisfying to beat them. Todd was

rider on the team, Ford Dale.

"We'd been good mates, racing and having some fun," says Waters. "But once we were racing for wins against each other, the relationship got more serious."

For 2010, Waters had been retained for the official factory-supported Honda squad, while Ferris was dropped, leaving him to put together a privateer Honda MX1 effort. Slighted, hungry and with it all to prove, Ferris stepped up to the premier class ... and it was all about to hit the fan!



The 2010 season was when the duo's rivalry intensified. Waters was on factory Honda, while Ferris was a privateer.

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*-Dean Ferris*





Waters (#47) and Ferris (#111) both dived for MXGP-class podiums in 2015, and both plan to race in Europe again.

*"In Europe, all they were talking about was racing each other. I'm going, 'What the hell are you trying to race each other for? You've got bigger fish to fry!'"*  
- Glen Bell



the support from [team principle] Yarrive Konsky, while Dean was doing it all as a privateer. That's where it all started. Dean is a bit cockier than Todd, and when stuff gets said in magazines, it can be read differently to what was intended. Then when there's an incident on the track, it's perceived as vindictive and deliberate. And things can snowball from there. It was such a rivalry between the two of them that first year on the 450s. They'd literally bang bars and take each other out. It wasn't nice there for a while."

To Ferris, it was like a switch had been flicked in the relationship. "Then it just seemed like it was on," he says. "Yep, we're gonna' kill each other. It just went on and on, and whenever we thought we'd gotten over it, one of us would hit the other one again. And it would ignite like petrol on fire. There was one race when we probably thought we were over it, and I've got to say, I came in and cleaned him out, but we both went down. It was stupid, but I don't know [laughs], if it was someone else, I would have backed off. But it was Todd, so I didn't."

"We were just trying to be the bigger guy. Even though we weren't really achieving anything, we were just showing each other, 'Hey I'm still here!' So it just kept escalating all year. After Albury, I think the people in both our corners probably thought something needs to be done. But this is motocross; not a sport for pussies," Ferris goes on to explain.

#### THE ALBURY INCIDENT

Waters broke his collarbone at Round 4 of the MX Nats in Toowoomba, but with his championship off to a great start, he didn't want to stop for a pesky broken bone, so he got it plated and soldiered through Round 5 at

Raymond Terrace and into Albury. "Albury was three weeks after my operation," recalls Waters. "I got a bad start and was following a guy over this jump, and then Dean jumped into us and took us both down. I got pretty upset about it, so I fronted him and said, 'What the f@#k was that?' And he just said, 'What? You were going too slow'. That's a disrespectful thing to say to your competitor, so from that day, neither of us liked to see

going too slow, or something like that [laughs]. I think that's what fired him up. It was just lack of respect; that's all it was."

"I grew up in Far North Queensland, where there's plenty of conflict if you want it, so I know how to fight," Todd Waters goes on to say. "But I knew that if I lay Dean out, I'm suspended for 12 months. And then, there goes my career. You gotta' handle yourself professionally in public. With riders like Tye

broke a scaphoid in 2011, which sidelined him for three months, and then Ferris took off to Europe for 2012. Fate only brought the pair back together again in 2015, riding for separate factory Husqvarna teams in the FIM Motocross World Championship. Here were two Australian GP racers on the other side of the world – both living around the corner from each other in Belgium, both riding for the same brand – but never associating with each other.

"Racing for Husqvarna was a little tricky," admits Waters. "We'd have to do media commitments and autograph signings together. It's no problem. We'd talk and stuff, but we're just not besties about it [laughs]."

But when it came to 'meeting' on the track, the two got together so often, it was like there were huge magnets inside their bikes. "I don't know what it was," reflects Ferris. "We found each other almost every single race. I could get a 35<sup>th</sup>-place start, and Todd would be 34<sup>th</sup>. I'd holeshot and Todd would be there with me. It was like that all year. It was good because Todd was the first guy I had to beat – it didn't matter if I got 20<sup>th</sup>; if I was in front of Todd, it was okay [laughs]. At our best GPs, we were usually one position apart. It was crazy!"

Waters couldn't believe it either. On the other side of the world, 10,000 miles from where they started, and they were still rubbering up each other's plastics. "My first ever decent start was in Spain," recalls Waters, "because Dean was getting good starts and I was working on them, and I finally got a good jump. So I get to the top of the hill and was in second on the way back down, and then this white mudguard just pumps up the inside of me ... DEAN!? [laughs]."

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the other guy win."

Steve Waters knew something was up, the second Todd rode into the Albury pits. "I could see that Todd's teeth were gritted," he says. "I patted him on the back, but he never said a thing. And he always says something. He rode up to [his mechanic] Mike Landman and said, 'Get on, Mike', and rode straight into Dean's tent. He would have run him over if he'd seen him at that point. Todd then came storming out and found Dean, and just as I got there, they were nose to nose. You could see he was going to punch him, so I stepped in between and said, 'It's not worth it, mate'. Dean had told Todd he was

Simmonds, I could race hard, then hop off the bike and shake hands, and go stay at each other's house. But Dean's got a different personality. That's how he goes about things. Ours is a healthy rivalry, but there's no love lost on the track. That's for sure."

"I'm not normally a fighter," says Dean, reflecting on the altercation in the Albury pit paddock. "But I wouldn't be scared to throw one either."

#### FATE STEPS IN ... TWICE!

Fortunes of motocross then put any sort of fight on hold. Waters

But what was stranger than these guys' personal battle in the middle of a world championship – at least, according to Glen Bell – was their single-minded focus on it. “When I went to Europe,” says Belly, “all they were talking about was racing each other. I’m going, ‘What the hell are you trying to race each other for? You’ve got bigger fish to fry!’ But that’s the way it was.”

### CAUSE OR EFFECT?

It’s interesting to ask whether the rivalry became a source of distraction or one of focus. Was it like the Heath Ledger *Batman* movie where the Joker says, “I can’t kill you; you complete me” or that classic line from *Rush*, Ron Howard’s acclaimed insight into Formula One in the 1970s, where Niki Lauder’s character says to arch-rival, James Hunt, “A wise man can learn more from his enemies than a fool from his friends”?

“I’ve found a lot of motivation from Todd,” concedes Ferris. “That’s been the case right from when we were juniors. Stepping to seniors, we both found new strength. And when he’s beating me, I’ve got to work harder.”

Waters feels much the same, it seems. “We’ve run into each other a lot of times,” he says. “It’s probably pretty even, but one thing I do know is that I put in a massive effort because I can be sure Dean’s putting one in. That’s one thing I’ve realised since we were 15. And it doesn’t matter where we are in the world. I know that if he’s winning, I can go there and run with him. When he did well in Europe, I thought, ‘Man, I’ve got to get myself over there’, and I did.”

So there you go. Just your regular, everyday, semi-abusive symbiosis.

### MATURING

On the track, their relationship has

begun to mature these days – it’s no longer vindictive, but still very hairy-chested – with literally no quarter asked nor given.

“Six years ago when our rivalry started, we were still a couple of teenagers who didn’t actually respect each other, and that’s the difference now,” Ferris says. “We still want to beat each other just as badly, but we’ve both got respect for each other. We’ve both had some big injuries and we probably both realise motocross is pretty dangerous, and we don’t really need to be doing that sort of shit. We’ve found a happy medium now, I think.”

But after the French GP last season, Todd was left wondering...

*“In 2015, Ferris and Waters were two Australians on the other side of the world – both living in Belgium, both riding for Husqvarna MXGP teams – but never associating with each other.”*

### FRANCE

“We’ve crashed a lot together,” says Waters, looking back on the French GP. “In France last year, though, I was in front of Dean up this hill, and he jumped onto me. It caused my leg to slip down and strike the footpeg in between my boot and the kneebrace, which chipped the bone. He stayed on and got fourth. But that’s just part of racing with Dean. I was angry, but I just thought, ‘I’ll get him back’. Either you do it to them or they do it to you; that’s how it is with some guys.”

It seemed just like old times, but

according to Dean it wasn’t: “France was probably my best Grand Prix. I went for 4-4 and I was just having one of those days when I didn’t give a shit who was in my way. I came up on Todd really fast and I didn’t realise that he was going right on the hill and then jumping back to the left as the track turned left. I was riding the best I had all year, and in one lap I took a lot out of him. I don’t think he saw or heard me there. I came from the inside and drifted wide, and he came from the outside and turned in. We hit hard mid-flight. I cleaned him out and kept going. I saw him later and I was like, ‘Oh shit, Todd, why’d you turn across?’, And he was like, ‘Dude, I was taking that line the whole time.’ I was like, ‘Are you sure,

because I didn’t see you take that line’. But then I saw the replay and, yeah, he was taking that line. I wasn’t waiting a second to make the pass, so I cleaned him out pretty hard, but I definitely didn’t mean it. It wasn’t, ‘Oh it’s Todd; I’m just going to run over him’. It was actually an accident but ... whatever, it was hard racing. After that, I knew that if Todd got the opportunity, he would hit me hard as well. I know how it works. I would have felt bad if I’d hurt him, but I was just having one of those ‘on’ days. While we were connecting bars mid-flight, I was already looking to see who I could catch next. On another

day, when we were in 20<sup>th</sup>, it would be stupid to put a pass on like that. But we were in fourth place.”

The timing of the incident in France was unfortunate, because the pair had actually been talking about catching up for a barbecue around that time. No more was ever said about that barbecue.

### AN ECCENTRIC RESPECT

While observing Todd Waters and Dean Ferris interact during the photo shoot for this feature, the regard is obvious. The relationship might have been ugly through teenage testosterone, coincidence and the unashamed desire to appear bigger in the pants, but it’s apparent the relationship (and God knows, it’s still a very eccentric relationship) has no hate. A little guardedness, the bond of common experience, plenty of respect, maybe even a degree of honest affection, but no hate.

Waters sums it up: “I’m not going to come up the inside of someone like Kirk Gibbs and just punt him off the track. That’s why I love racing Dean, because I don’t have any of those feelings. We can just race hard, because I don’t want him to win and we will just race bar-to-bar. We both want to get back to Europe and continue chasing the World Championship, so this year in Australia I need to know that people are willing to go hard. It keeps me motivated. It’s definitely going to be a competitive season.”

“We both know where the limit is,” adds Ferris. “And like I said earlier, I don’t want to hurt Todd; I just want to beat him. France was a bit far, but I didn’t mean for that to happen. This year back in Australia is going to be good for us. It’ll keep both of us honest. It’s a good opportunity for us to both do really well and get back to Europe; to push each other to the top.” 🏆



*“These days, their relationship is eccentric, but there’s no hate. A little guardedness, the bond of common experience, plenty of respect, maybe even a degree of honest affection, but no hate.”*

