



TRANS TASMAN EXPLOSION

New Zealander Athol Williams was an unknown Top Bike racer before the Winternationals. Now he is a serious Australian championship contender.

Story by **John Collins**
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He came, he saw, and he almost conquered. New Zealand Top Bike racer, Athol Williams almost pulled off the unthinkable at the recent Winternationals; he came within a couple of metres of winning the event.

In the weeks leading up to the Winters, it was a case of Athol who?

Now there is another six-second Top Bike team capable running with the likes of and winning against Jay Upton, Brett Stevens, Troy McLean, Kim Stevens and Craig Bonwick this coming season.

Williams, who has not been racing Top Bike all that long has decided to leave his bike and equipment in Australia up until at least the

Nationals at Willowbank in September.

And if Williams has reasonable success in Australia he may even complete the full 2006/07 season.

At the Winters test day the weekend prior to the event, Williams ran his first-ever six-second pass, a 6.79sec at 210mph. His previous best time was a 7.51sec recorded in New Zealand in early January and which was also the quickest-ever bike time recorded in that country.

Then at the Winternationals, Williams ran three more six-second passes, each one a new personal best.

After qualifying in third spot behind Brett Stevens (6.52/209.79) and Kim Stevens (6.623/210.48) with a 6.776sec at 213.17mph, Williams then ran a 6.775sec at 204.83mph to hang on to defeat a quicker and faster finishing Jay Upton (6.755/212.87) in round one.

Williams (7.312/158.28) then ran a solo in the semi final after Phil Parker could not start. In the final Williams ran a 6.623sec at 210.28mph in his narrow loss to Brett Stevens (6.507/214.19).

"When I came over to Australia, I had done two mid-seven second passes, a 7.5sec and 7.6sec," Williams said after the final.

"All I was hoping to do was get into the field of eight. I did believe I would end up being third qualifier.

"We've run 0.9sec quicker than we have ever run before and we've run close to 50mph quicker than we've ever run back home in New Zealand."

Williams put the improvement in his times and speed down to the preparation of the Willowbank track and the help he received from Jay Upton.

"The difference, most definitely the track.

People said watch out for the bumps in the right hand lane here (Willowbank), but I'm still waiting to find one. And people say you leap off a cliff at the end (past the finish line), but I'm still waiting to find that cliff as well. The track is flat, it's prepped well – it's great.

"I think I ended up a bit of a wild card (at the Winternationals). Nobody knew the potential of myself or the bike."

Williams, 50, a former Navy engineer and now part owner of Stud Welding NZ, has only been racing Top Bike since October last year.

He bought his Puma bike from UK Top Bike racer Chris Hannam in July last year. The bike arrived in New Zealand in August and Williams had his first ride on it in October at a test 'n' tune day at Champion Dragway, Meremere, which did not go that well after various mechanical failures and breakages including drive chain, drive and blower belts, sprag, sprockets, piston head meltdown and broken cam shaft.

A week later, Williams competed in his first event with the new bike at Ruapuna near Christchurch on October 23.

He did four passes on that day and while they were not at full power all the way down the track, Williams did run a 1.136sec 60ft time on his second pass, which exceeded Hannah's personal best of 1.169sec at the same mark.

In January, Williams raced Upton in a series of match races at the new Lakeside International

Dragway, Taupo and at Champion Dragway.

Williams will now race in the Trans Tasman (bike) Challenge at the Palmyra all bike event on August 12 and at Hidden Valley, Darwin on August 19. He then plans to race at the East Coast Nationals at Western Sydney International Dragway, September 1-2, then the Nationals at Willowbank from September 15-17.

Williams, who first started drag racing on a Kawasaki 900 in AA/PRO, and on which he held the New Zealand class record at 10.74sec in the late 1970s, said he decided to come to Australia to race after befriending Darwin Modified Bike racers Steve and Margie Paris when they raced in New Zealand several years ago.

"After racing the Kawasaki, I then crewed on Mike Gearing's Top Fuel Dragster in New Zealand for some 10 years, then got back into scuba diving. Drag racing in New Zealand was on a bit of a down hill spiral, so lobsters and scallops sounded good for a while.

"Then, in 2003, Brett Stevens toured New Zealand with two Top Doorslammers, a skid car, two fuel Harleys and two ex-Kiwi hangers on from Darwin, Margie Hoggard and Steve Paris, they got married on a later trip to New Zealand.

"So off to the local track I went to sniff Nitro, but Margie decided to climb off her bike while in full motion. I collected her bike the following morning and got it up and running for the following meeting, which she won.

"Steve and Margie then asked me to crew for the last meeting at the local track and I was hooked again.

"Steve and Margie Paris came back to New Zealand with a 20ft container and seven drag bikes from Darwin and Alice Springs just over twelve months ago, in February and March last year.

"Our place was their base and I moved them around (New Zealand). They really got me back into drag racing," Williams said.

"After I bought this (Puma) bike early last year, I then started arranging a trip to Australia.

"From Willowbank we're going Mackay (Palmyra) to an all bike meeting, which is the start of the Trans Tasman Challenge. Six bikes came across from New Zealand to do the Trans Tasman.

"From Mackay we then go to Darwin the following weekend for the second leg of the Trans Tasman Challenge and then at the end of August, beginning of September we go to Sydney for the opening meeting there, then we come back to Willowbank for the Nationals September. So by the time we get to September hopefully everyone will know who Athol Williams is.

"If we get to September and we are well up in the points I will probably leave the bike here for the rest of the championship series. That will be a goal now," Williams said. 