

Car Racing Dominates McLaren Household

Car parts on the kitchen table, race tracks round the backyard, nothing but gear ratios and car performances for conversation and sleepless nights waiting for results from Europe have been the lot of Mrs Ruth McLaren, the mother of the racing driver, Bruce McLaren, ever since her marriage more than 30 years ago.

"But I wouldn't have missed a bit of it," she said in Christchurch yesterday.

Even before her marriage, Mrs McLaren knew she would have a life in which racing played a big part. It was motor-cycles then. Her husband, Mr Les McLaren, and his two brothers were all motor-cycle racing enthusiasts—and highly successful ones.

In 1936 a dislocated shoulder made Mr Les McLaren give up motor-cycles. Two or three years later he became interested in racing cars.

World War II ended all racing, but after the war Mr McLaren did a great deal of club work in hepolite trials and hill climbs.

Bruce, aged eight at the time, was interested even then, and two years later, when he entered Wilson Home with a hip disease, he insisted on regular reports from his father.

Muddy Clothes

After Bruce came out of the home, at the age of 12, he spent 12 months with a hip sling and crutches. Football was out, much to his disappointment, but Mrs McLaren still found her share of muddy clothes to wash when Bruce and his father went on hill climbs and mud trials.

Bruce's first car was an Austin seven, which he acquired and "hotted up" at the age of 14. That was the end of Mrs McLaren's garden. Too young for his driver's licence, Bruce could not drive it on the roads, so he made a race track round the backyard and through the orchard. "No garden, and no branches left on the trees, either," Mrs McLaren recalled.

Every visitor to their Remuera home was initiated to the track, and had to endure a hair-raising and head-ducking ride round the course.

From driving-licence age on there was a series of gymkhanas, hill climbs and mud trials, Mrs McLaren said. "It was a great thrill seeing him win—we used to go everywhere with him."

Parts In Kitchen

When Bruce was 16 his father acquired an Austin Healey, which had something special about its engine. Although Mrs McLaren has picked up a great deal of motoring jargon, she cannot remember exactly what it was. All she remembers is the gloating and loving care with which the parts in question

were polished on her kitchen table, and the piles of engine parts on the back porch, which she dared not disturb.

Many motoring friends would drop in, and the men would sit for hours discussing the finer points of their machines. "I would just sit there, getting their food for them when it was a meal time—but I don't think they even noticed what they were eating," said Mrs McLaren.

By this time both Bruce and his father were driving the Austin Healey. There came a day when the son drove it faster than the father. That was the day when the father decided it was about time he quit.

Waiting For News

The news that Bruce had won the driver-to-Europe award caused great excitement in the McLaren household. Later, when he had gone, came the terrific strain of waiting for results.

"I just lived on my nerves the week-ends he was racing," said Mrs McLaren. Always at the back of her mind was the fear of a crash. "We have great faith in Bruce's driving ability, but there are always things beyond his control. But he has not had an accident yet—touch wood."

The McLarens waited anxiously for the first B.B.C. news in the morning, since the results of the championship races were always announced, and the news would come faster than a cable.

Visit to Europe

Two seasons ago, Mr and Mrs McLaren went to Europe and followed Bruce around the championship circuit. "We had a wonderful time—the racing fraternity accepted us as one of themselves, and looked after us wonderfully," said Mrs McLaren.

During the races in New Zealand Mrs McLaren acts as lap scorer, but this was Mr McLaren's job on the European tour. Mrs McLaren's job was to stand by with wet towels and warm pullovers.

With the wives of drivers and team managers, she would go shopping and sight-seeing in the towns of Europe. "Usually someone in the party would speak the language, which helped a lot," she said.

Language difficulties often caused panics on the racing circuits. "The turns of phrase

were often confusing in the commentaries, and often we could only pick out the names. Once we heard 'McLaren, wheel of Cooper'—we had visions of all sorts of accidents, but they only meant that he was driving the Cooper," she said.

Brabham's Crash

When Jack Brabham crashed in Portugal, Mrs McLaren was with his wife Betty in the pits. "It was dreadful—it was only half-way through the race, and we had to wait till the end of the 72 laps to get across the track to find out whether he was all right.

At the end they dashed across the track, jumped into Bruce's car and to the hospital, where they found after much difficulty and confusion that Brabham was not hurt, but was being kept under observation.

On another occasion in France, when the temperature was 96 degrees in the shade, and 136 degrees on the race track, Bruce came into the pits after the race badly cut with flying stones.

Now Mr and Mrs McLaren wait through the year for the few crowded weeks when Bruce is home. "It makes up for all the time he is away," said Mrs McLaren. The house is always full of drivers and friends, and is besieged by young autograph hunters.

"It's very hectic, but very exciting. I wouldn't miss it for anything," said Mrs McLaren of her life as mother of a racing car driver.