



His may not be a household name but it should be; for over the course of his career, Dr Michael Henderson has been responsible for saving thousands of lives.

Story by Rosamund Burton

Life Stories

# The fast & the curious

On this year's Queen's Birthday weekend, 84-year-old Dr Michael Henderson was appointed Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) for distinguished service to motor vehicle and motorsport safety, and to the prevention of road trauma.

"It is beyond my wildest dreams. I never thought I would receive that level of award," he says.

Born in England to an Australian father and Scottish mother, Michael has always been a car enthusiast. As a child, he spent his days racing his little pedal car around the vegetable garden. When his father taught him to drive in his Morris Minor, he told Michael: "This is not a racing car and you are not a racing driver."

"I remember feeling rather offended by that," says Michael, "because I knew I was a racing driver."

Having passed his driving test aged 17, he drove his sister to a party on the South Coast of England, where he met 15-year-

old Norma.

"I invited her to come for a run in the car the following day, and as far as I was concerned that was it. I couldn't see how anyone else was going to match her." Michael's parents insisted that they didn't get married until he had qualified. He passed his final medical exams in December 1961 and they tied the knot within days.

"We're an absolutely immutable team," he says.

When studying medicine, first at the University of Cambridge and then St Thomas's Hospital in London, he was already involved in motor sports, writing articles to make a bit of money. He persuaded Colin Chapman, who was developing kits for Clubman racing cars, that it would be good publicity if he wrote a series of pieces about building a Lotus 7. That was Michael's first racing car. It was the early 1960s. He had a basic crash helmet, but no car had a seat belt back

then.

The RAF were looking for doctors and, yearning to travel, he joined up, and was stationed in Cyprus for three years. It was his work with the parachute rescue team there, which was instrumental in him developing the crutch restraint safety harness for racing cars.

Back in England he started racing a Mallock U2. Realising that drivers were almost lying down in racing cars and that they could slip out of the vehicle in an accident, he combined an upper-body harness with the crutch straps of a parachute harness. This original concept was immediately translated into the first prototype six-point race harness. He was also writing articles about racing car safety. He collected extensive data on race crashes in the UK, and in 1968 his book *'Motor Racing in Safety'* was published. He asked Louis Stanley, who owned BRM (British Racing Motors), the team for which Jackie Stewart was driving, to write the



foreword for the book, because he also had an interest in motor racing safety. Stanley installed a six-point harness of Michael's design in Jackie Stewart's car making him the first Formula One driver to wear one.

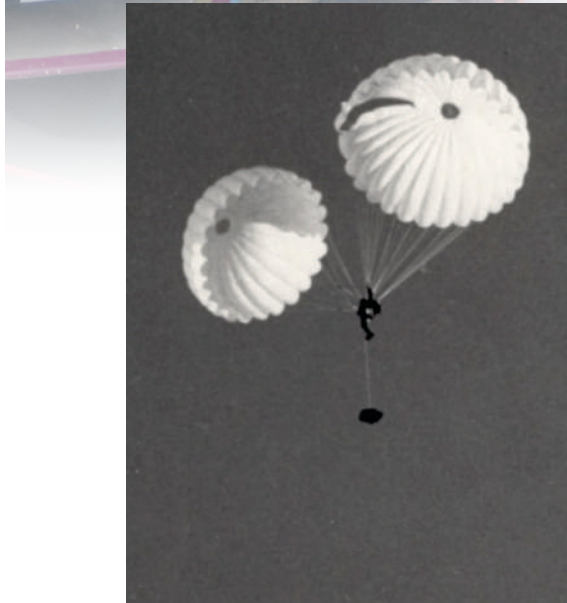
"By late 1969 the wearing of belts in open racing cars was almost fully comprehensive, having gone from zero to nearly 100%. It happened so quickly because people who were still not wearing seat belts were being thrown out and hurt, and those who had belts were surviving monstrous crashes," says Michael.

In 1968 Michael and Norma immigrated as 'Ten Pound Poms' to Australia with their daughter, Anita. The following year he was asked to join a group in Italy designing and building the Sigma Grand Prix, a concept safety Formula One car.

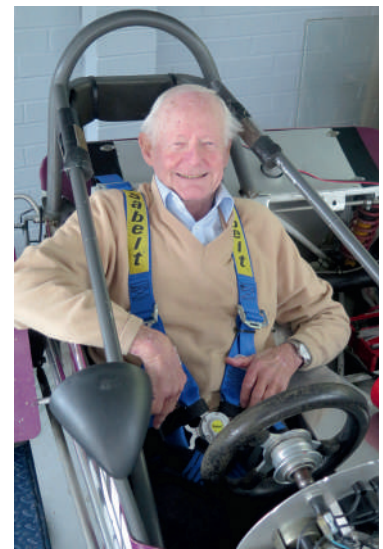
It embodied all the known principles of crash protection, and all but one of these innovations have since been incorporated into Formula One racing regulations. Sergio Pininfarina, famous for his Ferrari designs, was a leader of the team, and has said that it was the most important concept car he ever built.

Having gained a reputation for road safety, Michael joined a research group being formed by NSW Department of Motor Transport. He soon took leadership of the group and was nominated Director of Traffic Safety in NSW. He and his team knew that seat belts saved lives, but the question was how to make them compulsory. Michael wrote the original feasibility study and drafted the legislation, and by 1972 all states in

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Dr Michael Henderson with his prized Mawer Clubman in his garage at Church Point; racing Formula 2 at Sandown; with wife Norm at Estepona in southern Spain in 1986; with the Sigma Grand Prix concept safety Formula One car in 1969; as Chairman of CAMS; racing a Lotus 7 at Goodwood in 1960; strapped into the six-point harness; 'racing' his pedal car in 1937; escaping to Venezuela in 1983; working with the parachute rescue team in Cyprus.



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Australia had made seat belt wearing law, the first nation to do so.

“We generated in Australia an impetus, which was absolutely world class, and that’s the era of my life of which I’m proudest,” he said. Michael oversaw other innovations such as alcohol testing, child restraint standards, as well as changes in road rules. In the mid-1970s, for the first time the Australian road toll started to decline. Michael’s work on national coordinating committees, and liaising internationally, was instrumental in making Australia a leader in the road safety field.

While Michael was saving lives on the road, Norma and he were preparing for an adventure on the water. An invitation to sail on Sydney Harbour one Sunday had ignited a passion for sailing. They were in their mid-30s and had never sailed before, but within a few weeks had bought a 30-foot sloop. Then having decided they wanted to sail across large oceans in a small yacht, they contracted the Mona Vale boat builder, Geoff Baker, to build a hull and deck, and the young couple finished the yacht themselves. In 1981, they set off across the Pacific in their 37-foot sloop, Cera, and for the next eight years sailed along the East and West coasts of the Americas, around Europe and through the Pacific Islands.

This was before the days of GPS, and until the invention of a very basic satellite system, they were reliant solely on Michael’s celestial navigation skills. Norma and he describe navigating their way to St George’s Channel to reach Bermuda, a miscalculation of which would have meant they hit the huge reef before they had a sighting of the island.

When they returned to Sydney, Michael once again worked in road safety, undertaking a series of major studies including injuries of children in car crashes, and the effectiveness of bicycle safety helmets.

He has always wanted to live in the Pittwater area, and in the early 1990s they found their home nestled in the bush and overlooking the water at Church Point. The house was rundown, but they restored it. Norma’s mother moved into the granny flat, they put down a boat mooring, and Michael built a large garage for his racing cars.

His 1987 Ferrari, in which Norma and he travelled through Europe in 2001, is with a mechanic, but he shows me his Mawer Clubman, which he is planning to race at an historic car meeting at Eastern Creek in a few weeks. Michael has owned a string of racing cars. In the early 2000s he bought a 1972 2-litre European Formula 2 car that had belonged to racing legend, Niki Lauda. “It was a ferociously quick

racing car with shattering acceleration,” says Michael. “I was driving the same lap times as the V8 Supercars, but I didn’t have deep enough pockets to pay for the maintenance.”

With his interest in race car safety he was on several safety groups of the Confederation of Australian Motor Sport Safety (CAMS), and when CAMS formed the Australian Institute for Motor Sports Safety in 2007, Michael was its chairman for seven years, then a board member for a further three years. On the international stage, he was a Fellow of the FIA Institute for Motor Sport Safety and a member of all its research working groups.

He attended FIA meetings in Europe four times a year, so Norma and he bought a campervan in 2007 and every year until 2018 spent four months a year travelling extensively in Europe, touring every country east, west, north and south.

This is a man who has grabbed life’s opportunities, relishing the ‘fast lane’, but with his eye fixed firmly on safety. He has received many awards for his pioneering work, but his recent AO holds particular significance to him.

“It took me back through my entire life. I thought about what I’ve been able to do and all the clever people with whom I’ve worked. It has been said that between us we’ve saved thousands of lives, and for me that’s something to be proud of.”

