

TOBY HENDERSON

The name, Toby Henderson, is instantly recognized by any one who was involved with the sport during the peak years in the early 80's. Toby and I got to know each other during the summer of 2006 and the idea for this interview came about at that time. As I was preparing the layout for this article and trying to get photos to illustrate it I became acutely aware of an enormous debt of gratitude that was owed to Bob Osborne and BMX Action Magazine. This interview would not even be able to exist in any form remotely resembling the present if it were not for BMXA. I'd also like to thank those members who helped me with this by contributing questions as well as scans and photos for the interview. Now, without further delay... let's get right into the first in our new series of Old School BMX interviews:

Photo from BMX Action magazine/Bob Osborne



Steve: When and where was your first bmx race? Do you remember what place you took?

Toby: Would have been the infamous BUMS BMX Park in Long Beach. I am sure I got smoked!

Steve: Was your family into the sport as a "family activity" type of thing or how did your early days in the sport come about?

Toby: Sorry but no. I had to finagle a ride to the races as often as I could. The only race my parents came to was a Motocross race and I crashed bad so my mom would never come again to any race.

Steve: Everyone seems to remember your days at Hutch and SE the best but obviously you probably had a lot of other sponsors in your personal racing

history as well. Who was your first sponsor?

Toby: Jeff Bottema's uncle was my first sponsor. He was a high school student at the time and bought me a top of the line bike and took me racing for about a year. Then my local bike shop "Cerritos Bike Shop" took me in probably because I hung out there so much they got tired of me. Then I went to DG turned pro and Raleigh picked both me and Bottema up. That started the whole career and then yes Hutch and SE and GT at the end. That is all. I did not like moving around much!

My Mountain Bike career is a whole other story.

Steve: Could you give us a list of your major sponsors and the approximate eras for each?

Toby: DG 78 to 79
Raleigh 79 to 81
Hutch 81 to 83
SE 84 to 85
GT 86 to 91

Steve: When did you turn pro, who were you riding for at the time and how did you do your first outing as a pro?

Toby: 78 and for Mom and Dad. I was a local rider ripping up the pro class but when DG picked me up I went to my first national and got third. See BMX Action in late 78.

Steve: When was your last competitive bmx race... was it a conscious decision to retire or did it just sort of work out that way? How old were you.

Toby: I was 28 and I was forced by GT to do a race in New Zealand. It went well and I loved it but that was the end!

Steve: So this is kind of an abstract question, but I think it

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is interesting to get some insight into your personal bmx experience from a sort of emotional/psychological perspective. Let me preface it by putting this in terms of my own bmx experience... I began competitive racing on a P.K. Ripper. I was completely enamored with the whole "SE Racing mystique" and though I did later race other brands, now 25 years on, when I look back on the fuzzy warm golden BMX memories it is the SE oriented era that defines my BMX experience in large part.

So I guess my question is... out of that list of sponsors and times with each of them, is there kind of a sponsor or period that really sums up a "golden age of bmx innocence" in your personal experience. A period when you think "ahh... that was my favorite era from my bmx days"?

Toby: It would have to be Hutch for sure. His willingness to do what it took to win and be marketable was top notch while I was there. We did things like renting RED convertible mustangs at each event and putting the entire team in it just to drive in the event and strut our stuff. We had cheerleaders and even French Maids serving us food at key events. Not to mention I won more events riding for Hutch than any other sponsor!

Steve: Mike Devitt has described your period on SE as kind of a new era in sponsorship for SE. He implied that you received a degree of support that hadn't really been seen before or since (at least in the Devitt era) with SE sponsorships. You were paid a good salary, they had the Hauler, which was "your bike" and basically the gist of it is that you were unquestionably a "flagship rider" for them. That says a lot about what they thought of you I think, especially considering the star spangled roster of riders who have passed through SE.

Toby: Wow I am surprised they feel that way.

Steve: Well, let me qualify that by saying that I was paraphrasing based on things Mr. Devitt said in another interview and I think it was mostly about the "deal" they offered you. But, why would you feel surprised about that?

Toby: I felt I let them down as my riding was not up to par during my time at SE. However they paid me good money and built me my own bike but BMX started its decrease in sales volume so in turn riders like myself were left without the proper support to continue the lifestyle or roughed race schedule we once had. Not SE's fault just the name of the game "SALES".

Steve: Do you view your period on SE as a major moment in your career? I mean was it the benchmark for you, that it was for SE? Were the terms you received from SE with regard to salary and support and all a lot better than say... your deal with Hutch?

Toby: SE helped me buy my first house and I put a lot of money in the bank so personally yes BUT no offense to SE I was really a Hutch man and if I had to do it all over I would have stuck it out at Hutch but the money at SE was so much more I moved. Looking back I should have been more loyal to Hutch. Again no offense to SE as they were a great company. Devitt was so supportive to me and the team even during bad times "SALES".

Steve: You were a terror on a 20 inch but it seems like you completely kicked ass in cruiser class. Was cruiser class sort of a niche that you really excelled at or would you say that it was really no different than 20, and that you were great at both? Ha!

Toby: I liked the 24" better. That simple. Seems guys my size fit them better. Hence my MTB career. However the 20" was the premiere class so I concentrated on that more!

Steve: What cruiser titles have you

won and do you recall who you were riding for at the time?

Toby: World Champion Hutch National Champion SE.

Steve: Were pro cruiser purses comparable to 20 inch, or was the prestige and cash still in 20 in?

Toby: No. Cruiser paid less than 50% of the 20" class so \$\$\$\$ meant riding the 20" bikes.

Steve: Out of all the teams you rode for... would you say that there was one that was managed or coached in a way that you feel really helped the team riders achieve their greatest potential?

Toby: Back in those days all of us pros where the best suited to manage ourselves. There was not enough history for that support however Hutch and Scot B were big time motivators for me at the events.

Steve: A follow up... did you construct your own training regime, or did the teams have people there to coach you with that and make sure you were doing 100 gate starts a day, and running bleachers and working on flexibility and eating right, etc. ?



Photo courtesy of Sean Ewing

Photo of Hauler Production in SE's Taiwan factory Circa early 80s.

Photo from BMX Action magazine/Bob Osborn



Toby: I was so young I really did not need to practice. I rode my bike almost everyday and raced 4 times a week EVERY week so that was enough training. I learned during my MTB career "just do what your competing in on a regular basis and you will excel"

Steve: What's the story with the nickname, "Coca Cola Cowboy", how did that come about?

Toby: This was made up by Bob Osborn for no reason at all. I liked Dr. Pepper anyway??

Steve: A question from one of our members, 401flightcranks, and this is a guy that is super passionate about old school Hutch and really knows his Hutch details. He wanted to know, "Did you have any input into frame design at Hutch? Either with 20" or cruiser?"

Toby: Of course. That was our job. Most of my frames were 1 offs with my direction. Production frames came well after we tested and built what we liked.

Steve: So, was that the case at SE as well, were you involved with the design of the Hauler?

Toby: Just graphics. The frame was never spec correct geometry wise that I can recall. However this was the beginning of Asia imports and as of today we still struggle with spec and geometry from Asia

Steve: Did BMX give you the opportunity to see the world? What are some of your favorite trips/tours or countries visited? Any single international bmx travel moment or incident that comes to mind whenever you think of international BMX travel?

Toby: 17 countries and they all have significant stories from beer to girls it all happened! I think this is another story in itself !!

Steve: Oh, word?! (Laughing) But, you got married kind of young right? I was reading a Hutch test in I think it was an '82 BMXA and Bob Osborn is talking about "by the time this issue hits the stands, Toby will be married". Did that happen as scheduled and how long have you been married now?

Toby: Oh I got married young it only lasted 2 years. The ex was a 2 time world champion skateboarder and she was hot. We were just too young. Current wife 16 years with 2 kids Paris and Ryder. Yes pun intended.

Steve: Are any of your kids interested in racing bmx?

Toby: Paris likes BMX but she is still very much a girl. Ryder is only 15 months but he is already training!!

Steve: Ok, let's skip to the end of the BMX era... you retired from BMX while you were with GT. Then you got into Mountain Bike competition. How did that come about and were you a pro mountain biker?

Toby: It came about because I missed being a pro rider. MTB was where the money was so I followed. I struggled for many years until Downhill was the main event. I excelled at DH and made more money than I ever did racing BMX as a Pro MTBer!

Steve: That is interesting that money in Mtn. bikes was much better than BMX, and kind of provides a good "in" for a quick follow up in the form of a question from another one of our members - this time, my man Phil, Zmann99 who helped me collect old school pics and text from BMX action to help illustrate this interview. He was wondering what the fattest BMX pro purse you ever personally won was, and where was that race?

Toby: Yes \$6K NBL Grands 83' for first in 20"

Steve: Have you always worked

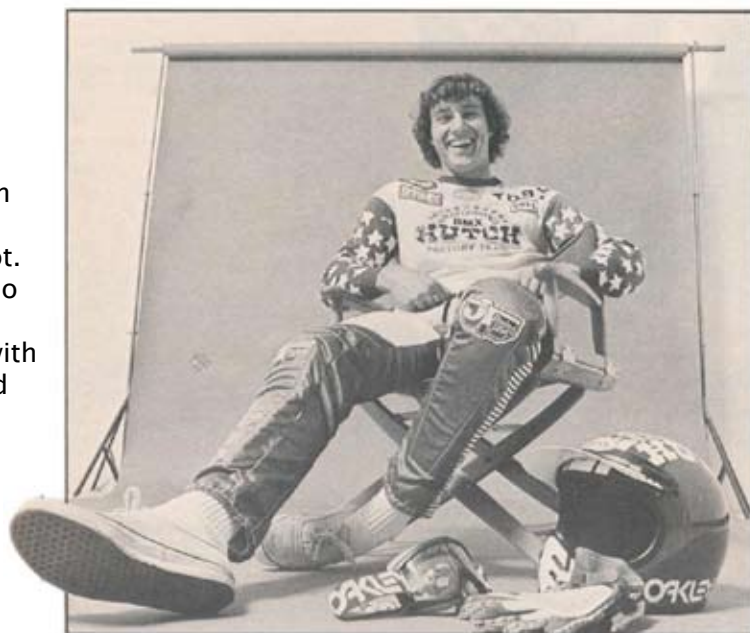


Photo from BMX Action magazine/Bob Osborn

with and had jobs in the BMX industry or did you get away from BMX and come back?

Toby: The only time I left BMX was when I raced MTB. I never had a job. What is that? Is a job what I have now? Not sure as I am having a blast running my bicycle products companies..

Steve: Well, big props... lovin' what you do? That's livin'! Let's talk about VSI. Give us the skinny on what you are doing now and how your involvement came about.

Toby: VSI stands for Vigor Sports Inc. My partner started Vigor Helmets 13 years ago and I started THE, Intense BMX, ITS, SINZ over the last 8... since I retired in 1998 from racing. We merged the 5 companies a few years back and called it VSI. My partner lives in Europe and is a partner in HJC Motorcycle Helmets. I tend to day to day at VSI as well as design of all of the products!

Steve: What is the focus of the VSI group of companies, is it BMX racing, or the broader definition of BMX as it exists today, encompassing Dirt, Vert, flat, etc. etc?

Toby: Actually or focus as of now is BMX Racing and MTB racing. We are definitely a leader in BMX racing at the moment with several top selling products. Our Tires and frames are number 1 as well as our THE saddles. Many other products cater to BMX racing and sell very well for us.

Steve: Are some of your companies under the VSI umbrella only doing components, while others are doing frames, forks and complete bikes? Also, are all of the companies on the VSI ticket focusing on top end premium competition hardware and soft goods or do you guys have an entry level line as well?

Toby: The reason for the multiple brands is to do all of the above. We have THE and Intense for premium products and Sinz and Vigor as more of utility companies that offer great products at competitive prices.

Steve: Yeah they do... I mean I know Intense is quality gear but I've been real impressed with the Sinz stuff. It looks good... titanium axles and all that! It looks like real trick gear. I know that Intense has what is among the most well known and respected teams in BMX racing today, but for the benefit of our members who aren't too up on the current racing scene, how many of the companies in the VSI group sponsor racing teams?

Toby: All of them at some level. We have over 40 teams riding for us and they all have some or all brands in their respective race camps.

Steve: When the Intense team goes to nationals, do you take a page from the ol' Hutch book and pump up the team with limos and French serving maids? LoL!

Toby: I wish. BMX racing is a small niche sport today and everyone is sponsored so that leaves little money for the Limos and French Maids.

Steve: Ok Toby, that's it for now. Thanks so much for your time, it's been a real pleasure to chat with you. Please stop in to os-bmx from time to time. We'd love to see you around more often.

Toby: Thank you sir!

