

“MR XR GT” Gary (WATO) Watson

BY PETER POLSON

The Falcon GT Club of SA & all motoring enthusiast fraternities have lost an important cog in the wheel in the passing of, Gary Watson, also known as “Mr. XR GT”.

Gary was known Australia-wide for his passion in Drag racing & the owner & restorer of a high-quality collection of XR Falcon GTs. On a personal level, I had meet Gary Watson back in the late eighties when I saw him racing or should I say belting his mighty XR GT down the ¼ Mile at Adelaide International Raceway all those years ago.

Through mutual friends as I was involved at the time in Top Alcohol Drag Racing & we roamed the drag circuits & car show scenes with regularity, & in the same circles we can't pretend but we both loved the horsepower of.....TRAINS!! We would talk for hours about these beauties, but inevitably we would end up talking about both our beloved XR's. He would always stir me up that I was over compensating with a 351 Windsor stroked to 416 & that the real challenge was to run what the model originally came with, a 289 small block.

But it was the little things that Gary said & did that left an impression on me all those years ago. He always made time to listen & give advice when needed, and advice he was full of plenty, with an astounding amount of knowledge on XR GT's in particular. It was when I had been to a SMASA meeting to get a book for AV GAS, that Gazza encouraged me to join the FALCON GT Club of SA. He worked on me, periodically planting that seed of what a club can do for my car, but also the bigger thought of joining a club & what you can then do for this club. And with that statement I soon learnt he was a brilliant shining light in amongst the Thundering Herd of Falcon GT's.



Hot Adelaide 92-93

Even today I reflect back on Gary & some of the mentoring & advice he gave me on the positions I held within the club over the years, & I can truly say that the visions he had for the club & its prosperity, & promoting the Falcon GT name & the social side of the Club to be the best example I could try & follow. Even days before he passed away Gary was still sending Text messages & emails with ideas & the direction the club should be heading to attain these goals.



Hot Adelaide 92-93

To the ones who met Gary for the first time, he came across as friendly and approachable person, with his enthusiasm for XR Falcon GTs unrivalled across the land. Gary was such a great ambassador for the GT movement

It is important to note that with his passing, the local motoring scene has lost a trusted committee member, active club member, passionate drag racer and sympathetic restorer; a true automotive renaissance man who was equally at home throwing a car down the quarter in 11 seconds flat, as he was quietly compiling a full history of his unique vehicles.



Even when I had an accident in my XR, Gary came to the rescue securing parts on my behalf as he was not going to let my beloved XR lay idle in disgrace. It was an urgent matter to get it back on the road & circulating again.

Garry left a deep & indelible impression on me & I hope that I continue to pick up the mantle of being as passionate about our GT's & the Club as he was.

Now a little history or Story on the man;

(Excerpts from friends of Wato's)



It was almost not to be; a 17 year-old Gary was driving an air-cooled VW during his misspent youth, however a hankering for more horsepower, and less imminent death in a front-end collision, drew him to a dodgy car yard. Up the back, there was an XR Falcon GT.

He wasn't impressed by the GT Gold, the official colour of all the XR Falcon GTs. He wasn't even impressed by the GT badges. He was impressed by the 289ci Ford V8 and 4-speed Toploader combination, and initially that was it. It was probably because Gary grew up with an XR in the family, as his Dad owned one.

Within hours of slapping down \$2499.00, he did what any lad would do and started cruising the city streets, dragging unsuspecting punters and doing some skids. With the battery not clamped correctly, upon giving the GT some squirt, the battery jammed against the radiator fan, stopping the car dead. A week later, the exhaust fell off.

But Gary persevered. He was much more about fire-breathing V8s than he was air-cooled Vee-Dubs and had great plans for the car. After daily-driving it for a couple of years, he pulled it off the road for new paint, wisely choosing to restore the body rather than modify it.



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Wayville Show grounds, early 90's - Gary under the stripped umbrella & his beloved XR with the customary blanket

With the car re-sprayed in original GT Gold, the engine received some work and received regular work throughout the 1980s, 1990s and beyond. When interviewed in the early 2000s, Gary said he'd pulled a low 12 second quarter and thought she had plenty left in her. Not bad given the original 289ci V8 was still between the shock towers, although by now it was sporting a steel crank, Carrillo rods, Victor Junior intake manifold and a huge carburetor.

Never to do anything small, Gary also selected the biggest cam in the Crane catalogue, with a usable rev-range of 5500 to 8000 rpm! This then necessitated a change in gearbox, "The toplayer would not shift OUT of gear over 6000 rpm!" he told us back then. Shunning the usual drag-racing convention of a tricked-up auto, he fitted a Tremec T5 manual.

It is perhaps for these reasons that Gary's XR Falcon GT is so fondly thought of amongst local circles; he always chased more power and more speed, but not to the detriment of the awesome that the base XR Falcon GT brings. Aside from a set of Centreline Convo Pro alloy wheels and some immense noise, the car was all XR Falcon GT – all the badges and interior were left intact; the transmission was still manual and it was, like all other XR Falcon GTs, GT Gold.



GT Nats Adelaide 2009

Oh, except Gary was not going to stop at one. Gary was a completist of the prime order. When he did something he did it with 110 percent. As he did more research on the XR Falcon GT, the more anomalies he found; while the official colour for the XR Falcon GT was GT Gold, only 671 of the 687 XR Falcon GTs built were actually Gold.

There were 8 XR Falcon GT's produced in Silver for the Gallaher cigarette company as a promotion for the 1967 Bathurst 500 (miles as it was then), and Gary found one in Queensland. He had to have it, and he then set about restoring it to its brilliant former glory..



Port Elliot 98-9



Wigley Reserve 2004



Perth GT Nats 2007

While Gary's Gold GT was one of 671 and the Gallaher car one of eight, his other acquisition was a very rare one of one. Leo and Pete Geoghegan were supplied a Polar White XR Falcon GT in which they competed at Bathurst 1967 under race number 53D.



Gary found the car in original order in, of all places, New Zealand. Once secured, he shipped the car back to Australia. Too good to restore, he removed the rusty 12-slotter wheels, big carburetor and sports exhaust, putting the car back to original.

With the Gold XR GT being a bit hairy and highly strung and the Gallaher car being restored to concourse condition, JUE-180 was frequently pressed into cruising duties,



*XRGT Round Up Wagga-Wagga with all 3 GT's present - Gary is looking on in the shade at bottom of picture
Gary organized the first of what is now a regular event - last one was the XT GT Round up, next on the list is XW*

When cruising, the cops would often pull Gary over to query the big '53' race numbers proudly displayed on the doors. When the history of the car was explained, their belligerence would turn to reverence, photos would be had, handshakes exchanged and he would be let on his way.



A fresh Gallaher GT still with orange stripe before the Gallaher Sign writing put on as we all now know it

Gary has now gone; his battle with cancer was unfortunately not a successful one.

He will be sorely missed by all Falcon GT Club members (in SA & interstate), the Street Machine Association of SA (of which he was also a life member) and the general street machine population.

His enthusiasm for his cars was nigh unmatched across the country, and the Australian automotive landscape, the clubs, the committees, the competitors, and our history is all better off for it.

We are left now with his cars & the memories each & every person takes away of Gary.

Every time you look at an XR GT, especially one with Convo Pro's, we will always Remember Him.

Peter Polson