



SPEEDWAY AWARD

“Remember the name Neiko Donovan, a future star!”

PHOTOGRAPHY AMCN ARCHIVES

FIRST OUT OF THE GATES

Townsville teen Neiko Donovan has turned heads across Australia, earning the inaugural AMCN Peter Baker Future Star Award



DURING 2025 we featured two stories from Peter Baker looking back at the progress of young riders coming through the motorcycle dirt track ranks.

In honour of Peter's 50-year history of writing for us, it was decided at the time to establish an AMCN Peter Baker Future Star Award to be presented at the end of each season.

We have cut Peter some slack with the timing as he has faced some health issues recently, but we can now announce that the inaugural recipient of the award is Neiko Donovan! Take it away, Peter...

Why Neiko earned the nod

People often suggest that the best selection committee consists of only one person, but that does not mean this selection came without plenty of to-and-fro on my part.

As I have witnessed over many years of watching junior competition, the sport has seen so many fine young talents come through the ranks – many who achieve ever-increasing levels of success as they progress through the age divisions, while others are ‘slow burners’ who take time to blossom while obviously

benefitting from their time coming through. Some of course ‘disappear’ off the scene by the time they reach the seniors.

At any given time, singling out one to be acclaimed as a Future Star is not easy as there could be a number of worthy contenders, but I have stuck my neck out to decide on Neiko as the inaugural winner of this award.

Motorcycle racing has numerous examples of family connections of racers across generations, and the Neiko Donovan story is just one of them.

His father Jodie grew up idolising speedway solo riders, crewing for several, then had a brief spell riding himself before an apprenticeship took priority.

He was later drawn to speedway sidecars, firstly as a passenger then as rider before a serious accident forced his retirement.

As well as the family DNA, it was the tight-knit North Queensland racing community of riders, ex-riders and families who lived and breathed motorcycles that Neiko became immersed in from the time he could walk.

1. Peter Baker reckons Neiko Donovan has what it takes to reach the top in dirt track and flat track 2. He wasn't bad at speedway either, until he outgrew the bike 3. With dad Jodie at the 2025 Queensland championships 4. Very early days with Dad 5. Yes, he's got a race face! 6. This is what makes it all worthwhile 7. Smooth but fast and ready to take on the Yanks at flat track

Sidecar stars like Brodie Cohen and Tyler Moon, solo guns Josh Grajczonek and Kozza Smith were part of the furniture and Neiko was the little kid tearing around trying to keep up.

One of the earliest influences on Neiko was a young Billy Van Eerde, who took Neiko under his wing. Later it was Billy's father Brian, himself a former solo rider, offering vital guidance to Neiko as well as passing on ideas and observations to Jodie.

Neiko's first bike was a Honda CRF50 for his fourth birthday – but it was a touch too big for him, so in true racer dad fashion, a PW50 was fitted with a sidecar so he could learn the ropes with a bit of extra stability.

After a short stint in BMX, Neiko took to flat track racing in 2016, at age six, and he was off and running; he didn't just want to ride, he wanted to go fast.

Two years on and he was off to state and national championship meetings and a steady improvement meant a collection of rewards of at least minor placings.

Chasing those title meetings of course highlighted what is a constant headache for sporting families in this country: Australia is such a big country. Venues as far south as Canberra are a long way from Townsville. The Donovan family is certainly not the first family, nor will they be the last, to tackle the tyranny of distance to give someone those opportunities.

Over the past two years, the family spent more than 600 hours driving over 60,000km to racetracks.

Neiko did dabble with junior speedway for several years, having some great battles with a future Australian champion in that category, Ky Mitchell, but Neiko's height and weight soon meant that he outgrew the four-stroke 125cc machine. And he was not old enough to try the bigger 250cc junior speedway bike at the time, nor has he since.



He also sampled a junior speedway sidecar. Road racing, too, was contemplated before Jodie and mum Stacey weighed up the distances for travel – there it is again – and that was cast aside.

Neiko's real breakthrough came in December 2024 at the Australian Junior Dirt Track Championships hosted by the Central Coast Junior Motorcycle Club.

He rode three machines, an 85, a 125 and a 250 – practice and five races in each class for more than 60 laps of racing – and he claimed a rare hat-trick of championship class victories.

The 2025 season was somewhat frustrating with a string of minor placings at both national and state level, before wrapping up the year with victory at the farewell North Brisbane meeting. But there was still plenty of learning in what

is currently an ultra-competitive 13 to Under 16 age bracket.

So what lies ahead?

Neiko will turn 16 years old in August and there may be little exposure in junior competition for him before then.

Practice with 19-inch wheels whenever he can will help prepare him for likely two trips to the US, one in May and again in July to the AMA Flat Track Grand Championship – a six day competition at the Du Quoin State Fairgrounds in Du Quoin, Illinois.

With the Australian Senior Track Championship scheduled for Ayr in September, Neiko could well get to make his first appearance in senior competition at home at one of the closest tracks to his Townsville base.

Remember the name Neiko Donovan, a future star!

THE BIKES ARE BACK!

LAST ISSUE we reported on the demise of the Mick Doohan Raceway in Brisbane as a motorcycle racing venue, but there is now contrasting good news about a venue in the country's biggest city.

The Western Sydney Speedway opened almost four years ago, but its purpose-built infield dirt track for solos and sidecars stood unused until Boxing Night when there were good reports on the first night of bike racing.

The Sydney Send Off meeting on 7 February (below) was even better as a well-prepared track and a well-balanced line-up delighted a healthy roll-up of fans with a program of top-quality racing.

Ben Cook had to work hard to win a memorable solo final ahead of Zaine Kennedy, Mitchell Cluff and Tate Zischke, while Grant Bond/Tom Glover took the sidecar honours after both father and son Treloars were sidelined with mechanical issues. More of that will surely have the fans flocking to the track next summer. **PB**

