

## INTERVIEW

# Ready, Freddie, Go!

He's helped win the Ashes, led his country to victory in Australia, and been awarded an MBE, but England all-rounder Andrew 'Freddie' Flintoff still had one childhood dream to fulfil. *Nick Blackmore* met him as he picked up his first Harley-Davidson®

To your average Harley-Davidson owner, the ankle is very important. It's a complex weight-bearing joint. You'd have trouble mounting your bike or wheeling precisely to your intended parking spot without it. But some ankles have to carry more weight, both physically and metaphorically, than others. This is the case with the man who walks into the Manchester Harley-Davidson dealership in mid-October: in fact, his ankle often carries the hopes and dreams of a sporting nation.

"Hi, I'm Fred," he says by way of introduction, but while the fans know him by this moniker, his birth certificate has him as Andrew Flintoff. The talismanic England and Lancashire all-rounder may have got his hands on some notable silverware (and pottery) during his career so far, but he's here today to pick up a considerably more functional trophy: his black Road King Classic® is the essence of Harley-Davidson cool and he is clearly very pleased with it.

Flintoff has held off on buying a Harley-Davidson until hitting "a responsible age" to own one. In his tearaway teens and early twenties this was not the case, but with fatherhood arriving and his thirties approaching, the time felt right. "I've always wanted one," he reveals, "It's not the case that I wanted a motorbike; I wanted a Harley."

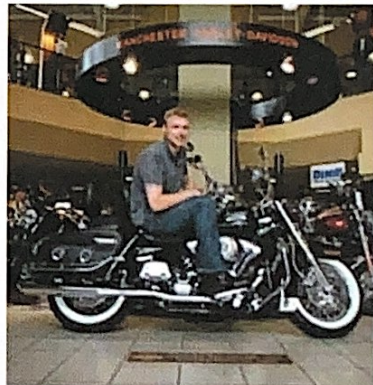
The love for all things Harley-Davidson was instilled by his grandfather Harry: "He always wanted a Harley but never actually got one," Flintoff explains. "He had all the videos, DVDs and books on them." In a few hours Flintoff will make the journey to Blackpool on two wheels and Grandpa Harry will finally experience the Harley-Davidson magic in person.

In person, Flintoff is approachable and candid, and his laconic Lancastrian voice often teeters on the verge of relaxed laughter. You feel less like you're chatting to one of England's premier sportsmen and more like you've briefly been left in the company of an amiable friend-of-a-friend down the pub. When I mention England's recent one-day tour success, he talks about the team like an armchair fan ("They've done well to win out there - they've never won in Sri Lanka, have they?") while also confirming that he sent a congratulatory text to captain Paul Collingwood.

A crossover between cricketing and motorcycling might not be imminent but Flintoff may help to foster a trend: some former England teammates already own bikes, some of his current peers are fair game ("I'm sure Kevin Pietersen, when he sees it, will want one.") and Flintoff is convinced that Sir Ian Botham would suit a bike if he could be persuaded to regrow the unfortunate mullet hairstyle he favoured in the 1980s.

However, when Tests of the cricketing kind are pitched against tests of the driving variety, Flintoff finds the latter more terrifying: "I can't remember anything more nerve-wracking than my test," he says with a tight smile. "It was probably the most nervous I've ever been." In his defence, he's had quite a lot of practice at cricket, while he's only had a few days practice before his bike test. Flintoff learned to ride with Rider's Edge, the Harley-Davidson Academy of Motorcycling®. The intensive expert-led training was to be a baptism of fire that ended in icy rain: "It was freezing and then on the day of my test it was lashing down," he laughs. Despite the deluge, and some hesitation on the infamous u-turn ("I nearly stuffed it up - my feet were out everywhere!") Flintoff passed first time.

Since then, he's indulged his passion by borrowing a friend's Harley-Davidson to ride up for training at Old Trafford and has used his downtime during the ICC World Twenty20 in South Africa to bike out into Cape Town. Many of his other touring destinations - like Australia and New Zealand - appeal to the biker in Flintoff, as does the idea of touring America, ending up in Orange County.



Wherever you travel, being a biker certainly seems to offer greater advantages to a sporting star than travelling in a car: "When you're on your bike no one else can get to you," Flintoff agrees, "you're on your own - it gives you time to think." The bliss of helmeted anonymity will be shattered, however, if his wife carries out her threat to "get a helmet with bunny ears on". Rachael Flintoff has already had to curb her husband's penchant for collecting Harley-Davidson t-shirts, but she may have bigger problems on her hands if the Road King Classic whets his appetite enough to spawn a collection. Flintoff is already interested in the forthcoming Rocker C® and the possibility of buying a vintage Harley-Davidson and getting it restored. For now though, he's content giving his Road King Classic its first workout.

And so, unfortunately, we're back to ankles: 'seizing the day' is the order of the day because tomorrow will see that all-important left ankle being subjected to surgery for a fourth time. "I've got to get it right so I'll take however long it takes to get me fully fit," he says, frankly. This means the Road King Classic may have to wait in the garage for a while. For the time being, Flintoff is enjoying the rest period for more personal reasons: "I've had time to spend with my family and kids. I watch the cricket out the corner of my eye, but I've just been living like everyone else is: taking the kids to the nursery and just doing normal things. It's been great."

With that, he goes to look for a suitable jacket to keep out the nippy Blackpool air and to further impress Grandpa Harry. It will surely be one of the few occasions on which an Andrew Flintoff delivery brings joy to its intended target.