

Speaking Frankly ...

The man in the towelling hat, for so long a part of the BMW family, has turned to rival Mercedes-Benz. Here he tells MIKE KABLE why:

THESE is a stack of Mercedes-Benz sedans in the car park where, not so long ago, only BMWs stood. The big blue banners at the entrance gates are adorned with silver three-pointed stars, instead of the blue and white propeller badges which were so prominent there in the past.

The different aura continues inside the administration building's reception area, with Mercedes-Benz accessories for visitors to buy, brochures of the company's latest models for them to peruse and photographs scattered around the walls depicting its motor racing achievements.

On the track and around the skidpan, instructors are putting drivers – in a variety of Mercedes-Benz cars – through their paces.

This is Frank Gardner's new-look Performance Driving Centre at Norwell, midway between Brisbane and Queensland's Gold Coast, that has undergone a startling transformation in its recent switch of German prestige car marques, from BMW to Mercedes-Benz.

The surprise changeover followed the break-up last year of an enormously successful partnership spanning nearly 20 years between Gardner – one of Australia's great

Longhurst and Paul Morris and countless other victories at circuits throughout Australia.

But all good things eventually come to an end.

Gardner ultimately was left with no alternative but to transfer his allegiances and his Coca-Cola sponsorship to a rival manufacturer when BMW Australia decided to disperse with his services and go its own way with the team the charismatic man in the white towelling hat had established and led so professionally for the best part of two decades.

Gardner, in an interview with Motorsport News, did not conceal his disappointment over the split.

"It took me 20 years to put all that lot together and it took them 20 months to pull it all to bits," he said with a grimace.

On the other hand, though, he's looking forward to channelling all his energies into driver safety, as well as overseeing additional developments that are planned for Norwell.

The expansion program includes a historic car museum, which will occupy the former BMW bond store, and other facilities aimed at making the centre a tourist showcase.



TRAINING FLEET ... Frank Gardner with his stock of Mercedes at the Norwell driving centre. (Photo by Mike Kable)

Schlickum, that were initiated by Gardner's friends in the corporate world.

It was Gardner's idea to build Norwell as BMW Motorsport's Australian base in the 1980s.

He says the cost of constructing the test-track complex left "very little change" out of \$5 million, but its contribution to the team's success was immeasurable.

"We were able to lift up the shutters on the cars, make sure every-

towards competitive times."

Before long, Norwell was opened for driver training, with BMW owners coming from near and far to learn the finer points of car control from instructors selected and trained by Gardner.

Its popularity spread to Asian countries and visits by groups from Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia were a regular occurrence.

Several thousand people had

place. It was nipped in the bud by people who respected our long association."

Gardner said the problems with BMW Australia had been compounded by its actions, including grooming a former prominent touring car driver to take over Gardner's driver training role.

He also denied the truth of persistent reports which were circulating in 1996 that an illness was forcing him to step aside as the team's man-