

GRAND PRIX MOTORCYCLE RACERS

THE AMERICAN HEROES

NORM DEWITT



FOREWORD BY ALAN CATHCART

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GRAND PRIX
MOTORCYCLE
RACERS
THE AMERICAN HEROES

THIS IS THE STORY OF THE AMERICAN RIDERS WHO CONQUERED THE WORLD.

In the 16 seasons from 1978 to 1993, Americans would win the 500cc world championship 13 times, cementing a tradition of U.S.-bred excellence that lives on in the sport today. These are the stories of the American world champions, told through interviews and with input from the riders themselves.

With additional chapters on the American riders who competed at the top level of Grand Prix racing and those who won the World Superbike Championship, this is the story American racing fans have been waiting decades to read.



Grand Prix Motorcycle Racers

The American Heroes



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Grand Prix Motorcycle Racers

The American Heroes

Norm DeWitt



To my wife, Betsy, who endured all of those 110-degree days at Riverside running my pit boards and so many other adventures . . . And to my parents, who stood behind me no matter what wacky idea I came up with.

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On the front cover: Foreground: Kenny Roberts, the very first American World Champion. *Imago/Icon SMI* Background: 2006 MotoGP World Champion Nicky

Hayden. *DPPI/Icon SMI*

On the frontispiece: Kenny Roberts leads Virginio Ferrari in the 1979 Austrian GP at the Salzburgring. Roberts defeated Ferrari in Austria en route to his second consecutive World Championship. *Mortons Media*

On the back cover: Freddie Spencer, Rothmans Honda, 1985 Spanish 500cc Grand Prix, Jarama, Spain. *Richard Francis/Action Plus/Icon SMI*

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Acknowledgments

INSPIRATION CAME IN THE pivotal year of 1967. The movie *Grand Prix* was released, and in November I attended my first race, the USAC Indycar finale at Riverside, featuring Gurney, Clark, The Unsers, Surtees, Andretti, and Foyt. It was a race for the ages, in which Dan Gurney took his first win in the Indy Eagle, at his home circuit before a wildly celebrating crowd. As Dan once said to me, “So, it’s all my fault.” Yes . . . and racing became my all-consuming passion.

By 1969, San Diegans had won the Daytona 200 for eight of the previous 15 years. The local “Marty’s”—Smith, Tripes, and Moates—became the first Americans to win the MX United States Grand Prix (125, 250, and 500). Meanwhile in Europe, Mario Andretti and Kenny Roberts were 1978 World Champions. Thanks to you all; you showed us there were no limits.

Heartfelt thanks to Alan Cathcart for providing the foreword, and Jim Michels for asking me to write this book, based upon a recommendation from Don Emde. Special thanks to my editor Jeffrey Zuehlke. Thanks to all those who have shared tales and insight or helped me across the years, and I sincerely regret if I neglected to mention any contribution:

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Foreword

JUST LIKE ANY GREAT thriller—and, indeed, this story is a thriller—the modern day history of Grand Prix motorcycle racing, and its upstart rival the Superbike class, has been told ever since Page One was written back in 1949 with the running of the first World Championship on two wheels.

Although British and Commonwealth riders from Africa and Australasia dominated the Grand Prix winners' roster in the 1950s and 1960s, and Latinos and Japanese do so today, there was a quarter-century of American domination from the mid-1970s onward, when it seemed you had to be a Yank if you wanted to stand on the top step of the podium. Strangely, it was a bunch of British marketing men who made this happen, when the venerable, soon-to-be-history BSA/Triumph concern's publicity crew decided to try to grab a slice of stateside action by signing up half a dozen U.S. riders to race their triples in the U.K. against a team of British riders in the first Transatlantic Match Races over Easter weekend in 1971. Until then, it had been rare to see any American rider competing in Europe, as there had been no good reason for U.S. riders to cross the Atlantic and race against the locals before this time—and indeed pavement racing was strictly second division in the United States compared to traditional dirt-oval action.

But those match races opened the floodgates, and when the series returned the following year with the British triples no longer the default mount, it was an American rider on an American bike who stole the show. The late, great Cal Rayborn on the iron-barrelled XR750 Harley-Davidson V-twin stunned us Brits by winning three of the six races against our best riders. In doing so, he kicked the door open for successive generations of American racers to come and do the same to other Europeans on their home tracks, often succeeding for the first time at the Transatlantic Match Races before going on to beat the world, not just the Brits.

From that point up until Nicky Hayden's 2006 MotoGP world title, the world has gotten used to hearing "The Star-Spangled Banner" played in victory lane, as a seemingly endless succession of greats who cut their racing teeth anywhere from New Jersey to Texas to California to Georgia have picked up the Rayborn baton and run with it. Now Ben Spies is getting the needle stuck in the groove again

with his conquering of World Superbike in 2009 and his advancement to MotoGP in 2010, reminding us that American riders know how to deliver results to their teams and sponsors.

Norm DeWitt is the master storyteller of motorcycling moments, and the perceptive profiles he's published in magazines all over the world of key figures in two-wheeled history would have marked him out as the right guy to tell this tale in its enormity, even if he didn't have the advantage of also being American. When I heard he was writing this book, I really looked forward to reading it, having experienced the so-called American invasion firsthand in the 1970s when I followed King Kenny around the track for at least a few corners in Brands Hatch practice. I later raced all over the United States and saw fresh-eyed kids like 14-year-old John Kocinski beating up riders four times his age with 10 times more experience at Oakville Raceway, or Freddie Spencer doing the same in the rain at age 17 aboard a TZ750 on the steeply banked Texas Speedway. To follow their subsequent careers up close and personal and to ride the bikes that took them to world titles—big, meaty, four-stroke Superbikes and fire-breathing, ring-dinger, two-strokes alike—for magazine articles was an honor and a privilege. This book records that era and the others that followed it in fascinating detail and makes the memory banks churn with the remembrance of things past.

Mention of the bikes underlines one important aspect of the way in which American riders ended up dominating the victory rostrum for the best part of two decades. In many cases, they dominated on bikes that were very alien to the machines they grew up racing. American riders have had in many cases to re-learn how to race aboard a very different motorcycle than they one that brought them that far, especially now that there is no longer a 250cc Grand Prix starter class at the American Motorcycle Association (AMA) level. In many cases, these riders had to adapt their dirt-tracking techniques to create a whole new style of riding on European tarmac circuits. Added kudos to them all, from America's first road race champion Steve Baker onward, for doing so.

Norm DeWitt's comprehensive roundup of a key chapter in road racing history is long overdue, and I'm glad he resisted the temptation to restrict it solely to the seven American 500cc/MotoGP world champions. Quite apart from the fact that the six World Superbike champions to hail from the United States—from Fred Merkel onward—all have a fascinating tale to tell, to leave out men like Gary Nixon (by any rights, the guy who should have been the first Yank world champion) and Pat Hennen (the first to wave the Stars and Stripes on the world stage) would have told only half the story. Instead, what we have here is the full story, from champions to contenders, title-winners to nearly men and compliments to Norm on producing it.

Alan Cathcart
Warwick, Great Britain

CHAPTER 1

The Pioneers



The TransAtlantic Match Races were the springboard for American GP success. Here Don Emde's Seeley-Norton leads Dick Mann's BSA Rocket 3 in 1974. Don Emde Collection

AMERICAN PARTICIPATION IN EUROPEAN motorcycle road racing started early in the previous century. The story begins with Jake DeRosier, a Quebec-born Canadian raised in Massachusetts, who got his start in bicycle competitions before moving on to motorcycles.

DeRosier would not only make his name racing Indians: In many ways, he made Indian's name by dominating Americar board track racing in probably the most dangerous era of what has always been a highly hazardous sport.

The colorful DeRosier was among the riders on the starting grid at the very first race held at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1909. Struggling against both terrible track conditions and Los Angeles' Ed Lingenfelder on his mighty *White Pet* NSU, DeRosier crashed during the battle. *Bicycling World and Motorcycle Review*'s coverage of the race noted, "Had DeRosier worn proper attire in his race against Lingenfelder, he would not now be suffering from painful injury. Instead of wearing trousers of stout material, such as khaki or duck, DeRosier rode in a suit of flimsy tights, which gave as little resistance as no clothes at all when brought into the rough stone surface of The Motor Speedway."

In 1911, DeRosier led the Indian factory team's assault on the soon-to-be-legendary Isle of Man TT race. He again brought out the tights and created a stir by setting the fastest speed of 75 miles per hour in a flying kilometer event on the Douglas Promenade. In the Senior TT, held for the first time in 1911 on the mountain course, DeRosier led the first lap on his Indian twin. He was second behind Charlie Collier's Matchless after lap two, but then crashed; DeRosier was eventually disqualified for receiving outside assistance. Surprisingly, DeRosier's 1911 performance remains the most impressive TT run by an American, with the possible exception of Pat Hennen in 1978, but the American's TT experience was not the team's highlight: British riders rode Indians to an impressive 1-2-3 finish.

Sadly, DeRosier's impressive career would come to a tragic end less than a year later; he was grievously injured in an accident with Excelsior teammate and rival Charles "Fearless" Balke at a board track match race at the newly opened Los Angeles Stadium in March 1912. DeRosier eventually succumbed to his injuries in February 1913. As his funeral procession

passed the Indian factory, flags flew at half-staff and all production ceased in tribute to the man who had done more than any other to make Indian motorcycles synonymous with speed.

THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

In the ensuing decades, the sport of motorcycle racing evolved in very different directions in Europe and the United States. The European tradition grew on asphalt circuits—Grand Prix races that were held on public roads. In the United States, motorcycle competition had its roots on dirt, oval, and horse racing tracks, so it was small wonder that the inception of a World Championship series of Grand Prix races in 1949 was not on the radar of America's top motorcycle racers of the time. In the United States, success at the highest levels of dirt track racing led to dirt track sprint cars, which eventually led to Indianapolis car racing. Asphalt road racing was limited to just a few events, such as Laconia. As a result, the greatest American road racers on two (or four) wheels—men such as Daytona 200 winners Joe Leonard, Brad Andres, and Paul Goldsmith—never seriously explored competing in Europe.

By the late 1950s, however, motorsports enthusiasts in the United States were taking more of an interest in the European racing scene due to the success of Americans in Grand Prix automobile road racing. Phil Hill, Dan Gurney, Richie Ginther, Harry Schell, and Masten Gregory were regularly competing in Formula One by this time, overcoming challenges such as different shift patterns on different cars. (The author once asked Phil Hill how drivers were supposed to keep track of such variations: “If you wanted to stay alive, you’d remember it. Once, in 1959, you’d go all the way across the gates and straight back in the same direction to go from first to second.”)

The first F1 United States Grand Prix (USGP) was held at Sebring in 1959, and the United States has hosted numerous F1 GPs since. In 1961, Hill became the first American racer to earn the title of world champion when he won the F1 World Drivers’ Championship, piloting his Ferrari Dino 156 to two victories and five pole positions. The end result of this late 1950s road racing automotive renaissance was the construction of

several permanent racing facilities, with names that echo across the ages, including Riverside, Road America, and Laguna Seca. With the racing facilities now in place, what was needed was a catalyst.

The first World Championship Grand Prix for motorcycles was held at Daytona International Speedway, the site of the Daytona 200, the most prestigious two-wheel race in the United States at that time. The 1964 USGP took place under adversarial circumstances between the American Motorcycle Association (AMA) and Daytona Speedway owner Bill France's Motorcycle International Committee of the United States (MICUS), which had become the Fédération Internationale de Motocyclisme's (FIM) affiliate for racing in America. The AMA forbade its riders from competing and most of the American racers chose to sit out the event rather than risk their AMA Grand National Championship ambitions. Some Americans did race, however, with Buddy Parriott placing sixth in the premier class (500cc) event to earn a solitary point. Mike Hailwood won the race on an MV Agusta. In the 250cc class, British emigrant Ron Grant finished second, followed by American Bo Gehring; these two share the honor of being the first Americans to grace a GP podium. The World Championship Grand Prix for motorcycles was held for a second and final time in 1965. This event saw Parriott become the first American to stand on a premier class GP podium after he rode his Norton Manx to second (again behind Hailwood) in the 500cc race. Parriott's singular finish earned him an eighth-place finish in the 1965 World Championship.

THE DAYTONA 200

Parriott would never have the chance to follow up his 1965 success: He retired from the sport in 1966, and the United States would not host another World Championship motorcycle Grand Prix until 1988. But the 1964 and 1965 races did bring more international interest to the Daytona 200. The United States was a major market for the British motorcycle manufacturers, so the public relations value of a win in the 200 was huge in this era before the arrival of the Japanese factories. These were the days when Norton, Triumph, BSA, and Harley-Davidson competed for top honors, with Daytona serving as the proving ground for the top American

riders, including the legendary Gary Nixon, who won the race in 1967 en route to the first of two consecutive AMA Grand National titles.

That year, Triumph's Tiger T100/R was the dominant force and Nixon had his greatest season, winning five Grand National races, including the Daytona 200. He also won the 250 GP race, taking wins in both of the event's major races and securing his position as an American road racing legend.

The 1968 Daytona 200 brought the European invasion of Phil Read, Peter Williams, and Rod Gould. Japanese rider Mitsuo Ito also competed on a Suzuki. The foreign riders' impact was dulled by the phenomenal Cal Rayborn, who won the first of his two Daytona 200s on a Harley-Davidson. Gary Nixon had essentially brought a knife to a gunfight, and said, "We were running one hundred thirty-five miles per hour; the Harleys were running one hundred fifty. I told them they needed to put a mirror on the f**ker, so I could see which side they were going by me on." Yet despite the superiority of the road racing Harley-Davidson, Nixon still repeated as Grand National Champion, further cementing his relationship with Triumph and giving him the opportunity to become the first American to race overseas.

Nixon recalls his 1970 experience in Europe:

Yvon [Duhamel] and I went over for the Race of the Year at Brands Hatch. You had to push-start [the bikes], and Mike Hailwood was the flagman. I had an eighteen-inch stainless-steel rod in my leg, and I'd never done a push-start before. Mike and I were buddies, so when I started pushing he threw the flag, so I got to the first turn with the pack.

For 1971, the rest of the American BSA/Triumph team joined Nixon for an event that would serve as a launching point for most of the future American World Championships: the Transatlantic Match Races.

THE TRANSATLANTIC MATCH RACES

It all started during Daytona Bike Week in 1971. A group of race and team organizers got into a debate at a bar over who had the fastest riders,

England or the United States. English promoter Chris Lowe recognized that he had an ideal battleground, as he had promoted an Easter weekend series of races at Brands Hatch, Mallory Park, and Oulton Park. Given the number of riders on the BSA/Triumph three-cylinder machines (there were 10 factory entries in the Daytona 200 alone), it could be a huge promotional coup for the manufacturer and a financial bonanza exploiting the “Us versus Them” marketing angle.

The format and site of the races heavily favored the home team. While American Grand National riders had to be competitive on various types of road and dirt racing machinery, the British riders (who in 1971 included Ray Pickrell, Paul Smart, Tony Jeffries, Percy Tait, and John Cooper) were not only road racing specialists but had years of experience on the circuits where the races would take place.

David Aldana was one of the Americans who participated in the Transatlantic event. He describes the challenges the Americans faced:

Racing with the likes of Barry Sheene, John Cooper, and Mick Grant, we were racing against the best in the world. In the U.S., we'd maybe do a road race every couple of months. The racetracks were up and down hills with off-camber corners. You'd come up to a ninety-degree turn, and right in front of you was a stack of railroad ties about twelve-feet high. If you didn't make the corner, you were dead. Another corner had a brick house for electrical equipment; it was like the Isle of Man—pretty scary.

Another American competitor, Don Emde, recalls that the riders had no idea what they were getting into in 1971:

We thought it was just an exhibition or a photo op, a seeing-the-factory sort of thing. On the plane ride over, I found out that this was going to be a full-on race against these guys. When we got there, the British papers were all full of the “Who will win?” kind of stuff . . . it was really more like Custer's last stand. Smart, Pickrell, Cooper . . . they were just gone.”

The American team suffered its first blow in its first practice at Brands Hatch, when Gary Nixon was knocked out of the competition. "Coming out of Clearways, the thing lost traction and high-sided me. The doctors diagnosed me as having a broken wrist," Nixon recalls.

Aldana, Emde, Dick Mann, Don Castro, and Jim Rice were left to pick up the slack. (Grand National Champion Gene Romero did not participate.) In the end, the Brits won the event. The final score was 183 points for Britain against 137 points for the United States. The top individual score came up a tie between Smart and Pickrell.

While the races may have been forgettable, the riders did create some lasting memories. U.S. Suzuki team manager Merv Wright recalls one of them: "My most distinct memory of the match races was driving down the freeway with David Aldana mooning everyone out the rear window of Barry Sheene's Rolls-Royce."

Barry Sheene served as England's one-man welcoming committee. "I had met him the year before," says Nixon. "He was the only English guy that came to our hotel and ended up being friends of ours. He was just a cool dude, the only one of their match race guys to hang out with us." Barry Sheene would go on to play a recurring role in the story of Americans in GP racing, helping some along the way, while challenging others for World Championships.

At the end of 1971, BSA/Triumph slashed its racing budget, with the end result being that the Transatlantic Match Races were opened to other manufacturers. A reluctant Harley-Davidson allowed Cal Rayborn, the two-time Daytona 200 winner and America's top road racer, to compete. Cal Rayborn would take his obsolete Harley and make the most significant impression for an American in European racing since Jake DeRosier in 1911.

Don Emde remembers helping his fellow San Diegan during the trip over to England: "On the flight he starts asking me stuff like, 'So what's Brands Hatch like?' I'd get a cocktail napkin and draw it out for him and explain the ups and downs of the course. Then we went over the same for Mallory Park and Oulton Park."

One might expect that Rayborn's Daytona wins would have carried some respect with the Brits; this was not the case, and the Brits laughingly



Three American motorcycle road racing pioneers (left to right): Gary Nixon, Cal Rayborn, and Don Emde in 1970. Don Emde Collection

dismissed the Harley-Davidson as agricultural equipment. They would not be laughing for long.

Rayborn quickly recognized the limitations of the British riders, amazed at their reactions when they put a wheel off the track. As Dennis Noyes recalls:

I overheard Rayborn say to Mann after they saw Dave Croxford on the John Player Norton go in the dirt on the exit of Paddock Bend, “That guy, when he got in the dirt . . . he just quit racing. He could have saved that. There is some grip out there this morning; you can tell by the color of it.”

“Our riders were from another world,” Noyes continues. “They spent so much time riding dirt they looked for drive in the runoff areas.”

On the first lap of the first race at Brands Hatch, Cal quickly moved into the lead around the back side of the track. Gavin Trippe describes the scene:

Cal was fifth as the bikes went out of sight behind the trees; as the bikes came back into view, he was in first. The British at the track were

completely shocked. One of the British tuners was standing next to me; he dropped his pipe when his mouth fell open. It was one of the classic moments of the match races.

The three-event, six-race series turned out to be a showdown between Cal Rayborn and Ray Pickrell, with the two trading wins at Brands Hatch and Mallory Park. Rayborn won race one at the final event at Oulton Park and was heading for victory in race two when his Harley-Davidson lost a cylinder and he dropped to second. The American and the Brit finished the series tied with three wins each. Rayborn's shocking success in England signaled the beginning of the American invasion.

Sadly, Cal Rayborn would never have a chance to repeat his initial success in Europe. In December 1973, the era's greatest American road racer suffered a fatal crash at Pukekohe Raceway in New Zealand.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

Were it not for bad luck, Gary Nixon might well have been the first American to enjoy GP success in Europe. In 1974, he was given the opportunity to partner with Sheene at the Dutch TT at Assen. It would have been Nixon's 500cc GP debut, but he never got the chance due to a vicious accident testing the Suzuki RG500 in Japan.

Factory test rider Ken Aroka had just set the lap record at Suzuki's Hamamatsu test track the week before. Nixon describes the scene:

Well, I go out, [Aroka] comes past me and motions for me to follow him. It's his track and he wants to show me the good way around. Well, stupid-ass me, I passed him back. On the second time through I'm in third, fourth, fifth . . . I'm coming up into this corner I've never been around fast before—a corner Ken had been going through flat out when he set the record . . . My bike had been too lean and seized just as Ken made a move to pass me on my left, knowing he could go through there wide open. He hit my rear wheel, and my bike de-barked a tree twelve feet in the air at 120 miles per hour, tearing the bike in half. I broke my arms, my leg, my back, my teeth, my pocketbook . . .

Nixon's season was over and his GP debut was put on hold indefinitely. Merv Wright describes Nixon's attempts to return in 1975: "I've seen X-rays of Gary after that crash, with all the plates, screws, and God knows what all he had in both forearms . . . He nevertheless showed up at Daytona, and actually qualified, but there was no way he was going to make it through the race."

"I ran at Daytona," says Gary. "With a broken arm I qualified in twenty-ninth place. My left arm came apart driving, and my right arm came apart in practice. I had a joint between my elbow and my wrist, so I didn't start the race."

While Nixon was recuperating in 1975, David Aldana enjoyed his best year overseas, taking individual honors as well as leading the American team to its first overall victory in the Transatlantic Match Series. (Thankfully, Aldana did not take his lap of honor at Oulton Park in the back of Barry Sheene's Rolls-Royce.) But despite this success on the world stage, Aldana never moved into GP racing, instead plying his all-around talent on racing flat track, Superbike, AMA Formula One, and motocross in America before moving on to international endurance road racing later in his career. Nixon didn't return to the international scene until 1976, when he came back to race for Kawasaki in his last season of international competition.



Gary Nixon wheelies his Kawasaki 750 over the hump at Oulton Park in England during the 1976 Transatlantic Match Races. Mortons Media

For 1976, Erv Kanemoto and a healed Gary Nixon contested the title with a new bike, the large-diameter tube frame Kawasaki 750-3. A big step up from the previous machine, the powerful water-cooled triple now had handling to match its grunt. Nixon brought the bike to Daytona, and finished second behind Cecotto's OW-31. The next round was held in Cecotto's home country of Venezuela, and what happened there will become synonymous with result tampering and political influence.

On the track, Gary Nixon won the race, but the race officials later gave the win to Yamaha's Steve Baker. "The big fiasco," Baker recalls. "What happened was the race started and on the first lap I had one carburetor overflowing and Bob Work got in there and tapped on the carb, and I was off again. Nobody could agree on anything as far as the results and payoffs for finishing. The Venezuelan organizer said, 'Fine, do whatever you want to do, but see if you can get out of the country.' That was the first time I'd been in South America and I didn't want to end up in some damn jail down there or something."

With the possible exception of the Russian team mauling of CZs Jaroslav Falta in the 1974 Swiss 250 motocross GP, the two Americans had found themselves in the middle of the darkest and most controversial chapter in motorcycle racing history. "I was right there, Steve came in, parked the bike against the pit wall," Merv Wright recalls:

A little while later he comes back out again, but the idiot scorers had him on the same lap, which is absolute friggin' nonsense. He lost at least one lap. I had my scoring sheets that verified that. I talked to the Yamaha distributor who was sponsoring both the race and Cecotto. I asked him, "What in the hell are you playing at?" He looked at me rather surprised and told me to my face, "You know, it's very important that Yamaha wins this race." I gave the FIM my scoring sheets, which was a mistake. It was sheer bulls**t.

"It was the FIM European Mafia," says Nixon. "The guy from Yamaha Venezuela told them that winning on a Kawasaki wasn't good for business. He [Baker] was really a lap down."

Nixon would appeal the results, although the FIM would not hear his appeal until the end of the season. As it turned out, the F750 title would hinge upon the results from Venezuela. "Roger DeCoster told me to be sure and go over," Nixon recalls. "If nothing else I suppose just to see how they were going to screw me. I went to the FIM meeting at Brussels in November and you could clearly see from the lap chart they had, that Baker was in the pits all that time." The FIM threw out the "supposedly" confused results of the Venezuelan race, giving the F750 championship to Spanish Yamaha rider Victor Palomo. Nixon is still bitter about it today: "They f**ked me and the horse I rode in on." Gary Nixon's career on the world stage had come to an end under bizarre and sad circumstances.

STEVE BAKER

Meanwhile, a young star was rising over the Yamaha camp in the form of Steve Baker. Like so many American motorcycle racers, the Bellingham, Washington, native got his start on the dirt tracks:

In 1970, my novice year, I had the highest number of points of any novice in the nation. Halfway through my novice dirt track year, I mentioned to a guy that worked for Fred Deeley [based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada] that I'd like to try a road racer sometime. Bob Work got a friend of a friend to loan him a bike for me to ride at Westwood [in British Columbia].

The timing was right for Baker. Longtime Yamaha rider Yvon Duhamel had just signed with Kawasaki, leaving a seat for Baker to step into:

During my novice year of 1970, I'd also ridden some 650 and 750 stuff, and I found that to be pretty hard for me to ride . . . with the Yamaha's power delivery. When I got that opportunity from Deeley to ride the road racer, it just kind of clicked for me. That was why I made my decision to branch off into the road racing side of things.

Baker's Canadian Yamaha sponsorship would cause many to mistakenly think that he was a Canadian, but his experience racing on the road courses north of the border would prove to be a crucial factor for his future in international racing. "The tracks in Canada were very rough," says Baker. "Oulton Park was somewhat like Westwood, off-camber exits and all."

Baker's first year as an expert came in 1973, riding against the top riders in the nation on the Deeley Yamaha. Thrown into a deep talent pool, he found the season to be a sobering experience:

I remember guys like Cal Rayborn, Dick Mann—all those people that I was suddenly racing against. I tried to learn as much from those guys as I could. Kel Carruthers helped me out some; he used to let me follow him around. The first time I did really good as an expert was second place at Talladega in 1973 behind Kel. By Charlotte, I think I had gotten a little cocky, thinking that I could race with these guys, and fell off.



© Mortons

Steve Baker tearing up the competition at Oulton Park in the 1976 Transatlantic Match Races. Mortons Media

Baker's experience the following year was equally memorable, but for the wrong reasons, as he would spend the season trying to tackle the fearsome 700cc TZ750A Yamaha:

Scary year. That bike scared the hell out of me, more so in Canada because the racetracks were rougher. It would do tank slappers like you wouldn't believe; you couldn't even hang on to the bars—if you tried to hang on to it, it would just get worse. Another thing, too: We were always trying different tires back then, they never had tires that worked on that bike. It was a big mess. I was so focused on wanting to ride one of these things and do well; I just kind of went along with the whole deal.

His stormy relationship with the TZ750A finally ended in tears with a crash at Talladega; Baker suffered a broken leg that ended his season. But all of these challenges were to provide Baker with the perfect training ground for racing on the dangerous road circuits of Europe.

Baker returned for Daytona in 1975, taking second in his comeback race: "Daytona probably isn't the place to regain your confidence, but fortunately I had a good handling new motorcycle [the improved TZ750D] with a good team behind me." He would also score his first win that season at Loudon, New Hampshire.

Baker's career trajectory continued upward the following season, helped greatly by the introduction of the OW-31 Yamaha. "The OW-31 was a trick bike," he explains. "It had different suspension, a different frame than a standard TZ—with the monoshock of course. The motor was modified, hand-built from the factory with all sorts of polished bits in it. It was like magic. At Daytona, I just couldn't believe how fast it was."

Although the bike blew the base gasket in the race, the new OW-31 was clearly a force to be reckoned with. Baker's success led to an invitation to compete in the Transatlantic Match Races. In Great Britain, Baker instantly took to the twisty off-camber racetracks similar to his beloved Westwood and swept the races at Brands Hatch and Oulton Park. For Baker, 1976 was starting to look like a dream season. His American teammate, Kenny Roberts, observed, "Stevie was HOT in 1976."

Baker agrees. "That whole year was really good. The bike worked really well, but I didn't do all the races in F750 that year."

In 1977, the F750 series became a World Championship, and Steve Baker, on top of his game and riding the OW-31, would be the series' first world champion.

The season began with a dominant win at the 1977 Daytona 200. Having the support that comes with being a full-factory rider proved a big advantage for Baker:

I'd been in Japan testing in January and February, so I was familiar with the motorcycles, and this was my first year with the actual Yamaha factory. Before that year, I wouldn't receive the bikes until Daytona. I was more prepared, we had some magnesium power jet carburetors, and the bikes were another step above OW-31 spec, with handmade parts that made them more reliable. I think everybody who gets into road racing from the U.S. wants to win Daytona; that's the big one."

Following Daytona, Baker went on to win the F750 World Championship, while at the same time fighting for the 500cc Grand Prix title. In the latter



Steve Baker on the Yamaha OW-31 during his 1977 World Championship season.
Mortons Media

class, Baker battled against the mighty Heron Suzukis ridden by Sheene and American Pat Hennen. It was a tough task, riding in a series he had never raced in before on tracks that he had never seen before. He was also left to carry the Yamaha flag alone for much of the season:

The 500s I struggled with, because I had to learn all the racetracks and my teammate [Venezuelan Johnny Cecotto] was injured, which put the pressure on me to win. I was coming from the U.S., where it was a clutch start . . . In Europe, I had to push these damn things. The Yamaha didn't start very well, so I always had to start from a deficit. By the time I would get started, guys like Sheene would be long gone. It was Yamaha's first year back in with their 500s. [The bikes were] very powerful, but in comparison to the Suzukis, we had handling problems that we had to work on.

Despite all of these challenges, Baker was still a force. At Hockenheim, he took third place behind the Heron Suzukis. He was the only non-Suzuki rider to finish in the top 10. "We had horsepower, and down those long straights the thing would really go, but the whole package didn't work as well as the Suzuki." Baker started from pole at Imola and finished second between the factory Suzukis at Spa. But it was too little too late. When Cecotto returned from his injuries, the Venezuelan was immediately on the pace, scoring a second place followed by two victories. Despite taking second place behind Hennen at the British GP finale—a finish that secured second place in the title chase for Baker, behind only Sheene—Yamaha informed Baker that he would no longer be racing for the team in Europe; they wanted him to race for them in America. "I don't know what the whole deal was," Baker recalls years later. "But I wanted to stay and race in Europe."

With the help of Barry Sheene, Baker landed a ride on the RG500 Suzuki with Suzuki Italy for the 1978 season. A third at the season opener in Venezuela—once again behind the factory Suzukis of Sheene and Hennen—showed some promise, but other than fourths at Imola and Sweden, the season brought little in terms of results. Baker finished seventh in the World

Championship on the privateer Suzuki. At the end of the season, Baker broke his arm and left leg in a crash at Mosport, ending the career of the first American world champion in motorcycle road racing.

PAT HENNEN

Despite his many accomplishments, Steve Baker never won a 500cc World Championship Grand Prix. Instead, the honor of being the first American to stand on the top step of a premier class Grand Prix podium would be earned by Pat Hennen a year before Baker won his F750 World Championship. Steve Baker and Pat Hennen both had spectacular careers, and both demonstrated that American riders could take on the Europeans on European soil and challenge for victories in their rookie seasons. Both men also saw their careers end abruptly and all too early due to injury.

Born in Phoenix, Arizona, and raised in the Bay Area of Northern California, Pat Hennen first became involved with racing while working for U.S. Suzuki factory racer Ron Grant, preparing road racing bikes in Ron's garage. "It was literally his garage at his home," Merv Wright recalls. "I worked there also, prior to Pat."

Hennen did the porting as well as the full-race setups (phases 1 thru 3) on the 500 and 750 Suzukis. Looking back, he remembers his first introduction to a racing machine. "I took this bike [a phase 3] to Sears Point and [after riding it, I] realized that I didn't want to ride a street bike anymore."

Pat Hennen's meteoric rise to GP racing was a combination of world-class talent mixed with a little luck. In 1974, Hennen was given an opportunity to partner with Ron Grant to ride Suzukis in a new racing series in New Zealand. The Suzuki distributor for New Zealand was Rod Coleman, 1954 Junior TT winner and an AJS factory GP rider during the Porcupine era. Coleman was instrumental in bringing foreign talent to showcase his new racing series.

"Ron Grant had a lot to organize," recalls Hennen, "going to races in New Zealand, and he introduced 'Team Cardboard Box,' as we worked to put together something that would run." In addition to the New Zealand experience, Hennen continued to hone his road racing skills while riding for Ron Grant in the United States. But the 22-year-old's promising career

appeared to be in jeopardy when the U.S. Suzuki factory road racing team closed its doors at the end of the 1975 season.

Luckily, Hennen had Rod Coleman on his side. "We sent him a two-year-old factory triple," says Coleman, "One of the bikes left over [when U.S. Suzuki closed its team] . . .":

I was at U.S. Suzuki and saw them loading the little factory 125 twins into a truck. I asked, "Where are you going to take that?" He said, "To the rubbish dump." I told him to hold on a minute and rushed inside to the main office. I asked, "Why are you going to destroy those?"

"Oh, well, that's the factory policy."

"Can I buy one?"

"Well, okay."

So I bought one, and then when I went into the race shop, they had the 750s spread out all over the floor, about to be going to the dump as well. I asked if I could buy some of these bits as well, and he said, "Yeah, but you'll have to get them out of the place."

So I phoned up Pat Hennen in San Francisco and told him, "Go buy a big van and I'll pay for it. Get down here fast and get all these bits in the van and take them back and put 'em together. Get one bike and a spare engine out of it. After I telephoned him, he drove overnight and was at U.S. Suzuki next morning. I shipped the van out with all that stuff inside it, and when the van arrived in New Zealand it contained an immaculate TR750 and a spare engine. Pat built it. He was not just a good mechanic, he was a most meticulous mechanic, and had absorbed all of Ron Grant's expertise.

Pat Hennen was to dominate the 1976 New Zealand racing season on the Coleman Suzuki 750-3, and his goal was to continue that success in America. But with no funding or equipment, it did not look favorable.

Once again, Rod Coleman stepped in: "Pat said, 'Oh, I'd love to ride at Daytona.' After the New Zealand season, the bike was shipped back to the U.S. for his use at Daytona."

This parts-bin special, built by Pat from the discarded U.S. Suzuki effort, was to achieve Suzuki's first podium in the Daytona 200, finishing third.

Coleman continues the story:

When Pat did so well [at Daytona], he said he'd love to go to Europe. So, we bought a new RG four-cylinder, one from the factory. I shipped it to England, and he went there to meet the bike, the RG500. He said, "What can I do to repay you for it?" I said, "When you win your first World Championship round, send us an air ticket and we'll come over."

Pat Hennen, recent graduate of Team Cardboard Box, and Team Rubbish Bin, was going Grand Prix racing. His brother Chip joined the "team." To say the team was racing on a shoestring doesn't begin to describe the situation, as Pat recalls: "I had \$1,500 for myself and my brother Chip to get to Europe. We arrived at Croyden near the Suzuki headquarters and stayed in B&Bs."

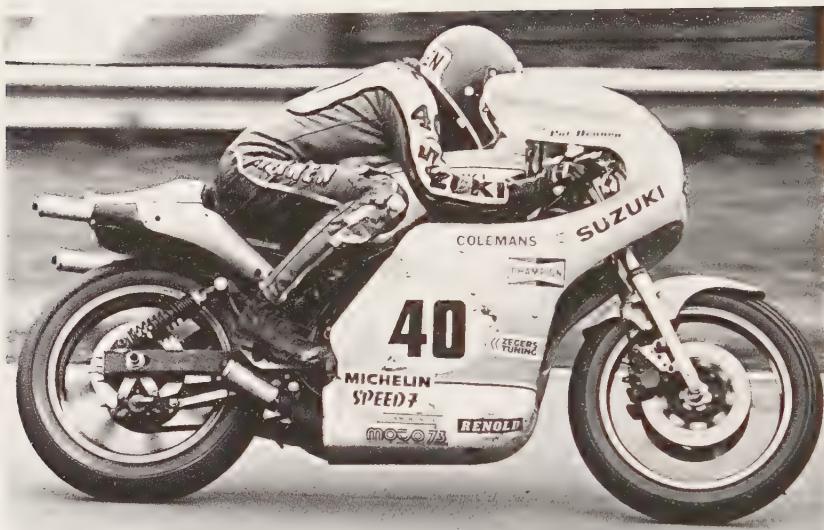
The Hennens were fortunate to have the help of another alumnus of Ron Grant's garage, Merv Wright, who happened to be manager of Barry Sheene's Texaco Heron Suzuki Grand Prix team.

Chip Hennen describes the arrangement:

I served as Pat's business manager and only mechanic for the first half of the 1976 season—just the two of us, a production RG500 (500GP), an obsolete ex-factory TR750 [F750], and our little diesel Bedford van. Merv's back-door support of our effort played a key role in Pat's early successes on the GP trail. Merv was also a terrific friend to both of us.

Not everyone was pleased with the arrangement, however. "Barry Sheene was more than a little displeased with Merv's support of Pat's effort," recalls Chip. "Barry was no idiot and very quickly realized Pat was a potential threat to his dominance of Suzuki's GP initiatives."

Sheene had made sure that no other riders had access to the latest 54x54 square engines that were clearly superior to the rest of the field.



Pat Hennen on the Rod Coleman Suzuki RG500 bike at Assen in 1976. He would ride this same bike to victory at the Swedish Grand Prix later that season. Frans Vandenbroek Collection

Making use of his advantage, Sheene dominated the 1976 season, winning his and Suzuki's first 500cc World Championship. Meanwhile, on the far-more-modestly funded side of the paddock, the tiny team of two brothers punched well above their weight and achieved results that seemed beyond the realm of fantasy, all while racing on a borrowed bike prepared by the two brothers competing on circuits they had never seen before.

Midway through the season, the brothers were able to add a third member to the team. Chip explains:

For most of the GPs we competed at in 1976, the only other Americans we ran into at the races were usually American servicemen stationed in Europe. Midway through the season, a young American showed up at our pit area at the Spa GP, Frans Vandenbroek. I offered to let him help my brother and I at the race . . . that evening I offered him a job as our first paid mechanic and he accepted.



A historic moment in American motorcycle road racing: One of the Hennen team's crew took this snapshot of Pat on the podium after his surprise victory in the 1976 Swedish Grand Prix. Frans Vandenbroek Collection

Two races after the Belgian GP at Spa, the Hennen team arrived at the Grand Prix of Finland. Teuvo Lansivuori of Finland was the favorite on his Suzuki RG500, but in the race Pat Hennen was to take an early lead and hold it to the end. The victory did not come without some suspense, however, as Vandenbroek explains:

The bike fluffed a plug on the warmup lap, and Chip and I frantically changed the plugs on the starting grid. We weren't sure the bike would start, but it did and much to our surprise Pat came by on the first lap in the lead. To our utter astonishment, he led the last lap as well, thus becoming the first American ever to win a World Championship GP. He did it with a borrowed production racer, with his brother and a tourist as crew. Everyone was caught off guard, including the organizers. They brought Pat to the winner's platform, handed him a trophy and a garland, then sheepishly told him they couldn't play the national anthem. They didn't have a tape of it. After Pat received his trophy, we all retreated to the pits,

which was in a blocked-off city park. As we pushed the bike up toward our spot, Takazumi Katayama greeted us waving a small American flag. He then attempted a sincere but fractured delivery of "The Star-Spangled Banner," as Takazumi was an amateur rock singer. It was actually quite touching and I remember the incident with great fondness.

Of course, Pat Hennen also remembers the moment with his usual humility: "Tepi Lansivuori . . . I almost felt guilty, he was a Finn and I think he was second at that race, the Finnish GP."

In a testament to the decency of Pat Hennen, one of the first things he did after winning the race was to follow up on his commitment to Rod Coleman:

When [Pat] won the Finnish GP that year, straight away he sent us a cable and said, "Where do you want the ticket sent?" He remembered. Yeah, I'll never forget that. A very nice fellow. I was sure he was going to be world champion. Of all the riders I've sponsored, Pat was the most sincere one. He always appreciated everything I did for him.

"Rod Coleman is the guy who made my career possible," says Pat Hennen. "He was the big key, along with Ron Grant."

The 1976 season concluded with the German GP at the infamous Nürburgring Nordschleife, a 14-mile course that favored track knowledge above all else. Vandenbroek's street bike was pressed into service. Hennen made a tour and came back with some useful information, as Vandenbroek recalls:

We mounted a set of used Suzuki front tires on my Honda 250, and Pat did a lap. He pronounced the track challenging and also was uncertain if the Suzuki carried enough gas to finish the race. So we took a high-pressure air hose, put it in the aluminum gas tank filler neck, sealed it with a rag, and pressurized the tank until the side panels, where Pat's knees fit, popped outward. Bingo, an extra half a gallon.

Pat went on to finish third behind Giacomo Agostini and Marco Lucchinelli and at the end of his first GP privateer season, he had finished a shocking third in the World Championship.

Heading into the Transatlantic Match Races of 1977, Pat Hennen was to become the dominant force, taking the individual high-point honors, all the while going about his business with quiet dignity and blinding speed. "He was a team guy, easy to deal with, easy to manage, and everybody respected what he could do," says Gavin Trippe, who served as manager of the American team.

Transatlantic teammate Gene Romero has similar memories of Hennen: "He was a quiet individual, a very nice guy, and a real formidable racer, a real clean racer as well. One of those kinds of guys you could race with and not have to worry about it. He wasn't like us renegade dirt trackers gone road racing."

Hennen was called on to race at the Isle of Man TT in 1977. As with the Nürburgring the previous year, the rider needed a prerace tour to learn the circuit.

Vandenbroek describes what happened next:

Pat really needed to have a closer look, so we broke out our secret weapon. In the back of the Suzuki team truck, under a cover, was my blue 250 Honda. Pat hopped on, me on the back, and off we went to do a lap. Ordinarily, I'm not a good passenger on a motorcycle, but how fast can a 250 Honda with two adults on it go? Well, it turns out that, right after start-finish at the Isle of Man is a long downhill, Bray hill, and at the bottom of that hill, that Honda is going at a pretty good clip and we're immediately busted for speeding! And as the cop looks at Pat's license, I see his eyes go wide, and he says, "Pat Hennen, the American motorbike racer?" Pat grumbled a response, but I'm laughing on the back of the bike going, "Yeah, it's him. Okay, bust him, Copper!" In the race, Pat finished fifth, which I don't believe has ever been replicated by an American.

Hennen was the obvious choice to join the factory Heron Suzuki team for 1977, but he soon found that being Barry Sheene's teammate would not be

an easy ride. It became clear early on that Team Sheene was different from Team Suzuki, and Hennen was never allowed to compete on an equal footing with his reigning world champion teammate. The situation was made more difficult by the departure of Hennen's friend and ally, Merv Wright.

Wright, who moved back to the United States, explains the situation in 1977:

Pat was a neat guy, but he was totally dominated by Barry . . . like everybody else. Barry liked to win the races off the racetrack as well as on the racetrack. He did it by commandeering the best machinery, which somehow he got away with. Unfortunately for Pat, Barry well knew that Pat was one of the ones that could beat him on equal machinery, and like John Williams [the year before], Barry did everything he could to make sure that he got the best machines. If they had been on equal machines, not to say Barry wouldn't have won anymore, but some of the results would have been very different.

In the end, the 1977 results saw Sheene repeat as 500cc world champion, followed by Steve Baker and Hennen. Pat's disappointment of losing the title was softened somewhat by beating Sheene on his home turf. Pat's win at the season-ending British GP gave him two victories in the motorcycle racing premier class.

Chip Hennen describes the difficulties the team faced that year:

The personnel looking after Barry's effort operated completely independent of the personnel looking after Pat's effort. When we arrived at the track for a race, his team set up in one area of the paddock and ours in a completely different area—no kidding! We shared a Suzuki GB mechanic named Martin Ogborne and the Japanese engineers the factory sent out to the GP circuit. Denis Rohan, who later became GM of Suzuki GB, told Pat and I that had Pat gone on to win the 1978 GP World Championship, Pat still would have been the number two rider behind Barry, because Barry was so important to U.K. sales.

U.K. politics aside, the American takeover of motorcycle road racing was nearly complete by 1978, as evidenced by the fact that the Transatlantic Match Races were a straight fight between two Americans: Kenny Roberts and Pat Hennen. Their titanic battle served as a preview for the upcoming season, with Hennen taking the individual title, edging Roberts, three wins to two.

Chip Hennen recalls the epic battles:

During the 1978 match races, Pat and Kenny were in a class by themselves, and what happened in those races really set the tone for the now-storied GP season that followed, both of them trying to stake an early claim to being the top road racer for the upcoming GP season. Of all the riders Pat ever competed against—both road racing and dirt track racing—I think he enjoyed most competing against Kenny. No matter how fiercely the two were competing against each other, he says he could always count on Kenny's allowing for a margin of error. He was truly a class act, both on and off the track. When Kenny joined the GP circuit in 1978, the match races were really his first opportunity in quite a while to compete against Pat, and the two of them had some great head-to-head races.

True to his humble nature, Pat credits the bike for his success: "With Barry Sheene and the RG500, Suzuki won a couple of World Championships. But the RG700 was a rocket ship. It was ahead of its time. They almost needed a whole class just for them. I was just beginning to understand how to race that thing."

Rod Coleman concurs. "They only made a handful of the RG700 Suzukis. The first time it came out, it was so much more powerful than anything else."

With Roberts joining Hennen on the Grand Prix circuit for 1978, it looked to be just a matter of time before an American took the 500cc World Championship. That reality appeared to be imminent after three World Championship races, as Sheene's win at the opening round in Venezuela was followed by a Hennen victory in Spain, with Roberts trailing close behind. The third round, in Austria, belonged to Yamaha and Roberts, who followed up his first GP victory with two more wins.

Hennen finished second in both races to stay on Roberts' tail in the title chase. And then Pat Hennen's brilliant career ended at the Isle of Man.

Chip Hennen describes the historic title fight that ended too soon:

When Pat had his accident, he was only two points behind Kenny in the standings, and Barry was well behind them. [Sheene had been suffering from a viral infection during the early season.] Pat and Kenny would literally lap nearly the entire field, with Barry usually about a third of a lap behind them. The 1978 Spanish GP, where Pat beat Kenny, and the 1978 Italian GP, where Kenny narrowly bested Pat, were probably two of the fastest and most ferociously fought GP road races ever. What I saw at those two GP races was absolutely incredible.

By 1978, most of the top GP riders were no longer competing at the epic Isle of Man TT. Barry Sheene had refused to ride the event that year. However, Suzuki GB wanted one of its top riders taking part in the prestigious event, so Pat Hennen was called upon to compete.

American circuit racer Jimmy Moore sums up the experience of racing on the island:

This place humbles you. I don't care how good you are, how good you think you are, what your accomplishments have been in the past. It humbles you back to your roots when you were a beginning racer. What's scary is Kirk Michael, there are three right-hand turns leading into the village, and in between each bend you bang another gear. By the time you are pointed into the village, you are in sixth gear; it's really tight and it's bumpy to where you get up out of the seat. That kind of stuff freaks me out. It's sixth gear, you can't get it wrong, you are going curb to curb to curb and get shot out the back side of the village. The hardest thing about the Isle of Man is tempering your enthusiasm, because circuit racers want to learn as fast as they can. It doesn't feel natural, it doesn't feel right, it doesn't feel legal. It's against everything a person has ever learned about riding motorcycles, and that makes it beautiful, but at the same time it's really really scary, and I mean really,

really scary. It is a huge challenge, and it is without a doubt the Mount Everest of motorcycle racing.

Only a handful of such street courses remained on the World Championship calendar by the late 1970s. It could be said that, for Hennen, racing Grands Prix at the highest level may have been the worst possible training for racing on public roads. Perhaps unable to withhold the blinding speed which came so naturally for him, Pat set the first sub-20-minute lap in the history of the TT.

There have been many versions of the events that occurred next—stories of a bird strike or other contributing factors—but no one knows for sure exactly what happened. Soon after his historic sub-20-minute lap, Hennen crashed at high speed. He suffered serious head injuries that left him in a coma for three months.

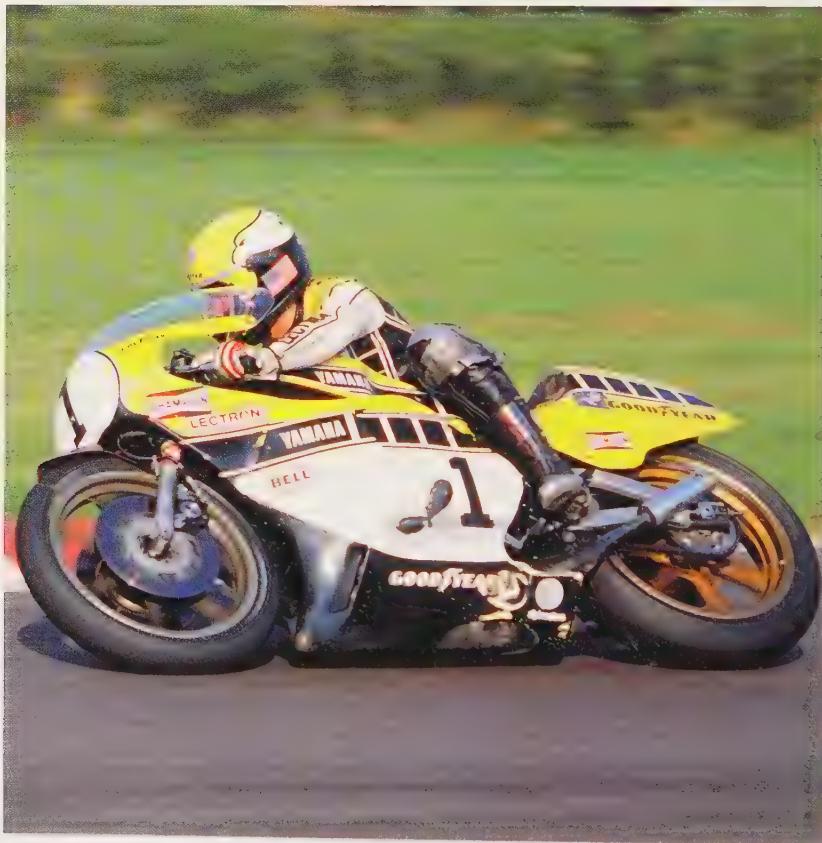
Frans Vandenbroek, speaking at Pat Hennen's induction into the Motorcycle Hall of Fame in 2007, summed up his longtime friend's amazing but all-too-brief career:

Some people say that Pat Hennen was lucky. He was in a coma for three months, but he survived. That year, at the Isle of Man, five competitors and a half-dozen race fans did not. But there's one thing no one can take from Pat Hennen, and it's this: Before there was Nicky, before there was Kenny Jr., Kevin, Wayne, Eddie, Freddie, and Kenny Sr., there was Pat Hennen, the first American to win a World Championship 500cc Grand Prix.

The Americans who have followed in Hennen's footsteps have immense respect for the man who led the way. Freddie Spencer offered this appreciation of the great Pat Hennen: "I've told people many times that if Pat hadn't been hurt, he could have been the first American world champion. I respect tradition; the guy before you makes it possible for you to do what you do." The groundwork that this handful of American pioneers laid in Grand Prix racing was to bear fruit for decades. American riders would become 500cc world champions for 13 of the next 16 years.

CHAPTER 2

The Natural: Kenny Roberts



Kenny Roberts, the first American 500cc World Champion. Mortons Media

KENNY ROBERTS MADE HIS Grand Prix debut at the 1974 Dutch 250 GP at Assen. The European motorcycling world, which had for years thrived on a culture of deference, protocol, and acceptance for whatever pittance the organizers would pay the riders, was wholly unprepared for the arrival of the outspoken and straightforward rider from Modesto, California:

That was my first Grand Prix. I went to the prize-giving and bad-mouthing everybody in the organization. When I sat down at the table, Kel told me, "You'll never race another World Championship race." I said, "Good, you know what? I don't want to race another World Championship race. They just take advantage of you." Kel said that I didn't understand nothin', but I didn't give a s**t. The riders were all dying, starving to death, and these guys were all getting rich. They'd give you something like two hundred fifty bucks to start the race, another two hundred if you did good; it was like nothing. They just raped us! A World Championship race at that time was *big* money for them. In America, they actually pay you to race.

Kenny Roberts had arrived, and the sport of Grand Prix racing would never be the same.

HOME ON THE RANGE

Kenneth Leroy Roberts was born on December 31, 1951, in Modesto, California. He grew up in the vast agricultural heartland of the West Coast, the San Joaquin Valley. Raised in an area better known for livestock than motorcycles, Kenny had his earliest experiences riding horses: "I only did one horse racing competition. My little horse got stuck in an arena with a bunch of bigger horses. But he wanted to race. I lapped everybody, damn near pushed the front and fell down. That was almost curtains right there. Everybody got a big kick out of it except me."

Kenny Roberts soon found his way onto two wheels: "It was just a series of circumstances. A Taco minibike had just scared the heck out of me, and I

thought, "Man, I've got to conquer that." So I built one out of an old lawnmower motor and a bicycle frame. Needless to say, I was adventurous."

Like Pat Hennen and so many of the West Coast riders, Roberts had hands-on practical experience and an intuitive understanding of how things work, which gave him a great advantage over most of his European rivals.

Kenny describes how he got into racing:

My brother got a Honda 50, the one that made Honda. He needed it to ride to summer school. When he got one, then I had to have one. So we found one that had ended up in a canal somewhere, and that was it. It wasn't long before the Honda 50 was traded for a Daihatsu 50 that blew up.

My dad said he knew a guy named Merle Mills. His kid raced one of these things, and he fixed it for me. There was a dirt racetrack called Playland in South Modesto, and I rode my horse to it and watched the races over the fence. Merle said there was another race the next weekend, and I went to the race with him. I saw that I could beat these guys, so that was it. I only rode [the bike] twice and it blew up both times, but it looked like I could kind of do it.

It wasn't long before Kenny's dad bought him a Hodaka 90. Roberts was on his way: "I trophied on it the first or second time I rode it in the 90 class at the Lodi Cycle Bowl, where I got my first win."

Roberts was fast, but wild:

One heat race at Lodi, I crashed three times and still got fourth. I went through a series of crashes; at the time we didn't have the right tires on it, things of that nature. The number one rider in Modesto was a guy named Ray Huff who said, "He's crashin', but if he ever learns to stay on it, he'll be fast." I ended up racing for him quite a bit; he was a hell of a guy.

Roberts did learn to stay upright, and Huff's prediction proved accurate. In fact, Roberts was so fast that it wasn't long before race

organizers began to handicap him in order to give the other kids a chance:

One race they made me start on the jump, facing backward, so I had to turn around and then take off. That pissed me off. So for the main event, they decided to let me just start thirty yards behind everybody, pointed in the right direction. They were trying to think of ways to handicap me, so I wouldn't just win. I moved up to the 250 and spent a year racing them. I was seventeen at the time in 1968. In 1969, I turned eighteen and they signed me up for the Cow Palace in San Francisco, the indoor short track where the experts rode. Novice, junior, and expert all rode together; I made the trophy dash and got third in the main event.

Roberts' feats were covered in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the publicity helped to launch Kenny's career to the next level. Jim Doyle provided his Suzuki 250 twin and Suzuki 250 road racer as well as money for expenses, allowing Roberts to compete at Ascot and Daytona. The Daytona International Speedway left an impression: "That was my first road race experience. I said at that time that I'd never ride another one. It just scared the s**t out of me."

Ascot Park, on the other hand, was the Promised Land for West Coast racers, and Kenny Roberts soon made his name there:

Doyle bought a 250 Montesa Cappra in Redwood City. We put a set of Girling shocks and Pirelli tires on it. Gary Scott was dominating at Ascot, the guy who was going to win all the races. And then this little kid from Northern California showed up and won the Ascot TT. Montesa's rider wasn't doing anything, so we met the importer in an itty-bitty building down in Los Angeles, and they gave us some parts and a bike . . . they wanted to help.

And the name of that Montesa importer? He, too, was a pioneer who had helped paved the way for Americans to compete in Formula One and

the first American to win a Grand Prix in a car bearing his own name. “Dan Gurney was the importer,” says Kenny. “He was a big motorcycle nut too.”

Gurney remembers the young Kenny Roberts well: “Kenny was just as fast then; he stayed that way for the rest of his career. And if you wanted to have trouble, then that was a good guy to be with [laughs].”

Trouble or not, Roberts had made a huge impression on the men who looked to Ascot for the next generation of racing talent. Roberts turned to Triumph in hopes of making the next step in his career. He did not get the reception he had hoped for:

We went in to negotiate my moving up to be a junior, racing the 650s. The guy looked at me and said, “I’ve enjoyed watching you race at Ascot, and you are a really talented little kid, but I’m afraid you are just too little to ride a big bike.” Man, when he said that, the veins started popping out of my neck.

That short-sighted response would have a profound effect on Kenny Roberts’ career. Spurned by Triumph, he turned to Yamaha: “The only problem I had with the Yamaha deal was that they wanted me to road race. Me and road racing just didn’t get along, but I had to do it. I was pretty good at it right away, but then I started crashin’, just like my sportsman career.”

When he stayed on the machine, Kenny was a factor. Roberts picked up his first major road racing win as a novice at Road Atlanta in 1971. (There was another Yamaha rider at that event, a man who would go on to have a profound influence on Roberts’ career. That man was the 1969 250cc world champion, Kel Carruthers.)

Kenny Roberts exploded onto the Grand National scene in 1972:

That first year, I led the championship halfway through the year, but the dirt trackers kept breaking down. Yamaha didn’t help me much. It was racing the old-fashioned way: “Here are some parts, try this, try that.” I almost left them for Harley, as the Yamahas kept

blowing up. I could have won the championship, if they had done s**t for me.

Roberts won at his second expert race, on the short track at Houston. The landmark event was witnessed by a rider who plays a major role in a later chapter of this story, Earl Hayden:

He's my hero. One time at the Houston Astrodome short track, on a Yamaha 360, I saw him go into turns three and four. When he went into three, he grabbed the throttle and picked the front wheel up. He went all the way through three and four on a short track with the front wheel off the ground. That was one, but I've seen so many of 'em. He ran the Yamahas against the Harleys. If he'd been on a Harley, he might never have lost a race. At Terre Haute, Indiana, he was broad-sliding in the groove on that Yamaha, trying to keep up with the Harley.

Roberts finished his rookie year fourth in points behind Champion Mark Brelsford, Gary Scott, and the previous champion, Gene Romero.

In contract negotiations with Yamaha, Kenny worked out a deal where Kel Carruthers prepared the road racers while tuning-legend Shell Thuet built the flat track machines. It was around this time that Roberts began to adopt his knee-dragging riding style, much to the chagrin of Carruthers:

I started leaning off the bike—I got that from [Jarno] Saarinen—and I started doing that at Ontario in 1972. The next year the race after Daytona was at Dallas, and I started leaning off and dragging my knee. I came into the pits asking for duct tape and started taping my knees. Kel freaked! He said, “What are you doing?” I told him, “I’m dragging my knee.” Kel said, “No, you’re not. Get off that bike. What do you think you are doing? You don’t drag your knee on a motorcycle.”

Carruthers had been schooled on the street circuits of Europe, where riders threaded their way between the phone booths and hedges. Such

an extreme riding style would have resulted in a very short career in Europe.

Carruthers continues:

You've got to remember that by that time the tires had gotten good enough that you could lean the bikes over. But at the time, it seemed like a pretty weird idea, dragging your knee on the ground! But hey, things change. In GP racing, we would hang off the side of the bike, with your bum off the side, but in the high speed corners you didn't go sticking your leg out.

Backed by the wizardry of Carruthers and Thuet, the bikes were competitive in every discipline. Roberts won the Houston short track race, the Colorado Springs Mile, and finished out the season with a win at the half-mile at Ascot Park. Roberts also won five of the nine 250cc road races held that year on his way to taking the 1973 Grand National Championship. He spent the season mastering his innovative knee-dragging style:

At Ontario at the end of the year, I was sliding the 250 around like a dirt tracker, as Ontario had corner after corner. Art Baumann, who would win or crash and was the craziest guy there, said that I was going to kill myself. He told me that I was the craziest guy he had ever seen on a road racer. And I said, "You know, coming from you, Art, that kind of scares me."

KENNY VERSUS THE WORLD

In 1974, Roberts successfully defended his Grand National Championship while also making his international debut in both the Grand Prix and Transatlantic Match Races. The match races in Britain would be Kenny's first experience with the European racing scene. It was not a happy beginning, as Kel Carruthers explains: "The first year we went over, we showed up with slick tires and the marshals at Brands Hatch were horrified; we had a front tire without tread on it."

Kenny continues the story in his usual direct manner:

Some a**hole—I guess they called him the clerk of the course—said we couldn't race with slicks. [But] that's all I had. Goodyear was my sponsor. [The weather] was beautiful, not a cloud in the sky, and he told me you never knew when it was going to rain here. I told him, "Yeah, I can see that." Kel ended up dragging me away; I was going to kill him. I said for him to just give me my goddamned money, and I'll just go home, no f**king problem.

The second round of the series, held at Mallory Park, didn't do much to improve Kenny's attitude toward the Brits:

We got to Mallory Park, and in the first race we took off. We were on slicks. About the second or third lap, I was leading and it just hailed like you couldn't believe. The next lap around, I couldn't see the racetrack. I thought, "What do I do?" I was thinking they would stop the race. Well, they didn't stop the race. We're on slick tires in hail—you just putted around. After, I went to the clerk of the course and asked him, "Why didn't you stop that race?" He says, "We don't stop races in England for a little hail." I said, "You call that a f**king race?" It was just a joke. From the moment I arrived in Britain until I quit, they had these silly little rules that didn't apply, and I was one of the guys that didn't like it.

The rain didn't stop for the second race. But Roberts was prepared this time: "For the second race at Mallory Park, we bolted the funny-looking Goodyear rain tires on. They were basically Formula One tire patterns for a motorcycle, with individual knobs in rain compounds. When the flag dropped, we just disappeared."

Goodyear's head of racing operations, Leo Mehl, describes the event:

Kenny said it was raining on race morning, and as you know we didn't race in the rain in the USA. All the Brits were giving him

the “mickey” saying stuff like, “Hohoho, Yank, you’ve never raced in the rain have you?” Tim Miller, who invented the Gatorback, had done a dirt tire design with a great rain compound, but it had never been tested in the rain. I can’t remember who all was in the race, but at halfway Kenny had lapped all but one guy. He was so anxious to lap the whole field that he hit a big puddle, laid it down, and slid many yards on the wet grass, stopping just in front of the biggest grandstand. He said he got up, took off his helmet, and was laughing like mad. The grandstand stared at him like he was a crazy man.

The first two events had clearly shown Roberts to be the fastest rider. But the American finally met his match at the final pair of races at Oulton Park. It wasn’t a competitor who proved to be too much for Roberts, however—it was the track itself. “I fall off at Oulton Park,” says Kenny:

I fall off EVERY time at Oulton Park! It was one of those racetracks that was real tricky, for all the wrong reasons. One time I cut the corner real sharp, squared it off on the last lap, and it was gravel. That spit me off. The corner marshal said, “Well, you don’t ride down here, you ride up there, everybody knows the line is up there.” It had trees overhanging the racetrack; you’ve got to be careful there because there’s a kind of moss from the trees that grows on the track. They told me about this after my second or third trip to the hospital. Oulton Park always got me:

Later that year, Roberts made his GP debut in the 250cc race at Assen. He was immediately on the pace, setting fastest time en route to an impressive third place:

I passed the first-place guy, the Harley-Davidson of World Champion Walter Villa, but I slipped the clutch and spun it out. I picked it up and was riding around in third, waiting for the last lap flag, the white flag. Kel was all excited that I’d gotten third, and I was yelling that they

didn't put out the f***ing flag. Then Kel told me, "They don't put out white flags in World Championship races."

As mentioned earlier, 1974 was also the year of the fearsome 700cc TZ750A. Unlike Steve Baker, Roberts was able to tame the beast. "I was always in the top three in the road races, but then the 700 came out, and it was 'Lights out' [for the competition]." Roberts also won the 1975 Indy Mile with a dirt track version of the bike, which was basically a state-of-the-art road engine bolted into a dirt bike chassis. The machine could do 140 miles per hour but had no front brakes. Roberts recalls his first time on the bike, which happened to be that 1975 Indy Mile. "We're all in the practice line and I'm saying, 'It's going to be funny when we all get down to turn one, these things don't turn, and we all end up ass-packing ourselves into that wall.' The first time I flicked it into a corner was a mile corner with a cement wall behind it. Now you probably wouldn't do something that stupid today, but at that time you did."

The author recently asked MotoGP veteran Colin Edwards how today's riders would react to being asked to race a GP-engined dirt track chassis without front brakes at 140 miles per hour on a dirt oval: "Sounds like a great idea. I don't want any part of it, but it sounds like a great idea. Obviously Kenny had the balls to do it. I mean we are talking about when men were men and sheep were scared. The s**t that [those guys] went through back in the day, it boggles my mind. It shows how really hard core they were."

Roberts spent the next three seasons dominating the U.S. Grand National road races. But he rarely had the equipment to compete on the dirt tracks and failed to win the title in 1975, 1976, or 1977. After Yamaha pulled the plug on its flat track program, Roberts found himself headed back to Europe almost by default. Competing solely in road races in the United States was not an option, as these events were so few and far between: "I had no desire to do this, but Yamaha didn't want to dirt race anymore; they weren't competitive. In them days, you didn't even think about Europe. I damn near had a breakdown when I found out that I had to go over there. Yamaha said, "We'll give you parts and some money," . . . which was about half of what we needed at the time. They gave us one hundred fifty thousand dollars."

Roberts looked to Leo Mehl at Goodyear for help: "I flew to Goodyear, and Leo Mehl said, 'Kenny, we're gonna go with you to Europe. Can you stay here until tomorrow? We have a lunch then with the board of directors.' There's like fourteen or fifteen of these guys. Leo was saying how 'Kenny has to go to Europe now to try to become world champion.'"

"I remember that lunch well," recalls Mehl. "I asked Kenny to tell the story about the races they had—USA versus Great Britain." Goodyear wrote the check, and Kenny Roberts went off to challenge the world.

Before making the trip, however, Roberts took care of some unfinished business at home by dominating the Daytona 200, lapping the entire field in the process.

The 1978 GP season opened in Venezuela with Roberts competing in both the 250cc and 500cc classes. He won the 250 race on a privateer Yamaha, but the factory 500cc bike broke:

My 500 blew up in the first race, and that's when I found out that I wasn't the works rider. Johnny Cecotto had a different motorcycle than I did. I was saying, "Wait a minute, I'm the factory rider." "Yes, but you aren't the *Japanese* factory rider." That pissed me off . . . At Jarama, we pretty much had the same equipment as Cecotto. I had the thing won, but then one of the throttle slides started hanging up.

Roberts would soon hit his stride; however, first he had to convince the FIM to allow him to race. "In them days, riders were more or less treated like monkeys," Roberts recalls:

The promoters at the World Championship races were just a**holes—there was no other way to explain it. In Spain they really lit me up; they said, "You get two mechanics passes," and I told them that I had three guys. They said, "You get two mechanic passes, what don't you understand about this?" Then they said, "You are not entered because you aren't on the grading list for the 500s." It was because I didn't get any points in Venezuela when the bike broke on the first lap. So I missed the first practice because they weren't going to allow me to

start. It was a different world, and you weren't invited. I ended up with the fast time and was leading the race by about eight seconds until one of the throttles stuck open.

After losing a tense battle with Hennen at the Spanish GP, Roberts took the next three races at Salzburgring, Nogaro, and Mugello. A second place in the next GP at Assen, combined with Pat Hennen's career-ending injury, meant Roberts was now leading the World Championship in his debut season. "It's not like I wasn't used to winning road races," says Kenny, "but I couldn't believe I had won so easily."

Many American riders struggle to cope with the European culture, including the drastically different retail landscape, accommodations, meal times—even the smallest details, such as trying to get ice in your soft drink. But Roberts never missed a beat and immediately replaced Barry Sheene as the sport's dominant force.

The 1978 season marked the farewell of the legendary nine-mile Spa-Francorchamps circuit with the Masta kink on the road to Stavelot and roads either lined with barbed-wire fences, buildings, cows, or trees. (The 1967 Formula One World Champion Denny Hulme once famously said, "Spa in the rain? Park it.") The site of the Belgian Grand Prix is challenging enough in dry conditions with predictable and reliable equipment, but Kenny had neither:

The 500, every time I'd take it out, it would seize. Of course, the 250 kept blowing up, too, so I never really had any laps. The [Yamaha] racing manager ripped the number plate off of Johnny Cecotto's spare bike and put my number on it. That night, my truck pulled out of the pits, and Johnny's truck pulled out of the pits. They went out to a field or parking lot somewhere. Johnny had decided which bike he wanted to use, and they took Johnny's engine out of the unused bike and put it into mine, and then drove back to the track.

As if lack of practice time and intra-team shenanigans weren't enough, Roberts would make his Spa debut in intermediate weather: "It was

probably the most scared that I've ever been on a starting line. I didn't know where I was going. I couldn't believe we were there racing. Johnny Cecotto's bike blew up [laughs]."

Despite the conditions, Roberts took second, further cementing his points lead over Sheene. If Roberts had concerns over Spa, he was shocked at Imatra, Finland. "Finland was a rude awakening; that place was a full-on street, big long straights with trees on either side of it. The only good part about that whole thing was that Sheene was more scared about that s**t than I was."

The money involved was abysmal, hardly in line with the risks involved. "They told me that they were going to give me 30 percent more start money," Roberts recalls. "My start money was like \$200. I just laughed and told them, 'Wow, now I can take my kids out to McDonalds after the race.' They would get pissed saying, 'You don't appreciate it?' Oh God, that pissed them off."

As in 1976, the season concluded at the fearsome 14-mile Nürburgring Nordschleife. Roberts describes his first experience at the mountainous track that three-time Formula One champion Jackie Stewart called the Green Hell: "To me, I didn't think it was that bad. The only problem in my estimation was that you could have rain in four corners and nobody would even know it. It happened to me in practice. I came up on this corner over this hill and boom! It was a rainstorm."

Sheene was the only rider who could still challenge for the title, and with the British star in fourth place, Roberts stayed in control of the situation, covering his rival by finishing third behind Ferrari and Cecotto, a result that put him down in history as the first American 500cc World Champion. The author recently asked Roberts to recall the moment:

The first American to ever do it . . . Unfortunately there weren't too many Americans around, and you couldn't pick up a cell phone like you can now and call home. I think Yamaha U.S. didn't even know about it until Monday. There was a bar inside the racetrack, and me and Sparky [Edmonston of Lectron carbs, who later introduced Roberts to Wayne Rainey], we kind of took it over and got drunk. We

had a lot of champagne and had a big party there with the people we worked with. But you know what, when you've got two small children living with you in a motorhome, reality sets in real quick. Three days later it was back to changing diapers.

Oh the glamor of big-time motorcycle racing . . .

KING KENNY

A testing injury would hamper the start of Roberts' title defense in 1979, forcing him to miss the first round in Venezuela. "I just was really conservative," he recalls. "I didn't want to crash."

He returned for round two at Austria, taking the win despite wearing a back brace and struggling with his injuries. After taking second at Hockenheim, Roberts notched three straight victories at Imola, Jarama, and in Yugoslavia.

At Spa in July 1979 there was a rider's boycott when Roberts and the top GP riders in the paddock drew the line on track safety. "I got in an argument with one FIM guy in Belgium and I went over the fence after him," he recalls. "I was going to kill him. It was just awful, it was a different era. Ed Youngblood, president of the AMA, told me they were going to pull my license, and told me I had to write a letter and apologize. I said 'Ed, if they pull my license because of safety, I'll make far more money suing them than I'll make racing.' A win at the penultimate race of the season, the British GP, followed by a third place in the finale in France, clinched the title.

The 1980 season would prove to be much more of a struggle, as the Suzuki had the advantage in pace over Roberts' Yamaha. Despite the disadvantage, Roberts still defeated Franco Uncini and Graziano Rossi (father of Valentino) on their Suzukis in the season opener at Misano. As the season unfolded, it became a battle between Roberts and a fleet of Suzuki-mounted challengers that included future champions Uncini and Marco Lucchinelli as well as Randy Mamola and Takazumi Katayama. Wins in Spain and France gave Roberts a commanding lead in a championship that would run only eight rounds that year.

Roberts' supreme riding in 1980 cannot be overestimated. The Yamaha was clearly inferior to the Suzuki. The other Yamaha riders, including top-drawer talents Barry Sheene and Johnny Cecotto, were never in the fight. It was clear that Kenny Roberts was the difference. In a preview of the 1981 season, Suzukis would sweep the final four Grands Prix of the year, but by then it was too late. Roberts' late-season consistency—a third at Zolder and second places in Finland and Great Britain—were enough to seal his third consecutive World Championship.

But Suzuki's dominance would put an end to Roberts' epic run in 1981. The American won Rounds 2 and 3 at Hockenheim and Monza, but his



Roberts leads Randy Mamola at the British GP at Silverstone in 1981.
Mortons Media

title challenge was effectively scuttled when Lucchinelli swept the following five races. At season's end, Marco Lucchinelli was the world champion, with Randy Mamola (Suzuki) second, followed by the Yamahas of Roberts and Sheene.

The 1982 Grand Prix season proved to be more of the same for Roberts and Yamaha. It began on a promising note with wins at round one (Argentina) and round four (Spain). But despite pole positions at Assen and Silverstone, the rest of the season would mean frustration as Franco Uncini and Suzuki took five wins and the title. As Roberts and Yamaha struggled to find the pace to match the Suzukis, another threat was emerging in the form of a very fast 20-year-old from Shreveport, Louisiana: Freddie Spencer would win two GPs in his rookie season, establishing himself and Honda as forces to be reckoned with in the future.

Roberts had struggled for two seasons, but hopes were high for 1983. "They started experimenting around building in-lines, squares, Vs, and things got turned around for a few years," says Roberts. "The 1983 was a good bike again."

Another positive was the addition of Eddie Lawson as Roberts' teammate. "I made Yamaha hire him [Lawson] . . . I needed some help with the bike. It's kind of hard racing against five works Hondas on one works Yamaha."

Roberts had already decided that 1983 would be his final season in Grand Prix. He was going to enjoy it, and, if at all possible, celebrate it with a fourth championship.

Kel Carruthers describes the situation:

Eddie got thrown in the deep end that first season. To me, he really had concentrated just on the racing; he wasn't into the socializing that much. Kenny was about having a good time—not getting drunk or all that stuff, but everything was a good time for Kenny. Kenny was serious about it in a different way. You can be serious and still have a lot of fun doing it. People ask, "How do you compare Eddie Lawson to Kenny Roberts?" Well, they are both good, but the difference with

Kenny was that you could put him on a bad bike and he could ride it. With Kenny, you could say, "This is as good as it is going to get, so just get out and ride the damn thing." That was one of the best things that Kenny had going for him, that he could do that.

Lawson's era was to come soon enough, but the Yamana challenge in 1983 would come from Kenny Roberts.

Kenny recalls his final World Championship campaign:

We didn't hit the ground running. We had some problems. But by Monza, it was going the way I wanted it to go. But the Japanese engineer figured the mileage wrong, thinking we wouldn't go that fast in the race, and I ran out of gas on the last lap. That didn't help. I could have won France, but then the bike broke. Just everything that could have gone wrong happened, and Freddie . . . it was just one of those years where he wasn't going to lose.

Yet despite the uphill battle Roberts faced, the championship would be one of the all-time classics, a see-saw battle that went to the final lap of the season. But the defining moment came a race earlier, on the last lap of the penultimate round in Sweden.

It's not a moment Roberts is likely to forget: "Yeah, he ran me off the track on the last lap. He ran beneath me and didn't make the corner. Who was on the outside of him? I was. There is no discussion, nothing you can do when the guy on the inside of you doesn't turn."

The young upstart had given no quarter to his established rival.

The author asked Roberts if this was a situation where the Honda handled significantly better than the Yamaha. "Of course it did, it had Michelin tires. I had Dunlops, and the tires from time to time were definitely superior to what we were running."

The final race came a month later at Imola. Spencer held the lead in points; Roberts needed to win and have Spencer finish third or lower. "He wasn't going to beat me [in Imola], because it didn't really depend upon tires," says Kenny, who duly won the race. "I could've taken him off the

track, but I didn't." Spencer followed Roberts across the line to win the World Championship by a mere two points.

TEAM ROBERTS

Roberts' GP riding career may have been over (he would continue to compete in the United States), but he had no intention of walking away from the sport. For 1984, his focus turned to team ownership, starting out with a 250cc Grand Prix team and running Wayne Rainey and Alan Carter. Two years later, he moved up to the premier class, signing Randy Mamola and Mike Baldwin to ride for his team.

Mike Baldwin recalls the earliest days of the 500cc Team Roberts:

The good thing about [1986] is that they got the bikes early, before the season started. We went to Malaysia and ran four races down there, in the heat . . . in the sweltering heat. By the time we got to Spain for the first race at Jarama, we were ready to go."

After finishing third and fourth in the points, the team improved to second in 1987—it would be Randy Mamola's fourth season as championship runner-up. In 1988, Wayne Rainey returned to Team Roberts, paired with emerging talent Kevin Magee. Roberts explains the keys to the team's success at the time: "We started doing our own development work on the bikes, and that was what separated us from the other Yamahas. I started putting together people, and we started doing it the way I wanted to do it. Then we took over the Marlboro deal."

Wayne Rainey describes the advantages of riding for a legend and a three-time world champion:

I respected what he said. I was able to run stuff by him and he would give me what he thought. Having an ally of that caliber is an advantage; in this case Kenny and I worked really well. I could ask Kenny to go out there and watch Kevin [Schwantz] coming out of turn three: "Does he sound like he's using more rpm, is he shifting sooner?" These are not questions you can ask just anybody and expect to get a good answer.

Rainey, Team Roberts, and Yamaha would win three consecutive World Championships from 1990 through 1992. Despite the success, the situation was not always rosy, as Roberts explains:

Yamaha started saving money and spending it in other places; there was no happy ending. The problem was that I had Marlboro on one side yelling and screaming that it wasn't good enough, and on the other side I had Yamaha saving money. I was like caught in the middle and I couldn't get out. We were making the ignition products at that time. All the cylinders Wayne won with were ours, not Yamaha's. Cylinder heads, exhaust pipes, pistons, fairings, chassis, linkages—all our spec, all on my nickel. It got to the point where I said, "Look, I can't keep this up."

Roberts explains his decision to break away from Yamaha and start his own team with backing from Malaysian motorcycle manufacturer Modenas:

[I had] two choices: quit or build my own motorcycle. I had a lot of people depending upon me, and I leaned toward building my own motorcycle. The biggest mistake I made was saying that we were building a three[-cylinder engine]. If we had used a four, we would have had a Yamaha from the start. All we had to make would have been a crankshaft and a crankcase, because I was already making all the cylinders.

Part of the decision to go with three cylinders was a concern about utilizing any of his past work with Yamaha:

I was worried a little bit about the legality of Yamaha saying that we'd copied their motor or something. The engineers were pushing really hard on the three-cylinder because they thought it was an advantage at that time. The development of the four-cylinder engines had kind of stopped because of the tires. The tires weren't very good. The four-cylinders were struggling for about two or three years; the lap times weren't getting any

better. The 250s were gaining on us, so we thought, "Okay, we'll build a three-cylinder." Well, guess what? Before the three-cylinder actually hit, they made a new gas rule that took the lead out of gas, and that hurt us on the three-cylinder. Then the tires got better, putting the three-cylinder at a disadvantage. The first engine was built by Tom Walkinshaw at TWR, but then we started doing it after that. At that time, doing two-stroke development, it was kind of black magic. The first engine was kind of a shot in the dark; to make it small and light we compromised some things that we probably shouldn't have. The second design was balanced, based off the Honda three cylinder with a couple of changes to it. We never had vibration problems with that. It had one cylinder down and two up, like the Honda, and the crankshaft turned backward, which was counterproductive. The last three-cylinder we built, we built in our own facility; it was the best engine out of all three.

Suffice it to say, the Modenas KR3 was off the pace. The repercussions would be profound:

What happened was that we had plenty of budget to do this, but in the first year it didn't win. Then we lost the budget. Marlboro said if it wasn't going to win they weren't going to dump a bunch of money into this thing, so we lost all our money.

Team Roberts would continue, working with Proton and then KTM. Both experiences were frustrating and ultimately fruitless:

We basically never had an engine that was competitive. The KTM thing was on a shoestring, anyway. If the sponsorship didn't come, then they were supposed to pick up the expenses. When it came time to pick up the expenses, nobody was doing it, so I was. The contract kept getting delayed, and then they just walked away. In racing, most of the time you are dealing with people who want to do something, that have the passion. If I were just a businessman, I wouldn't have done it, as the contract wasn't done.

The 2006 season would prove to be the brightest spot in the history of Team KR.

There were no years, except for the first year with Honda and the five-cylinder, where we had a competitive motor. We had a very good engine, probably the best four-stroke in that era. We started with the right motor and we had Kenny [Jr.] riding it. Two thousand six was a great year for everybody; it showed that we could actually build a good motorcycle, and Honda did help us a lot. We had about twenty-five people working on the project.

Roberts Jr. led two Grands Prix in 2006, including the first lap of the United States MotoGP at Laguna Seca and part of the last lap at Estoril. By the end of the season, there was optimism that Team KR would be a factor in 2007. This would not be the case, as Roberts explains:

Unfortunately, somebody dumber than me made the rule that we'd go to 800s [800cc engines from 2006-spec 990cc engines]. The 800 motor



Kenny Roberts in 2006. Joe Bonnello

didn't live up to its billing, and the money just kept getting tighter and tighter, and the costs just kept going up and up. To be able to afford the Honda motors, and being an American team . . . it just didn't work. The Italians can do it, the Spanish can do it, but in America it's unheard of to sponsor a Grand Prix bike. At that time, there was nothing.

In Spain, virtually every billboard has a motorcycle on it, and the top Spanish riders are media and marketing superstars. Yet, despite all of the American success on the world stage of Grand Prix motorcycle racing, an all-American team simply does not have those kinds of marketing opportunities. Sadly, Team KR closed its doors before the beginning of the 2008 season.

The demise of Team KR has left Roberts with some free time for other pursuits. His new sport of choice might surprise some, considering Roberts' high-speed exploits of years past. Wayne Rainey notes that his former boss had recently spent almost a month at his house, practicing his golf game every day in preparation for his next big challenge: the Pebble Beach Pro-Am.

Roberts describes his latest ambitions:

When I quit racing in 1983, I was a twenty-nine handicap; now my handicap is four. We made the cut [at Pebble Beach] but then it rained out. This year the schedule was so tight there was no date available to do it. My luck. We'll get another shot at it, because making the cut, you are automatically in . . . but making the cut is hard. Really good golfers didn't make it.

It's probably safe to say that any pursuit that Kenny Roberts attempts will see success.

Throughout his career, Roberts has had a major influence on the motorcycle racing community, offering advice and mentoring to numerous young talents over the years. Earl Hayden, father of 2006 World Champion Nicky Hayden, explains how Roberts helped him out:

He always told me, "Go get one of your kids ready, and then come see me." He told me to get 'em road racing, get off the dirt track bikes and

maybe go see the world. Staying in dirt track, you would only get so far. King Kenny, he's the one who told me to get them out there road racing, and I'm glad he did. I'd be on food stamps if they were still out there dirt trackin'.

Roberts blazed a path that many Americans would follow. As Doug Chandler explains, "Kenny is one of the role model leaders as far as Americans go. Going over to Europe and winning World Championships—everyone wanted to follow suit."

Of all the Americans in Grand Prix racing, none would be able to match Kenny Roberts' impact on the sport. From his earliest years racing on the public road circuits of Europe and through the MotoGP era, Kenny Roberts has been the most influential American in GP racing history.

CHAPTER 3

The Prodigy: Freddie Spencer



Spencer on board the NR500 Honda during the 1981 British GP. Despite wringing everything he possibly could from it, the revolutionary bike was not a success.

Mortons Media

BY 1980, ONE WOULD think that Europeans would have finally come to recognize the remarkable road racing skill and depth coming out of the United States. But they would be shocked once again by the arrival of a bright-eyed teenager from Louisiana.

As in previous years, the wake-up call would be delivered during the Transatlantic Match Races. U.S. team manager Gavin Trippe describes the event: "The thing with Freddie that year was that nobody paid him any attention. All the articles were about other people. But those of us in the know were thinking, 'You just wait. Just wait. You have no idea.' It was the arrogance of the Europeans. It was the same with Rayborn, Roberts, and Spencer. The Europeans were blindsided."

Freddie Spencer recalls that first race at Brands Hatch: "I started on the front row—one of the least-experienced guys in the field—and ended up winning it. Barry [Sheene] and Kenny [Roberts] were fighting for second. You can imagine when I got up on the podium afterward, the surprise of the crowd and everyone. I ended up winning race two, and Kenny and I ended up battling for race wins."

With his sweep of both races at Brands Hatch, "Fast" Freddie Spencer had arrived on the world stage.

BOY AMONG MEN

Frederick Burdette Spencer was born on December 20, 1961, in Shreveport, Louisiana. The Spencers were a racing family, and young Freddie got his start early. He began his motorcycle racing career at age four, competing at the local dirt tracks. Before Freddie came along, the family had been inclined toward four-wheel competition: "My brother, my dad, and my sister all raced go-karts. My brother is eleven years older than me, and my sister is fourteen years older. I came along very late: My mom thought she had the flu. My brother had always liked motorcycles, so the family started doing motorcycle stuff together."

Even at such a young age, it was clear that Spencer was blessed with an uncommon gift. Riding ever larger and more demanding machinery, he proved a match for anything he tried: "I had always ridden bikes much bigger than me, and much more powerful. By the time I was five, I had already been

racing for a year. Even when I was eight or nine years old, when I was riding my brother's 250 dirt tracker, I couldn't even touch the ground."

Riding oversized machinery no doubt forced young Freddie to rely entirely on his keen sense of balance. He wasn't tall enough to just put a foot out to stay upright on the bike.

Spencer spent years honing his technique, hour after hour on a practice track in his yard, often keeping one part of the track wet to increase the challenge:

I pulled [the site where Spencer grew up] up on Google Earth: You can still see the path I rode, the oval. I could judge what this lean angle would do, what speed. It helped me to become a quick study. I'd lean, rotate, and see how soon I could pick it up and how much I picked it up, what I had to change to pick the throttle up sooner. That drill that I ran, with my track being dry on one end, wet on the other . . . it had more impact than anything else upon my ability, depth perception, throttle versus lean angle, and changes as the tires went away.

It wasn't long before Freddie had his introduction to the world of road racing. He was all of 11 years old:

One Friday night, I was racing at a flat track event in Irving, Texas, and we heard over the loudspeakers about a road race that was going to be at Green Valley Raceway. Well, they didn't have anything for kids my age. The smallest class was the 0-to-250 production class, and the only bike I could kind of fit on was this RD100. Of course I didn't do very well running a 100 against 250s, but within a couple of races I got an RD250. They came out with the TA125 production road race bike later, so by the time I was twelve, I had a proper road racing bike.

Meanwhile, Freddie Spencer was already immersed in the sport of motorcycle road racing, poring over the magazines that told of the exploits of his European heroes and the specifications of their factory road racing machines: "I already followed everything. Kent Andersson was the world

champion on the Yamaha TA125, except his was water-cooled. Years later when I met Kent at the Swedish GP, I told him about that, and he said, ‘At eleven years old you knew about this?’”

Spencer’s second full year of road racing saw him reach the sport’s mecca in the United States: Daytona International Speedway:

I raced in the amateur race at Daytona with the [Yamaha TA125] at age twelve. I led the race on the last lap, but I was so little . . . To get to the front brake, I’d have to roll my hand off the throttle; same thing with the clutch. When it seized up on me, I couldn’t get my hand to the clutch in time. All I had to do was go through the last turn and the checkered flag was there . . .

Freddie Spencer had arrived, but his size needed to catch up with his enormous natural speed and talent.

Over the next few seasons, Freddie rode and raced everything he could get his hands on, often running in every class at any given event:

By 1977, I was riding an RD400, a 125 single, and a TZ250. I’d race all those bikes on the same day. A lot of times I would go to a race, and it was just Dad and I. At the WERA national finals at Mid-Ohio in October of 1977, I won the 250 race. I was fifteen and because I won that race, my dad got me a TZ750—can you believe that? That would be like a fifteen-year-old riding a Grand Prix bike today!

Giving a TZ750 to a 15-year-old might be roughly equivalent to giving a child a loaded revolver to play with. The Yamaha road racer was a fearsome machine that had prompted the near-retirement of some great riders. Gene Romero, the 1970 Grand National Champion, describes the bike: “Those TZ750s were really a two-wheeled hot rod. They were almost violent compared to what we had been running. When testing at Daytona on the main straight at about 160 miles per hour, the thing would do this wobble and begin to shake. We tried everything, but it still had that problem. It just scared the living s**t out of you.”

Freddie Spencer, however, was not intimidated by it: "I was telling my dad, 'I want one of those [TZ750s]. I know I can ride it.' Kenny Clark, who was the [Yamaha] race manager at that time, sold it to us. Boy, I sure did enjoy riding that thing. Of course, I wasn't old enough to race it professionally until 1980. You had to be eighteen."

There was a Superbike-sized loophole in the rules, however, and Spencer would race right through it: "When you turned sixteen, you were a novice dirt tracker and raced against other novices. When you road raced, you rode a maximum size of a 250 against other novices. But I could also run Superbike, for whatever reason."

Regardless of the logic (or lack thereof) behind setting 16-year-old riders loose on 1,000cc road racing machinery, the Superbike series offered Spencer the opportunity to continue his upward career trajectory:

When I raced at Daytona in 1978, I rode a 1,000cc Suzuki that my brother and Doug Polen built. Doug Polen was the mechanic at my brother's Suzuki dealership in Texas. Doug took up racing late; I'm pretty sure [Daytona 1978] was the first time he had gone to a professional race. I can't remember where I finished, but it wasn't that good. The thing wobbled so bad; it was unstable.

The following season of 1979 would be a breakout year for Spencer. After Mike Baldwin smashed his femur in a crash at Loudon in June, putting him out of racing for a year, Kawasaki brought Spencer in as a replacement. This was the era of Suzuki domination, with Wes Cooley earning Superbike Championships in 1978 and 1979 on the Yoshimura GS1000. But the 17-year-old Spencer would make the best possible impression in his debut as a factory rider:

The two races in July were Sears Point and Laguna, and they ran a Superbike class. I had never tested on this thing; I just showed up on Friday. Gary Mathers, their team manager, asked me to fill in; I was only seventeen. Luckily, I went out and won at Sears Point, and that had a big effect. I had won 250 races and raced the

Superbikes three times before, but this was my first real chance on a good bike.

Three weeks later, Spencer repeated with victory at Laguna Seca. Fujio Yoshimura (son of legendary tuner Pops Yoshimura) witnessed those races and understood the significance of those wins perhaps more than anyone else, because he was more than familiar with the specifications of Spencer's machine. "We sold Wes Cooley's old Kawasaki to the Kawasaki factory so they could do their racing based on the bike we ran. Freddie Spencer rode the bike at Sears Point and Laguna Seca, and he beat us with the old bike we had built!"

The two races put Freddie Spencer on the map in American Superbike racing, while providing a glimpse of the greatness that was to come. With the AMA Superbike season only spanning four events in 1979, Spencer had finished third in points, while adding the title of American 250 GP champion to his résumé with more than twice as many points as runner-up Eddie Lawson.

Young Freddie Spencer was a hot commodity, drawing interest from both Kawasaki and Honda, and Spencer chose the latter partly for sentimental reasons. "They had equipment for me to race at the Astrodome; I'd been going there since I was eight or nine years old and had always wanted to race there."

Spencer also understood the long-term potential Honda could provide. "Although it didn't say anything about a GP program specifically in my contract, I knew I was going to get the opportunity," he says.

In the meantime, Freddie had turned 18 in December and was eligible to ride in America's premier event, the Daytona 200. Legendary tuning wizard Erv Kanemoto prepared the Yamaha TZ750 for this memorable debut in the premier class, Formula One.

Honda's director of racing, Gerald Davison, recalls:

When I first saw him ride at Daytona, he was just sixteen, and I didn't know anything about him. Having watched him on the track, I then went to see him, and I was really shocked to see how young he was. It

was hard to relate to the mature rider I had been watching on track. This was the first conversation I had with him and Erv about coming to Honda to ride in our new GP team. At that time, we were not ready and it was important for him to continue to ride the Yamaha until we were.

At Daytona, 18-year-old Spencer was on the pace immediately: "My first year that I could race there professionally was 1980. At Daytona, I missed out on the pole by a couple of tenths to Kenny. Kenny fell out with a throttle cable problem about ten or fifteen laps into the race, and then I had over a minute lead when the bike suffered a crankshaft failure."

When asked if he was shocked by Freddie's speed at Daytona, Erv Kanemoto recalls, "No, because prior to that all indications were that if everything ran to its potential—if the machine was close—Freddie would be able to make up the difference."

Meanwhile, Gavin Trippe always kept an open slot or two on the Transatlantic Match Races team in case someone had a remarkable performance at the Daytona 200. Freddie Spencer had passed this audition and was added to the team. At just 18 years old, the precocious young kid was going racing against the likes of Barry Sheene and the rest of the world's greatest riders on road racing courses he had never seen.

The rest, as they say, is history. Freddie recalls that first experience: "When I showed up, nobody knew who I was. I was the young American. Friday as we were coming out of the tunnel to the racetrack for the first race [at Brands Hatch], I knew this was where I wanted to be. It wasn't the World Championship yet, but I really felt that I had prepared my entire life for this opportunity."

Erv Kanemoto reveals the confidence that he had in his rider: "Freddie could go to almost any racetrack, and within a few laps, he could be competitive. Deep down, you kind of felt that it could have been possible. Later, in the GPs it was the same way. Within a dozen or twenty laps, he could be competitive. Provided the machine was running correctly, he could run at the lap record."

Spencer's sweep of the series-opening races at Brands Hatch was all the more remarkable when you consider that the 18-year-old was battling with

the world's best road racers, including world champions Barry Sheene and Kenny Roberts, and he was doing it on a customer bike. Clearly, Freddie Spencer was going to be a force to be reckoned with in the future.

VALUABLE LESSONS

Two seasons of racing Superbikes in the United States followed, as Spencer (and Honda) continued to develop toward a career in GP racing. In 1980, he finished third in points and scored Honda's first AMA Superbike win at Elkhart Lake. The following year, results improved to second in the championship on the strength of three wins from Spencer. Perhaps more importantly, the 1981 season included Spencer's GP debut, astride the oval-piston NR500 Honda.

Freddie recalls the radical four-stroke bike:

The first time I rode it was at Laguna in 1981. I only rode it twice, and the only race it ever won was that heat race at Laguna Seca. The interesting thing about it was that the powerband was supposedly between 13,600 and 21,500, but the reality was that it didn't have much torque. The oval pistons with the eight valves made it similar to a V-8. Another thing was that the valve springs were pretty weak because of the massive amount of heat the engine was generating at the time. To get the power required, there was a lot of friction. 21,500 is not a small amount of rpm, and they didn't have hydropneumatic valve operation then. When I rode the bike at Laguna, I geared the thing so I was shifting a lot. I was running it between about 18,000 and 22,000, because that's really where the usable power was. Because of the slipper clutch, I was able to run like a 250 and just shift it a lot.

Watching from the Laguna Seca sidelines was local legend Pat Hennen: "Freddie is one of my secret heroes. I watched him on the 500 Honda at Laguna Seca. I was told the redline was 21,000 rpm, an electric drill. Talk about sounding pretty, that kind of mechanical genius."

The heat race would be the only victory for the NR500, as Spencer explains:

In the main event, it broke valve springs and it wasn't able to finish. They decided to take it to Silverstone for the British Grand Prix, which was in two weeks. I rode it there in the top ten, got as high as fourth, and then the valve springs broke. I was doing well, the best it had ever run, but [Silverstone] is so fast; it's an old airport, and as soon as I would get the thing up and going, I'd hit a gust of wind and the rpm would drop because there was no flywheel weight on the thing. So, with the tall gearing and the corner speed I would try to have to run and how hard I was trying . . . It wasn't as conducive to a good result as on a track like Laguna, where I could gear it to run in the powerband. Plus, it wasn't reliable. But [Honda] learned a great deal that benefited the V-4 technology.

Despite the disappointing results, Spencer still impressed with his speed and dedication, as Gerald Davison recalls:

What was refreshing was that he had this clean-cut tennis player aura about him. What made him so likeable was that he was just a really nice person that did his best in all circumstances. This was pre-HRC [Honda Racing Corporation] and the NR500 was anything but a good racing tool, but he even got some better performance from that. Of course, it was the NSR that made all the difference.

It was not only Spencer who was doing his best to make the NR500 competitive. The Honda factory was spending an enormous amount of time and money trying to prove that four-stroke technology was still competitive in a two-stroke world. Spencer explains:

They tried to make the engine smaller again. One of the issues I had at Silverstone especially was trying to get enough weight on the front to help the thing have some really good feel. And the overheating problems: It generated so much excess heat that it really caused a lot of the reliability issues. The Honda engineers just didn't have the experience and knowledge of materials available that we have today. That's

what I tell people about the bike. Was it successful on the track? No. But the experience it gave us was even more valuable.

The 1982 season would be the first full GP campaign for 20-year-old Freddie Spencer. He would compete on Honda's new two-stroke GP bike:

Honda had been in the World Championship races with the NR since 1979 without much success, but the first year of the two-stroke was where things got competitive. [Before then,] we had heard the rumors that Honda was going two-stroke. They brought the engine to American Honda in July of 1981. It only had three cylinders. Erv's first reaction was, "Well, it's missing a cylinder." Plus, it was reed valve when Yamaha and Suzuki had gone to rotary valves. The whole idea was to make a bike that was lighter and narrower, but in fact it was heavier than the Yamaha or the Suzuki. That first race out, we battled for the win in Buenos Aires but still had some of the overheating issues that we had experienced in winter testing.

Nevertheless, Spencer managed to take the three-cylinder NS500 two-stroke to third place. Next stop was England for the Transatlantic Match Races, but the new bikes continued to struggle with teething problems, and Spencer was forced to withdraw midway through the series:

The reason we had to withdraw was that we were having some throttle sticking problems. Barry and I were battling coming through turn one and going up to the hairpin, my throttle stuck open. I laid the bike down and went into the haybales. Obviously, we were racing for the World Championship, so we weren't able to continue racing the bike in the match races. This was what eventually killed the match races: The World Championship was a priority; the riders weren't encouraged to ride in nonpoints international events. We ran Daytona, and so would Kenny. But that was important because there was no USGP at the time.

Part of the problem was that Freddie was pushing the bikes far harder than the development riders had done in preseason testing. Spencer's first test of the new bike nearly led to a massive accident due to his trail braking and early turn-in technique. The front wheel impacted the radiator mid-corner. The team had underestimated the loading that only Freddie could generate. "You can test and do R and D work," says Spencer. "But until the guys are riding the bike at the top level . . . Things happen, things come up because of the stresses."

Stuart Shenton (who would later serve as technical director of the Suzuki MotoGP team) had been brought on board at Honda for 1982. He explains the situation when he joined the team: "The early [bikes] were [unreliable]; they had problems. But Freddie was quite tough on the machinery. In some ways, it was good for Honda because when they had the problems, they got on top of them, and we knew if it could last with Freddie, it could last with anybody."

Erv Kanemoto applauds Honda's commitment to success in the 1982 season:

It was their first venture with a two-stroke Grand Prix machine, and having been working in 1981 with Barry Sheene and Yamaha, I felt it would be really difficult for the bike to be up and running in such a short time. [Honda was] definitely committed to doing whatever it took. They were willing to do most anything to catch up.

In terms of sheer speed, Spencer was a factor from the moment the Honda GP team arrived in 1982. But reliability problems kept him from contending for the championship. After starting from pole for Round 4 in the Spanish GP at Jarama, Spencer's Honda retired from the lead after a coil wire broke. "The vibration from the fact that it was a three-cylinder did cause some problems initially," he recalls, "frames cracking, transmissions, things like that." At the following GP at Misano, Freddie took fastest lap on his way to a second-place finish. Another fastest lap at Assen confirmed that the speed was there. A maiden victory for Spencer and HRC seemed just a matter of time.

That breakthrough win would come soon enough—on the Fourth of July, no less—at the Belgian GP at Spa-Francorchamps, a track well-suited to Freddie's style and the Honda's strengths. "I love that track," says Spencer. "Just high-speed sweepers, and I could make up for the lack of acceleration with corner speed." Freddie Spencer, age 20, became the youngest rider ever to win a 500cc Grand Prix—and he had accomplished the feat on America's birthday.

The Spa victory was followed up with another at the penultimate round at Mugello in the San Marino GP, and Spencer ended the season third in points behind Uncini and Graeme Crosby. The young American also started from pole position in the final three races of 1982 to carry momentum into 1983 as the fastest man in GP racing.

THE EPIC 1983 SEASON

Over the winter, Honda continued to develop the three-cylinder bike, fine-tuning the response of the chassis to fit Spencer's demands. A critical point for Spencer was the turn-in response of the motorcycle, the vital ingredient to his approach:

One of the things we really worked on in the off-season was the directional change. We needed the new bike to steer a little better. I wanted to get more of a directional change at the first application of lean angle. The reason that is so important is because the speed you carry from the moment you turn—that first rotation toward the apex—is so critical. The longer it takes you to change direction, the more it's going to begin pushing the front.

Honda also worked on the engine, as Spencer explains: "In 1983, they made it a little bit lighter and got a little more horsepower out of it. There were two times at the end of the races after we stopped it wouldn't start up again because the main bearings were lying in the bottom of the cases."

All the off-season work would pay off when Spencer won the first three Grands Prix of the 1983 season. The improvements were particularly striking at Spa, where Freddie was six seconds per lap faster than

the previous year. One would think such advances would have ensured Honda's domination, but that was not the case.

Instead, the 1983 season would prove to be one of the greatest championships in the sport's history—the year when the era's two greatest road racers collided head-on. In terms of sheer speed, the matchup was a draw. After the first six Grands Prix, each rider had three poles. After the first eight Grands Prix, each had four. After 10, each had five, and after 12 races, each had six.

Race results told a similar tale: Every Grand Prix in the 1983 500cc World Championship was won by either Spencer or Roberts. Spencer describes the intensity of that epic season:

I'd go out and turn a quick lap, come in, and that would be it. I'd say, "I can't go any faster." Then Kenny would go quicker. So, I'd go out and do it again . . . and again . . . Then I'd go nine-tenths quicker after saying that there was no way I could go faster. Every race, every session in 1983 was like that. It's like the Japanese would say, "Are you ready to jump back in the fire?" Chuck Yeager put it perfectly—a great test pilot survives only because he could push it past the envelope and reel it back in.

As described in the previous chapter, the titanic battle of wills would reach its climax at the second-to-last race in Sweden. Coming in to the race, Spencer had a two-point lead over Roberts. But Roberts was on a roll, having won the previous three rounds. A fourth-straight victory would give the Yamaha rider the points lead going into the finale at Imola, putting his destiny in his own hands at a track where he was all but unbeatable. Roberts was one lap away from taking the win until that epic and controversial moment when Spencer made his attempt for the lead, diving up the inside of Roberts under braking at the end of the straight.

Not surprisingly, Spencer sees the incident differently than Roberts: "We got next to each other, and I wasn't going to shut off until he did. So we both ran deep. I got it slowed down, and he was a little bit wide. And when he got back on the throttle, the rear end came around and he got off on the edge of the track."

It was a split-second that made history, a moment that is still being talked about nearly 30 years later. Spencer's move was the pivotal instant when the two greatest riders in the world, each with five Grand Prix victories, came together in a moment that decided the World Championship. Spencer's controversial victory kept him in the points lead going into the final race. As with Rossi's lunge up the inside of Sete Gibernau at the Spanish MotoGP (Jerez) of 2005, Spencer's move will always be the subject of much discussion and opinion.

The 1983 season was also the greatest battle between teams since the 1967 clash of Hailwood/Honda versus Agostini/MV Agusta, when each rider finished the season tied with five Grand Prix wins each, and Agostini carried home the prize on the strength of his superior number of second-place finishes. Such a clash of titans usually only occurs once in a generation.

Lost on few in this, the greatest rivalry of the era, was the fact that both riders were Americans. Roberts' teammate was another American, up-and-coming rider Eddie Lawson. At the finale at Imola, it was essential that Lawson play a role. If Roberts won with Spencer's Honda in second, the World Championship belonged to Spencer. If Roberts and Lawson could manage a Yamaha 1-2 finish, then the World Championship belonged to Kenny Roberts. Imola would favor the powerful Yamaha because of the track layout, so the championship was very much still in question. However, given the results at Sweden, Spencer had more control over his destiny, as he only needed that top-two finish if Roberts won.

Spencer describes the situation heading into the season finale: "We knew Imola was going to be the toughest track for us because of the tight chicanes. As soon as you would start shifting, the Yamaha would jump ahead. But I figured out in practice that there was one corner that I could go through wide open, and if I needed to make a pass I could."

The importance of a World Championship for Honda was beyond calculation. Despite the company's many great years in the 1960s with the incredible multicylinder machines of the day, and despite the riding talent of Mike Hailwood, MV Agusta had always come out on top. Honda

had never won a 500cc World Championship. The pressure on the 21-year-old American was intense, as Spencer explains:

That championship was very important. HRC had been in existence for five years, and we talked about that the night before the race. I understood that it was very important to [Honda], and it was very important to me because it would allow me to be the youngest 500 world champion. Mike Hailwood—whom I respect very much—he had the record [1962 at age 22] and it would give Mr. Honda his first 500 championship.

Roberts' best hope was to slow the pace down to allow Lawson to be a factor in the hunt for second place. Spencer comments on Roberts' strategy:

When he would get to the chicanes, he would almost park it. I almost hit him a few times. He was trying to slow the pace down to let Eddie Lawson and the others catch up. But I could get by him in the turn after the start-finish line, and I probably did it seven or eight laps in a row there, so we were able to pull out a pretty good lead [on the third-place bike]. My bike was working really well, and I was actually thinking that maybe I could have beaten him there, but I wasn't pushing that hard because I knew that second was good enough.

In the end, second was good enough. Honda had won its first premier-class World Championship on the strength of 21-year-old Freddie Spencer. Perhaps of equal significance was the fact that the top four riders in the 500cc World Championship were all Americans—Spencer, Roberts, Mamola, and Lawson. When one considers that the 1982 500cc and 250cc world champions of motocross were also Americans—Californians Brad Lackey and Danny LaPorte—one must conclude that there has never been a time when Americans so thoroughly dominated all forms of motorcycle racing.

THE DOUBLE

Kenny Roberts retired from Grand Prix racing after Imola, returning to America a three-time world champion. The Freddie Spencer era had begun. However, for 1984 Honda took a radical turn toward revolution instead of evolution, and the World Championship-winning three-cylinder bikes were revamped and assigned to the other riders, while Spencer got the radical new four-cylinder. Everything about the 1984 bike was different, from the four-cylinder powerplant to the architecture of the overall design.

Spencer describes the problems he faced with the new bike:

The gas tank was on the bottom. We thought we'd get the CG [center of gravity] as low as possible, and we had problems stabilizing the fuel. The bike was pretty good through the sweepers, especially with a full fuel load. But it broke down in the beginning of the season twice, once when the carbon-fiber wheel exploded. That was the first race bike that it had been on. There was really no experience with carbon fiber at the time, and how it was strong but brittle. It was a hard lesson. Another time, when leading at the match races, it pushed the front and high-sided me because of the shifting fuel load. We realized that the CG being that low wasn't the direction we wanted to go. But it taught us something about the bikes being flat with a lot of steering head angle.

The first-generation V-4 was also a tremendously difficult bike to work on, as Kanemoto explains:

It was a difficult year. Maybe in another year the machine would have been more stable from race to race. Putting the gas tank down that low created a few difficulties; as the fuel was being used up and the fuel level reduced, it had a greater effect on the handling, much more than a conventional gas tank on top of the machine. There was a lot of work in some of the problem areas. It wasn't such a new idea; it wasn't the first time anyone did that. But trying to make it small and compact, with the pipes above and the gas tank where it was—there was a lot

more work involved in the maintenance of this machine, due to so many more parts to make the lower gas tank design work.

Spencer notes that it didn't help that the carburetors were in the immediate area of the exhaust pipes: "It wasn't allowing enough cool air into the engine. There was just no way, as everything was packed in so tight, there was nothing they could do. I came in at Assen while leading the race by eleven seconds when the plug cap came off. You couldn't get your hand in there to put the cap back on without taking off the carbs."

Despite the problematic machinery, Spencer was still a factor for race wins. Eddie Lawson stepped into the role of team leader at Yamaha with a victory in the season opener, and Spencer responded by winning race two at Misano. After Lawson won the following two rounds at Jarama and Austria,



Freddie Spencer in 1989, when he returned to GP racing for Marlboro Yamaha.
DMT Imaging

Spencer was desperate for a solution. The three-cylinder machines ridden by Randy Mamola and Wayne Gardner in 1984 were much improved over the previous versions. "In 1983 they still hadn't figured out how to get rid of the vibration," Spencer explains. "They hit on it for 1984; it had less vibration and could run a higher rpm and went up 11 horsepower all through the range." Unfortunately, the significantly improved 1984-spec three-cylinder would not fit in Spencer's 1983 machine, as the engine design had different motor mount locations, so Freddie's mount was fitted with the 1983-spec triple for the next race at the Nürburgring. Despite the horsepower disadvantage, Freddie won the race, along with three of the next four rounds. In the end, however, Lawson's consistent speed paid off, despite the fact that Spencer's five wins were more than any other rider. Add Mamola's three victories, and American riders had once again swept every race of the 500cc World Championship. The stage was set for the greatest season by any American or by a Grand Prix racer of any era.

In 1985, Freddie Spencer dominated everywhere he raced. At Daytona, he achieved a sweep of the 250 GP, Superbike race, and Daytona 200, a feat that had never been accomplished before, or since. An awestruck Kevin Schwantz was making his first start at Daytona, sharing the grid with the American world champion:

That's the only race that I ever went to where people said, "Watch Freddie Spencer . . . Holy s**t! You want to see how it's done? Watch that man." I didn't do any Grand Prix in 1985, the Daytona 200 was it. Just knowing that the 1983 world champ, the latest, greatest, fastest, and flashiest thing in racing was here, and damn it, I was going to get the chance to race against him. Of course you just looked up to the guy, knowing what he had done at such a young age.

At the time, it was widely considered impossible for a rider to successfully race for both the 250 and 500 championships in the same year. But this was the goal Freddie Spencer had set for himself. The 1985 season would be incredibly demanding, especially given the fact that the 1984 Honda NSR500 clearly wasn't getting the job done and needed to be rethought.

However, if any racer was ever equipped with the “A-team” for making such things possible, it was Spencer in 1985. In addition to crew chief Erv Kanemoto, Freddie had Jeremy Burgess wrenching on the 500 and Stuart Shenton on the 250.

Freddie recalls the task at hand:

Basically, I had to develop two brand-new motorcycles. Honda didn’t have a 250 Grand Prix bike at the time, and we were coming off the bike with the gas tank on the bottom and the pipes on the top. I was also developing the radial tires, as we were making the switch from bias-ply tires. For development, we were taking a light fuel load on the 1984 bike and then adding weight to the top of it to simulate what we were trying to do with the next-generation bike, and that was tough. I was trying to develop the 250 and 500 bikes so that they had a very similar feel. But they had different lines that they’d need to take in the corners, and they’d have different corner speeds that I needed to run.

As for Spencer’s goal of making both handle similarly, he says, “Most of the time they didn’t.”

Even more problematic were the almost-overlapping session times when one class would immediately follow the other:

At most tracks, the practices were back to back, so I’d have to wait until after I did both sessions and sit down with the crews and tell them what each bike needed. On race day, I’d have to make the switchover between the two on my warmup lap. Granted, they were both two-strokes, and they were both Grand Prix bikes, but there was such a huge difference in power delivery. My 1985 bike had just about 160 horsepower, maybe a little bit more, and weighed under three hundred pounds. My 250 bike that year, dry with nothing in it, was under 200 pounds.

Kanemoto recalls the difficulties: “If people were only able to see what he was going through. He’d just get off one bike from a race and then

have to race the other one, having to refocus again and be ready, with the huge differences in power and weight. It was far more difficult than people can imagine."

Although the 1984 Honda 500 GP bike had been truly revolutionary, the 1985 bike was to set the design theme for an entire generation of Honda racing machinery. As Spencer notes:

The two-stroke 500s never changed that much in dimensions and geometry from 1985 through the last year they ran them in 2001. We had such chattering problems that we found an engine position that would actually help it change direction. Also, we were raising the rear ride height and kicking it out to get it some more trail, which was the opposite of what was believed up to that time. They had been trying to keep the bikes as flat as possible to help stabilize weight forward and back. Then the only way you could make the things change direction was to make the front end very steep, which made for a very narrow forgiveness once you got the thing on its side.

Asked if the 1985 V-4 was more forgiving than the three-cylinder 1983 championship bike, Spencer replies, "Oh yeah, because if for nothing else, we had figured out the chassis geometry. The three-cylinder was not forgiving at all."

Armed with an arsenal of well-developed and fast 250 and 500 GP machines, Spencer carried his momentum from Daytona to take the world by storm. He began his 250 GP campaign with a win at the season-opening 250 GP at South Africa before going on to sweep rounds four through nine—a staggering six Grands Prix in a row, making the 250 title a foregone conclusion. In the 500 class, he took victories in three of the first five Grands Prix and closed out the season with wins in four of the final five races, taking the title with seven wins to Lawson's three. Spencer had won the double, a feat that has not been repeated since.

American domination of this world-class sport even drew the attention of the White House. Spencer received a letter from then President Ronald

Reagan, congratulating him on his accomplishments, something previously unheard of for American motorcycle racers. Later, when Reagan was visiting Dallas, Texas, Freddie was invited to meet with him. America again had much to celebrate, as American riders had won 11 of 12 500cc GPs and Lawson had finished second in the championship.

CHALLENGES AND COMEBACKS

Spencer was at the top of his game and at the top of the sport everywhere he raced. At the time, no one would have believed that Freddie Spencer had already won his last Grand Prix. Spencer went into the 1986 season as a massive favorite to repeat as 500cc world champion. However, the 24-year-old's career was about to be waylaid by a physical condition that was rarely diagnosed at the time.

Spencer describes his struggles with carpal-tunnel syndrome, a compression injury to the nerves in the wrist that is usually caused by repetitive motion:

They are so much more understanding of the physiology involved now of how it all works, with all the knowledge and understanding of carpal-tunnel and nerve issues, restrictions, and blockages. But we just didn't know back then. I had it operated on, but it was exploratory; nobody even knew of carpal-tunnel back then. [My wrist] was never the same and it took a lot out of me physically, which in turn affects you mentally and emotionally in how you are able to recover from it. When I started off the 1986 season, I did not even test.

Despite the lingering injury, Spencer started off the season in impressive fashion. At the season-opening Spanish GP at Jarama, he rocketed off from pole position into the lead, and it was looking as if the new GP season would be another Spencer romp. "I was leading the race by about ten seconds when my right hand just stopped working. It was still going numb, but it was worse. It literally stopped working," he says. Spencer, unable to operate the front brake, went off in the hairpin, ending his season when it had just barely begun.

Spencer's teammate Wayne Gardner moved past to win the race, and for Spencer, the glory days had ended at age 24. Could it have been the rigors of that 1985 season? Had all that effort just been too much for Spencer's body to withstand?

Spencer reflects on his long journey back from injury and the premature end to his GP career. "I have no regrets," he says. "It would have been great [to have won more races and titles], but the championships we won were very special to all of us."

Spencer struggled with his injuries, missing most of the 1986 and 1987 seasons; a seventh-place finish in Sweden in 1987 was the highlight. He retired from GP motorcycle racing soon afterward, eyeing a career change that other GP world champions, such as Hailwood and John Surtees, had found success with: "I was going to race cars. I flew to Del Mar to race the Barber Saab series. I was leading until the yellow flag came out when I overheated the turbocharger and finished third. I also got a test with Chip Ganassi in an Indy Lights car."

Unfortunately, the Indy car route did not pan out. This stint was followed by an unsuccessful comeback attempt for Marlboro Yamaha in 1989. The highlight from that season was a fifth at the Spanish GP in Jerez:

I was running with the lead group at Australia, but it went downhill from there. There wasn't a problem with the bike; the problem was with me. I tried, I had more surgeries, I had neck surgery, had bone chips removed that were causing nerve issues, which had something to do with it as well. But it reached the point where my whole arm would just go weak; I couldn't even support it. So that was basically it; it never got any better. The nerve signals were weak, and those not only control your movements, but control how the muscle performs.

Despite all the difficulties, racing was not something Spencer could give up easily. He returned to race in the AMA Superbike Championships in America and was a consistent presence in the early 1990s with the Honda RC30, taking a win at Texas World Speedway in 1992. At the end of that

season, Spencer tested a GP bike for Erv Kanemoto at Kyalami. Despite not having ridden a GP bike in three years, he turned a time that would have put him second on the grid for the Grand Prix. “I ran pretty much a race distance with Rothman’s Honda, and then earlier in the year I set a lap record in the 8 Hours of Suzuka [in Japan]. It got me thinking about [a comeback],” he admits.

Spencer returned to Grand Prix once again for 1993. His final hurrah on the world stage was to come with two points scored at Misano in 1993—on the dark day that will forever be remembered for the catastrophic crash that ended Wayne Rainey’s racing career. After another year away from riding, Spencer returned to American racing for 1995, winning the AMA Superbike race at Laguna Seca on the new Fast by Ferracci Ducati 916. It had been 16 years since his first win in the class. Despite his physical issues, Freddie had been a winning presence for a generation.

For Honda’s GP team manager, Gerald Davison, there are two greats that immediately come to mind:

There are the perennial debates about who has been the best bike racer at various times. My old friend Mike Hailwood is always a serious contender for the “best ever,” because he raced over many years and in many classes. However, I have always believed that, number of races aside, Fred is the all-time greatest bike track racer. Plus his double 250/500 was done in an age when it just shouldn’t have been possible.

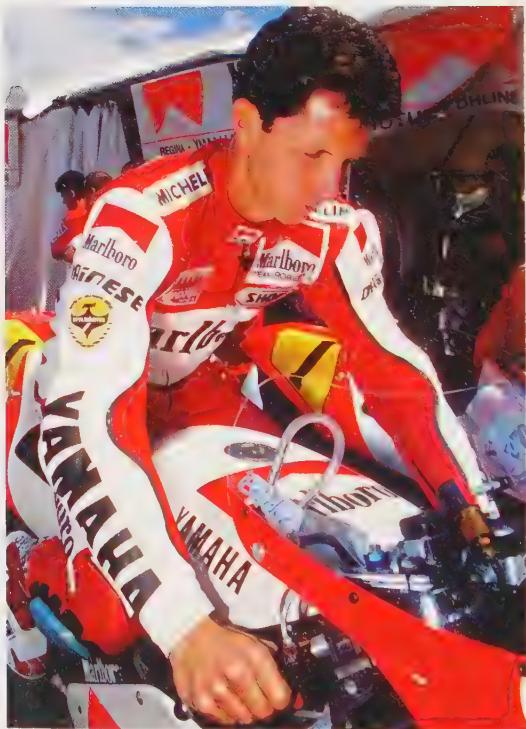
Spencer’s style of early turn-in with trail braking, along with the rear of the bike rotating to the point that it lines up straight for the apex, allowing an early power application and high exit speed, wasn’t a common approach. “My exit speeds would be higher because I would get on the throttle sooner,” Spencer explains.

“His lines were always amazing,” says Gerald Davison. “And other riders tried but failed to follow him.”

Regardless of who puts together a “greatest of all time” list, one thing is certain: Freddie Spencer will be on it.

CHAPTER 4

“Steady . . . and FAST”: Eddie Lawson



Eddie Lawson on the Team Roberts Yamaha in 1990. DMT Imaging

EDDIE LAWSON ARRIVED IN Europe in 1983 as the defending two-time AMA Superbike champion. He was also a twice-crowned AMA 250 GP champion. As noted earlier, Kenny Roberts was planning to retire from riding after 1983 and had convinced the Yamaha team to bring Lawson from America to serve as his teammate and heir apparent, in order to give the young rider the opportunity to learn the tracks and the bike. This arrangement would ensure the Yamaha GP team was left in capable hands upon Roberts' retirement.

Lawson's first year of Grand Prix racing was something of a sobering experience: In the first five races, he managed just one podium finish, and with Spencer and Roberts battling wheel-to-wheel for the title, 1983 would be the first time in Lawson's professional road racing career that he was not in contention for a championship. However, four podium finishes over the course of the season showed that Lawson had promise.

That promise blossomed in 1984, with Lawson winning the season opener en route to the championship over the fast but erratic Honda of Freddie Spencer. The 1984 title would be the first of four for the Californian—the best record among all American riders. Eddie Lawson's 31 Grand Prix wins also make him the winningest American GP rider of all time. Add two Daytona 200 victories, a win at the 8 Hours of Suzuka, and two wins at the multidiscipline Superbikers competition—all of which had followed a successful career in flat track racing—and Lawson's on-track career achievements stand alone. His consistency may have earned him the nickname of Steady Eddie, but there was no venue where Eddie Lawson could not win at the highest level.

"SO FAR AHEAD OF EVERYBODY"

Eddie Ray Lawson was born on March 11, 1958, in Upland, California. Coming from a long line of racers, young Eddie started riding at the age of seven on his Father's Yamaha 100, before moving to a Kawasaki. These small rotary valve rockets were perhaps best known for their explosive and tricky powerband, narrow even for a bike in the 100cc class. The difficult-to-ride bikes were good training machines for any aspiring racer, as they required some talent and determination to ride to their potential.

Thanks to the 1971 film *On Any Sunday*, California motorcycle racing culture was in its heyday in the early 1970s, and Lawson was one of many riders who arrived on the scene during this period. By the middle of the decade, the young teenager was racing in the novice class at regional tracks like Ascot Park. It was obvious that he was one of the quickest of the next generation of flat track racers. As they say, talent and fast machinery tend to gravitate toward each other. "I rode everybody's bike," Lawson recalls. "Whatever I could get my hands on at a lot of local dirt tracks until about 1976 when I turned Novice Pro."

As director of emergency services and track paramedics at Corona in those days, Dusty Behrman was there to witness the growth of many great riding talents, including the young kid from Upland:

At the time, Eddie was riding Novice on a Bultaco. That was his first decent Novice class ride. Eddie was quiet; he was very shy. There was a whole lot of talent when he came up through the ranks. One time at an Ascot National in the Novice class, Eddie was racing Mamola and Rainey, and Eddie was falling back. Then on the last lap, he caught back up like a bullet, passed Randy and won the race. He reached down and shook the back disc on the Bultaco. It was loose and kept locking up! Hell of a race for Novice class.

Butch Sylva, who built 750 Yamahas, he put Eddie on the bike. Eddie rode part of his junior year for Butch, who had built two Shell Thuet racers and a Champion-framed version. When Eddie showed up at San Jose in the Mile in 1976, the Shell blew up. They put him on the other Shell, and he won the San Jose Junior Invitational.

During those early years, Eddie's grandfather had also bought him a proper road racing machine, a 50cc Italjet. So the teenager also began to sharpen his asphalt skills along with his improving results on the flat tracks.

Behrman continues:

Eddie was concentrating on road racing and doing quite well riding the 250. They went back and won the Novice race at Daytona. I've

watched Eddie ride a bike to the point where I thought he was going to crash. In a few races at Corona, riding the Champion-framed bike, Butch would have to go out there and tell him to slow down. He was so far ahead of everybody; all he was doing was wearing out an engine.

As he had done with Wayne Rainey, Shell Thuet was to play a major role in the racing education of Eddie Lawson. Thuet, a tuner and mechanic extraordinaire since his early days preparing flat track racing Indians in the 1930s, would later build the XS650 flat trackers that Kenny Roberts rode to Grand National Championships in 1973 and 1974. Thuet took Lawson under his wing as a novice rider in the late 1970s, and Eddie became an Expert riding for Shell in 1978.

By that point, the Expert class was a tough nut to crack riding the 750 Yamaha, as Behrman explains: "The Yamahas were really a struggle compared to the XR750s; you absolutely had to override the Yamaha. Eddie was extremely good; the problem was that the Yamahas weren't that fast. Even Shell's stuff, they really struggled to make them win. They just weren't as fast as the deep-down horsepower of the XR750."

Dusty Behrman goes on to describe how the sport was changing in the late 1970s: "There was no money in flat track racing; it was just local prestige. All the money was in Europe; Roberts had shown everybody that. A lot of guys were starting to rethink their racing careers, and Eddie was doing a whole lot of road racing."

"My grandfather got me a 350 Yamaha RD twin and then a 500 triple Kawasaki," recalls Lawson. "I rode that for a while."

The 1979 season marked the beginning of the great rivalry between Lawson and Spencer in AMA professional road racing. The campaign opened in the 250 GP class. The 1979 campaign was an abbreviated season of only three races, and Spencer took the title with two wins at Loudon and Sears Point, while Lawson finished second in the championship. In 1980, the two went head-to-head in Superbike, with Spencer riding for Honda and Lawson for Kawasaki. But before that, there was a made-for-television series of races that brought together the best riders in the world from every discipline. This event would play a role in Eddie Lawson's rise to prominence.

SUPERBIKERS

Late in the 1979 season came the Superbikers competition, a grand plan to pit the best motorcycle racers in the world from every discipline against each other on a combination road race, flat track, and motocross venue to be televised on ABC's *Wide World of Sports*. (This event launched the concept of Supermoto to the world.) Promoter and series creator Gavin Trippe describes the basic idea behind the concept:

The idea at Carlsbad was to have equal time on the asphalt and the dirt. I called Shell Thuet, and I told him I needed somebody who could give a day to help us lay out the track. He sent his rider Eddie Lawson, and Eddie spent an entire day with us talking about if this or that would work. Then I got a tractor and built the track.

The interesting thing was that they were all racers. The thought of going head-to-head with guys they don't normally get to race with—the X factor, the curiosity—they loved the idea, thinking, "That guy, I want to see if I can beat his ass."

The made-for-TV extravaganza had a budget that dwarfed the other racing events of the day. As a sign of the event's importance, ABC brought Jackie Stewart, Chris Economaki, and Jim McKay, likely the most prestigious team of television journalists to ever cover a motorcycle event. The races were televised in two parts: Part one covered the heat races, and part two showed the final.

Mark Johnson, who was with Kawasaki's motocross department at the time and who would later work as a mechanic for Wayne Rainey, describes the level of excitement: "It was a good time; it was a different event, and it kind of got everybody energized. It was at the end of the year, it brought *all* the disciplines together for the first time."

And so, on the biggest stage American motorcycle racing had ever seen, Eddie Lawson made a lasting impression. The 1982 500cc world MX champion, Brad Lackey, recalls Lawson's performance: "We came down the straightaway/drag strip, and we'd go into the TT dirt track section at about 120 plus. And Lawson, he was a good road racer and dirt tracker, so

he had a lot of advantages, but he didn't even shut off when he'd go into the dirt for the longest time, and I was just thinking, '*'Madman!'*'"

When told of Lackey's comments, Lawson laughs. "I probably just didn't know any better. They were kind of upset because I had laid out the track with a lot of road race and flat track. There wasn't much motocross. They weren't too thrilled. Oh well . . ."

In the first Superbikers competition, Lawson would end up crashing out of his heat race and the semi, but he had certainly delivered a memorable performance in front of the biggest imaginable audience. For television rating of motorsports, the Indianapolis 500 was the most-watched American motorsports event, with 10.8 million households tuning in to the 1979 race. In second and third places, with 8.1 and 7.6 million, were Superbikers 1 and Superbikers 2, ahead of NASCAR's Daytona 500, with 7.3 million households.

The upshot of this is that the Superbikers helped to make riders like Eddie Lawson household names. In the seven-year history of the Superbikers event, Lawson was the only nonmotocross rider to win the event, taking victories in both the 1983 and 1985 races on his Yamaha YZ490 equipped with 19-inch dirt track tires.

During 1979, in the midst of all this success, Lawson suffered a crushing accident at Riverside Raceway. He severely dislocated his hip, as Dusty Behrman recalls:

[The bike] threw him on the ground in turn six. The next morning, when I went to work, I was looking through the inpatients and it showed "Lawson." They had taken him to the Fontana emergency room after transporting him from Riverside General and the hip was out for so long they almost couldn't get it back in. After four or five hours, you are going to have an immense amount of swelling in the hip socket area. There can be long-term effects of something like that. He was in traction for something like ten days. I made sure that there was always the right nurse there to take care of him.

Despite the trauma, Lawson was to spring back with his characteristic determination, and the damaged hip was not a factor until after his

retirement from racing. “I never thought about it until my mid-forties. I’ve had a hip replacement and now it’s perfect.”

Lawson’s performances at the Superbikers and in 250 GP earned him a test and, eventually, a spot on the Kawasaki Superbike team for 1980. It is hard to overstate the emerging importance of Superbike to the manufacturers in those early days and equally hard to overstate the difficulty in riding them. “[Superbike] was really just starting to get going,” Lawson recalls. “Coming from the TZ250s, they were just a handful. They were just nasty to ride. They were horrible. They had a lot of engine and no chassis, no suspension, no tires . . . just a ton of horsepower.” Lawson scored his first series win at Talladega and would be part of the controversial three-way battle for the title that was eventually awarded to Wes Cooley and Suzuki after months of wrangling over protests and counter-protests.

The points race couldn’t have been closer. Spencer and Lawson each had three wins going into the finale at Daytona, while Wes Cooley had two on the Yoshimura-prepared Suzuki. Cooley won the race by less than a bike length over Spencer’s Honda, but then Kawasaki protested that there were illegal frame modifications to the Suzuki. Cooley was excluded from the results and Lawson declared the AMA Superbike Champion. The story wasn’t over, however, and it wasn’t long before Lawson was disqualified as well, losing the championship in his rookie year.

Lawson’s teammate David Aldana explains the situation:

We were in a lot of trouble trying to keep up with Freddie Spencer at the time. I made a lot of changes, moving the engine forward on one bike, shortening up the swingarm on another, putting big rotors on another. That’s what they paid me for. Eddie and I always had about the same equipment, but he took it to the next level. One time [at Daytona], Eddie blew up his bike, and Gary Mathers, the race manager, asked me if I could let him have my motorcycle. I told them that I had as good a chance of winning this thing as anyone, so they said they’d give me the five thousand dollars in contingency money if I let them have the motorcycle, so I said, “Okay.” So, they switched the number plates on

the bikes. Eventually [someone] found out, protested, and [Lawson] got disqualified.

"We swapped number plates," Lawson remembers. "And it wasn't in the rules. But consider that everyone else was on illegal frames and everything . . ." Rule bending was raised to an art form during those early days of Superbikes.

The following season would bring better results. Rob Muzzy had joined the team as crew chief at the end of 1980:

I came into a fairly disappointed program because they had lost the championship. They had lost it kind of because of mechanical failures, or at least that was their feeling. We started with a new bike in 1981, the physical bike itself was a new machine, and we didn't use any of the stuff that they had run in 1980. So, we built the new bike, went to Daytona, and got our ass kicked by Honda. To make a long story short, we just didn't have enough power at the first couple of races. Pretty much what we had been using was what Japan had sent. We made some changes to the engine and found some power. I remember having to port a cylinder head in a closet at Atlanta . . . in the distributorship there. We won Talladega, and from that point on, it was competitive.

"Yeah, that was a good season," Lawson recalls. "We had something that could run with them even though they were outspending us probably about ten to one. We'd win and from all their advertising you'd think they had won. We'd show up with a box truck and look like privateers compared to Honda, who were showing up with decked-out eighteen wheelers. It made it more fun when we'd beat 'em."

Frans Vandenbroek, Pat Hennen's mechanic from the GP days of the mid-1970s, was on the Kawasaki team at the time and recalls the testing that Lawson had to endure in the predata-acquisition telemetry days:

Kawasaki sent me to Japan to learn how to mount strain gauges on bike components. I put 120 on the KZ1000 swingarm, then constructed

a backpack with a strain gauge amplifier and an eight-channel tape recorder. We strapped it to Eddie, and he rode around Daytona at speed so I could record readings. It was an aluminum box the size of a small fridge! I'm amazed he didn't complain about taking it around Daytona.

That 1981 season would be the last year of the Lawson-Spencer rivalry—at least until 1983, when Eddie would join Spencer on the GP circuit. With Kenny Roberts having won the previous three world GP titles, there was a great deal of interest in motorcycle road racing in general, particularly the American Superbike series.

It was a golden era for American Superbike racing, with a number of future American Grand Prix champions doing battle on what were essentially factory hot rods, in which the engine development was miles ahead of the chassis. Superbike racing was the kind of platform that allowed the truly gifted to stand out from the merely talented.

The results for Kawasaki were to improve in 1981, as Lawson not only had the ability to develop the machine but had the formidable talents of Rob Muzzy focused on the search for more power and speed. In yet another season-long title battle with both Spencer and Cooley, it all came down to the final race. Despite Spencer winning the season finale at Daytona, Lawson took the title by virtue of his trademark run of steady finishes—this was “Steady Eddie” Lawson at his finest. Lawson not only won the AMA Superbike title but also repeated as champion in AMA 250 GP.

Even more impressive was the fact that Lawson repeated as Superbike Champion in 1982 despite suffering serious injuries on the Kawasaki while riding in the AMA National at Laguna Seca. Muzzy recalls, “The most serious injury I know of was the neck injury on the KR500 at Laguna Seca. I got married in 1982, and he had that halo [head and neck brace] screwed into his head.”

“Yeah, I broke my neck, the C-7,” Lawson recalls. “The rehab was about two months. I felt good and won the first race back. I didn’t even think about it.” Pulling off the AMA Superbike Championship, Eddie clearly hadn’t lost any speed despite his previous misfortune. Obviously, Lawson

had that special quality that enabled him to shut out the pain and achieve results despite injury—a quality that was perhaps as important as anything else in a 500cc GP rider of that era. "You're just young and stupid," Lawson says of those days, "and you don't know any better."

No one would question Eddie Lawson's toughness. His development skills were equally notable, as Muzzy explains:

My opinion is that the guys who are really good development riders develop that ability through the teams they ride for. The best ever was Eddie Lawson, followed by Chandler and then [Scott] Russell. Rainey is in there too. And all of those guys in their early stages rode for us. Of all the guys I've worked with, Eddie is the one who is my favorite. He never, ever complained. If he had a crappy bike, we all knew he had a crappy bike. When we'd be going through the setup, and if he'd be unhappy and want more than what he had, it wasn't in the form of complaining. It was more, "It does this; it does that." But come Sunday morning, he'd throw his leg over the thing with a smile and ride it as hard as it could possibly be ridden. And when he got off of it, if he didn't win, he never ever said it was because he didn't have the equipment to win on. I'm sure you have some concept of how hard the guys work—the guys who work on the bikes. Imagine what it's like when you've worked your ass off, you've hardly slept and were doing everything you could possibly do, and the rider doesn't win and gets off the bike saying, "Well, if I had a better bike." Eddie always gave everything he had to give, no matter how bad or how good the bike was.

For 1982, Lawson was to have yet another teammate, this one a rider who would become one of his greatest GP rivals. Rob Muzzy recalls that season with the two future world champions: "The reality is that Eddie really helped Wayne. He didn't hold anything back, admittedly because, at that point in time, Wayne really wasn't an equal to Eddie."

Lawson enjoyed a stellar Superbike season, winning the title by nine points over Honda's Mike Baldwin and Kawasaki teammate Rainey. Eddie

Lawson had beaten all comers in the United States. It was time for him to move up to the world stage.

TAKING ON THE WORLD

A rider couldn't have asked for a much better situation than the one Eddie Lawson stepped into in 1983: a year to race as the understudy to the outgoing three-time world champion on board one of the best bikes in the series. The year started out in the best possible way at the Daytona 200, with Roberts leading Lawson home to a 1-2 finish on the new 680cc Yamaha OW-69.

The 1983 Grand Prix season is covered in depth elsewhere in this book: Suffice it to say, there wasn't any room at the top for anyone other than Spencer and Roberts, but Lawson's four podiums comprised a more-than-respectable campaign in support of his teammate. Lawson took his first Grand Prix podium in round three at Monza, followed by a second to his teammate in Austria.

Looking back on his European debut season, Lawson remembers the advantage that Honda held over Yamaha that year:

Kenny may not tell you this, but the Honda was way better. That Yamaha was bad that year, it was disc valve, wouldn't start, and had no bottom end or midrange. [Honda] would just kill us. We had a little bit of top end on them, but it didn't matter, they'd be long gone. We were on Dunlops, they were on Michelin, and their tires were so much better than what we had. Kenny still got within two points after they ran him out of gas at Monza; the bike wouldn't start in Yugoslavia so he started dead last. Freddie's Honda triple was way better and for Kenny to match him on that bike was amazing.

A third-place finish at Rijeka cemented Eddie's position as a future GP contender, but at the final round he was unable to help Roberts secure the title against Spencer. All told, Lawson completed his rookie GP season fourth in the World Championship behind Spencer, Roberts, and Mamola. The era of Kenny versus the world came to a close, and

Eddie Lawson was ready to take up the challenge and the mantle of world champion.

Helping Lawson's chances in 1984 was the debut of Honda's revolutionary V-4. The story of this fast-but-fragile machine is covered at length in Chapter 3. While Honda was busy out-thinking itself, Lawson would have the improved, newly developed reed valve Yamaha GP engine that formed the basis for the next 15 years of Yamaha GP bikes. "Yep, it was a big jump up," Lawson recalls of the bike. In the right place at the right time, he also had the luxury of being backed by Kenny Roberts' former mentor, technical wizard Kel Carruthers. The pieces were in place, and Lawson duly won the season-opening race at Kyalami, South Africa. Spencer came back to win at Misano, but Lawson countered with two wins in Spain and Austria. In the end, consistency proved to be the key to the title that season, and the approach brought Steady Eddie his first World Championship, despite having four Grands Prix wins to Spencer's five. It was Lawson's four second-places that made the difference. Crucially, Lawson finished every race, and his worst finish of the entire season was fourth. He was on the podium for nine of the twelve races. Randy Mamola won three of the last five GPs, making it the second straight year where only American riders had won a 500cc GP. The era of American dominance was at its zenith.

The 1985 season was to be Freddie Spencer's greatest season—and one of the greatest all-time for any rider—but Lawson would make him work for it. From the beginning of the season, it was clear that the Yamaha was simply no match for Spencer on the new V-4 Honda. Yet despite the disadvantage, Lawson won three GPs and was able to keep Spencer from completely running away with the title. Once again, it was his consistent approach that allowed Lawson to hang in with Spencer: Lawson had just one DNF and his worst finish was again fourth. Americans finished 1-2 in the championship for the second year in a row.

As the 1986 season began, injuries would deal a blow to Freddie Spencer's future hopes, allowing Eddie Lawson to become the dominant force in Grand Prix racing.

With Spencer effectively sidelined for much of the season with carpal-tunnel syndrome and assorted nerve problems, Aussie Wayne Gardner

stepped into the role of main challenger for Honda. Lawson and Gardner would engage in a season long duel, with Gardner taking the season opener at Jarama before Lawson went on a roll, winning at Monza, the Nurburgring, the Salzburgring, and Rijeka, Yugoslavia. Gardner fought back with victories at Assen and Silverstone, but then Lawson sealed the title with wins in three of the season's final four races at Le Mans, Anderstorp, and Misano. Clearly demonstrating why his other nickname was "Fast Eddie," Lawson won his second World Championship by 22 points over Gardner, with Yamaha teammates Mamola and Baldwin in third and fourth. It had been another staggering display of consistency and speed—Lawson had one DNF all season. With the exception of one third-place finish, every other finish had been first or second place.

The 1987 season would belong to Honda's Wayne Gardner, as he won four of the first six races to take a lead that Lawson could not overcome. Although the Californian certainly made it interesting, with wins at Hockenheim, Assen, and Donington that pulled him back into contention, the gritty Australian responded by winning the next two Grands Prix to increase his advantage. Despite finishing out the year with wins at Jarama and Buenos Aires, two of the last three races, Lawson finished third in the title chase, one point adrift of Mamola. For only the third time in 10 years and for the first time since 1982, an American was not the 500cc world champion. "They missed it in 1987," Lawson recalls. "The bike was pretty slow. For whatever reason, we missed it on the top speed. That, and I fell down in the rain a couple of times, and that was that."

Lawson's sixth GP campaign would be a rematch with Gardner, although some new faces would emerge to join the fight. One newcomer was a young hotshot from Texas: Kevin Schwantz opened the season with a victory at the Japanese GP at Suzuka, his first of many. "He was learning, learning the ropes," Lawson says of Schwantz. "But like all of us, that first year on a 500 was a handful." Gardner followed in second with Lawson taking third. The second race of 1988 was the first GP held in the United States since Daytona 1965. Not surprisingly, Lawson was the man to beat at Laguna Seca and wildly celebrated his victory before his home crowd, while Gardner finished second. Jarama brought another surprise when Australian Kevin Magee took

the win, followed by Lawson and Gardner. At that point, Lawson went on a tear, winning three of the next four Grands Prix before Gardner responded with three straight wins, although Lawson minimized the damage by taking second at Spa and Assen. Whatever momentum Gardner might have had swung back to Lawson for the final five races of the season: The American won three Grands Prix to clinch his third 500cc World Championship and Yamaha's sixth in eleven seasons. "The 1988 bike was a really good bike," recalls Lawson. "It did everything well." Finishing third in the points that season was another American: Wayne Rainey.

THE SWITCH TO HONDA

Eddie Lawson may have been fast, he may have been steady, but he was certainly not complacent. To the shock of nearly everyone, Lawson abruptly quit Yamaha after team manager Giacomo Agostini told Lawson that his pay would be reduced for 1989, despite having won a third World Championship. "He was always playing games," Lawson says of his legendary former boss. "That was it for me. I said, 'I'm out of here. I'll take less and I'm going to ride the other bike.' I felt bad for Yamaha, because [it was] a great company that I had enjoyed being with, but I was at that point with Ago." Lawson contacted Erv Kanemoto and switched to Honda for 1989. To outside observers, a repeat title seemed unlikely: No rider had ever defended his 500cc World Championship after switching brands of machine. Yet the Rothmans Honda certainly had pace, especially with Kanemoto tuning the bikes. Meanwhile, Freddie Spencer had returned from retirement to take Lawson's place at Marlboro Yamaha, and the Kenny Roberts team returned with the up-and coming Wayne Rainey. There was also the ever-exciting Kevin Schwantz . . . The 1989 GP season certainly was not lacking for storylines.

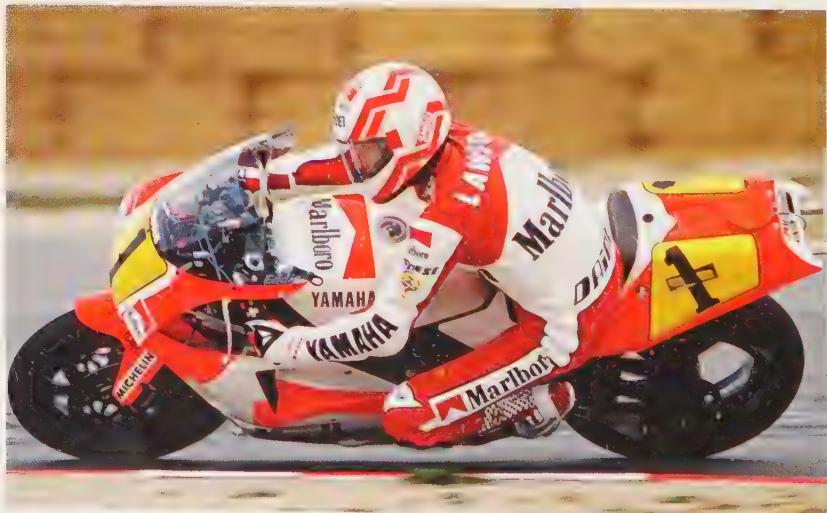
The season opener was once again held at Suzuka. Schwantz and Rainey immediately showed that they were ready to contend for the title, finishing first and second respectively in an epic battle. Meanwhile, Lawson followed in third. The second race, held at Phillip Island in Australia, saw Gardner take the win, followed by Rainey. A fifth place by Lawson seemed to signal that this would not be his year.

But Steady Eddie continued racking up points, taking third at the USGP and catching a big break in Spain after Schwantz threw away certain victory, handing the win to Lawson. Followed home by the ever-consistent Rainey, Eddie had moved into contention. The next race was the rain fiasco of Misano, where the top riders refused to compete on the soaked and slick circuit.

Adapting to the new Honda was difficult, as Kanemoto explains:

We tested during the winter, but the bike development took a while. Sometimes you don't understand the bike until you have someone ride it at a different, higher level. Almost every race there were new things coming. It was a new bike for Eddie, coming from riding the Yamaha, and we were trying to input a lot of what he needed. It took a little while. We were getting new frames, mostly things from the chassis side.

Were the changes to the bike individual? Were there different bikes for Gardner and Lawson?



Lawson at Laguna Seca in 1990. DMT Imaging

Yes, it was to suit Eddie, as Gardner got hurt early. The Honda, due to the character of the engine, was a lot more aggressive. It wasn't very forgiving compared to the Yamaha. The power would come in fairly abrupt; it was a pretty violent bike. The top speed was good, but it seemed the bike wasn't as agile and forgiving as the Yamaha, which was a much nicer bike to ride, because the power and handling was so smooth. Somebody who never raced one of those Yamahas probably wouldn't be aware of the difference. Eddie was trying to change the Honda into something a lot easier to ride. We did a lot of work in the chassis and suspension area. We would get chassis delivered to the racetrack and things were coming in late. We'd have to assemble everything in a day or so before the race. It was a lot of work that year, just trying to get something to work, just getting through and hoping the next race would be good.

One would think that having to qualify and race a different machine at every event would result in radically inconsistent performances, but that was not the case with Lawson. "Erv made a lot of changes," says Lawson. "And that bike was really good. The press had made it out to be kind of nasty to ride and all that, but it wasn't. It was a good bike."

Rainey and Schwantz traded victories in the four midseason races, while Lawson picked up three second-place finishes as well as a third. And then, as the season began to reach its climax, Eddie Lawson again went on a tear, winning three of the next four Grands Prix, including a defining victory at the Swedish GP at Anderstorp in which Rainey high-sided during a late-race battle with Lawson, handing the points lead to Fast and Steady Eddie—a lead he would carry to his fourth championship.

Lawson's championship-winning days were over, although no one would have guessed it at the time. For the second straight season—after having developed the Honda into a championship machine—Eddie threw the GP community a curveball, surprising many by moving back to Yamaha for the 1990 season. With Rainey now at the top of his game in his third season, Kenny Roberts' team looked fearsome. Unfortunately, injuries would curtail much of the first half of Lawson's season.

The misery began when he broke his left ankle at the season opener at Suzuka. He would suffer an even worse injury to his right ankle at Laguna Seca. Wayne Rainey describes what happened: "I remember his front brake pads fell out in qualifying. My dad was standing next to the pit wall as we were qualifying, and he saw something land next to him. It was brake pads, and they were Eddie's. He grabbed the brake going into the Andretti Hairpin, and there were no brakes. He crashed and hit the wall, crushed his ankle."

Meanwhile, Rainey won three of the first four Grands Prix on his way to the title. Lawson returned for the second half of the season and showed himself still capable of consistent performances, taking a long series of seconds and thirds. His seventh place in the standings was his worst result by far. In hindsight, his move back to Yamaha looked to have been a mistake. Kanemoto felt Lawson could have won a fifth title if he had stayed at Honda in 1990:

Once we got the new bike, I thought it was really too bad [that he had left], with all the work Eddie did. Due to Eddie's input, most of the things we were looking for, and the things Eddie was looking for, were built into the following year's bike. Trying to get all of Eddie's ideas into place with the machine, it was virtually impossible to do it in a short time. It's too bad; the following year it would have been a real advantage for him. We were lucky enough to win the championship [in 1989], but it would have been a whole lot easier the next year, with the 1990 bike.

"Yeah, if I had any regrets, for sure that would be one," Lawson says today. "In hindsight, I should have stayed. Mick [Doohan] said that was a big step up from the 1989 bike."

The 1990 season did have some bright spots, most notably Lawson's victory at the 8 Hours of Suzuka, the race that means as much to a Japanese manufacturer as any Grand Prix win. The Steady Eddie hallmark of fast and consistent performances would undoubtedly have made him a great success in endurance racing, had he chosen that path.

"Eddie was steady, and that's why they called him Steady Eddie," says Kenny Roberts. "He knew what he wanted with the bike and what it was doing; he'd give you very good feedback."

THE CAGIVA YEARS

At the end of the 1990 season, Lawson left Yamaha to ride for struggling Italian manufacturer Cagiva. Lawson's reasoning was simple: "Well, they offered a *lot* of money. I was ready to retire. I had another year to go with Kenny, but I told Cagiva if they would buy me out of my contract, I'd sign with them." There was far more to the story than meets the eye, however, as Kenny Roberts explains:

Lawson rode for me at the end of his career, and we moved him over to Cagiva. I had to move John [Kocinski] up, because he was world 250 GP champion, so I moved him up into Eddie's spot. Cagiva needed somebody like Eddie worse than Yamaha did. We helped with the development of the Cagiva. Nobody knows it, but we gave them a Yamaha for a week—one of my race bikes, the Grand Prix bike, the one that Wayne rode. We pushed it into their factory, and I left a mechanic there. They dyno'd it and tore it apart, measured it all, and looked at it. I was trying to help Cagiva because it was to Yamaha's advantage that Cagiva was in Grand Prix too; there weren't a hell of a lot of people in Grand Prix at that time. I asked Yamaha if they would mind if we were to help Cagiva, and they said, "Okay." So we gave them a bike for a week. That's how they got their start; that's what really started it all. When John went over to them, it was good. The bike was good.

MotoGP race director Paul Butler, formerly with the Roberts team, confirms the story: "It was a time, not dissimilar to [today], in that they wanted competition. Yamaha has always had an open mind; they wanted to encourage competition, they wanted to help. They had sympathy and admiration for what Claudio Castiglioni was trying to do."

Given the amount of money that teams spent each year to gain the smallest of advantages, such a move was an incredible gesture on Yamaha's

part. Butler agrees: “[Yamaha] would probably deny it, but those are the sort of things that they do privately, and it is one of the characteristics that is most admirable about them. You have to remember it was the following year that [Yamaha] made engines available to teams. They were ready to help the class survive.”

And so Cagiva’s GP program was given a huge jump start, albeit in the form of an end result rather than the years of experience and development customarily required to reach that point. Lawson would be the key to Cagiva’s plans—the Italians were counting on his experience to fill in the gaps. The Italians didn’t take full advantage of the opportunity, though, as Eddie explains: “I was there when it [the GP Yamaha] arrived [at the garage]. We looked at every single thing. The geometry was really close because we had all of [Yamaha’s] numbers, but their engine was incredibly heavy, and they didn’t build a Yamaha.”

The 1991 season began miserably, at least by Lawson’s lofty standards. But after finishing fifth or sixth in the first four races, the four-time champion had his breakout at Cagiva’s home race at Misano, taking a third place. A fourth at Hockenheim and another fifth at Austria confirmed that the Cagiva was not a contender for race wins, to say nothing of



Lawson on the Cagiva at Laguna Seca in 1991. DMT Imaging

championships. Lawson did manage another third-place finish in the French GP and finished out the year sixth in the championship.

The 1992 season would be Lawson's final GP campaign. Unfortunately, Cagiva's results deteriorated further: Lawson's occasional sixth was a better-than-average placing for the Cagiva. Often, the bike was a DNF or outside the top 10. The Cagiva was simply no match for the big-bang Honda engine, and the frustration factor was high.

However, in the midst of this despair came the occasional surprising performance. Lawson took pole position at Assen and later took a win in changing conditions at the Hungaroring in Hungary. Lawson had restarted from the red flag with a cut slick, which proved perfect for the conditions as he went through the field to his only win of the season. It would be Eddie Lawson's last Grand Prix victory, and a fitting one at that: Throughout his career, Lawson had excelled in wet conditions, which might surprise some, given his upbringing in arid Southern California.

The 1992 Hungarian Grand Prix was a special day in many ways, as Lawson shared his final podium with polesitter Doug Chandler and Randy Mamola. With Schwantz in fourth and Rainey in fifth, it was a top-five sweep for the United States, making that day in Hungary the greatest American sweep in GP history. "To be honest with you, yeah, it was fun," Lawson recalls. "We won a Grand Prix, but it was under such special conditions that you can't say that's a win. We lined up with cut slicks and it started raining. Special circumstances. I consider my last GP win to be 1989 at Le Mans."

Unfortunately, the team wasn't able to carry the momentum into later rounds. Lawson finished fifth in France, followed by a fourth place at Donington Park after starting from pole. A dismal eleventh in Brazil was followed by a DNF in South Africa—an ironic final race result for a rider who had won four championships based on speed and the ability to bring his bike home with the best result possible.

It had been an amazing 10-year run for Eddie Lawson. He retired from GP racing with 31 victories and four championships, tops among American GP racers. Both records still stand today.

RETURN TO DAYTONA

Lawson's retirement from GP racing did not mean he had given up racing entirely, however. In 1993, he agreed to a one-off deal to race at Daytona for Vance and Hines, as Terry Vance explains:

Yamaha made that happen. We had a bike available. They thought the odds were better with Eddie on the bike, and it was obviously a very good move. It was an interesting project for me because I had never worked with Eddie before. Seeing him interact with the guys and engineers—he was totally professional. I don't know that I've ever seen anyone as focused as he was.

Despite multiple unplanned tire changes for all concerned, the race turned into a down-to-the-wire battle royale between the four-time world champion and Mr. Daytona himself, Scott Russell, who remembers the race vividly:

Racing with Eddie Lawson for the lead at Daytona was one of the highlights of my career, because he was one of the icons of the sport. To have never been in a Grand Prix, I was thinking that I'd missed the boat. So when I finally got a shot to race Lawson, I thought . . . this is it for me, this is the big time. Unfortunately, they showed up with a Yamaha that was just a little bit too fast for us that year. I remember coming off NASCAR turn four leading it, and Lawson went by me on the high side. I was thinking, "Uh oh, I hope he's nowhere around me on the last lap."

Terry Vance was amazed by Lawson's focus throughout the event:

Lawson came in for the last pit stop—I think we were running second or third—and he had some ground to make up. I remember looking at his face when they were fueling the bike, and I thought, "Man, this guy is intense." It was like he was totally focused on his mission. He went out, reeled them in, and passed Russell right at the finish. He really

made that happen. The bike was very fast, but without him on it, that win wouldn't have happened for Yamaha that year for sure.

Scott Russell continues the story:

We traded the lead back and forth. I wanted to beat him through the infield, but when you hit the banking, it's the motorcycle's job at that point. But Steady Eddie, he knew what was going to happen at the end, and he beat me to the line. He looked at me after I crossed the line, pointed at me, and had his finger up: number one. To lose to him was like winning. What a ride.

Sadly, the race was marred by the fatal crash of Ducati racing legend Jimmy Adamo, forever adding a tragic element to the triumph of Lawson's return.

Lawson returned to Daytona for a final time in 1994, taking third behind Russell and Troy Corser despite early tire problems. Eddie Lawson would finish his motorcycle racing career later that year, running the 8 Hours of Suzuka one last time for Yamaha.

FROM TWO WHEELS TO FOUR

Moving on from motorcycles, Lawson soon turned his considerable focus to a (slightly) safer form of racing: Indy cars. In 1993, Lawson began his open-wheel racing career running in the Indy Lights category, the feeder series for the Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART) World Series. The early 1990s were the heyday for CART, when the series rivaled the Formula One World Championship in terms of prestige and driving talent, featuring some of the world's top racers, including Emerson Fittipaldi, Nigel Mansell, Mario Andretti, Al Unser Jr., and Michael Andretti. For a driver, there was no greater challenge than the CART World Series, with its mix of street courses, road courses, short ovals, and superspeedways.

Eddie Lawson recalls his brief time driving in CART:

I was driving for Rick Galles in champ car. I just did a half a season. We [the team] didn't have the right combination of things; we had a

Lola when we should have had a Reynard. We had Goodyears when we should have had Firestones. It was a bad thing, so about halfway through, I said that this wasn't quite what I had in mind, so I bailed out of there.

Veteran open-wheel journalist Robin Miller offers an opinion on Lawson's ill-fated CART career:

Lawson got screwed over by Galles. He was a hell of a lot better than they ever gave him a car for. He was so tough on himself. He ran fifth or sixth in the rain at Detroit. I waited out there for him and told him that was a hell of a job he did. He said, "Nah . . . should have been third." I remember Owen Snyder, his chief mechanic, said that they really screwed over that guy; they never gave him the right stuff. Eddie had the worst combination.

With no chance of success, Lawson would compete for only a partial season—11 races. His best finish of sixth place was a far cry from his hopes to match John Surtees' feat of winning World Championships on both two and four wheels.

AN AMERICAN LEGEND

Eddie Lawson continues to race on four wheels, only now he competes in SuperKart in a machine prepared by Wayne Rainey's father, Sandy. During the SuperKart support race at the 2008 American Le Mans Series weekend at Laguna Seca, the four-time world champion showed he still knows his way around the place, taking the win despite the fact that the second-place finisher had broken the lap record.

Eddie Lawson's nickname, "Steady Eddie" certainly fit his smart and consistent approach to racing; however, on any given Sunday he was as fast as any rider in GP racing. What set him apart was the discipline he employed to turn that speed into four World Championships.

CHAPTER 5

No Surrender: Wayne Rainey



Wayne Rainey, 500cc world champion in 1990, 1991, and 1992. Mortons Media

WAYNE RAINES FATHER, SANDY, was a flat track racer, having come from a career as a technical innovator and driver in kart racing. The elder Rainey describes his life leading up to the birth of his future world champion son:

After doing a soapbox derby race, I knew that's what I wanted: racing with the machines. I was a pioneer in go-karts in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I started when I was eleven years old. I built a lay-down kart, the very first one, and my first outing was at Riverside International Raceway. In tech inspection, all three kart manufacturers protested me. Their designs were where you sat up; with mine, you laid down in the thing. Because I didn't pre-enter, they made me start 109th, in the rear of the pack, for the two-hour endurance race. After an hour and fifteen minutes, I was in fifth . . . until it broke a chain. There was so much hassle over it, everybody was whining and complaining. I'd been doing sprint racing and endurance racing for about eight years. I quit karting and started racing motorcycles. I tried desert racing, hare and hound, track racing. Actually, my wife was pregnant with Wayne when she crashed the go-kart at Riverside. I think that's where he gets a lot of his pizzazz.

Sandy Rainey started racing at Ascot Park, which at the time was the Greatest Show on Earth:

If you raced Ascot, you were some kind of superhero back then. Guys like Mert Lawwill and Skip VanLeeuwen would come down. I didn't get past the Novice class. I had trouble one night in a TT race; I crashed and broke a knee joint off. The wife said, "That's enough."

After I was hurt, I prepped [the bike I had been riding] for somebody else. It was a twin-cylinder Yamaha in a rigid frame, and I thought I'd try this mechanic stuff. I was the first one to get rid of the Dell'Orto carburetors and go to the Mikunis. I wasn't getting any flak from the wife, and to me this almost carried the same value. When the kids got older, I started doing the minibike thing with them. I had three kids, and Wayne is the oldest.

SON OF A GEARHEAD

Wayne Wesley Rainey was born on October 23, 1960, in Downey, California, a suburb of Los Angeles. He describes his experiences growing up with a gearhead dad: "My dad decided to start building bikes and had guys who rode his early Yamaha twin . . . with no brakes. I'd be up there in the grandstands watching them every Friday night at Ascot. My dad was a really innovative guy. He was also a machinist and made the first set of air cleaners for the Yamaha dirt tracker."

Wayne recalls his first motorcycle, which was of course an innovative contraption: "Soon, I started riding bikes, but not racing. I had a Honda step-through 50. My dad made it for me. I was just a little guy, and there were no minibikes really. Ahead of where the gas tank was, where it came down in that [step-through] area, he built a seat, and that's where I would sit."

By the time Wayne was ready to compete in the ages 9-to-11 class, he found himself up against numerous ready-made machines, including Taco minibikes and Powell Challengers with their variable-belt-drive systems. Sandy Rainey explains: "We were in the minibike class, one to three horsepower, and the 50cc Honda overhead engine was classified as one horsepower, whereas the 120–140cc Tecumseh had three horses. We just couldn't outrun those CCs."

Wayne continues the story: "The guys who were running those Powell bikes were Kelly and Shawn Moran, the Speedway racers who later went to Europe. We just couldn't beat these guys. They had too much torque. My dad, being the innovative guy that he is, didn't want to just join the club and get a Powell."

Sandy Rainey preferred beating them over joining them, as he explains:

Well, I looked in the rulebook to see what I could do. You could only bore it 40 over . . . you could only do this or do that . . . but under fuel, it just said "Gasoline available to public." Nitro is available to the public. It had to be stock appearing, so I had to modify the interior parts of the carburetor. So I did that and made my own needle out of a piece of brazing rod. I set the 50 motor up on 50 percent nitro, 50 percent

methanol, and got it to carburete good. I took Wayne out of school to go test this thing.

Wayne Rainey continues: “The next thing I know he’s telling me, ‘Don’t tell Mom, but you’re not going to school today. We’re going to test something.’ We go off to Saddleback Park on a Tuesday afternoon. He’d brought all the jets. This thing was a lethal weapon. It was so fast. I remember doing big ol’ feet-on-the-pegs powerslides. It would wheelie when I’d shift gears.”

“After about three or four laps,” Sandy Rainey recalls, “Wayne comes in and says, ‘This is something. You don’t even have to use first gear anymore.’ It had that much torque. This thing didn’t throw up dust. It would cut trails in *rock*.”

“After you were done riding the Honda, you had to flush the engine out with alcohol; that nitro was so corrosive,” Wayne Rainey explains. “My dad told me not to tell anybody what we were doing. It wasn’t illegal, but he always looked for loopholes.” And so “Nitro” Wayne Rainey was winning races before “Nitro” Nori Haga had even been born.

According to Wayne, it wasn’t long before their competitors knew that something was different about the Rainey Top Fuel 50cc Honda Mini Trail: “The toxic fumes . . . you know how nitro burns your eyes? I’m sitting there warming this thing up, and the next thing I know, dads are diving in and grabbing their kids and yanking them off their bikes. They didn’t know what was going on.”

A triumphant Sandy Rainey describes the results of his experiment: “We beat those bikes with the bigger motors on the first time out. They’d say, ‘What’s that awful smell?’ I’d say, ‘Race gas.’ Not too many were familiar with nitro.”

The nitro advantage was to last for a while, but the Rainey advantage could last forever, as Wayne recalls: “We ended up blowing everybody’s doors off for a long time, but my dad turned one of his racing buddies on to what was up. Well, that guy told Steve McQueen, whose son, Chad, was racing at the time on 50cc minibikes. Soon, everybody knew, and they outlawed it.”

“We pretty much terrorized everybody that year, including [future MX champion] Jeff Ward,” Sandy Rainey recalls proudly. “We won the series,

and then they banned the fuel. Actually, I think we got to run it for two years before they finally outlawed it."

Whatever the case, the ban was probably a good thing, as a grid full of over-stressed toxic avenger minibikes might not have been the best scenario.

Moving up to a bored-out Suzuki 90, Wayne found himself in a world of high-maintenance two-strokes. The elder Rainey recalls that the modified engines he built for his son were best described as grenades:

I had a little trouble with that. I got it to run pretty good, but I had ported the cylinder into another time warp that I wasn't ready for. It was a 90, but it would run like a 125. But it had a real short fuse. We called it *Checkered Flag Blues*, because it would never see the checkered flag, because it would throw a rod. I tried different style rods, I tried different clearances, I had a handmade rod made out of Kryptonite . . . it went about twelve laps.

Wayne remembers the challenges of being the only rider struggling with a Suzuki in a flat track world dominated by other brands: "The thing would rev so high that you couldn't shift it; the transmission wouldn't let you shift. I was getting good at catching seizures. We would take it apart and see signs where the pistons were starting to crack before they failed. I was racing with Eddie Lawson, Mike Tidwell, and Mike Minnig, and they all rode Kawasakis and Yamahas."

This experience would come in handy years later when Wayne was riding the temperamental 500cc GP bikes that required keeping a finger over the clutch lever as a survival mechanism.

Sandy Rainey sums up that particular era for Team Rainey: "As Eddie [Lawson] said, 'We used to be really scared of you guys when you showed up, but then we learned that we only needed to be scared early, because later on we didn't have to worry about you.' "

Taking, as always, the road less traveled, the next windmill the Raineys chose to tilt at was Honda's first competition two-stroke racer, the new 125cc Elsinore. Wayne explains: "I was the only guy on a Honda and was

the first one to have a twelve-pedal reed on it. [We used] two six-pedal reeds [from my dad's] go-kart days. We had a special chrome-moly frame, disc brakes . . . I could drag race the 250s and stay right with them."

Sandy elaborates: "That was another thing I took to the limit. I kept blowing the cylinder off the cases. [Honda used] four bolts to hold the cylinder on. I added three more. I couldn't keep head gaskets in it either. I machined it for an O-ring using a piece of copper wire."

It wasn't long before Wayne moved up to race the 250s, with a Bultaco that Sandy had converted from right shift to left shift. "I built him a 250 Bultaco," Sandy explains. "Because I had started on them, I thought, 'He has to ride a Bultaco.' I made my own hemispherical heads and everything."

While riding this bike, Wayne came to the attention of the legendary tuner Shell Thuet. Sandy continues the story:

We ran that for about a year until we made the deal with Shell Thuet and John Reed. They had a 360 short track program in the AMA. They were changing the class back to 250, so I told them, "How's about I take your chassis and make a template to put the 250 in? Then you can go 250 or 360." They said, "You got a deal." I bought the engine, and they had a brand-new chassis, brand-new wheels . . . our first experience with everything brand new. That was *factory* to us.

Wayne recalls this first big break: "Shell Thuet and John Reed saw me and said they would give me a short track bike if I'd come race Ascot. [They provided] all the parts I needed, anything I had to pay to get there like entry fees, gas . . . It was huge."

Sandy describes how the Rainey family made the most of the opportunity: "We got that 250 running so well that Wayne would run it at Tulare in the open class and win against 650 Triumphs, 750 Harley-Davidsons, and Wayne would beat them on that 250 Shell-framed Yamaha. It was the only time in all my years that I got protested . . . for that motor."

In 1978, Wayne would race all over the country, taking 50 wins from 52 starts and finishing second at the Ascot Junior Invitational. He was a young man in a hurry, about to switch to Professional class, racing the Yamaha.

Wayne Rainey recalls that period, which was a time when the Yamaha was *not* the bike to have:

At eighteen, in my rookie year as Expert, Shell, who had been traveling every year before that, decided to stop traveling. I was racing Professional against guys like Jay Springsteen and Gary Scott, and I remember all those guys telling me that I need to get off the Yamaha and “get on a Harley. You don’t have Shell here with you and are trying to do this all by yourself.” My first national race was the Houston Astrodome [in 1979]. I think I got eighth place. I only made one more national after that with the Yamaha, and I think my confidence started to go a little bit.

For his second season, Rainey made the switch to the Harley-Davidson, riding Chris Armstrong’s bike. It was a hand-to-mouth existence. “We were racing week to week, living out of the van,” Wayne remembers. “We knew some people back in Indianapolis, and we could stay at their house. We weren’t racing for the money; it’s just what we did. You didn’t race to get rich.”

For 1980, Rainey was to get his next big opportunity, and it came at the expense of Eddie Lawson. Lawson was going to be racing the new 250 piston-port Kawasaki MX engine in flat track racing in an aftermarket chassis by Viper. However, Lawson dislocated his hip and was unable to ride.

Wayne explains the situation: “They asked [Eddie] if he knew anybody who could ride this bike in the short track nationals, and Eddie mentioned me. I won the consolation race the first time out on this thing, and it really excited Kawasaki. I started racing all over the Midwest. Back in those days, you could race seven times a week, and we were winning more and more on it.”

Rainey was starting to dabble with road racing, doing some AFM (American Federation of Motorcyclists) amateur racing when time allowed: “Kawasaki then asked me if I wanted to ride the road race bike. I ended up going to race AFM at Riverside and Willow Springs in the 550cc and 750cc classes. I won fifteen of the sixteen races and set track records at each one.”

Wayne’s performances caught the attention of many, and he received an offer that he clearly could not refuse:

Kawasaki asked me if I wanted to race at Loudon [New Hampshire] in a professional AMA national road race. I grabbed a buddy, and we drove from California to New Hampshire and rode the 250 for the first time there. The Novice race was in the rain, and I was out there in my dirt track leathers and boots. I ended up winning the race by twenty seconds. So the next day, Gary Mathers of Kawasaki offered me a contract to race Superbikes for 1982.

Rob Muzzy sums it up: "I suppose that was when everyone suddenly realized that Rainey was someone to reckon with."

SUPERBIKE RACER

Wayne Rainey had made a big career move, and he had done it very quickly: "Eddie was the reigning Superbike champion from 1981, and I went from fooling around in club racing to becoming Lawson's teammate on the 1025cc Kawasaki. [That bike] was a monster."

Rob Muzzy elaborates:

And that was the good news. Eddie's bike was in a higher state of tune. One of the things when you have multiple riders on a team, a rider always thinks the other guy has a better bike. In this case, it was a fact. We were doing tire testing at Daytona, so this would be early in the year for Wayne. Wayne put in a zillion laps, and he really had improved. We said, "Do you want to try Eddie's bike?" Well, he climbed onto it and went about a second and a half slower, saying, "Nah, I'm not ready for this thing." The closer you take it to that fine edge, the more capable the guy has to be to ride the things.

Wayne Rainey went on to win his first Superbike race at Loudon in 1982, eventually finishing third in the points chase behind Lawson and second-place Mike Baldwin. His fine performance earned him AMA Rookie of the Year honors.

The 1983 season brought a rules change to 750cc, a full factory onslaught from the new water-cooled Honda V-4, and big changes in

the class. With Lawson moving on to GP racing for 1983, Rainey's new teammate for 1983 would be Wes Cooley.

Steve Johnson and Mark Johnson were put in charge of preparing Rainey's bike. It would not always be an easy job. Mark Johnson recalls an early-season conversation:

Gary Mathers called us in the office and said, "We've hired Wes [Cooley] to replace Eddie. I want you to know straight away that you aren't going to be getting the good parts. Wes is getting all the new stuff, and Wayne is getting the old stuff that's left over." Steve and I kind of looked at each other and said, "You know what, let's do it." We got to Daytona and were close to putting a production engine in the thing. We were blowing up everything we had.

Rob Muzzy continues the story:

We had bearing problems, and every motor we had lost the rod bearings. We fixed that, ultimately . . . The problem we had was we figured out how to make the power, but with the camshafts we were using to make that power, the valve springs wouldn't last. It wasn't until about Brainerd that we'd found valve springs that would go long enough—125 miles. Then we took off.

Took off is putting it mildly: Rainey went on to win six of the last eight races on his way to becoming AMA Superbike Champion. Rainey describes how he sealed the title:

It came down to Mike Baldwin [riding for Honda] and me. At Willow Springs while I was chasing him . . . he came over a rise. The wind caught him and blew him off the track. I couldn't believe he was trying to come back onto the track over the lip at the edge. There was no way at over 100 miles per hour, and he crashed in front of me. His bike was spinning in front of me on fire, and I wasn't sure if I should run over him or the bike. I ended up missing them both and won the race.

Mark Johnson elaborates on that memorable race: "Their bike was on fire, and the Honda guys were really dejected. They had worked so hard with the V-4. The joke was that they had spent more at Daytona than we had spent all year long. I have a picture in my garage of that celebration when Wayne [got] off the bike, and everybody lifted him up in the air; it was just fantastic."

The celebration wouldn't last for long, however, as Rob Muzzy explains: "When we came back from the last race, we drove into the parking lot, and Mathers' boss was standing out there. He came up and said, 'Gary, I need you to come to my office right now.' Gary came back out and said, 'Well, we've all been fired.' We'd just come back from the last race, gotten off the airplane, having won the championship."

Mark Johnson continues the story: "Kawasaki had decided to discontinue road racing. They had nothing to compete with the Honda. They had nothing coming and thought that we weren't supposed to win this year. It was better to get out and regroup."

A TOUGH START IN GRAND PRIX

Superbike Champion Rainey found his career unexpectedly on hold, and he began to explore his options. What initially looked like a setback turned out to be excellent timing: Kenny Roberts was putting together a 250 GP team for 1984, and the three-time world champion selected Rainey to ride for him. Wayne Rainey was going racing in Grand Prix.

The team started out with a small-budget effort at Daytona before moving on to the Grand Prix season. Rainey explains: "We came to Daytona--a couple of the guys came over from Europe [Sito Pons and Martin Wimmer] to run it as a tune-up race—and we blew their doors off with this 250 Yamaha. After that, we went to Kyalami, South Africa, for the first race. The only thing I knew about GP racing was looking at the track maps that Kenny gave me to see which way to go."

Rainey recalls that the low-budget team lacked even the spare wheels on which to mount a set of rain tires:

Kenny told me to go out on slicks. Barry Sheene came by and said, "What are you doing going out there on slicks? It's raining." In practice,

the track started drying a little bit. There was a dry line, so I just stayed on that. [Later on] I locked up the front brake and crashed in the first turn, taking out a few riders, crashing into a big heap. I remember this Venezuelan yelling and screaming at me in Spanish. I didn't even know what language he was speaking. It was my first race outside of the United States. Nobody knew who I was before, but they remembered who I was after that.

They also remembered Wayne Rainey as the guy who couldn't get his motorcycle to start: "I qualified fourth or fifth, on the front row, but the problem was that it was a push start. I'd never done it; I pushed, let the clutch out . . . bikes [were] going by me . . . I jumped on, hoping it would start; it didn't. By the time I got it going, I was twenty seconds behind the pace car."

This problem was to ruin Rainey's first GP season, as he struggled to get the bike to fire on the line. The second race of the season, at Misano, provided more of the same: "My bike seized in final qualifying. So with fifteen minutes left, I got my teammate Alan Carter's bike, so I could qualify with his. I ended up qualifying fourth." Rainey was allowed to race, and again he couldn't get the bike to fire up, leaving him [to start] behind the pace car again. He managed a surprising result anyway:

I didn't know what place I was in, what lap I was on, where my pit board was . . . The next thing I know the checkered flag was out. I come off the track, and this big guard is making everyone go through and points to me, telling me, "That way." I'm thinking, "What did I do now?" I thought I was in trouble for something. There's this crowd of people clapping . . . I had gotten third place.

The launch problems continued, however, and Rainey's debut GP season can perhaps be summed up best by a memorable moment from the Assen 250 GP: "I pushed the bike past Kenny. He was on the pit wall yelling, 'Push harder! Push harder!' It wasn't funny then, but it is now."

Rainey finished the 1984 season eighth in the 250cc World Championship, which was not a fair reflection of his speed or potential.

He returned to America for the 1985 season:

There were no offers for me in Europe. I didn't try to stay in 250 GP; I didn't want to do that again. Kenny wasn't sure what he was going to do [that season], but I knew I wanted to stay home in 1985, to try and win a championship to get in the position for an opportunity to get back to Europe. I didn't know how it was going to happen; there was no road map on how to do it.

Rainey spent the year riding for MacLean Racing in the 250 GP class and the AMA Formula One class on the three-cylinder RS500 two-stroke Honda. Rainey swept the F1 and 250 GP races at Road America and Sears Point, and he also won the 250 GPs at Mid-Ohio and Kent, finishing third in 250 GP points for the season. Rainey describes his 1985 season:

Coming back to the AMA with a team that was racing against the factories, I had done well enough that year to get Honda's attention. I had my eye on Europe also and wanted to ride 500 two-strokes. So they provided me with a three-cylinder 500 to race in the Formula One class. That year in Formula One, you could also race Superbikes in that class. The four-stroke was like cutting butter, it was so easy. The two-stroke was *much* more difficult to ride. Honda wanted me to focus on the Superbike, but I wanted to stay on the two-stroke because my focus was to get back to Europe somehow, and I didn't want to get rusty on it.

The move to Honda for 1986 gave Rainey the chance to reunite with Gary Mathers and Rob Muzzy. He continued to compete in both F1 and Superbike, although the team's primary focus was on the Superbike title. Rainey's main competition that season would be his teammate, Fred Merkel. In a situation similar to that of the 2008 Yamaha MotoGP team, the two riders would run different tires, with Rainey using Michelin rubber and Merkel running Dunlops.

Rainey put together an excellent season, winning six of nine Superbike races, but he narrowly lost the championship to Merkel. Rob Muzzy

explains: "Wayne lost the title for two reasons. He got penalized for passing under a yellow flag and because he crashed at Mid-Ohio. Merkel, who basically could never beat him on the bike, won the championship because he was always second."

The yellow flag incident also involved a rider who would go on to play a large role in Rainey's story, not to mention in the story of Americans in GP racing. The 1986 season saw the beginning of the Rainey-Schwartz rivalry, one of the greatest in all motorsports. Wayne recalls the penalty that ultimately cost him the title:

Schwartz and I were racing at Sears Point, and there was a yellow flag where this guy we were lapping was coasting because his bike had blown up. There was about a 70-mile-per-hour difference in speed [between us and the lapped rider]; there's just no way, you can't park it. So, they threw both Kevin and I out, and it cost me the championship. In 1987, I *had* to win the championship, and I was just riding Superbike.

Standing in his way would be a certain lanky Texan:

It all really started at Daytona in 1987. We were racing it out, and Schwartz was starting to get away from me. Then I started to chip back away at him. I probably wouldn't have gotten him before the end, but he knew that I was coming and threw it away thinking about it. So I won the race. I said something about, "Yeah . . . the pressure must have gotten to him." So he said something about how I never would have caught him.

RAINEY VERSUS SCHWANTZ

The budding rivalry continued to grow as the two went overseas to compete in the Transatlantic Match Races. Stretching the concept of "team" to the limit, the Americans were led by Rainey and Schwartz. For the 1987 races, Rainey brought the momentum from his recent Daytona win, but Schwartz had the confidence that comes with being the defending individual match races champion. "He was out to get what I had," Rainey

recalls, “and I wanted to make sure he didn’t have it. If you won all nine races over three days, you would win 100,000 pounds sterling.”

It has been said that there was a deal between the two Americans that whoever won race one would get the free pass, and the Americans could then split the booty at the end of the series. Rainey wasn’t game and denied that it was ever a consideration: “The problem was that you cannot base everything off one guy. You don’t know if he’s going to fall off, and Kevin didn’t have the greatest reputation at that time of staying on.”

Payout scenarios aside, Kevin Schwantz took the win in race one at Brands Hatch. With £100,000 at stake, the gloves—if they were ever on in the first place—came off. Race two could be best described as savage, as Schwantz recounts: “I come in there leading on the last lap and get just about down to the line, and I get hit. It slowed me down enough going sideways across the oil dry that going down Paddock, but I was able to get a run back on him to get past him . . . but then I out-broke myself getting into there, ran a little wide, and he got back by me.”

Rainey recalls the incident from his perspective: “Coming into that blind turn one, he’d left the door open and I stuffed it in there. He turned down, we made contact, and I knocked him off the track. I didn’t want him to win those races.”

Schwantz continues the story:

There’s not but one other place to pass, and that’s the left-right into Clearways. At that point I jumped the curb, went up the inside of him, and laid some rubber down the right side of his leathers. I did all I could to muscle him out of the way. I finally just about crashed. Me and my bike were both just about in the grass. We almost fought on the podium.

Rainey still has vivid memories of that intense, emotional day:

He’d come back on the track, and the last turn . . . he started to go under me, so I just leaned on him and won the second race. I asked him, “What are you doing out there?” He said the same thing to me.

It was a pretty violent and vicious start of a rivalry that continued on for a long time. It was like war after that; we didn't respect each other. I was the established guy, and he was the guy with the wild style coming up.

Schwantz would go on to win the 1987 match races, and memories of the bitter Rainey-Schwantz rivalry have lived on over the decades. Although the two are now friends, when the seven American 500cc/MotoGP world champions all appeared together at Laguna Seca in 2008, Nicky Hayden noted that Kevin Schwantz and Wayne Rainey were at opposite ends of the stage.

Rainey would go on to win the 1987 AMA Superbike Championship through consistently strong performances to go along with race wins. Learning a valuable lesson from the 1986 championship loss to Merkel, he would carry that focus throughout the rest of his career. However, by season's end, everyone was talking about Schwantz, who finished the campaign by winning five of the last six races.

THE RIVALRY GOES GLOBAL

Having proven his worth with an AMA Superbike Championship, Rainey was ready to return to GP racing. He had thought Honda would offer him a slot on its GP team, but HRC wanted Rainey to stay in the U.S. Superbike series. Once again, the timing was right for Rainey and Kenny Roberts, who had decided to let Randy Mamola and Mike Baldwin go for 1988. And so Rainey made his return to GP racing for Kenny Roberts' Lucky Strike Yamaha team, but this time in the premier class alongside new teammate Kevin Magee. Rainey was not the only rider to make his full-time debut in the top class: Schwantz was also making the jump for Suzuki.

The first race of the 1988 season was held at Suzuka, a track Rainey had never seen before. His first practice session as a 500cc rider would be memorable for all the wrong reasons. Knowing that Schwantz had recently won the 8 Hours of Suzuka, Rainey decided to follow the Texan to learn a few tricks: "The first lap, he knows where he's going and just disappears. So I'm going into this corner, and I lose the front and crash—on my out lap. In front of all these teams . . . here's Rainey with this bike all tore up and crashed."

Schwantz would pour more salt in Rainey's wounds by winning the race. The Texan took the lead in the championship heading back home to Laguna Seca for the first United States Grand Prix held since the 1960s.

"It was the worst thing that could have happened," Rainey recalls. "Kevin won the first race in Japan. I was devastated."

Schwantz took more than a little delight in the situation: "He [Wayne] gets back, and every paper is saying 'Schwartz wins Japan.' I thought he was going to kill himself."

But Rainey quickly bounced back at Laguna, taking his first 500cc pole and finishing fourth behind winner Lawson. Rainey no doubt took some satisfaction in finishing ahead of Schwantz in the race. However, Wayne's confidence suffered yet another blow when his teammate, Magee, won the next GP at Jarama. As the season went on, Rainey found himself just off the winning pace. In most races, he rode well enough to finish near the top (five podiums in nine midseason races), but that first win continued to elude him, and his frustration was made worse at the Nürburgring, when he finished second behind a victorious Schwantz. It was only a matter of time before Rainey's breakthrough win, however, and he duly earned it in August at the British Grand Prix at Donington Park.

As noted in the previous chapter, the 1988 title race was mostly a two-way fight between Eddie Lawson and Wayne Gardner. But the lessons Rainey had learned in Superbike paid off in his first Grand Prix season: His consistent finishes added up to third in the World Championship. (Schwartz finished eighth.)

Lawson's switch to Honda gave Rainey the chance to step into the top Yamaha slot. He took full advantage of the opportunity, stepping up his game another notch.

The season began with a tightly fought battle at Suzuka. Rainey came out on the losing end to Schwantz. The results might have been different if not for a mistake by Rainey: "I was right behind Kevin, and near the end of the race I saw L2 [on my pit board]. There was really only one lap to go. I was going to set him up; I came by and saw the checkered flag waving. I just couldn't believe it, that I had made a mistake like that."

At the second round, held at Phillip Island in Australia, it was Wayne Gardner who narrowly defeated Rainey for the win. Round three was the USGP at Laguna Seca. Rainey would not be denied victory on home soil. He started from pole and won the race, followed by Schwantz and Lawson to make an all-American podium. Sadly, the joyous celebration would be cut short because Lawson never arrived, having been at the scene of a terrible crash on the cool-down lap. Rainey's best friend, Bubba Shobert, was seriously injured in the accident. Meanwhile, Gardner had also crashed and broken his leg during the race, eliminating him from the championship equation.

The rest of the season was a three-way fight between the American superstars. The importance of consistency was proved yet again by the fact that Schwantz won six races but finished just fourth in the title chase. Rainey, on the other hand, took half as many victories but never finished off of the podium. It would come down to Rainey's one DNF—a crash in Sweden—to leave the door open for Lawson (four wins and only one finish off the podium) to take his fourth World Championship for Honda.

WORLD CHAMPION

Yamaha brought Lawson back for 1990, giving the team an impressive rider lineup. "Marlboro said, 'We want a super team,'" Rainey explains. "The previous season they had [Alain] Prost and [Ayrton] Senna in Formula One, so Kenny hired Eddie and I, numbers one and two in the world . . . but Eddie was coming to *my* team."

Kenny Roberts describes Rainey at that time, a young man on the cusp of his first world title: "Wayne was very eager, very serious. Back then he was not quite as technical as Eddie, but he had an extreme amount of talent. We haven't had a rider like that since, to be honest."

One suspects the team chemistry between Rainey and Lawson was not as caustic as the Prost-Senna relationship, but both riders were accustomed to being number one. The situation was quickly resolved in Rainey's favor after he won three of the opening four races while Lawson's title defense was besieged with injuries.

With Lawson eliminated from contention, it would be a straight fight between the sport's two young American rivals, Rainey and Schwantz. "After Eddie got hurt, we realized that the championship was between us," recalls Schwantz. "The difference was, when I won, Wayne was normally second." Schwantz (five wins, four DNFs) was unable to match his rival's speed (seven wins) or consistency (five second-place finishes, two thirds, one DNF), and Wayne Rainey took his first World Championship in commanding fashion.

With Lawson moving on to Cagiva for 1991, Rainey was paired with another American, defending 250cc World Champion John Kocinski. The matchup was no contest as far as the team owner was concerned. In fact, when it comes to riding style and technique, Kenny Roberts holds Rainey above all others:

There was chemistry. I had it with Kel, and Wayne had it with me. His timing, to get the bike to do what it wanted to do . . . his riding was perfect, and John wasn't going to be able to beat that. Wayne was



*Raney on the podium following his win at the 1991 USGP at Laguna Seca.
DMT Imaging*

definitely the quickest guy that I've had; it's a raw natural talent with the determination and drive. Eddie had the determination and the drive, but it was at the end of Eddie's career when Wayne was strongest. I think Wayne had just a little bit of an edge when it came to natural talent. Eddie manufactured what he had to be, but Wayne just had it naturally.

Although Kocinski occasionally showed Rainey his heels in 1991, the defending champion had the measure of his teammate. Rainey's main challenge in 1991 came from Honda's Mick Doohan. The gritty Australian would prove to be a tough opponent; he was often able to match Rainey not just in terms of speed but also consistency.

For the third straight season, Schwantz won the opener at Suzuka, with Doohan finishing second. Rainey won the following two rounds, but Doohan took second both times. Doohan broke through with victories in the following two races at Jerez and Misano—the title was starting to tip toward the Australian. Schwantz and Doohan traded the next two wins, with Rainey runner-up each time. As the season passed the halfway mark, the defending champion went on a tear, winning four of the next seven races to seal his second straight title. Unfortunately, he broke his leg during the last event of the season in Malaysia. The injuries sustained in the crash would add to the challenge of defending his title the following season.

For 1992, Rainey tried to return to testing too early and crashed, breaking bones in his hand. His inability to develop the Yamaha in the off-season left him at a serious disadvantage to Doohan and the new big-bang Honda. During the early part of the season, the championship was simply no contest: Doohan won the first four races, followed by seconds at Mugello and Catalunya. Despite his disadvantage in equipment, Rainey kept his head down and recorded three second-place finishes and one win from those first six races.

However, things got worse for the defending champion at the German GP at the Hockenheimring: Rainey crashed, injuring his back and breaking both his hand and his foot. Adding insult to injury was the fact that Doohan won the race, and the title appeared to be a foregone

conclusion. Rainey tried to come back for the next race at Assen, but it was not possible and he returned home. Then Doohan's misfortune became Rainey's opportunity: "I got a fax that said that Doohan had crashed, but I still didn't think that we had a chance at that point. I think I was 65 points back. But Mick made a mistake, and when I came back I had a big-bang engine myself."

Doohan's crash was particularly brutal. The injuries to his right leg were so extensive that there was a risk of amputation. The Australian would have to use a hand-operated rear brake for the rest of his career. Meanwhile, Rainey, still recovering from his own injuries, returned to the grid to take second at Donington and wins at Magny-Cours and Brazil. He had erased most of Doohan's points lead. Doohan, still unable to walk, gamely returned to race in the final two events, but Rainey's third-place finish at the finale in Kyalami decided the championship in the American's favor. Wayne had won his third consecutive World Championship.

"THE BIGGEST BATTLE I'D EVER FACED IN MY LIFE"

The year 1993 brought a renewed challenge from Schwantz. After a year under the guidance of Stuart Shenton, the Suzuki team had brought predictability and consistency to Rainey's greatest rival. Finishes of 1-3-2-1-1-2-1-3-2 to start the season were decidedly unlike Schwantz, leading one to think that perhaps the "win or crash" label may have had as much to do with the previous development program as it did with the rider. The challenge to Rainey's supremacy was on, as Schwantz took a significant points advantage going into Donington Park.

In qualifying, it all went wrong for Wayne Rainey: "I crashed and fractured the vertebrae in my back. I was hurting so bad, I didn't know where I was going to finish, or even if I could finish. Doohan took out [Alex] Barros and Schwantz, and I figured that since Kevin was out that I could just cruise around and get second, so that's what I did."

Despite the back injury, Rainey followed up Donington with a win at Brno (Czech Republic), retaking the points lead in the process. The chances for a fourth straight championship looked promising heading into three of his favorite circuits: Misano, Laguna Seca, and Jarama.

Then it all went horribly wrong at Misano. Rainey was running ahead of Schwantz:

Mid-race, coming into turn one, I put the front wheel about three or four inches off line. I got it back on line . . . when I just started to open the throttle, I lost side grip and the rear stepped out, hooked, and swung back toward the inside of the turn. Instantly, I was sliding in front of the bike at well over 100 miles per hour.

The first thought I had was, "Damn, I've lost this World Championship." I hit a curb, and that got me up in the air, so I cleared the grass and landed in the speed bumps in the sand trap, which got me flipping through the air, flying like a rag doll. I'd hit with my head, my legs, my back, wham, wham, wham . . . I was going fast, and one of the thoughts I had was that I hoped there wasn't a guardrail to stop me because it was really going to hurt. Then I heard this huge *POP*, with a burning pain in my back.

It was the most pain that I had ever felt in my career. I'd had big ones before, but something was not right, and I knew that right away. Before anybody got to me, I remember thinking, "If I can just get up that would be the next step." My brain was saying get up, but the only thing that was moving was my arms. Now I had this confusion. I felt my legs with my hands, and my hands felt my legs . . . but my legs didn't feel my hands.

I knew something terrible was wrong, and I was wondering how something I love so much could hurt me so bad. I could hear the bikes going by, and my left eye started going black . . . and then my right eye started going black . . . and the pain began to go away . . . I felt like my spirit was slipping away. I was conscious of everything that was going on, and when everything started going black, I thought, "This is it; I'm gonna die right here. God, if you are real, if you are there . . . I want to see Shay [his wife] and my son Rex." Rex was only ten months old; he didn't even know me. It was the first time I'd ever been that close to death. I didn't want to die, and I just wanted to see my family. What was so important one second was so unimportant the next. Nothing

else mattered to me; it didn't matter about the World Championship. It didn't matter how much pain I was in . . . Then it was like a spirit came over me, like God saying, "Okay, and now you are going to come to know me."

I was never a religious man at any time in my life. All of this happened in maybe ten seconds. Then all the pain came back, and the biggest battle I'd ever faced in my life was just getting to the next breath. That's all I was focused on. I focused harder on taking my next breath than anything I'd ever done in my career in trying to win a race.

I had what was called a "T-6 complete," which means I had no feeling from the chest down. My spine was completely broken in half and it stretched the aorta, which normally tears, and then you just go to sleep as you bleed to death internally. The doctors were amazed that I lived through it because the spine was so displaced. It was a miracle as far as I'm concerned. But it was still a battle just to get to the next breath; the pain was just tremendous . . . It would have been so easy to just say, "This is much too hard. I don't want to battle this to stay alive." It would be easier just to slip away.



The Endless Battle: Rainey leads Schwantz in 1993. Across their careers the two were seldom further apart than this. Mortons Media

I remember seeing Kenny and Dean, my trainer, at the track hospital. When I saw the look on Kenny's face, I knew something serious was wrong by the way he was looking at me. Kenny knew that I was paralyzed, and we were very, very close. They put me in the helicopter, and I was grabbing these Italian doctors, looking them in the face and telling them that I didn't want to die in that helicopter. They put me in an ICU, and there was a guy in the bed next to me who was a spectator from the race who had gotten into a motorcycle wreck. I was trying to encourage him to stay alive and not to give up . . . The kid didn't make it. Death was so close to me, and I wasn't out of the woods. They didn't know if I was going to make it through that first night or not. My focus was to just keep breathing. I thought if I kept breathing, that I could make it. It was a lot of work.

RECOVERY AND COMEBACK

A long and painful recovery followed, as Wayne Rainey struggled to return to health while also coming to terms with the fact that he would never be able to walk, let alone race a motorcycle, again. He explains how the qualities that made him such a great rider helped him through this most difficult period:

If you want to be the best and want to be world champion, you have to be completely focused on racing, with no distractions. My teammates would think, "I'll just wait until the bike gets better." I was going to push until the end, whatever it took to be champion, and we almost pulled it off for a fourth time. I think that is the same mindset that kept me alive.

In addition to support from his family and friends, Wayne also received a boost from Formula One team owner Frank Williams, who visited Rainey in the hospital. Williams had been in a wheelchair since 1986, the result of a road accident. He provided some much-needed wisdom and inspiration, and helped to point Rainey toward the next chapter in his life: "Seeing Frank

and his condition, he had focused all his attention onto his team, and he was very successful. I had a lot of opportunities from Yamaha, from Kenny, from Philip Morris. If I hadn't started the team, I would probably have struggled more because I wouldn't have had something to focus on."

And so, less than a year removed from his devastating crash, Wayne Rainey returned to Grand Prix racing, this time running his own 250 GP team. The determination that had seen Rainey reach the pinnacle of international Grand Prix competition was now redirected into team management.

For 1996, Rainey moved his team up to the 500cc category, signing double 125cc World Champion Loris Capirossi. The high point of the season came when the Italian took his and the team's first premier class victory at the final race of the year at Eastern Creek, Australia. Capirossi recalls that joyous moment: "That moment was great for me and also especially for Wayne because it was really his first big win as a team manager. I have a beautiful picture in my home. I am in the arms of Wayne."

It was only two seasons later, at the end of 1998, that Rainey decided that 20 years of rigorous traveling in pursuit of racing glory was enough. He moved on from GP racing, turning his attention to his family.

Wayne Rainey remains a legend, one of America's greatest racers in any form of motorsport, a fact demonstrated by his induction into the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame in 1999 and the FIM's naming him a Grand Prix Legend the following year. Laguna Seca paid homage to the three-time champion by renaming its turn nine, the sweeping downhill lefthander, Rainey Curve. Only Bobby Rahal and Mario Andretti have been so honored. "That to me is very flattering," Andretti told the author recently. "To be on the same circuit with Wayne." It's interesting to note that the 1978 Formula One World Champion and one of the greatest American auto racers actually dreamed of racing two-wheeled machines in his early years. "That's what I dreamed about doing, that's the path that I thought I would follow while I was still a young kid in Italy," Andretti explains. "I always had the greatest respect and admiration for these guys; you have no idea how much I love that kind of racing. No one appreciates those guys more than me; I can tell you that sincerely."

STILL COMPETING

Rainey has returned to racing, now on four wheels. In contrast with other SuperKarts, it is hardly surprising to find Rainey's kart has handlebars and grips instead of a steering wheel. Sandy Rainey prepared the SuperKarts for the 2009 Laguna Seca MotoGP shootout between Wayne, Valentino Rossi, Eddie Lawson, and Kenny Roberts, and knowing Sandy, one couldn't help but ask, "Where are you hiding the nitrous bottle in Wayne's kart?"

Pointing at what appears to be a fire bottle, Sandy grins. "That would be this one right here." Sandy Rainey's search for the slightest advantage continues and, as ever, 40 years after the nitro Mini-Trail, Wayne will put it to good use.



Sandy Rainey with the SuperKart he tuned for Wayne for the 2008 race at Laguna Seca. Note the motorcycle handlebar setup on the kart.

CHAPTER 6

Victory above All: Kevin Schwantz



Kevin Schwantz enjoying one of the 25 victory laps he earned during his career.
Mortons Media

KEVIN SCHWANTZ RODE ON the absolute limit, period. In a classic understatement, Kevin's father, Jim, sums up his World Championship son's podium-or-gravel-trap career: "He's done his share of crashing."

Wayne Rainey had the best view of many of those crashes:

Kevin had a special feel for riding on or over the edge and most of the time getting away with it. He did things on a bike, and I would think, "Man, he is down." He had a peculiar way of riding; with Kevin I could never predict where he was going to be, or how consistent he was going to be. But I could always tell it was going to be tight. Kevin made a lot of fans, you always root for the guy like Kevin—maybe not the guy that's dominating, but the underdog. I think in some ways Kevin made himself the underdog, but then he turned and it made him a fan favorite. I was lucky to have a competitor like Kevin who was so good and had so much raw talent. He brought the best out of me. I'll never forget that he won more races than I did. We've been through a lot together, that's for sure. And in the end we saw just how much we had meant to each other.

The era of the fast and consistent Rainey versus the blindingly fast and fearless Schwantz has left an enduring legacy. Their thrilling eight-year rivalry began in the United States and carried over to Europe, defining one of the greatest eras in the sport's history.

"THIS MOTOCROSS ST IS NOT FOR ME"**

Kevin James Schwantz was born on June 19, 1964, in Houston, Texas. Born into a family that owned a motorcycle dealership, Schwantz was raised in perhaps the ideal environment for an aspiring racer. Jim Schwantz had raced some himself, as he explains: "I rode some dirt track but never got past the novice category. I tried motocross and kept falling down. We became a Yamaha dealer the year Kevin was born, so he had access to things to ride from the get-go at around four years old. Kevin learned a lot of his skills from Ossa's two-time European trials champion, Mick Andrews."

Kevin's first competition event came when he was five or six years old, riding in observed trials—competitions that test a rider's balance over difficult terrain.

My dad was big into trials; we were Ossa [the now-defunct Spanish motorcycle manufacturer] distributors at the dealership. All the guys who were really into it wanted to ride the Mick Andrews [Mick Andrews Replica] bikes at that point. Until the Yamaha TYs came out, I had a Yamaha Mini-Enduro, and then he built me a 90cc with a cut frame to lower the center on it.

Jim Schwantz explains Mick Andrews' influence on his young son's development: "Kevin was riding a little TY-80, and we'd have Mick over to do trials schools. Kevin picked up on what Mick was teaching. He had some one-on-one, but at the school Kevin was just another student."

"I think I gave up trials about the time I outgrew my TY-80," Kevin recalls. "I wanted to try motocross, enduro, and hare scrambles-type stuff."

"Before Kevin started doing local motocross, we raced karts four or five times a year," says Jim. "We went to Baja on a few occasions; he rode a Yamaha IT-175 enduro."

"It was on a 1976 model YZ80C that I started riding motocross," Kevin explains. "There was Friday night motocross and a Sunday one. I did okay; I could always ride at the front of the group of minis."

Jim explains that it wasn't long before Kevin was ready to leapfrog the 100/125/250 MX bikes to the largest class: "In MX, he started on an 80 and then went straight to the open class. He quickly became the guy you had to beat in that area."

Almost unbelievably, in 1981, 16-year old Kevin Schwantz went straight from the YZ80 to the powerful YZ465, a motocross bike similar to the one that Marty Moates had used to win the 500cc motocross 1980 USGP at Carlsbad. After graduating from high school in 1982, Kevin moved up to Expert class. This was about the same time Yamaha introduced the brutal YZ490 motocrosser, a quantum leap from the 465.

"I was running local stuff as expert," Kevin recalls. "I did Saddleback in 1982 and the Houston Supercross in 1982 and 1983."

"One time he brought a Yamaha 490 to race in Southern California at the Superbikers race, racing against Eddie Lawson," Jim Schwantz says. "That was a fun race; it led more than anything else to Supermoto . . . having combined asphalt and dirt."

Just as he had outgrown trials, it wasn't long before Kevin was ready to move on from motocross. "At Houston, I'd qualified for the program, made the semis, but never made it to the main event," Kevin says. "I decided this motocross s**t is not for me."

Aside from his parents, another big influence on Kevin's racing life was his uncle, (his mom Shirley's brother) Darryl Hurst, a professional dirt track racer who carried a familiar No. 34 number plate. According to Jim Schwantz, Hurst passed along some dirt track wisdom to his young nephew: "Because his uncle was a dirt tracker, he also did a fair amount of dirt tracking."

Hurst also provided the occasional burr under Kevin's saddle: "My uncle was the one who never seemed to give me any credit for anything I had done until I started racing professional AMA stuff. He made a comment when I was a kid . . . I told him I'd won three or four club races on that weekend. He said, 'When you win an AMA National, call me up and let me know.'"

This dismissal of his efforts would grate on the young Kevin for many years; he was never to forget it.

"IT CAN'T BE MUCH FUN"

It wasn't long before Kevin's interest turned toward endurance road racing. More as a lark than anything, he decided to enter a race at Texas World Speedway: "At the end of the season, some of my buddies were in the shop, and they said, 'Hey, why don't you come and do a road race with us? We're gonna do an endurance race.' I thought, 'I'll give it a try, there's no jumps, there's no dirt; it can't be much fun [laughs].'"

And so the future world champion made his road racing debut, riding a 1982 shaft-drive 750 Yamaha Seca:

I went out and tried it, and after my hour stint I was doing the same times as these guys who'd been doing this stuff for eight or ten years. I thought that maybe I ought to try this. We had fun, and that was the main thing. I talked to my parents, and we had a Vision, a modified XZ550, and put some good tires on it and went out and sprint raced it. I had a very good time sprint racing, and I took to it that weekend and thought maybe I'd give this a go next year.

Kevin's parents soon upgraded him to an FJ600, and he began racing in every class he could enter. After winning his first race on the 600 as a novice, he was moved up to Expert:

I could run six or eight classes. I'd step all the way up to 1,000cc and open . . . I wasn't really competitive, but I was sure having fun and getting experience and track time. So then I went home after the first full weekend in 1984 and told my parents, "Hey, I want to ride an RZ350 too!" Then I could ride the smaller classes and the four bigger classes on the 600, win three or four of them, and run right at the front in a couple of the others.

Kevin soon decided the time was right to enter the eight-hour national enduro at Texas World Speedway. Riding his FJ600, he raced against experienced organizations like Team Hammer:

John Ulrich and his guys . . . he was riding an 1150. We weren't ever a threat to win in the dry on our 600. But then it started raining and they red flagged it, and we all got to bunch up. The water crossing across the back straightaway was—and I'm not joking—at least a foot deep. On the first lap, John's bike had open stacks on it, and they slowed down to go through the water. Well, I see this as an opportunity, first of all, to splash him and make his visor really messy. But I didn't even think about the open stacks. It filled that bike up; it quit running on the spot. For the next ten laps I rode it around, and I'd see them every lap, working on the bike. I thought how they were only

a couple of laps ahead of us when we stopped; we might be winning by now. The other guys with big bikes didn't have the super trick rain tires that John was running, and they really weren't a threat in the wet.

Schwantz went on to win the race, a result that made a splash across the racing world. The mighty Team Hammer had been felled by an unknown privateer on an FJ600.

Jim Schwantz explains how that victory opened the doors for Kevin's career: "The enduro was where John Ulrich saw Kevin and got him the test on the Yoshimura bike. He went out and tested at Willow Springs and went straight up from there."

Things moved quickly from that point, and Kevin continues the story:

John [Ulrich] told me that what I did really impressed him, and he started to go to bat for me with Yoshimura to see if they would give me a tryout, because by then it was public knowledge that they were looking to replace Wes Cooley. John called and got me a test at Willow, and he asked me to come out a couple of days early and let me have a practice day, and that he'd let me ride his enduro bike. All the Southern California hotshoes were there, and I think I went two and a half or three seconds faster around Willow than that bike had ever gone there before. The next day for the AFM race, the Yosh guys showed up, and by the time they got it through tech I only got three laps of practice. I didn't even get to practice a start. I started the F1 race from the back of the field . . . and I stalled the thing. I got a push start, and as I went into turn one, the start of the field was going through turn three, heading up the hill. In less than eight laps I caught them and won the class. I had already gone as fast as Merkel had that year when he won the AMA pro race there. I started in the back in the 750 race against all the Southern California hotshoes and lapped one and a half seconds faster than in the F1 race. Then I went faster in the Superbike race . . . It was the very last race of the year, and by the time I got off

the bike, Nabe was standing there with a contract for me for the next year, 1985.

The Yoshimura bike had been carrying Wes Cooley's number: No. 34.

Kevin would learn a lot during that 1985 season, and it wouldn't be long before his career path went vertical. Things didn't exactly start out well at Daytona, though, as his race was over by the first corner due to a clutch failure. But things picked up from there, as Kevin explains: "I won Willow Springs, and the races that we did all went well. At the end of the season, I had a contract for 1986 to 1987 to run for American Suzuki on the GSXR."

As always, the 1986 season opened at Daytona, where Kevin was pitted against the mighty Yamaha team, with Lawson and Baldwin on factory FZR750s. Meanwhile, Honda had the formidable teaming of Rainey and Fred Merkel on VFR750s. Schwantz hung with the lead battle of Lawson and Rainey and eventually finished second after Rainey hit tire trouble. It was a strong debut race with his new American Suzuki team, but even bigger things were to come just a few weeks later.

MATCH RACE ACE

Kevin Schwantz's first chance to compete in Europe came thanks to an arrangement between Suzuki UK and four-time world champion Kork Ballington. Two time Daytona Superbike winner and the future founder of World Superbike, Steve McLaughlin explains the arrangement: "We had made a deal. I had gotten Korky Ballington, a Kawasaki guy, to ride for Suzuki UK at Daytona. It was a big deal; he was a Kawasaki world champion. In turn, Suzuki UK was supposed to give Kevin a good bike for the match races."

Suzuki UK didn't exactly fulfill its end of the bargain, however, as Schwantz recalls: "I turned up on the promise that there would be a really well-prepared GSXR750 there for me to ride. It turned out that the bike was Tony Rutter's Isle of Man TT bike. Tony shifted on the right. I walked into the garage and looked at this bike; it's leaned up against the wall with right-hand shift and a big puddle of oil underneath it [laughs]."

McLaughlin continues the story:

We get there, and they give us this clapped-out Tony Rutter bike. It was filthy, like they drug it off the Isle of Man. I don't think it had run since the Manx. The first thing Kevin did was wash the bike. The first thing I did was shame the hell out of the UK guys for giving us this piece of s**t. The wheels were made by a British wheel manufacturer, and they had stamped sections riveted together. The rivets were loose, and the wheel was wobbling. Fortunately, we found the wheel maker and got new wheels for Kevin. They got a lot more interested once Kevin got on the track and broke the lap record. Suddenly, we had a *lot* of support from Suzuki UK.

Kevin recalls how the 1986 Transatlantic Match Races came together for him:

The guys at Suzuki UK were able to get some spare parts and switch the thing back to a left-shift motorcycle. We were given some wheels so we could mount rains and slicks at the same time. The bike was an absolute rocket; it had the standard suspension, but they had done some work to the engine. It started off as one of those things I thought I would really regret going over and doing. But the bike handled great and everything worked fine. Between Merkel and I, we won every race. Merkel [who was riding a Honda UK 750 Interceptor] fell in one race, which gave me the advantage on the points.

McLaughlin sums up the event:

Kevin went out and kicked their ass on that bike. Rutter could never go so fast on this bike. He and Merkel absolutely decimated the British on their home track.

The 1986 Transatlantic Match Races were a turning point in Kevin Schwantz's career, a fact he knows full well:

There was absolutely no doubt in my mind, with all of the exposure that gave me—Barry Sheene was there, all the TV commentators were there, the races were on Eurosport [TV] across Europe—it really gave me my opportunity to come to Europe and do some racing. I stayed a couple of weeks after the race, tested one of Barry's old bikes, did the Race of the Year at Mallory Park. I was dominating the race handily until the cables popped out—a couple of the throttle cables popped out of two of the carburetors, so we were on a 250 for the last five laps—but I think we finished second. Barry went to Heron Suzuki and said, "Let's find a bike; let's do something; let's get this kid on a 500." I was really grateful to him for all he did, especially early on in my career.

McLaughlin explains how Schwantz became something of an overnight sensation in Europe:

It was the first time for Kevin out of the country, and the races were on TV with Barry Sheene commentating. We went to get on the tube in London, and the people selling the tickets recognized him from the TV show on the weekend. They wanted his autograph. He had never experienced the European celebrity thing before.

Another successful American career in 500cc GP had been launched.

Returning home to America, Schwantz's star kept rising throughout a season dominated by the American Honda riders, Wayne Rainey and Fred Merkel. Schwantz finished the campaign seventh in points and was a contender for wins. The positive results and some factory support allowed the team to carry some momentum into the 1987 season, as Kevin describes:

There were full-factory Suzukis for me and Polen in 1987. We did some testing over the winter with the Michelin tires on the GSXR and really got our bike working good. At Daytona, I was thirteen seconds in front of Rainey, and I was ready to make my second pit stop and got pinched out by a backmarker in the chicane. I fell and broke my little finger.

The battle at Daytona set the stage for the drama of the 1987 Transatlantic Match Races. Schwantz tells the story from his point of view:

When I went to Brands Hatch, I still had external pins sticking out of my fingers. I had to tape my fingers together, because I found that with tape on only that finger, the wind kept trying to blow that finger off and it really hurt. Rainey and I had an agreement going in that we were probably going to be the better guys here. We were going to run this first race and then maybe we'll talk about this £100,000 bonus that was there if one rider can win all the races. We went really hard in the first race, and I came out on top. But there was never a word said; he never came over and we never talked. The second race went on, and we did a bit of pushing and banging.

That race and Germany in 1991 with Wayne are probably the two races people talk about the most. People say, "I saw that video from the match races. Oh my God, you guys are crazy, you wanted to kill each other, didn't you?"

It was full-contact, desperation-meets-determination racing, the likes of which had rarely been seen before or since. In the end, Schwantz emerged



A battle for the ages: Kevin Schwantz leads Wayne Rainey at the 1987 Transatlantic Match Races. Mortons Media

as the victor, becoming the match races individual champion for the second year running.

The red-hot rivalry continued back in the United States. Kevin recalls those very intense times: "At that point in our careers, we didn't think there was room for both of us in Europe. We thought that it was either going to be me that made it or that he would make it. We didn't think we could both make it."

Rainey dominated the first three races of the AMA Superbike season, but Schwantz would come through in round four at Loudon to take his first Superbike win. Remembering Darryl Hurst's harsh response to his earlier achievements, Kevin placed a call to his uncle soon after his Loudon triumph: "He said, 'When you win an AMA National, call me up and let me know.' I called him right after I won Loudon in 1987."

From that point forward, the top step of the podium belonged to Schwantz, who won at Elkhart Lake, Mid-Ohio, Memphis, and Sears Point. The only exception was Laguna Seca, where Wayne's Honda teammate Bubba Shobert won. Yet despite this incredible run, the Texan fell short to his rival, losing the title to Rainey by just nine points. This would not be the last time Schwantz would top Rainey in wins but fall short in the championship.

GP WINNER

As it turned out, Kevin was wrong in his belief that there wasn't enough room in Europe for both him and Rainey. In fact, the Schwantz-Rainey rivalry was about to go international, as the two Americans moved up to racing in the 500cc Grand Prix class for 1988.

A pole and a win at Daytona gave the young Texan plenty of momentum going into the season-opening GP at Suzuka. But what happened there surprised even Kevin:

I got a good start, [and 1987 champion Wayne] Gardner gets by me, but he's not going anywhere. I look back and I can't see anybody behind us. So my mindset going into the last few laps of the race was, "I'm second, and the only guy in front of me has the No. 1 on the side

of his bike." I'm thinking I've really accomplished something, and then the next thing I know he runs off the track.

All on its own, the victory was impressive enough. But what few knew at the time was that Schwantz had done it with a fracture in his left arm, the result of a practice crash at Daytona.

The rookie racer was completely unprepared for the postrace interviews: "I was a PR nightmare. I never said the word 'Suzuki,' and worse yet, I commented on the other guy's Honda. I guess the good thing was that as long as you won the Japanese Grand Prix, you could probably say anything."

Schwantz's brilliant debut had a profound impact not just on his own career, but also Wayne Rainey's. Rainey recalls: "Sometimes things happen early in one's profession or career that you don't really know what it did until it is all done, like the Russians beating the Americans up into space. If that hadn't happened, then America wouldn't have been so determined to get to the moon. Basically that's what Kevin did to me by going out and winning that first race."

Unfortunately for Schwantz, he was unable to carry much momentum on from Suzuka, and his 1988 season was plagued by the inconsistency that would become almost a trademark of his early GP years. His win in Japan was followed by a fifth, two DNFs, and a fourth place before he broke through for a second win at the Nürburgring (a victory made all the sweeter by the fact that it was taken at the expense of a despondent Rainey). With just one podium and four DNFs across the following eight races, Schwantz was left well behind in the championship chase; he finished eighth in points.

But any analysis of Kevin Schwantz's first GP season must include the fact that Suzuki was just making its return to GP racing after a hiatus of several years. The fledgling team had no GP knowledge on which to develop its bike, and it showed.

The manufacturer delivered a much better machine for 1989, but Schwantz himself still required some development. Suffice it to say, the young Texan had not quite grasped the concept of "race craft."

The 1989 bike was probably the best motorcycle I ever rode. If it had had somebody intelligent on top of it, instead of somebody who just wanted to win win win, that bike should have won the championship. It was that good. I sat on the pole so many times that year. At that point, I really wish I had had somebody there saying "just finish." I wanted to win races beating everybody by a lap; that was my idea of a victory.

Schwantz began the 1989 season with a repeat win at Suzuka, this time narrowly over Rainey. But pole position at Australia led to no points, and Rainey returned the Suzuka favor by winning at Laguna Seca. The next race was at Jerez, where Schwantz learned a valuable and painful lesson:

I fell off [at Jerez] in 1989 trying to do one more good lap because Eddie Lawson was five seconds behind with six laps to go. I felt like if I had a second a lap to give away then he couldn't catch me. I put my head down that lap, thinking, "One more good lap." The next thing I



The King of Donington Park: Kevin Schwantz riding with his usual eleven-tenths style en route to victory at the 1989 British Grand Prix. Mortons Media

know, I'm on my back. After that race, I realized that five seconds on a Grand Prix bike is a *big* lead.

Schwartz followed up his DNF at Jerez with seven pole positions in the following eight races. Speed was clearly not the issue, as demonstrated by wins in Austria, Yugoslavia, and England, along with second places at Spa and Le Mans. But these results were not enough to offset the DNFs. Winning the last two Grands Prix brought his total to six for 1989, and he finished just fourth in the World Championship, despite having the fastest bike on the grid.

THE EPIC TITLE BATTLES

The 1990 season opened with a reversal from previous years: Rainey romped to victory at Suzuka, taking the pole and fastest lap in the process; Schwartz had to settle for third. Lawson's injury at round two at Laguna Seca meant the title fight would be more or less a two-man race, and Schwartz duly raised his game when the championship arrived in Europe. The Texan took third at Jerez before finishing second at Misano, followed by wins at the Nürburgring and the Salzburgring. The Rainey-Schwartz finish in the next GP at Rijeka was offset by a Schwartz-Rainey finish at Assen. Rainey would match the Texan's wins at Le Mans and Donington with his own victories at Spa and Brno. The difference was in the consistency. Across the first nine GPs of the season, Rainey's worst finish was second. Those results, coupled with five wins, were enough to trump Schwartz's five victories by 67 points.

Once again, the 1991 season began at Suzuka with what Kevin considers his greatest race:

We had been horrible all winter in testing. The first race of the year was in Japan, and everybody was there: Lawson, Doohan, Gardner, Kocinski, Magee, Niall Mackenzie, and a handful of Japanese wildcard guys. I got a good start and got to the front, but before I knew it I was the length of the front straightaway behind. That was my best race; the bike wasn't great. It was really good to start with but started pushing the front like a truck, and I found a way to ride around the problems

and get back in front. Wayne and I had so many knock-down drag-out races, but I really think that was my best race because the bike wasn't great and so many great guys were there.

Unfortunately, the following races saw the usual Schwantz pattern take hold. After Suzuka, his results went fifth, third, DNF, and seventh before his next win at Hockenheim. Schwantz would also take victories at Assen and Donington Park before finishing out the season with another pair of wins at Brno and Brazil. But once again, the consistency wasn't there, and Rainey repeated as world champion.

It would be unfair and incorrect to blame all of the inconsistency on the rider, however. Testing had never been extensive through Schwantz's early years at Suzuki, and the team's development and setups bordered on desperation, as Kevin explains:

[During those years] we didn't do nearly as much testing. We didn't keep good enough notes, so we didn't have much to fall back upon. It was always, "Well, I don't know what the f**k we do now, let's try this. We'd throw s**t at it, even after warmup we'd still be trying stuff. On certain weekends, it worked like gangbusters, but it was much more of a gamble. That's where I felt that so much of my inconsistency was coming from. If we were way off in left field on the setup after we worked and worked, then Sunday morning if we were still behind the eight ball, we'd go, "Watch this . . . seven come eleven . . . yeah, maybe it'll work."

Things began to change for the better in 1992, when Suzuki brought in two key people who would help change the direction of the team. Stuart Shenton, Freddie Spencer's former 250 mechanic at Honda, came in as Schwantz's race engineer. Doug Chandler also joined the team as the No. 2 rider. He was shocked by the Suzuki approach:

Kevin was a great rider, and he's a great person. Not to knock him in any way, but he was the total opposite of what Wayne Rainey was. It was

quite an experience, working in my first year of 1991 with Wayne and being able to learn so much, and then in 1992 shuffling over to the Suzuki side. At the time I made the switch, I'm thinking, "This is great, I'm going to be teamed now with Kevin. I've learned from Wayne; let's see what Kevin knows." I was dumbfounded. The input was vague from Kevin, whereas I was being more positive in trying to give the Japanese direction in trying to correct the problems with the bike. Kevin would just get on that thing and ride the wheels off—which is amazing to have a guy who could do that—but he ended up on the ground.

Shenton explains how he brought engineering discipline to the team, along with an organized development program:

It wasn't a case of making a new bike; it was more a case of "this is not the correct way to do that in terms of engineering." There were some fairly nasty things about [the bike] that we rectified. They were silly things, like not having what I'd call proper bearings in the swinging arms. You need a thrust bearing in there as well, rather than just bolting it up and shoving washers in it. [A lot of our focus was on] stuff like that.

Schwartz welcomed the new approach:

For me, Stuart was the guy who explained what was going on. He didn't just make changes and say, "Go try this." He would tell me what he adjusted, tell me what he thought it was going to do, what it should do. By the end of 1992, we knew what we could try and what we couldn't—we'd thrown everything but the kitchen sink at it. [The 1992 bike] never was a good consistent motorcycle, but that helped us a lot in 1993.

Meanwhile, Chandler's methodical and detailed approach to setup also played a huge role in moving the team forward. "He was just the opposite

of me," says Schwantz. "He would be working on the [bike] Sunday night [after the race], almost to an anal extent. He wanted to know oil levels, springs, geometry, everything. Doug was a big part of the development of our bike; he and Stuart together came with so many new ideas; a lot of the adjustability features of the bike were ideas that Doug had."

Shenton concurs:

Doug was a real professional. He had a lot of experience and had ridden a lot of bikes even at that early stage, having won on all sorts of things. Doug was able to confirm a lot of stuff for us, to back us up when decisions were made and parts were tried. He was a good guy to have on the other side of the garage, someone we could work with and get stuff done. But sometimes I think you can get too deep into the motorcycle, with too much of that stuff playing on your mind. There is a happy medium. Kevin and Doug are very different characters. Maybe getting too deep into the motorcycle, focusing on too many things instead of just riding it, can be a handicap. What is good for a test rider maybe isn't so good for a racer; maybe what you don't know and what you don't want to know ain't hurting you.

In the case of Lucky Strike Suzuki, the combination clicked. "Chandler was a hands-on guy, and FAST," says Schwantz's mechanic at the time, Hamish Jamieson. "He was a strong teammate, quite often beating Kevin in races. When you've got two guys running as quick as that, it is really good for the development of the bike."

CHAMPION AT LAST

The pieces were in place for Suzuki to challenge for the title in 1993. Endless winter testing resulted in a consistent and quick machine. "I think I just about lived at Eastern Creek, Australia, where we did our testing," Shenton recalls. Bringing Schwantz into the development loop helped him to understand and gain confidence in the bike. In turn, he delivered the best season of his career.

The trademark speed was still there, as evidenced by Schwantz taking pole in the first five races. But the big difference came in the results. "In 1993," Wayne Rainey recalls, "Kevin was riding races, finishing races, and going really well. He wasn't jumping off like in the past." Across the first nine Grands Prix, Schwantz finished first, third, second, first, first, second, first, third, and second. As the British GP at Donington Park approached, Schwantz and his bike were dominant. He held a 23-point lead in the standings and appeared well on his way to his first World Championship.

Everything appeared to be going in the Texan's favor. Schwantz's three wins at the track had earned him the title "King of Donington," his confidence was sky-high coming into the race, and he duly qualified more than a second faster than the rest of the field. Meanwhile, Rainey sustained a serious back injury in practice and would struggle to compete.

But Schwantz's dream scenario soon became a nightmare. Running second early in the race, he found himself a victim of a banzai move by Mick Doohan. Doohan took out Alex Barros, whose bike slammed Kevin into the gravel trap:

With that, I did a big nasty flip that took me out of the race. I left there with a three-point lead instead of what should have been a full Grand Prix lead. This opened everything back up. Then Wayne won in Brno. To make matters worse, I had broken a few bones in my hand at Donington and was trying to keep that as quiet as I could.

Jamieson recalls the situation:

We went into Donington with something like a race lead in the championship. Both Barros' and Kevin's bikes were bent, and at the time we didn't know it, but Kevin was injured. He kept that to himself. The couple of races after that, we really did struggle. Earlier in the season we had been very consistent. The destruction of the primary bike was a huge blow. We replaced the chassis with the same specification, but it is never exactly the same. You never expect something like that to happen to both riders before the first lap is even over; it just killed us.

The championship had been thrown wide open, and Rainey's win at Brno gave him the points lead heading into Misano. But then came Rainey's crash; the World Championship was decided in Schwantz's favor, but under the worst possible circumstances. Kevin Schwantz had finally achieved the goal that had eluded him for so long, but there was little to celebrate. He would go through the motions at the final two races of the season, taking fourth and third, but things would never be the same:

There is no doubt that [Rainey's crash] had a huge impact on me. I called Suzuki at the end of that year and said, "I'm going to do my damnedest to come back and ride in 1994, but after seeing what's happened to Wayne, I'm not sure that I'll be able to."

Schwantz did return to defend his title, and, ironically, it was an injury that helped him find his focus:

What helped me was falling off my mountain bike and breaking my arm three weeks before the first Grand Prix. At that point, I had something else to focus on, instead of thinking, "S**t, there is just no way . . . What am I going to do? There is just no way!"

Wayne was how I judged my performance. Wherever he was I wanted to better than that. If he was fourth, I wanted to be third. I took all the abuse about "the idiot that can't even ride a bicycle," so now I had something else to come back from, something for me to focus my attention on. . .

The injury didn't keep Schwantz from starting his season strong—he followed an early win at Suzuka with three second places at Spain, Austria, and Hockenheim. But the 1994 season would belong to Mick Doohan and Honda. The first of the Australian's five straight titles would mark the end of the era of American dominance of GP racing.

Schwantz's second and last win of the season came at Donington Park. This would be, as it turned out, his final GP win. The lure of competition brought him back for 1995, but the fire wasn't there. Fittingly, he would

make his final Grand Prix appearance at Suzuka. The rainy conditions gave him pause: "I rode around looking at how close the guardrails were and thought, 'Holy s**t, this place is dangerous in the wet!'"

Kevin remained undecided until he found himself sitting next to his old rival on the flight home. Their conversation would tip the balance.

"I could tell by his body language that he wasn't the same as when I raced against him," says Rainey:

So I thought being on the outside looking in, I could ask him some tough questions. I was able to ask those questions only because I had some similar thoughts at the end of my career before I had fallen off at Misano. Before my crash, I had had some doubts about still wanting to do what I was doing, doubts about wanting to keep the effort going at the degree that it took to be successful. Kevin had won his championship, and seeing him on the track, to me it just looked like he was second guessing himself. Normally he was committed all the time. I had a serious concern about him being able to walk away from a sport



Schwantz in 1994, carrying the No. 1 plate as defending 500cc world champion.
Mortons Media

that is really brutal if you aren't totally committed to it. I told him there is nobody who needs to be pleased in this sport except yourself, and if you can't get on the bike knowing you've done all you can to be the best, you are second-guessing yourself. If that's what's happening, then, man, keep your helmet in the pit.

When he arrived home, Schwantz made the call to Suzuki that ended his career in Grand Prix racing. "I'm sure that phone call was both very difficult and also a relief," says Wayne Rainey. "The reason I say that is because when I wasn't able to get back on my bike after my accident, there was a huge relief. I didn't have to go out and do it again. At the time, I wasn't sure that I was doing it for all the right reasons, and getting the performance that I needed wasn't coming as easily as it had just one year earlier."

Kevin Schwantz retired from racing with 25 GP wins, second only to Eddie Lawson among Americans and one win ahead of his arch rival, Wayne Rainey. Suzuki graciously accepted its world champion's retirement. Kevin Schwantz remains one of only two Suzuki champions from the past 22 seasons—both are Americans. "Suzuki gave me a chance," says Schwantz. "Not to say I didn't get the opportunity to get away from them, but I'm really glad none of those opportunities ever materialized."

Stuart Shenton summed up Schwantz's brilliant career and offers an explanation for what made him so great:

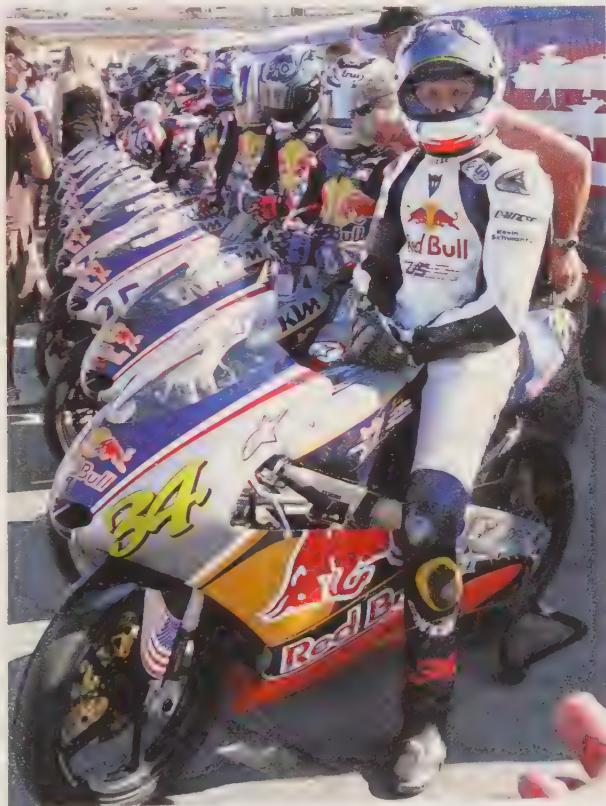
A lot of the top guys, Kevin included—the really good guys like Casey Stoner or Valentino Rossi—come Sunday, they race the bike whether it has problems or not. They are going to get on it, and they are going to get the result. That is one of the things that separates the really top guys. It is not only getting the motorcycle to that level, but when there are problems, to not let it be a problem. Kevin or Freddie, they'd run it, right or wrong, and there may be things going on, but they get the job done.

A NEW CAREER

Schwantz went on to found a riding school, which for years was based at Road Atlanta but recently moved to Barber Motorsports Park in Alabama.

The most memorable period of Schwantz's post-racing career was the two years (2007 and 2008) he spent as a riding coach for the short-lived Red Bull AMA Rookie's Cup, a series of races for KTM 125s that was designed to serve as a ladder series for the country's top young road racers looking to break into GP racing:

When somebody mentioned about me having twenty-three kids for ten or twelve weekends a year, I thought, "I don't have any kids of my own; I hope I know how to work with them." But it has been amazing to earn their respect, ride with them, and watch them mature and grow up.



Schwantz with his young charges at Laguna Seca in 2008. "I think I had the twenty-three best kids on Planet Earth."

Kevin took a hands-on approach to his work. He started out each session at the front before slowly slipping back to let the next group of riders follow him in order to study his lines and technique:

Most of the kids had never been to the tracks, so I would try to ride the first session with the kids at each event to give them some idea of the lines. It was so rewarding to work with kids who appreciated what you did for them, to have one say, “I was just doing everything wrong; I followed you for half of a lap, and what a difference it made.” Most of the people I have worked with don’t appreciate it, but here as soon as you start to talk, everybody wants to listen.

One of the highlights of Kevin’s 2008 season was the performance of his students during the MotoGP weekend at Laguna Seca: “I’ve bragged about the kids so much, the way they all conducted themselves when they were here with MotoGP. We put on such a great race, and had it not been for the Stoner-Rossi showdown [in the premier class event], we would have blown every other race away for that entire weekend.

Sadly, the Red Bull AMA Rookie’s Cup was not to last. The series was cancelled before the 2009 season due to a lack of funding. It was a tough blow for Kevin. “He had so much fun doing that,” says his father. “He was crushed when they cancelled that series.”

LEGENDS LIVE ON

Kevin Schwantz’s retirement may have marked the end of American dominance of Grand Prix racing, but the legendary riders and their legendary battles live on in the memories of fans—and in the minds of the riders who have followed in their footsteps. In his post-race interviews after winning the 2009 Indianapolis MotoGP at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 22-year-old Spanish rider Jorge Lorenzo reflected on those times: “Remember the times that Kevin, and Wayne, and Eddie were fighting always at the limit and sometimes crashed. Now I think we are coming to those times again, and I am happy to be a part of this. I would

have liked to have competed with Kevin, Wayne, and Eddie. I think at that period of MotoGP [500cc], they had a lot of talent. Maybe today is quite similar to that epoch of the 1990s."

Lorenzo says he sees America as the land of superheroes. As a tribute at the Indianapolis race, he wore the colors of a superhero on his helmet. When asked which hero he had chosen, Lorenzo replied, "Capitán America." The American GP riders have left their mark.



Schwantz still owns his World Championship-winning machine from 1993, and he brought it out for the 2009 MotoGP Indy race. "He always had that in his contract," said Jim Schwantz, "that if he won the championship, he would get one of the bikes."

CHAPTER 7

Dynasty: Kenny Roberts Jr.



Kenny Roberts Jr. leads the pack through the corkscrew at the 2006 USGP at Laguna Seca. Joe Bonnello

IT WAS PROBABLY INEVITABLE that Kenneth Lee Roberts Jr. would be a racer. Born on July 25, 1973, in Modesto, California, he grew up in the racing world, surrounded by top racing talent. Like many kids, he got his start riding dirt bikes. "He started racing at Lodi Cycle Bowl a little bit," recalls his world champion father, "a novice on an 80 Yamaha at ten or eleven years old."

"That's where he took us to do dirt tracking and stuff like that," Kenny Jr. explains. The youngster caught on quickly. "Thinking you want to do it and having to make the decision to do it is a big difference. I went through [dirt track racing] so fast, I probably had less than twenty races there."

Kenny Sr. explains that it wasn't long before the young Roberts was ready to move up to racing on harder surfaces:

He called me one day—I was in Europe at one of the races—and he said that he wanted to road race. I asked him, "What are you talking about?" So, he said, "I want to road race." I told him we'd talk about it when I got home. That's how it started. The first thing he did was with the little YSR50. He did three or four of those races and won all of them. The first race that he did was in L.A. in a parking lot with cones and haybales. He did that for a while, and then I got him a Yamaha 400, four-cylinder, four-stroke.

Roberts Jr. rose quickly through the ranks of the Western Eastern Roadracing Association (WERA)'s Formula Two series and finished second in 1991. He was ready to move up to the AMA pro ranks for 1992. Taking a proven path to success blazed by riders such as Spencer and Lawson, Kenny chose to make his professional debut in the AMA's 250 GP class. The timing was perfect because Wayne Rainey had founded his own Yamaha AMA 250 GP team for the season. It was a natural fit and a great place for Kenny Jr. to start his career. Kenny Jr. recalls, "Wayne had the team together, and it was really a professional team for American racing. It was a first-year team and everything was first class; the bikes were new, the equipment was new."

The 18-year-old rookie faced strong competition that season, racing against the likes of Chris D'Aluisio, Jimmy Felice, and the series

eventual champion Colin Edwards. Roberts held his own and finished an impressive fourth in the standings, earning a chance to make his World Championship 250GP debut the following season at his home track of Laguna Seca. He finished tenth in the Grand Prix, riding the Roberts Yamaha in the 250GP.

To keep his career moving toward a full-time GP ride, Kenny Jr. decided that his best option was to move to Europe for the 1993 season. With help from his father, Kenny Jr. competed on a Yamaha in the new Spanish 250 Ducados Open championship, a series founded by Kenny Roberts and Jaime Alguersuari (whose son of the same name drives in Formula One). “I told Jaime we needed a series for 125 and 250 bikes, for production race bikes, no works bikes,” explains Roberts Sr. “It was a good period for people who didn’t have much money but could win if they had the talent. It got so big that we were on Eurosport live when some of the Grands Prix weren’t.” Kenny Jr.’s teammate was a young Spaniard who would go on to enjoy a successful career in GP racing—Sete Gibernau.

“I knew Sete’s grandfather,” Kenny Sr. explains. “His grandfather was Bultaco—Señor Bulto. He would tell me how his grandson was very very determined and should be a good racer, so I put Sete on the team.”

Riding a Yamaha for Team Roberts, Kenny Jr. won a few races and took second in the points ahead of Gibernau, despite Kenny breaking his arm late in the season. The young American had shown that he had the talent to race in the World Championship. The opportunity to do so in 1994 came from a family friend.

ON THE WORLD STAGE

It just so happened that Wayne Rainey was fielding a 250cc team in the 1994 World Championship. Roberts Jr. was a natural choice for one of the Marlboro Yamaha seats, with Japanese rider Tetsuya Harada coming aboard as his teammate. The fledgling team struggled in its first season, a year that saw Honda and Aprilia dominate. Max Biaggi rode his Aprilia to five wins to secure the title; Harada was the highest placed Yamaha in seventh, while Roberts finished out the season a disappointing eighteenth. His best finish was a sixth in Argentina.

Roberts and Marlboro Yamaha found their stride the next season, though. The young American moved up to eighth in the points, although he was once again topped by Harada, who finished runner-up to Biaggi for the title. "The 250 was just not my kind of riding style," says Roberts Jr. "It's all corner speed and not a lot of sliding. There is not a lot happening; it is all about momentum—not spinning, not sliding—and being super smooth. As a dirt tracker, growing up on motocrossers, you want the thing moving around."

But Roberts had done enough in 250cc to earn a spot in the top class for 1996. He made his 500cc World Championship debut riding his father's Roberts Yamaha, finishing thirteenth in his first season. The 23-year-old was one of many top-notch riders who could not make the Yamaha competitive in that post-Rainey, pre-Rossi era. (The fact that Mick Doohan and Honda were sweeping all before them didn't help either.) Roberts' best finish that year was fourth at the Czech round, and he also had three other top-six finishes. The world champion's son had proven that he could produce results at the highest level and had done it while struggling with injuries:

I was hurt. I broke my ankle at the beginning of 1996 and had twenty-two screws and two plates put into my ankle. I rode the first quarter of the year injured, but I had some of the fastest laps in the races. I didn't have the experience at the time and that was the biggest thing. I think we could have made the Yamaha competitive, but I only had one year. Mick Doohan said that I was one of the up-and-coming guys, and then I got on my dad's bike for the next two years.

Kenny and Kenny Jr. together moved from the Yamaha effort to a new venture started by Kenny using a new design known as the Modenas KR3. The concept of a narrow V-3 two-stroke was unique in GP racing, but in execution it accomplished less than was expected, and the team struggled with various versions of the Malaysian-built machine, later known as Proton. Kenny Jr. looks back on those days:

It was hard, because you are riding as hard as you can for positions that aren't as good as you should be able to achieve. It was frustrating

riding the three-cylinder trying to keep up with the four-cylinders. Our team was trying to get an advantage [with three cylinders instead of four], but it just didn't work out that way. Then [the FIM] switched to four-strokes [for 2002]. A lot of it was probably down to bad timing.

For perspective, it's important to note that everyone was struggling to keep up with Doohan and Honda at this time. But the Modenas were far from the best of the rest, and decent results were few and far between for Roberts Jr. A lowly sixteenth in the points in 1997 was followed by thirteenth in 1998. By that time, it was clear that if Kenny Jr. wanted to achieve GP success, it would not be on the Modenas.

ONWARD AND UPWARD

While Kenny Jr. was struggling through unproductive years on his father's team, Suzuki had been in a steady decline since Schwantz's retirement. Daryl Beattie had taken the fight to Doohan and Honda in 1995, taking second in the championship, but Suzuki had not seen the top step of the podium since. "I don't think we did anything particularly wrong," Stuart Shenton recalls. "It's just that other teams did a better job than us, and Honda was getting its act together. In those days, [Honda was] pretty tough to beat." Indeed, Mick Doohan and Honda won the World Championship for Honda for five straight years from 1994 through 1998.

World Superbike champion Scott Russell had spent some time on the Suzuki and experienced its violent temper firsthand. "It didn't have a slipper clutch in it like I'd been riding in Superbike. It swung around so fast; it slung me over the top, slapped me on the ground, and broke two toes. I was lying in the gravel trap saying, 'What just happened?'"

Kevin Schwantz has similar memories: "Beattie went fast on it when I left, but when Kenny Jr. came along, he told me, 'I don't know how you guys rode that f**king thing.'"

"A fairer statement is that I didn't see how Kevin had been able to do what he had done with the little engineering department that they had," says Roberts:

At one point, I wanted to test the 180-degree crank motor, and they had it ready for the next test. At first, I was thinking, "This is awesome, how did they do this so fast?" Well, they had brought a crank in a bag of oil; it was Kevin's crankshaft from 1993. So I was on the same motor that Kevin had ridden in 1993.

Roberts signed with Suzuki for the 1999 season. Moving to a full factory team might have seemed like a step up, but Roberts would soon have his hands full trying to tame the Suzuki GP bike, working with the team's relatively modest engineering department.

Fortunately for Roberts and Suzuki, Kenny Jr. had access to the talents of Warren Willing, who had moved from the KR team, to serve as technical director for the Suzuki 500cc GP program. Roberts was able to make the most of this budget-limited package. "When I got on the Suzuki, I was quick out of the gate on it. It wasn't so bad right out of the box, but we had a lot of chassis problems with the feel. Warren softened the chassis up and that helped some of the feel problems that we were having. The thing wasn't perfect, but it was maneuverable with an okay engine."

"Quick out of the gate" might be an understatement: Roberts shocked the GP world by winning the first two races of the season, besting Doohan at Malaysia and Suzuka. To the surprise of everyone, Roberts and Suzuki were challenging Honda's dominance. After Doohan's career-ending injury at race three in Spain, Roberts' main title rival would be Doohan's teammate, Spaniard Alex Criville. The new Honda team leader rose to the challenge to win five of the next six races, with Doohan's replacement, Tadayuki Okada, winning the other. Roberts responded with a second at Assen and a win at the German GP, but subsequent wins by Okada and Criville began to push the championship out of reach.

The next round was Valencia, where Roberts had to mount a challenge. Australian Garry McCoy, who shared the podium with Kenny that day,

recalls, “I got the first podium on the Red Bull Yamaha, and Kenny was second. I had a bit of a dice with him, we had a bit of a push and a shove; nothing too aggressive or dirty. We always get along well, and he was a tough competitor, that’s for sure. After all, he got second and I got third. We spoke after the race and had a bit of a laugh about it.”

Despite Roberts’ determination, the title all but slipped away at the next round at Phillip Island. The American had to settle for tenth, while Okada won and Criville finished fifth. A third place in Brazil and a fourth win in the final GP of the season allowed Roberts to finish the season second in points, splitting the Hondas.

While the victories and podiums were encouraging, a lack of consistency proved to be Suzuki’s undoing. As in the Schwantz years, the great results mixed with a thirteenth in Spain, twenty-second in South Africa, and a DNF in France. There was no way of telling where Roberts might finish on any given weekend.

Roberts remembers vividly the trials and tribulations of that up-and-down season:

In Spain, on the first lap, my teammate [Nobu] Aoki ran into the back of me, knocked me off the track, and I was dead last. I got back up to seventh or eighth, but a rock had gotten into the airbox, and I ended up finishing on three cylinders. In South Africa, we had a shock overheat. In France, we took a front tire and mounted it on a narrower rim. I pushed the front on lap one, the rear stepped out, and I high-sided; it was a big high-side. From then on, we were just trying to achieve second in the championship, and we achieved that. I told myself, “I’m not falling down again. I am not going to win the World Championship falling down like this. I cannot keep doing these stupid crashes and giving up points.”

THE CHAMPIONSHIP SEASON

The pieces would fall into place in 2000, however, as Suzuki delivered the kind of consistency and reliability needed to fight for the world title. Roberts’ main rival would be McCoy, and the Australian showed himself to be a force by riding his Yamaha to victory in the season opener. Roberts

responded with a victory in the second race in Malaysia while McCoy took third to hold a slim points advantage going into Suzuka. A second in Japan, followed by two wins and two sixths in the following four events, solidified Roberts' lead in the points.

Did Garry McCoy consider the Suzuki to be the superior bike that season? "Nah, I think we were on pretty much equal equipment, although I did have some bad luck that year with some accidents and mechanical problems," Roberts agrees. "I think that the Yamaha was equal equipment, but I don't know that Garry was on the best Yamaha. I think [Max] Biaggi was their main focus."

After suffering through a DNF at Assen, Roberts bounced back at Donington Park to take second behind Honda's rookie 500cc racer, the up-and-coming Valentino Rossi. Roberts' title quest was aided by the fact that the season had seen seven different winners in the first nine races—Roberts' three wins made him the only repeat winner.

Roberts understood that 2000 was going to be his best chance to follow in his father's footsteps as world champion. He says, "We knew that Valentino was strong, and anybody who could get it together on a Honda would be strong. It was our time and we had to take this championship; otherwise it was not going to be ours, and Honda would have had a ten-plus year winning streak. It was a special place in time."

Valentino Rossi recalls going up against Roberts during that 2000 season: "Kenny was very determined, and he never gave up. But to be honest, in that year I wasn't thinking so much about the championship, just about learning and trying to win races."

Roberts explains that Suzuki started out the season with an advantage over the Hondas, but that advantage soon slipped away:

We had a chassis advantage for the first half of the season; the advantage was in turning and in us having a lack of horsepower. We were on 17-inch tires that didn't have a lot of side grip. The Hondas had a lot of acceleration but they couldn't use it. We switched to 16½-inch tires halfway through the year, and that was the nail in the coffin at Suzuki. I kept complaining to them that we didn't have enough horsepower and that the engine had

to be developed. We slowly made progress, but it was nothing like what Honda was doing; they were making progress hand over fist. As soon as they got side grip with the 16½-inch tires and they got it turning with a bigger contact patch, we were dead. That was halfway through the season. Hondas would come out of the corner, nailing it, and they had the grip to go. We'd be coming out full, and it's not even spinning.

However, the consistency shown by Roberts and Suzuki would be enough to continue scoring substantial points when he wasn't winning. As the season wore on, Roberts racked up an insurmountable points lead and clinched the title with two races remaining. His last three finishes for the year were typical of the entire season: sixth, first, and seventh. Kenny Roberts Jr. was the first second-generation, premier class motorcycle world champion, and he remains the only one to date.

Kenny Roberts Jr. takes special pride in the fact that he won his World Championship in the two-stroke era:

"I rode with Eddie, quite a bit with Wayne, and obviously my dad. It was my childhood dream to be able to win it in the 500 class, during the era when the bikes were extremely difficult to ride. It was everything I wanted. The power-to-weight ratio of those bikes and the precision you had to have—there was nothing even close. One tiny little mistake on a 500 and you fell down. From a rider's standpoint, the [four-stroke 990s that made up the MotoGP class from 2002 through 2006] were probably the most fun. But for very precise riding, there was nothing like a 500 on 17-inch tires. There was nothing even close."

Sete Gibernau, who joined Suzuki in 2001 for that final year of the 500cc class, agrees. "The 500s were something special. You really needed to understand the bike; you really had to adapt yourself to win with a 500. If you didn't, you would never win."

HARD LANDING

Unfortunately, the 2001 season would be a disappointing one for Roberts and Gibernau. Any hopes that Kenny Jr. might be able to follow in his father's footsteps as a repeat champion were soon dashed by the might of

Honda and Valentino Rossi. "At Suzuki, we raced the same bike in 2000 that we raced in 2001," Roberts explains. "Whoever spends the most money is going to get the best outcome. Our window had come and gone."

Kenny Roberts Sr. had been working with Suzuki behind the scenes in 2000 and 2001, and he witnessed the team's rapid decline firsthand. "The year that [Kenny Jr.] won the championship, we were helping with the development—cylinders and exhaust pipes, porting, running them on a dyno—stuff like what we had done with Yamaha, trying to help a little bit. But after 2000 we stopped; [Suzuki] ran out of budget. They couldn't afford to have us help them."

Gibernau continues, "We were not getting the things that Kenny had been asking for in 2000, things that we needed to go that one more step forward. All the other teams went forward, and the Suzukis just stayed there. It was very frustrating. The whole year Kenny and I were at the back."

Not only was the bike slower, it was also unreliable. Five DNFs would contribute to a miserable eleventh-place finish in the standings, with his teammate Gibernau in ninth. The season's highlight was Gibernau's win and Roberts' third place in the wet at Valencia. This was Roberts' only podium of the season.

The Valencia result was emotional for a number of reasons. Not only was it the maiden win for the Spanish crowd's favorite son, it was also the first Grand Prix held following the nightmare of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. Stopping on his victory lap, Gibernau set American and Spanish flags into the gravel trap in front of the main grandstand as an expression of solidarity with the people of the United States. He says, "It came from my heart; it was one of those things that you do. You don't know how important it is in the moment that you are doing it. I had 'I love NY' on my leathers. It was something special; it was a big honor for me to do it."

"I was right there with Sete in the sand trap and watched it," Roberts Jr. recalls. "It was nice, and I think he did what everybody wanted to see, subconsciously. It was definitely the right thing to do at that time."

The 2002 season would provide even fewer opportunities for celebration, as it was the year in which the World Championship transitioned to four-strokes. Teams had the option of running 500cc two-strokes or

990cc four-strokes in 2002 before the championship became completely four-stroke in 2003. Suzuki was late to commit to preparing a four-stroke 990 for the season.

Suzuki's indecision would cost the team dearly, as technical director Stuart Shenton explains: "Once we decided to go down that [990cc] avenue, we were just late to the party. We struggled; we were always a little bit behind, which was really frustrating. A lot of it was the momentum of the late start, and it does come back to resources."

Part of the problem stemmed from the fact that the team thought it was going to be running two-strokes during the transition year. Roberts says, "It was last second, with not a lot of money spent compared to Honda, who had been testing their 990 for two years already. It was rough; it wasn't even in the same league at the time. Hondas were so far ahead of us. Honda had eight bikes with test riders, and we had two."

Roberts describes how indecision would plague the team throughout the season:

[At the start of the season] we were on Dunlops, because we wanted to get a tire advantage because we were down on engine. We ended up switching three races into the year back to Michelin. It was a cluster—trying to find an advantage when you aren't on even equipment, trying to make up for a lack of horsepower. That's just the way it doesn't work. Whatever you shortcut is going to be there in the end to bite you.

Although the 2001 and 2002 seasons were largely forgettable for Suzuki, they held great value for Gibernau, who learned a lot from his teammate and Kenny Roberts Sr.:

I learned a lot from big Kenny, from Kenny Jr., and Wayne [Rainey] as well. We would go to Kenny Roberts' ranch in Modesto for long periods of training. I understood why the American riders should ride a 500, as they really have control of what it took to ride with the rear tire spinning . . . and I got to see how they train and learn their

approach . . . learn why Wayne was so fast, why Eddie was so fast.

With Gibernau moving on to race for Fausto Gresini's Honda squad for 2003, Suzuki brought in young American John Hopkins as Roberts' new teammate. Sadly, the team's slide continued, with the lowlights coming when the two teammates crashed at the Italian GP. Roberts finished nineteenth in the standings, seven points behind his new teammate. The following year brought still more misery, as Roberts ended the season eighteenth with Hopkins sixteenth.

Hopkins describes the frustration of those years:

In 2003 and 2004, it was just me and Kenny doing whatever we could to try and develop the thing. We'd make an improvement every year, but it was nowhere near the steps others made; we were so far behind. Basically the electronics were really bad on it, and we were trying everything. Basically it seemed like trial and error. We'd have a lot of electronic problems that would either cause crashes or breakdowns.

Roberts became increasingly frustrated with Suzuki's struggles. In addition, his approach to risk taking was becoming tempered with age, especially in comparison to his ambitious young teammate:

John went out and risked everything. He had a couple of broken ankles, he broke a bone in his wrist, chipped some teeth. He went out onto that ledge to prove he was fast, but I was like, "Screw this." I told John, "Dude, you are going to hurt yourself. This isn't the way to do it. You ought to think about what you are doing."

You have to have an end goal, and my end goal was to be able to walk away from the sport and still be able play golf, or play tennis, or racquetball, or basketball, soccer, baseball. I didn't want to leave the sport at thirty-five and not be able to run. I wanted to win the World Championship and then walk away when my career was done. I can play with my kids, do every sport they can do. Now at thirty-five, I'm in as good of shape as I was at twenty-five, and that was my end goal.

Roberts finished thirteenth in the standings in 2005, his final year at Suzuki. A relationship that had started out so promising and had achieved the ultimate success ended on a sour note. Roberts says, "I had a tire problem and crashed out at Australia, and that was it for Suzuki. They said, 'He can't ride anymore; we'll get a younger guy who is faster.'"

FAMILY TIES

Roberts moved over to his father's team for 2006, racing the new 990 Honda-powered KR. The change clearly re-energized the former world champion as well as the team. Roberts Jr. was particularly impressed by the Honda engine. "The chassis was never even close to what we thought it was. We had made a lot of mistakes within the group. But the bike had a good engine, and with a good engine you can see how much better it was to ride. It was the best engine that I've ever ridden with," Roberts says.

The KR211V proved to be a strong contender at numerous races, with



Kenny Roberts Jr. rode his father's Honda-powered KR with a special Stars and Stripes livery at the 2006 US MotoGP. Joe Bonnello

a best finish of third at Catalunya. Certainly the season highlight was when Roberts led the first lap of the United States Grand Prix; it was arguably the highlight of the entire history of KR racing in the post-Yamaha era. Kenny Jr. remembers that race well, but not for good reasons. The brutal heat was nearly unbearable:

It was torture. That weekend was ridiculously hot; that's all I remember. For me, it was the hottest Grand Prix race that I've ever raced in, by far. The track temperature was 157 [degrees F]. It was just ridiculous—no breeze, no time to rest on this track; it was just sick. I just wanted that race done. Chris [Vermeulen, Roberts' replacement at Suzuki] passed me going into the last turn of the first lap, and I remember thinking, "If you want to lead, dude, go ahead, because it's way too f**king hot to be fighting for the lead on the first lap." He took off and atomized the fuel on the Suzuki about three-quarters of the way through, so we passed him. Valentino passed us, then his Yamaha blew up. Nicky [Hayden] won, Dani [Pedrosa] was second, [Marco] Melandri was third, and I was fourth. We all wanted that race *done*. The last three laps, Melandri was looking over his shoulder and I was trying to catch him, but when we stopped we were all just destroyed.

The team might have earned a win at the Portuguese GP at Estoril, were it not for a lapse in concentration from Roberts. His father explains how Kenny Jr. dropped from the lead down to third on the last lap: "He thought the next-to-the-last lap was the last lap. He didn't look at his pit board; he had looked at Valentino's. The checkered didn't come out, and he was like, 'What happened?' So he ended up third."

A fourth at Brno helped to lift the team to sixth in the final points standings, giving Roberts his best finish since his championship year. The team carried high hopes into 2007, the first year of the 800cc MotoGP formula. It wasn't to be, however. The V-4 Honda 800 was underpowered compared to the competition from Ducati and Yamaha, and Kenny Jr.'s thirteenth place in the season opener at Malaysia would be

the highlight.

Honda's struggles were a surprise to many, including Roberts Jr.:

We figured that whatever engine they were going to build, we'd just put it in and it would be perfect. It turned out to be the exact opposite. You never would have thought that Honda would have one of the worst packages right out of the gate; you'd have thought they'd have been the best. The bike was just horrible. It was a half-second off from last place. The engine was just . . . nothing there. When the bike was perfect, it was two or three tenths slower than the fifteenth spot. We finished every race dead last. I was done. I said I didn't want to ride this thing, didn't want to end my career falling down on something I'm going to be finishing dead last with. So [Kenny Jr.'s brother] Kurtis, if he's having fun doing it, let him have it.

Joined by his brother Kurtis for the Misano round, Kenny finished seventeenth while his brother DNF'd. A sixteenth at the Circuit de Catalunya ahead of his brother in eighteenth was enough for Kenny Jr.; he decided that racing the machine was pointless in its current configuration.

Roberts' decision to stop racing wasn't meant as a permanent retirement from the sport; at the time, he believed that further chassis development would permit a competitive return later in the season. But the struggles continued at Team KR. At the United States Grand Prix, Kurtis was unable to keep tires under the bike; there was no way the bike could make the finish without a pit stop for a tire change. At the event, Kenny Jr. was often seen at his father's paddock motorhome, but to the frustration of all in attendance, the man who had led the previous year's GP didn't race. The GP racing career of Kenny Roberts Jr. was over.

Kenny Roberts Sr. sums up the career of his world champion son:

Kenny was a good racer. He had all the qualities to be a great racer, and when he wanted to win, he won. He had everything it took to do it; the problem was the equipment. When the equipment started lacking, he was done. He didn't go to Honda, didn't go to Yamaha; he stayed with Suzuki when the bike wasn't capable of winning a World Championship.

Meanwhile, the history of Team KR was coming to its own end. Kurtis was unable to achieve anything better than his older brother in the way of results—the highlight of his 2007 season was a twelfth at the Sachsenring, followed by DNFs in four of the final eight GPs. Unable to secure sufficient sponsorship, Team KR closed its doors before the start of the 2008 season.

Kenny Roberts Jr., for one, was not a fan of the 800cc bikes and the sport's heavy reliance on electronics. And he will tell you so in the blunt manner made famous by his father. "That's what MotoGP is like now. You ride out of your mind and out of your bike's ability to finish fourteenth. If you don't have the best electronics package or the best engine mapping, that's where you are at. It's not a riding style that makes sense. It's a riding style that's all about corner speed."

Sete Gibernau, who returned to the sport briefly in 2009, has similar opinions about the sport's current fascination with high-tech:

With the 800s, I'm just trying to get them to . . . think [laughs]. Now when I come into the pit box and I tell the engineer that it's not turning,



Kenny Roberts Jr. in 2006. Joe Bonnello

he says, “It’s electronics.” If it won’t stop, “It’s electronics.” Hello? If I’m not turning, I want to put on a different fork or a different spring. But no, it’s electronics, electronics, electronics. No, no, no, don’t give me that s**t.

THE END OF AN ERA

The end of the KR MotoGP team also marked the end of the Grand Prix careers of Kenny Roberts, Kenny Roberts Jr., and Kurtis Roberts. The family that had more to do with the history of Americans in Grand Prix racing than any other stepped away from the world stage. During 30 years of continuous involvement in the sport, Kenny and Kenny Jr. had earned four World Championships as riders, while Team Roberts had fielded the machines that won another four World Championships for American riders (Rainey’s three 500cc crowns and John Kocinski’s 250cc title).

Eddie Lawson appreciates Roberts’ great impact on the sport and also upon his own individual career. “I have to thank Kenny,” he says. “He brought me over [to Europe] and had faith in me that maybe I could do something. I have to thank him for all my championships.”

Kenny Roberts is certainly proud of all of his world champion protégés, although naturally, he has a favorite. “I didn’t make all of them; I only made this one [laughs, nodding to Kenny Jr.]. Just because I was the first, that just makes me the oldest, that’s all.”

CHAPTER 8

Grit and Determination: Nicky Hayden



Nicky Hayden, 2006 MotoGP World Champion.

THROUGHOUT NICKY HAYDEN'S CAREER at every level, his competitors have always been impressed with the sheer determination and focus that are Nicky's stock in trade. Seven-time AMA Superbike champion Mat Mladin, who raced against Hayden in the early 2000s, says of the 2006 MotoGP world champion:

Nicky is a very good, aggressive rider. He pushes hard and he never gives up. It doesn't matter how bad or how good the bike is; he just really rides hard. That is a trait that not enough racers have. In the end, through his grit and determination, it has brought him a couple of championships over here and the World Championship in 2006.

Al Ludington, Hayden's crew chief for American Honda in the AMA Superbike series, concurs. "The thing about Nicky was his determination," Ludington says. "It was all about racing to Nicky. That was his whole focus, and that was his everything. There was no, 'I've got to hurry and go to dinner,' or things like that."

This grit and determination are driven by an intense competitiveness that belies Hayden's easy smile and charm. "He hates to lose more than anybody I've ever known," says his older brother, Tommy. These qualities carried Nicky Hayden from the small town of Owensboro, Kentucky, to the world stage of MotoGP, where the riding skills range between gifted and surreal. And in 2006, Nicky Hayden employed all of these qualities and more to etch his name on the elite list of 500cc MotoGP world champions.

KENTUCKY KID

Nicholas Patrick Hayden was born on July 30, 1981, in Owensboro, Kentucky. His father, Earl, raised thoroughbred horses while also pursuing a career as a motorcycle racer. "There was no money in motorcycle racing back then," recalls the elder Hayden. "A long time ago in Kentucky, with horse racing you could make money breeding them and raising them. And we boarded a lot too." Nicky's mother, Rose, had aspirations to become a professional jockey. Given the competitive background of their parents,

it's no surprise that Nicky and his brothers would grow up to be competitors themselves.

Earl recalls his career as a motorcycle racer: "That's what I did for twenty years—from about 1965 to 1985—until the kids came along. I started out in scrambles, but when I got my pro license for the Novice class, we started running short tracks and TT courses. I ran the 76-mile Novice road race at Daytona one time in the 1970s; I rode a 250-class four-stroke Ducati."

Naturally, the father passed along his love of motorcycle racing to his children. Earl and Rose Hayden made every sacrifice to allow their kids to race, and they wasted no time in doing so, as Earl explains:

Tommy's first race was with training wheels the week before he was three years old. The next week, I took the training wheels off. [Nicky's older sister] Jenny and Nick started at about three and a half. [Nicky's younger brother] Roger was four. I got kind of a late start with him. Not long ago, somebody asked me when their kid, who was seven, should start racing. I said, "I think you're about three or four years late." They looked at me like I was crazy.

Nicky's development was surely accelerated by the fact that he had to try to keep up with Tommy, who was three years his senior. The older brother recalls the many hours they spent racing on their backyard track:

That's where we really started riding; we still ride there a lot to this day. We've had a lot of good races there, had a lot of fun, and learned a lot. Looking at the videos from back then, not much has changed really from fifteen years ago. Dad's still out there flagging off the races. We are riding MX450 dirt bikes, flat track like they race in short track and TT, lowered down a little bit.

Both Tommy and Nicky adopted the No. 69 number plate that their father had carried during his racing career. Earl's reasoning behind the number was that it read the same whether you were right-side up or upside down. "I stayed upside down a lot, but I'm paying for it now," says the elder

Hayden. "The bikes we rode, they didn't have suspension. We started out on rigid frames, and I've been through a lot of fences and stuff."

GOING PRO

In 1998, 17-year-old Nicky Hayden entered the ranks of professional road racers, competing on Suzukis in the AMA's 600 and 750 Supersport classes. He notched his first win as a pro in just the third round of the series, taking the checkered flag in the 750 class at Laguna Seca, a venue where he would go on to celebrate many more accomplishments. At the next event, Nicky won his first professional double, when he won in both classes at Willow Springs. In all, Hayden won five races in the 750 Supersport class and finished fourth in points in both 600 and 750.

Hayden's impressive rookie season earned him the occasional ride with the Honda factory in 1999, and he raced in the Superbike class for American Honda in the final season of the RC45, while also competing in the 600 Supersport and Formula Xtreme classes for Erion Honda. The injuries suffered by Miguel Duhamel at Road Atlanta had provided the opportunity for Hayden to ride a top-tier highly developed factory Superbike. His main rival for the 600 Supersport Championship would be his brother Tommy. The season would unfold as a close-fought battle, but Nicky's five wins would prevail, and the younger brother took the title with 372 points to Tommy's 364. Both Haydens finished ahead of a strong field of AMA stars of the future, including Kurtis Roberts, Jamie Hacking, Aaron Yates, and Josh Hayes.

Tommy Hayden recalls their 1999 sibling rivalry:

The highlight was the race that we had at Ohio. On the last lap, we bumped into each other two or three times; we went side-by-side pretty much most of the way around the last lap. Nick ended up beating me there; it was a little disappointing. I had been faster all weekend, and this was a race that I needed to win. He came alive for the race and made a battle out of it. It was fun that whole year."

Nicky was arguably better in the quicker Formula Xtreme class that season, winning seven of ten races, including the final four in a row. Yet

these results weren't enough to take the title from three-time winner Kurtis Roberts.

While going all-out in the lower classes, the high school senior used a more conservative approach to the Superbike class, as Al Ludington explains:

When I dealt with him, I don't think Nicky's expectations were that high. It was more, "Let's see what this Superbike thing is all about, get one under my butt and see." In the other classes, he was definitely riding fiery. But Honda's thinking was, "Let's throw one more class at him." So he was riding three classes on three different motorcycles. I think that was very difficult.

Even as a teenager, Nicky put his signature riding style on full display. His skill at backing the bike into corners was a result of his years of racing on dirt ovals. "He's definitely a rear-steerer, no question about it," says Ludington. "But that was how you had to steer them [in those days], as you didn't have traction control. If you wanted to finish the corner—particularly on a Honda in that day and age—you had to rear steer it, as the bikes weren't known for their brilliant cornering capabilities."

"Nicky likes to slide the bike around," says John Hopkins. "He does that more than any of the other riders."

As if graduating from high school and racing in three different classes wasn't enough for Nicky, in 1999 he also competed in Grand National events (winning a half-mile dirt track race and taking dirt track racing's Rookie of the Year award) and was named AMA Athlete of the Year. The sky was the limit for the well-grounded and focused Nicky Hayden.

THE SUPERBIKE YEARS

For 2000, he rode for the factory Honda team in AMA Superbike, fielding the RC51, the manufacturer's new V-twin racer. Nicky was in the right place at the right time, as the new Honda challenger proved to be a worthy machine that was capable of taking the fight to Suzuki and defending champion Mat Mladin. The title fight was a close-fought battle, although in end the Australian nipped Hayden by just five points—388 to 383.

No one else was even close. The many highlights of Nicky's season included his first win (a double at Road America) and a win at Laguna Seca on World Superbike weekend, the one race of the year in which Americans were performing on the world stage.

Mladin would defend his title once again in 2001 on the new GSXR. And although Eric Bostrom beat Nicky to second in the points, Hayden gave a hint of things to come by winning the final four races of the year. Many felt it was just a matter of time before Hayden had his breakout year.

"At the end of 2001, we changed some stuff and really got into a rhythm with the bike and team," Hayden recalls. "Everything started to fall into place. From there, we carried that momentum through winter testing. It was a great year for me; everything just clicked. The bike was great; the team was awesome; everybody just worked well together and everybody knew their job. It was special to be part of something like that when everybody was on point."

After winning the season-opening Daytona 200, Hayden reeled off five wins in the next six races to take a commanding lead in the points. By season's end, he was trading wins with Eric Bostrom on the Kawasaki, but Bostrom's effort was too little too late. Hayden was the 2002 AMA Superbike champion on the strength of nine wins from 16 races. He had also broken the Mladin-Yoshimura stranglehold on the series: From 1999 until 2009, Nicky Hayden was the only rider to beat the mighty Yoshimura Suzuki team for the championship.

Somehow, in the midst of his championship run, Hayden also found time to compete in dirt track racing. He won four dirt track races, including a never-before-seen sweep of the podium by the Hayden family at the Springfield TT. When time permitted, Nicky also showed up at unsanctioned events, such as the parking lot Supermoto races at Anaheim Stadium. Racing all the time, on anything available, clearly was paying off. Nicky Hayden had conquered America: He was now ready to take on the world.

NO EXCUSES

Not only did the 21-year-old move up to MotoGP for the 2003 season, he landed the best seat available: Nicky Hayden signed to ride for the

Repsol Honda factory team as teammate to Valentino Rossi, the man who is unquestionably the greatest rider of his time. The Honda riders would field the dominant machine of the day, the mighty V-5 990 Honda. For Hayden, there would be no excuses for a lack of pace.

Sadly, the rookie's GP debut at Suzuka would be marred by tragedy. Daijiro Kato, Honda's shaggy-haired favorite son, was mortally injured in a crash. "It was a bad sight," Nicky recalls. "When I was coming around, his boots were in the middle of the track. It was tough. In this sport, you've got to prepare yourself for what can happen and know that you've got to be willing to pay the ultimate price. I never really got a chance to know Daijiro or ride with him."

Sadly, the comatose Kato succumbed to his injuries two weeks later.

In the race, Hayden finished seventh, less than a tenth of a second behind fellow American and MotoGP debutant Colin Edwards. "I started in the back and finished seventh," Nicky recalls. "So it wasn't such a bad first GP result for me. Our bike was really good that year, but it was a hard weekend."

The first half of Hayden's debut season would best be described as unremarkable, as he came to grips with the new machinery, tracks, and tires. However, as the season progressed, his results began to improve, and he finished strong with a pair of fifths in Germany and Brazil followed by a pair of podiums in the last four races of the season. Hayden's late-season form was enough to lift him to fifth in the points, ahead of Troy Bayliss on the factory Ducati.

Hayden took advantage of the fact that he shared a garage with one of the sport's greatest riders. He says, "I watched [Rossi] and his crew and how they did things. I certainly studied them, because they sure knew what they were doing. They knew how to put a weekend together. Rossi starts out on Friday and keeps working, working . . . Come Sunday afternoon, he puts it all together."

Hayden left a positive impression on Rossi: "Nicky was a good teammate, no trouble, no polemics. He is a nice guy. It was the same with the championship in 2006, always respectful and fair between us. I enjoyed racing against him."

Rossi would win his third straight title for Honda in 2003 before surprising everyone by moving to Yamaha. Alex Barros was brought in as Hayden's teammate for 2004.

Nicky had hoped that his strong finish to the 2003 season would give him some momentum going into 2004. It was not to be, however. Podium finishes in Germany and Brazil and a pair of fourths in England and Malaysia were the highlights of a mostly disappointing season. Hayden finished eighth in points, a result that was unacceptable to both Hayden and Honda:

That was a tough year. We had a couple of podiums, but it wasn't a great year for me. We didn't make the progress that I wanted. I got hurt midseason. I crashed and broke my collarbone training, and it kind of set the season back. I missed a race, came back a little bit injured, and hurt my knee, which kind of hurt my momentum. That was the year that Honda basically cleaned house at the end of the year. They made a lot of changes in personnel, the second half of the season was a disaster, and a lot of the mechanics knew they weren't coming back, and the atmosphere wasn't a lot of fun.

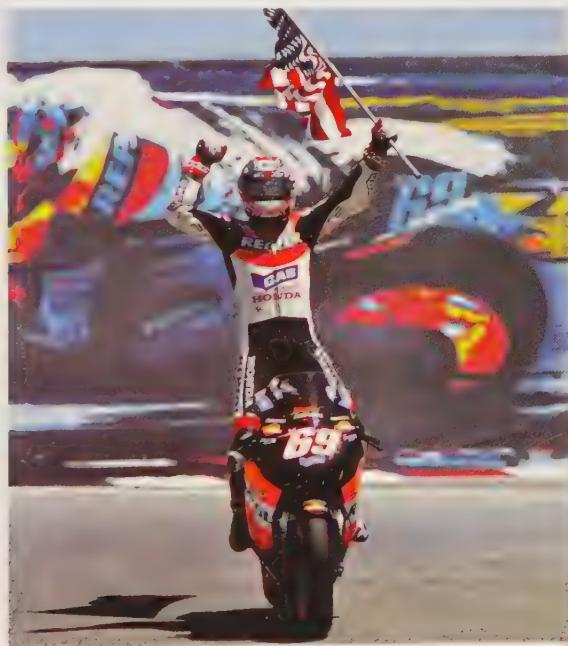
Making matters worse was the fact that Hayden had finished behind not only his teammate Barros (fourth) but also behind four riders from Honda's satellite teams. The 23-year-old managed to escape the off-season housecleaning (unlike Barros, who was replaced by Max Biaggi), but he knew that he needed to show marked improvement in 2005 in order to keep his factory Honda ride.

Hayden recalls that the season did not start on a promising note: "In the first race at Jerez, I crashed out when I was running third with a few laps to go."

The season would turn out to be a championship battle between Rossi and Gibernau. But Hayden showed steady improvement as the year went on. "We kind of had a slow start going, but I had basically a whole new team. About midseason, about the time we got to Assen and just before Laguna, things started to come together."

Hayden finished fourth at Assen, and he was feeling confident as the MotoGP circus arrived at Laguna Seca for the first United States Grand Prix since 1994. Returning to familiar territory would prove to be the formula Hayden needed, and he proceeded to dominate the weekend en route to his first win in the premier class to the delight of the partisan crowd. The image of the victorious Hayden carrying the large American flag while riding down the corkscrew section of the track is one of the iconic images of MotoGP racing in the United States. "From there, we were able to build momentum and keep going," Hayden recalls. "That was really when I realized how important it is to have the right guys around you. Not just 'good' guys, but the *right* guys."

Hayden and the team carried that momentum all the way through the second half of the season, taking top-five finishes in the last eight races of



The image of Hayden carrying the American flag on his victory lap following the 2005 USGP at Laguna Seca is one of the iconic images of MotoGP racing in the United States. Joe Bonnello

the year to secure third place in the points behind champion Rossi and runner-up Melandri. The pieces of the puzzle were falling into place, as Hayden explains: “We made a lot of progress that year, and basically that was the same group of guys that I had all the way up until I left Honda [after 2008]. We got stronger together each year and learned from each other. I had more English-speaking guys in my team, and that was a big help.”

Looking forward to 2006, Nicky Hayden was ready to contend for the MotoGP World Championship.

WORLD CHAMPION

For 2006, Honda replaced Max Biaggi with the talented and diminutive 250 GP champion, Dani Pedrosa. Hayden’s new teammate would start out the season by throwing down the gauntlet for team supremacy with a second-place finish at the Spanish Grand Prix at Jerez. Three races later, the ambitious Spaniard snatched his maiden MotoGP win with a stunning performance at the Chinese Grand Prix at Shanghai. It was clear that Hayden was matched up against his strongest teammate since Rossi. And with Yamaha’s superstar struggling with some uncharacteristic DNFs to start the season, it began to look like Hayden’s biggest rival for the title might be coming from across his own garage. However, the now-seasoned Hayden was up to the task, scoring seven podiums in the first eight races to take a 42-point lead over Pedrosa. “In racing you need to be good, but you need a bit of luck too,” Hayden says. “And that year—early in the season especially—it seemed like we were always in the right place at the right time and took advantage of every opportunity.”

That eighth race of the season, the Dutch TT at Assen, would be one of the defining moments of Hayden’s 2006 campaign. The contest would come down to an epic last-lap battle between Hayden and fellow American Colin Edwards. In one of the wildest conclusions to a race in years, the two clashed on the final chicane: When the dust cleared, only one man was left on the track—Nicky Hayden. “That was my one and only win outside of home soil,” he recalls. Those early-season points would prove crucial as the season wore on, because Rossi and Yamaha were finding the magic once again.

After a difficult seventh-place finish at Donington (where Pedrosa won), Hayden rebounded to a strong third in Germany. Once again, Hayden had some momentum going as the series made its way to the United States and Laguna Seca Raceway. The American needed a good result to keep his championship hopes on track: Rossi's win at Germany had cut Hayden's points lead down to 26.

Unlike 2005, Hayden did not dominate the weekend. He started the race sixth on the grid behind Vermeulen, Edwards, Roberts Jr., Pedrosa, and Hopkins. With four Americans starting in the first six spots, hopes were high for an American victory, and truth be told, the partisan crowd was well and truly behind the championship leader, roaring with approval at every mention of his name. Meanwhile, Rossi struggled through the weekend, qualifying tenth. In the brutal heat described so vividly by Roberts Jr. in the previous chapter, Hayden made a strong start, launching straight into third; he then proceeded to work his way up into the lead by mid-race on his way to a win over teammate Pedrosa. Meanwhile, a huge roar came up through the crowd as smoke was seen pouring from the Rossi Yamaha with only a few laps remaining, the DNF a fitting result for a difficult weekend.

The 25 points earned for the victory allowed Hayden and Honda to go into the summer break with a big points lead. Nicky had high hopes for the rest of the season. But the most difficult times were still to come. "After the summer break, we lost a bit of momentum," Hayden recalls. "There were some difficult times, but really, it was our year. I had that feeling from about the third race in, when I took over the points lead—that this was going to be my year."

As the momentum waned for Hayden, others stepped up the pressure. Loris Capirossi won the next race at Brno, and Rossi took the checkered flag at Sepang. Pedrosa finished third in both races. Hayden watched his points lead dwindle to 22 as he finished well back in ninth at Brno and fourth in Sepang.

The Australian Grand Prix at Phillip Island was next, and Hayden showed his fighting spirit by taking pole. Unfortunately, he made a miserable start and found himself near the back of the field before he

had reached the first turn. But showing his characteristic grit and determination, Hayden fought back in rainy conditions to salvage fifth. Rossi finished third in the race to cut Hayden's points lead down to 21 with just three races remaining.

More struggles were to come at the Japanese Grand Prix at Motegi. Hayden could only manage seventh in qualifying, and the clutch problems that ruined his start in Australia would continue, dropping him to eleventh by turn one. He fought back to finish fifth, but Rossi's second place meant that Hayden's points lead was now just 12.

As the series returned to Europe for the final two races, Marco Melandri and Capirossi were also within reach of the championship. But at least a pair of miserable finishes by Pedrosa had knocked the Spaniard down to fifth place, 34 points behind Hayden and making his title chances remote at best. Yet, despite the pressure coming from all sides, all Hayden needed to do was finish strong: A pair of good finishes would likely earn him the title. But then it all came undone in the most unimaginable way in Estoril, Portugal.

For the previous two seasons, Honda had lost the World Championship to Rossi and Yamaha. The team badly wanted the title back, and Hayden was obviously its best hope. In situations such as these, it's accepted—or perhaps even expected—practice that team orders will be imposed. That is, the rider with the best chance of winning the title can count on his teammate to do whatever he can to help the team claim the crown. However, Honda apparently didn't feel that team orders should be given before the penultimate race of the season at Estoril. "There were never any team meetings or nothing like that [before Estoril]," explains Hayden. "But really, there didn't need to be. In that situation, you would have thought we kind of knew what to do." The team would pay for its mistake by nearly losing the championship.

Tommy Hayden was there for that fateful weekend: "Nick came into Portugal pretty confident, and he was riding that way. The weekend overall seemed like it was going pretty smooth. Nicky was going pretty fast all weekend, he qualified on the front row, and was always in the hunt. The race went on and there was a pretty good battle there."

Rossi led from pole, followed by his teammate Edwards, with Hayden running third and Pedrosa fourth. Both Honda riders passed Edwards on the first lap, but the Yamaha rider battled back to retake his position behind his teammate, enabling Rossi to work up a lead. On lap four, Nicky scrapped past Pedrosa and set off after Edwards. Colin could not have been acting as a better teammate and was doing exactly what Rossi needed. The same could not be said for Pedrosa, who on lap five came charging up the inside of Hayden impossibly late. The Spaniard's front wheel tucked, and he slid right into his teammate, sending both of them into the gravel trap. In an instant, the race was over for both riders, and Nicky Hayden's World Championship dream looked to be slipping away. The agony in Hayden's face as he realized his race was over said everything. The sole bright spot from the disastrous weekend came from the fact that Tony Elias had ridden the race of his life to snatch the win from Rossi. The defending champion would go into the finale at Valencia with an eight-point lead over Hayden, when he could have had 13 points.

The Pedrosa–Hayden debacle sent shockwaves through the sport. For American fans of motorcycle road racing, this was one of those moments where everyone will forever remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they saw Pedrosa take out Hayden. "There are many stories of people who lost TVs and got holes in the walls," Tommy Hayden says. And while historically Honda has typically avoided imposing team orders on its riders, in this case the company had seriously compromised Hayden's championship chances; Pedrosa's misjudgment had swung the door wide open for Valentino Rossi and Yamaha. Honda was heavily criticized by the media and fans across the globe, but most of the venom was directed at Dani Pedrosa.

The always supremely confident young Spaniard understood the gravity of his error and offered a humble apology: "I made a mistake and I'm really sorry. It's the first time I've hit another rider in my career. It's never happened before in practice or racing in six years, and it's happened at the worst moment that I could do it. I just want to apologize because I made a mistake."

"It was definitely a very emotional kind of weekend," recalls Tommy Hayden:

It was an intense few weeks when you take Valencia and all that into consideration. Those were crazy, crazy emotional events. You know, I picked [Nicky] up on a scooter in the gravel trap at Portugal. He was very upset, and there were definitely some interesting conversations in the bus. He was pretty crushed initially, but he realized pretty quickly that it wasn't completely over. The odds were becoming stacked against him, but it definitely was not over. But Nick did what he needed to do; he put it behind him, headed for Valencia, and came there ready to race.

An eight-point deficit was not insurmountable, but it did mean that Hayden would have to finish at least two spots ahead of Rossi, if not more, depending on positioning. The best scenario for Hayden and Honda would have been a Hayden-Pedrosa 1-2 finish with Rossi fourth or worse. Honda would not repeat its mistake and made sure that both riders understood their roles come race day. "Before Valencia, me and Dani, my crew chief, and Alberto [Puig, Pedrosa's manager] had a little chat about what was the plan," Nicky says.

One of the positives of the situation was that Hayden was able to approach the Valencia weekend from a fresh perspective, as his brother Tommy explains:

For the first time all year, he felt like there was no pressure on him. He'd been leading the championship for such a long time, and Rossi was slowly closing in. At Valencia, [Nicky] didn't have that pressure on him anymore; he could just go out, ride hard, and do his part. He was aggressive early and got himself into a good position, where even if Rossi didn't crash, he could fight for the win. That would keep pressure on Valentino, who was going to have to get third if Nick won.

The situation did not look good as the weekend unfolded, however. Rossi, who had won at the track twice before, took pole position; Hayden

qualified fifth. The veteran seven-time world champion was famous for his supreme confidence and ability to deliver results under pressure.

But as the field took position after the warmup lap, it all began to go wrong for Rossi. Race officials held the grid for longer than usual before the launch, causing his Yamaha to overheat. As a result, he had a poor start and dropped down to seventh on the first lap. On lap five, came the unthinkable: The seemingly invincible world champion tucked the front and crashed. He quickly remounted and proceeded to put on a charge with his damaged bike, but 13th was the best he could manage. Meanwhile, Hayden delivered a consistent ride to finish third behind the two factory Ducatis: By a mere five points—the difference between first and second place at Assen—Nicky Hayden was the MotoGP world champion.

Nicky Hayden was ecstatic as he celebrated his victory lap, as were his many supporters and family at the track. It was the crowning achievement of his career. “You dedicate your life to something, and when you win you just feel really good,” an emotional Hayden said in his post-race interview. “I thought the championship was over after the first ten laps in Estoril. Thanks to everyone who helped me get here; I’m so humbled by all this and it’s been a great day for me.” If there was ever a lesson in tenacity rewarded, this was it. The wild family celebration at the conclusion of the race could not have been a more extreme counterpoint to the dejection of Estoril.

Despite his disappointment, Valentino Rossi was gracious in defeat and quick to congratulate his rival: “To arrive at the final race with an eight-point advantage and then not win the title is a disaster. It has been a very emotional season, with some great moments, some bad luck, and now some mistakes. But this is racing. All I can say now is a big ‘congratulations’ to Nicky because he is a great guy, a great rider, and he is the world champion because he has been the best this year.”

The emotional roller coaster for the Hayden family had ended in victory, and Nicky Hayden, against all odds, had achieved his dream.

AN UNFAMILIAR DIRECTION

Nicky would celebrate his triumph with his family and friends at home in Owensboro a few weeks later. But he had team commitments to honor

first: The season finale was followed the next day by the first tests of the 2007 bikes. The Valencia race had marked the end of the 990cc era, and all the teams were eager to test the new 800cc bikes. At first glance, it was obvious that the tiny new Honda had been designed for the diminutive (110-pound) Pedrosa.

"Initially, the Honda that year looked like a minibike," explains Tommy Hayden. "It was kind of an eye opener right out of the gate for him. That particular bike was too small, and Nick could hardly fit on it. It was a lot different than what he was used to, and it didn't fit his style very well."

"It's true that bike wasn't designed for me," Hayden explains with characteristic diplomacy. "I mean, Honda admitted that. It was a tough blow mentally for me as much as anything, as I certainly never really felt comfortable on it and a lot of it was the size. But you know what? When we went to the 800s, things changed and with [Spanish oil and gas company] Repsol paying the bills, things were certainly focused a lot more around Dani. That's pretty open information, and that's just the way it was so I had to deal with it."

Moreover, the new RC212V 800cc V-4 MotoGP bike was not nearly as effective as Honda's previous machines, especially compared to the Ducati that Australian Casey Stoner used to romp to the 2007 title. (The fact that the Michelin tires that Honda was running were clearly inferior to Ducati's Bridgestones only added to the misery.) Many riders compared the feel of the bikes to 250cc Grand Prix machines, the bikes that the majority of Europeans riders had raced on as they moved up the ranks to MotoGP.

For Hayden, the new bikes were a huge move in an unfamiliar direction. His season carrying the No. 1 plate would be mostly forgettable, with the exception of a midseason run of three third-place finishes. He finished eighth in the championship. Not surprisingly, Pedrosa adapted well to the bike built for him (the Spaniard said he could touch his knee to his elbows while riding it) and was able to nip Rossi for second in the standings by a single point.

For Nicky Hayden, 2008 would be a critical year for his future with the company that had brought him to Europe. Unfortunately, the season would be another struggle, and Hayden never would come to terms with the 800cc Honda. The season did have a few bright spots, however, including two podiums, the first of them coming at Nicky's "home track,"

the iconic Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The 2008 MotoGP Indy was the first motorcycle race held at the Speedway since the 1909 event that Jake DeRosier had participated in.

Nicky Hayden was honored to be a part of what many hope will be a new American tradition: "It is a dream come true to get to race in what is basically my backyard. To be a part of it is awesome. Indianapolis Motor Speedway, the tradition and history here is second to none. There is not a more famous place to race a motorcycle or car anywhere in the world."

Hayden was called upon to help promote the race, and his duties included making an appearance at the 2008 Indianapolis 500 race on Memorial Day weekend. Before the race, the Kentucky Kid ran two exhibition laps on the famed 2.5-mile oval in front of the huge crowd, the largest attendance for any one-day sporting event on earth.

Hayden's presence at the Indy 500 gave him a chance to answer some questions from the automotive press. When asked about the wisdom of racing a motorcycle at 200 miles per hour, Hayden, always the ambassador, answered:

Our sport certainly takes guts and nerve. It's not a cupcake sport where just about anybody can do it. You've got to be brave, but you need a bigger



During the 2008 Indy 500 weekend, Nicky Hayden answered questions from the automotive press regarding the upcoming Inaugural Indianapolis MotoGP at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. The ever-smiling Hayden is a perfect ambassador for his sport.

brain than just balls, or you won't be around long enough to get to this level. You have to know when to hang it out and take risks, and when to hold it back. You have to be smart because it's a long season. I don't think of myself as a daredevil, a fool, or somebody who doesn't value his life.

However, Hayden's chance of participating in the event looked to be in jeopardy after he was injured practicing for a Supermoto race at the X-Games. He had to sit out the two Grands Prix leading up to Indy, and he was still not 100 percent heading into the race in mid-September.

The inaugural Indianapolis MotoGP would run counterclockwise on the famous oval, using most of the Speedway's pit straight before turning into the track's flat infield portion and following a series of twists and turns to make up a roval, or road course dropped into the middle of an oval. Eager to give his home crowd something to cheer about, Hayden grabbed his Honda by the throat and manhandled it around the circuit, defying the conventional wisdom that 800cc racers don't respond to a flat track riding style. He qualified fourth, just one half-second off the pace of pole-sitter Valentino Rossi. It was a stellar performance, especially considering the fact that Hayden was still hobbling around the pits on crutches.

It was intriguing to watch Nicky back the Honda into the turns, with his tail out, employing the flat track style from his 990cc days. In this more advanced era of electronic engine management systems, it was clear that a rider still had the ability to adjust the bike to suit his individual riding style. "You can adjust your engine management to adjust however much engine braking that you want," says John Hopkins. "But nobody else is doing that; nobody else is sliding around that much."

Italian Andrea Dovizioso, who rode for the JiR Team Scot Honda satellite team in 2008 and went on to replace Hayden at Repsol Honda in 2009, compares his riding style to Nicky's:

There is a very big difference. He comes from Superbike, I think, and his style is dirty on the entry and the exit. With the 250, you cannot ride dirty; also without engine braking, you cannot slide on the engine. [The European] style is that you don't slide, and I think [that style fits]

better with the 800s. With the 990, [Nicky] won the championship. With 800s the power is less so we need to use all the power of the engine; we need to be precise and not slide too much.

“Nicky is still one of the best guys as far as working hard and being dedicated,” says Kenny Roberts Jr. “But the 800 is not his cup of soup. I would think he would be the one more likely to switch over to something like World Superbike with a bigger engine that better suits the character of his riding style.”

“It’s been an uphill battle for [Nicky] in a lot of ways, trying to adjust his style,” Tommy Hayden says:

It’s been a lot of work. When you get to that level, it is difficult to make drastic changes when you’ve been practicing and perfecting the things you do for your entire life. Making a change like that [the 800], really threw a wrench in what he was doing. A lot of people had to change also, but it seemed like naturally some people adapted better than Nick. But that’s part of it, and it’s the same for everyone. Nick realizes that if you want to race Grand Prix you race 800s, and he’s trying to make it happen.

The first motorcycle races at Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1909 had been an unmitigated disaster, the abysmal track conditions causing nearly all the riders to refuse to take part. Giving credence to Mark Twain’s oft-repeated phrase, “History may not repeat itself, but it rhymes,” the 2008 Indianapolis MotoGP was held in equally abysmal conditions. The remains of Hurricane Ike slammed into the Speedway on Sunday, leading to the shortening or cancellation of every race. The premier class did run as planned, albeit amid rain and treacherous winds.

Despite the appalling weather, Hayden was yet again a factor at an American Grand Prix. He rocketed off into an early lead, and after swapping the lead with Andrea Dovizioso, Nicky led for 13 laps before giving way to Rossi. Hayden’s soft rear tire had begun to go away, and Jorge Lorenzo was closing in, so perhaps Hayden was fortunate that the

race was red-flagged after 20 of the 28 scheduled laps due to rapidly deteriorating track conditions. Rossi took the victory, with Hayden coming in second. In his post-race interview, the Italian noted that the conditions were the worst in which he had ever raced. He also pointed out that sharing the podium with Hayden reminded him of all the times they had stood on the podium together in 2006.

MAKING THE SWITCH

It was obvious to everyone that Nicky Hayden was in his last year with Repsol Honda. There were plenty of rumors and lots of speculation about where the American was going to wind up in 2009, including hints that he would switch to the World Superbike series. But the majority of rumors linked Hayden to Ducati, and soon after the Indy GP, the announcement was made that Nicky Hayden would join the Italian team as teammate to Casey Stoner.

The Ducati ride was a huge gamble. On the one hand, the Desmodici was clearly one of the fastest bikes of the 800cc era; Stoner had demonstrated that by running away with the title in 2007. But on the other hand, only Stoner seemed capable of taming the beast. Loris Capirossi had managed to show occasional flashes of brilliance on the bike in 2007, but not enough to keep his ride in 2008. Marco Melandri, Capirossi's replacement at Ducati, was completely confounded by the bike. He finished the 2008 season 17th in points, 15 places behind Stoner.

Hayden was not oblivious to the struggles of his predecessors: "I knew that was a risk I was taking when I signed the deal. I felt like it was a risk worth taking. The bike has potential if you can find it. I realized it was a risky move, but I felt like if I ever wanted to win races and be world champion again, I had to be willing to take that risk."

No doubt buoyed by hopes for the future, Hayden made a strong finish to 2008, closing out his Repsol Honda career with five top-five finishes, including a third place in Australia. In so doing, he moved ahead of Edwards in the points to take sixth in the championship.

Having started his MotoGP career as teammate to Valentino Rossi, Hayden was no stranger to sharing a garage with an intimidating world

champion. Not unexpectedly, the American struggled to adapt to the new bike and new team in testing. And then, just as things were beginning to improve, he suffered a vicious 130-mile-per-hour high-side during qualifying for the season opener in Qatar. He raced through pain to finish 12th while his teammate won. More misery was to come at Motegi, where he was rear-ended on the first lap, knocking him out of the race.

Through the first five races of the season, it was beginning to look like Hayden's risky move to Ducati wasn't going to work out. While Stoner fought for wins and podiums, Hayden was finishing outside the top 10. The author spoke to Tommy Hayden during this period, and he had this to say:

They are trying, and they are working with Nick, giving him good support. They don't want to make a bike that is a one-rider bike, as it doesn't look great for them. There is no question of them working hard, and that means a lot to Nick to keep him motivated. He's trying hard, giving his best every lap. Usually that prevails. They are making huge steps, but it hasn't been an overnight thing. It's a competitive series.

By the time the circus reached Circuit Catalunya in June, Nicky was starting to turn things around. After a great deal of effort and extensive modifications to the machine and electronics package, he finished a fighting 10th in the race. This was his best result of the year, giving him some momentum going forward to two of his favorite venues, Assen and Laguna Seca.

The upward swing continued at Assen, with Hayden finishing eighth. Returning home to Laguna, Nicky recovered from a lowside crash in practice to take a season-best fifth in the race. Although pleased with the improvement, Hayden made it clear that he was not satisfied: "There is still a big gap between me and the front. I know that. I've got higher expectations than this; I'm not thrilled about an eighth place or a fifth-place result. I know I am capable of more and the bike can do more, as can the team. But it feels good to finally have some momentum and to have the team start to understand me better. I really hope I'm on my way; I'm a momentum guy and I needed some decent results."

For the second straight year, the Indianapolis race would be the bright spot as Nicky battled the entire way and finished with a strong third place. Soon after the race, Ducati announced that it had signed a deal to bring Hayden back for a second season. Nicky's World Championship latest challenge continues.

Whenever Nicky decides to move on from his Grand Prix career, he will have some unfinished business to attend to in America. The Kentucky Kid can proudly claim to have won in three of the four flat track disciplines. He has won on the half-mile, TT, and short track, but he still needs to win a race on the mile in order to achieve the flat track Grand Slam. If and when he does so, he will join Kenny Roberts Sr. as the only GP world champions achieve this feat. "I would say that mile win is still in the cards," says Hayden. "That's still in the plan. I don't have any immediate plans, but before the rides are all over, I still want to try to get that mile. I know the longer I wait the harder it's going to be, but I certainly haven't forgotten about it."

It is a safe bet that the legions of Nicky Hayden fans haven't forgotten either. If he comes to race the Mile with some momentum, don't bet against him.



Nicky Hayden at Laguna Seca in 2009, his Ducati sporting a special Stars and Stripes livery for the race, complete with firecracker helmet design, in celebration of the July 4th holiday.

CHAPTER 9

The Contenders



Randy Mamola on his Suzuki leading Barry Sheene on his Yamaha in 1981, one of four years Mamola took second in the World Championship. Mortons Media

MANY AMERICANS HAVE COMPETED in the 500cc MotoGP World Championship, but only a select few have earned the sport's ultimate honor. This chapter tells the stories of the great American riders who competed on the Grand Prix stage but did not win it all.

MIKE BALDWIN

Mike Baldwin was a member of the American contingent that dominated Grand Prix racing in the late 1980s and early 1990s. He was the master of the Formula One class in United States, earning five AMA championships in the category—in 1978, 1982, 1983, 1984, and 1985. Baldwin would move on to race in the 500cc World Championship from 1985 to 1987, with his best year coming in 1986, when he finished fourth in the points standings riding for Kenny Roberts' Kool Yamaha team.

Michael Baldwin was born on January 15, 1955, in Pasadena, California, and moved to Connecticut with his family as a youngster. Like so many of the American riders of his generation, he got his start on lawnmower-powered minibikes.

"It was a Rupp," he recalls. "And then I got a Honda 50. It wasn't anything nice like a Mini-Trail; it was a step-through that had been abused and was in a nonrunning state. I bought it for \$5. It taught me how to do a valve job."

The closest track to Mike's home was Bridgehampton, on Long Island. He recalls attending a club race there and seeing some of the AMA's hotshoes in action:

A friend of mine saw an ad for the races in the *New York Times*. He had a Norton Commando and I had an H2 Kawasaki [750 two-stroke triple]. We were into the café racing thing back then. We saw Gary Fisher running around that track on a 350 Yamaha; it was scary to watch. Fisher was making a rare appearance at a club race; there was a rough downhill section—a tank slapper the whole way—and he looked like a fish going through water with the thing wiggling like it did. Within about eight hours of getting home, we both had number plates bolted up. We were going to go out and try to beat Gary Fisher . . . or pretend we were.

I went to a Kawasaki training course and worked for a Kawasaki dealership in 1974. I met a customer who bought a Z1 and wanted all this performance equipment put on: a 1,000-cc big-bore kit, wheels, pipe—all the Yoshimura stuff. One weekend, he saw my H2 with the number plates, Dunstall fairing, and clip-ons. He asked where I raced it. Turns out he had a house out near Bridgehampton. The man's name was George Beavers, and he was an executive from New York City with plenty of money to burn on bikes. He asked if I'd like to take my bike and his bike out racing.

At Bridgehampton, he commented about the bright white Yamahas with the red stripes and wanted to know where they came from. Those Yamahas had open expansion chambers; when they went by, they sounded like low-flying fighter planes. He was shocked at how fast they were and wanted to know where to get some. He bought a TA125 and made arrangements to also buy a new TZ350 from Tom Bovaird. It turned out that the 125 had been a championship-winning 125 and was extremely fast with another 1,000 rpm on top versus the stock bike. I took it to Canada and raced it at Sanair; that track was like a drag strip, and the bike was an absolute missile. Steve Baker was there with the Yamaha Canada entourage, and my bike was staying with him on the straight. We actually ended up beating him there. The [Yamaha Canada people] came running back to the pits saying, "This kid's got to be cheating!" They were convinced it was a 200. From that point forward, the H2 and the Z1 were left in the garage.

Rising Star

Mike had made an impression, and his rapidly growing reputation helped him to make another connection, one that would send his career into high-gear:

A few weeks later, near the end of 1974, I got a chance to ride a Ducati SS 750 that was built up by Reno Leoni at Bridgehampton. At the spur of the moment, he walked up to me and asked, "Do you want to ride in an endurance race?" At the time, I was also racing a Ducati 250

single that we had resurrected out of somebody's barn. It turned out to be a Formula Four Ducati, which is a rare twin-loop frame, sand-cast engine Ducati. It would beat the 125 Yamahas down the straights, and that caught Reno's eye. It was a nice gesture on Reno's part, and we ended up winning the race.

The 1975 season would be Mike Baldwin's first full AMA campaign. He soon found himself facing the best riders in the nation: "We were thinking we are going to go ride against juniors, and guys that we knew," Baldwin recalls. "Suddenly, they told us we were going to be racing against Kenny Roberts and Steve Baker."

The following year saw the debut of the AMA Superbike Championship, and Mike would compete in the inaugural campaign astride a Reno Leoni Moto Guzzi. Baldwin explains:

We were actually as fast as anybody, but at Daytona we could only run the stock rear tire and wheel because the slick was interfering with the driveshaft and swingarm. It wouldn't fit, so I had to ride around on this street tire. [Baldwin finished fifth.]

For the next race [at Loudon], we cut a chunk out of the swingarm so we could fit a slick. Once we did that, it was all over for them. Loudon was the shocker; nobody thought that would have been possible. I won and shut up Steve McLaughlin and all the BMW riders for a change. After that race, my friends told me that Romero, Nixon—all the guys that rode the Formula One bikes—were cheering for me because the Guzzi sounded like a dirt track bike. For me, the best thing was in the 250 class. I was able to stay with Steve Baker and Yvon Duhamel and was able to pass Kenny Roberts down the straight, and I got on the podium. That was the biggest deal for me.

Mike finished the Superbike season fifth in points, one point behind Cook Neilson and Gary Fisher and three points behind McLaughlin.

Even better results came in 1977 as Baldwin won on the mighty Guzzi at Charlotte on his way to third in Superbike points behind Jason Pridmore

and Neilson. In the 250 GP class, he finished fifth in points. However, Baldwin does not look upon that season with much fondness:

1977 was a tough year. I bought a twin-shock Yamaha TZ750A from Boston Cycle and raced it in the AMA Formula One [Road Race National] class. I would say probably my best race that season was the nonpoints AMA race at Long Beach, where I rode the Yamaha on the weekend that was headlined by the Formula One [car] race. Kevin Cameron built a really good set of pipes for it; it had good power up top, but I ran out of gas. That year, I was focusing more on the 250 and the Superbikes. In Loudon, I had a spectacularly unsuccessful event by crashing in all three events.

Battling for third place with Barry Sheene at Long Beach helped established Baldwin in AMA Formula One, while he gained valuable experience. He would put that experience—along with the new Yamaha TZ750D monoshock—to good use on his way to winning the AMA Formula One Championship in 1978. Baldwin looks upon that legendary bike with great affection:

That was a good bike. The D was the one to have, that everybody could get. They were \$5,800 or something. It was amazing, a cheap way to get into racing, and the bikes were reliable and fast. I remember getting third at Laguna that year behind Roberts and Baker, who were probably on OW-31s.

That championship season included Baldwin's first win in the Formula One class at Sears Point. He recalls that memorable event:

At Sears Point, I was behind Skip Aksland coming down the carousel, and he got sideways and got high-sided off the bike. He had such a tight grip on the throttle that it came off the bar, and all four carbs were attached to the throttle and came off the bike. All of this stuff was going down the track like footballs left and right. I hit one of the

carburetors and just about crashed myself. I won, and at the end of the race, the tire had a half-moon slice down to the tube and the tube was coming out through the hole. The wheel was cracked and the tube was coming out through the crack. The funny things is, the day before, all the Goodyear guys were making fun of me for using tubes. I showed them the slice, and they couldn't believe it. That wheel is still in my basement.

Baldwin followed up his first win with another at the next round at Pocono. Then he flew to Japan with Wes Cooley, where the two of them teamed up to win the 8 Hours of Suzuka, a feat that certainly improved his standing with the Japanese manufacturers, including Kawasaki.

Baldwin would sign up to race for Kawasaki in 1979. His debut was memorable, but not for good reasons: "Kawasaki had been trying to get me to ride it in Formula One, but I said no way to a four-stroke; it had to be a two-stroke. We went to Daytona with a KR750, a 250, and a KZ1000 Superbike. In 750 qualifying, I went out on the first lap; the fuel was puking out through the breather. It went onto the rear tire, and I landed on my head and broke my collarbone."

Despite his injuries, Baldwin still raced the 200. He started dead last but finished a very impressive fourth.

Disappointment and Comeback

After Daytona, Baldwin made his European debut in the Transatlantic Match Races, where he was individual high points-scorer. He then got a chance to compete in a handful of races in Europe, in both the F750 class and 500 GP class. "I had a secondary sponsor that gave me a TZ750 and an RG500 to ride in the Grand Prix," Baldwin explains. "The best I did was at [the 500cc race] at Jarama, Spain, where I took the pole [and finished third]. Every week, I was riding a different bike on tracks I'd never seen before."

Baldwin's strong showings in Europe had earned him a lot of attention, and further opportunities during the 1979 season were likely; however, things changed dramatically for the worse during his first race back in the

States. At Loudon, Baldwin suffered a severely broken leg after a high-side on the KR750 threw him into a fire extinguisher that had been left standing upright by the edge of the track. "I caught it right in the middle of my leg," Baldwin says. "I smashed my femur into about fifty pieces." The injuries were so severe that he did not race again for a year.

Baldwin returned in 1980, only then he was riding for Honda. "Steve McLaughlin asked me to come and ride for Honda in a six-hour endurance race," Baldwin explains. "And we won. Then I went to ride the Superbike; I think they were hoping I could finish up there between Freddie and Eddie or something."

In 1981, he would ride for Team Honda France in the World Endurance Championships. Paired with David Aldana, Baldwin would score his second 8 Hours of Suzuka win that season, on his way to further rehabilitating his career.

With Freddie Spencer moving on to the World Championship in 1982, Honda pegged Baldwin as its new AMA golden boy. The 27-year-old veteran would lead Honda's Superbike campaign and narrowly lose the title to Kawasaki's Eddie Lawson. Baldwin also raced in the AMA Formula One class—in fact, he would dominate the 1982 season, winning his second AMA F1 Championship astride the legendary 1,000cc FWS V-4. "When they loaded [the FWS V-4] off the truck at Laguna Seca," Baldwin recalls, "you could see it had just been built by HRC, never been ridden. Out of the box, not touching one setting, it was under the track record."

For the 1983 Superbike season, Honda unleashed the water-cooled 750 V-4 Interceptor. The bike was dominant right out of the gate, and Baldwin appeared on his way to winning the title. But then Rainey mounted a late-season charge. "It came down to the very last few races," Baldwin explains, "and I just simply threw the thing away. Everybody warned me about the crosswinds." Caught out by the tricky crosswinds at Willow Springs, Baldwin had a massive crash and lost the Superbike Championship to Wayne Rainey and Kawasaki. His 1983 Formula One season would have a happier ending, though, as the 28-year-old won his second straight title.

Baldwin made it three F1 titles in a row in 1984, winning five of eight races on Honda's RS500 three-cylinder. Earlier in the season, he became the first rider to win the 8 Hours of Suzuka three times.

Return to Europe

Having accomplished so much in the United States, Baldwin was ready to have another go at the World Championship. With no offers coming from established GP teams, he chose to tread his own path. Ironically, Honda's decision to pull out of AMA Formula One racing in 1985 would aid his cause. "I bought all my bikes from them," Baldwin explains. "Then I decided to race in the GPs in Europe, race in the events that didn't conflict with the U.S. race schedule." Equipped with the old three-cylinder Honda RS500s, Baldwin had little chance of making a major impact in GP racing.

Baldwin was well aware of the challenge of racing as a privateer against the works teams. "In the Grand Prix, first through fifteenth was normally locked up by the works bikes," he says. Yet Baldwin was up to the challenge and finished a very respectable 11th in the World Championship, scoring 18 points and a best finish of eighth at Misano on the Honda. Meanwhile, he continued his unprecedented run in AMA Formula One, winning the championship for the fifth and final time. Baldwin's focus was directed overseas by then, and his privateer GP season captured the attention of Kenny Roberts. King Kenny was launching a new 500cc team for 1986, and he brought Baldwin aboard, alongside Randy Mamola.

Extensive preseason testing gave the team some momentum heading into the opening round, and Baldwin showed what he and the team could do, taking third at Jarama with Mamola behind in fourth. Baldwin's strong start continued, with another third (as well as fastest lap) at Monza, and yet another place on the bottom step of the podium at the Nürburgring. Baldwin finished the season with two more podiums, and his impressive speed and consistency earned him fourth in the 500cc World Championship.

Hopes were high coming into 1987, but once again, Baldwin's career would be hampered by injury. Returning to Kenny Roberts' team for 1987, he fractured his wrist in round three at Hockenheim. He did make a comeback before the end of the year, scoring a season-high sixth in the

season finale at Argentina, but Roberts had Wayne Rainey waiting in the wings. Mike Baldwin, now 32 years old, would not get another opportunity for a top GP ride. He explains, "In GP racing, when you get to be thirty, they think you are done."

Baldwin returned to the States, racing in assorted AMA series over the following three seasons. During that time, he made a brief return to the World Championship when he competed in a handful of races with a privateer Honda team. The highlight of that experience would be the USGP at Laguna Seca in 1989, where Baldwin finished a very impressive tenth. But by that time, Mike was starting to shift his focus away from racing; he was making movies and had started a riding school, which operated from 1988 through 1990.

Although Mike Baldwin's career may not have reached the heights of some of his compatriots, he still owns a very impressive list of Grand Prix racing achievements, including a 500cc GP pole position, six podiums, and fourth in the 1986 World Championship—facts all recognized by the Motorcycle Hall of Fame, which inducted him in 2001. One of America's best road racers, Baldwin has plenty of great memories from his racing



Pole-sitter Baldwin on the Laguna Seca AMA grid with his boss, Kenny Roberts, in 1986. In second position is Eddie Lawson. DMT Imaging

career to look back on. Interestingly, it is his first AMA win that sticks with him the most: “The first time I won at Loudon in 1976, I’ve got a picture of me and Reno [Leoni] and the trophy girl. That was the high point. Everybody laughed at us when we showed up with a Moto Guzzi.”

They say that he who laughs last, laughs best, and Mike Baldwin remains the only man to win a U.S. Superbike race for the Guzzi factory. It seems odd that this achievement has received so little attention, given the amount of fanfare surrounding Cook Neilson’s *Old Blue*, which achieved minimally superior results during the same timeframe. Ducati has even gone so far as to create a “New Blue” replica/tribute bike. One can only hope for similar recognition someday for the Leoni-Baldwin racer built by that other Italian factory up the road.

RANDY MAMOLA

Randy Mamola never won a World Championship, but his 13 career wins are more than Kenny Roberts Jr. (8) and Nicky Hayden (3 through 2009) can boast. “Always the bridesmaid, never the bride” sums up the career of Randy Mamola, who finished runner-up for the World Championship on four occasions. He is Grand Prix motorcycle racing’s nearly man, and perhaps more deserving of the title world champion than any racer since Stirling Moss.

Randy Mamola was a spectator favorite, a racer who loved to entertain the fans by doing stoppies, waving, and throwing his gloves into the stands. He has never forgotten what it is like to be a fan, an attitude that has made Randy one of the most beloved racers of his generation. “He’s a dynamic type of rider and definitely a crowd favorite,” says Mike Baldwin. “Everybody loves Randy.”

Overnight Sensation

Randy Mamola was born on November 10, 1959 in San Jose, California. Like so many Californians, he grew up on dirt bikes before moving into flat track racing. As a teenager in the mid-1970s, he idolized Kenny Roberts, and by the time Randy was 14, he was following in KR’s footsteps, having acquired sponsorship from Yamaha and even painting his racers in the classic Yamaha bumblebee color scheme.

Ron Grant, the man who did so much to launch Pat Hennen's career, would also play a huge role in Randy's ascendance. In 1975, Grant brought Mamola to New Zealand to race a TA125 Yamaha GP bike in the same series that Hennen was competing in so successfully from 1974 to 1977. Randy won the 125cc series title and returned to the United States with the goal of becoming a road racing champion. Upon graduating from high school, Mamola turned professional and spent his first two seasons racing in the AMA's 250 GP class. He didn't have to wait long to enjoy success, winning the title on a Yamaha in his second year.

Changing rides for 1979, Mamola brought his 250 GP Bimota to Daytona, where he gave Freddie Spencer and Skip Aksland a run for their money before falling back with brake trouble and settling for third. It was such an impressive performance that it earned him a spot on the Transatlantic Match Races team, where he finished second to Mike Baldwin. Randy Mamola, just 19 years old, had arrived in Europe. He would remain there for the next 13 seasons. This is perhaps the most amazing aspect of Mamola's career: He went straight to the top levels of European Grand Prix, bypassing the Superbikes that were virtually a mandatory career stop for any American riders.

Mamola would start the season competing in the 250cc class on his Bimota while also racing in the 500cc class on a privateer Suzuki. In 250 GP, these were the days when Kork Ballington was simply untouchable on his Kawasaki GP bike, but Mamola turned in stunning performances on tracks he had never seen before. Following a midseason switch to Yamaha, he finished fourth in the class. Perhaps even more incredible was Mamola's performance in the 500cc championship, where despite running only a partial schedule he scored a sixth in Sweden, followed by shocking seconds in two of the final three races (at Finland and France). Mamola had finished eighth in the 500cc World Championship, securing his place in 500cc Grand Prix racing.

Signed on to race for the Heron Texaco Suzuki factory team for 1980, the 20-year-old suddenly found himself in a battle for the World Championship, challenging the rider he had grown up idolizing. Kenny Roberts started the season with three consecutive wins, but Mamola continued to make progress as he gained experience. Helped by the fact that he was riding Suzuki's very potent bike, Mamola's first win appeared

inevitable, and the young Californian put his name in the record books during the midseason race at Spa-Francorchamps. Another win at the British GP at Silverstone, coupled with an impressive run of consistent finishes, allowed Mamola to end the season a stunning second in the championship, only 15 points behind Roberts. Perhaps just as impressive was the fact that Mamola had finished ahead of the rest of the Suzukis, a roster that included future world champions Marco Lucchinelli and Franco Uncini, as well as Graziano Rossi (father of Valentino).

Needless to say, expectations were high going into 1981, especially when it became clear that the performance pendulum was swinging toward Suzuki and away from Yamaha. The Suzuki was the dominant machine, and the championship unfolded into a straight fight between Mamola and Lucchinelli. Randy struck first, winning the season opener at the Salzburgring in Austria. After Roberts won the next two races, Lucchinelli posted his first win. Mamola answered with another victory of his own at Opatija, Yugoslavia. But Mamola's championship hopes soon withered under Lucchinelli's onslaught. The Italian won four of the next five races on his way to the title; Mamola ended the season in second place once again, 11 points behind the leader. It was a disappointing result, but Randy was still just 21 years old, and most observers felt it was just a matter of time before he broke through.

Yet 1982 belonged to Franco Uncini (Mamola finished sixth), and 1983 was the epic battle between Roberts and Spencer (Mamola took third). The following years brought a switch to Honda. A tough start would ultimately doom Mamola's 1984 title effort, although he would mount a valiant charge to finish behind Eddie Lawson who won the title on his powerful and effective four-cylinder Yamaha.

Late in the season, Randy was given an opportunity to race the radical four-cylinder "over and under" bike and found it suited his riding style far more than it had for Spencer. "I rode it at Silverstone," Mamola explains. "Freddie got hurt so Honda gave me that bike, and I won. The problem was that the three-cylinder wasn't strong enough to go up against Eddie's Yamaha. It depended upon the racetracks; at certain tracks it would work; the best point of that three-cylinder was getting out of the corners, the

acceleration. In top speed, the four-cylinder bikes had it over us *big time*. Haslam, myself, and Raymond Roche all got invited to ride the four-cylinder at Silverstone, but those guys opted to ride the three-cylinder. They weren't even in the same race . . .”

The author asked Mamola if he found that the increased speed was offset by the handling problems that Spencer experienced. “I actually thought it steered better than the three-cylinder,” said Mamola:

The three-cylinder really was built for Freddie Spencer, in terms of his riding style. To this day, when you look at photos of me with my leg off the side of it, it was because I could not get that thing to turn. Freddie could get the three-cylinder to turn by spinning it much earlier than myself—or anybody else. I won races on it, whether it was in the rain or in the dry, but I just didn’t get along with it. It always felt like it had a really big rear and a really narrow front. On the other hand, the four-cylinder felt completely the opposite; it had a much more stable front end. Of course, Silverstone is a huge track, and I didn’t get to ride the four-cylinder on any racetrack where you had to really man-handle it.

In final race of 1984, Mamola made a statement by taking fastest lap and winning the race, and in hindsight it might have been far better for Honda in 1984 to have given Freddie the updated triple while fielding Randy on the “over and under” V-4. In terms of points, it was Mamola’s best year yet, but it was his third second-place finish of the previous five seasons. In the end, Randy had taken eight podiums in the season’s 12 races, including three wins.

Unfortunately, Mamola was unable to carry the momentum into 1985, the year dominated by Freddie Spencer and Eddie Lawson. Mamola did get into the win column at Assen, but overall it was a disappointing season by his lofty standards. One very fleeting moment of that season has become a major part of the Mamola legend.

Riding the Rothmans Honda at Misano, he pulled off one of the most unbelievable saves in GP history. The incident occurred when Mamola was

forced to correct a rear-wheel slide coming out of a left-hand turn. After resisting the Honda's initial attempt to throw him over the handlebars, Mamola stuck out his left foot on the pavement and was thrown headfirst over the fairing. With almost superhuman strength, he continued to hang on and pull himself backward, despite having both legs bucked off the seat. With both feet now dragging on the *right* side of the bike, the side-saddle-riding Mamola still held the machine upright while it careened through the gravel trap before ultimately throwing his left leg over the seat and continuing on.

No doubt a contributing factor to the save is Mamola's physique, probably best summed up by saying that if Popeye wanted to take him in arm wrestling, he'd best bring extra spinach. Mamola is known for literally bending the handlebars off the bike with his counter-steering riding style, to the point that wrestling the thing into submission is often referred to as having to Mamola the bike—using a riding style as a verb.

Team Roberts

Randy joined Kenny Roberts at Yamaha in 1986 and 1987. His first season with the team brought seconds at Imola, Yugoslavia, Assen, and France, along with a win at the Belgian GP at Spa. However, the entire rest of the season was won by either Wayne Gardner or Eddie Lawson, and Mamola had to settle for third behind the dominant pair. More importantly, that was also the year that Randy became involved with the global charity program Save the Children. His work with the organization gave him another mission in life to go along with his determination to become world champion.

In 1987, Randy came out of the gate hot with a win at Suzuka, but as the season wore on, Wayne Gardner took control of the title chase. Despite additional wins at Le Mans and Misano, Mamola once again found himself runner-up—this time 20 points behind Gardner, who became Australia's first world champion. For 1988, Team Roberts decided to go in another direction, replacing both Mamola and Baldwin. Randy would move on to Cagiva, and although the 28-year-old may not have realized it at the time, his window for winning the World Championship was now closed.

As a three-time world champion rider who also employed some of the greatest riders of the era, Kenny Roberts' opinions carry a considerable amount of weight. He has a great deal of respect for Randy Mamola and feels that his failure to win a title has more to do with the riders he competed against:

Randy had a lot of natural talent, and he didn't waste it. But he wasn't going to beat Wayne Rainey. He was a great racer. Randy could have been world champion, and if that bike hadn't screwed up that one time, he would have been. [In 1987] Randy was putting in good rides and winning races—there was nothing wrong with Randy's riding. It was just that in comparison to Wayne Rainey . . . I knew what I had with Wayne, and that's why I brought him on for 1988. It's like Valentino Rossi today. There are some great riders riding MotoGP bikes right now, but Valentino is just a step up.

The Cagiva Years

The frustrations at Cagiva were many, and the under-funded new team struggled for any kind of decent result. Mamola finished the season with a career worst 12th place in the standings. There was one highlight, however: a sole podium at one of his favorite tracks, Spa-Francorchamps, following home Gardner and Lawson. He also managed a decent finish at Rijeka, Yugoslavia, taking fourth.

The struggles of 1988 would seem easy compared to the disaster of 1989. A seventh place at Rijeka would be his best result on his way to a dismal 18th place in the standings. The 1990 season, his final year with Cagiva, would not be much better, with a best finish of fifth and 13th overall in the championship.

Kevin Schwantz remembers Mamola from those last years at Cagiva:

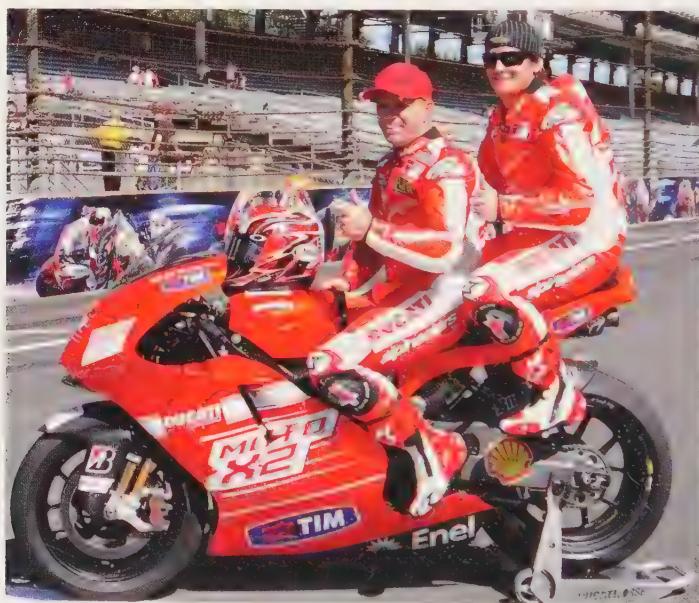
When I went over full-time in 1988, he had just gotten onto the Cagiva. At that point, Randy wasn't doing much but developing machinery. It kept breaking, and his focus on racing I don't think was all that great, because he knew more often than not the

equipment was going to let him down. He wasn't a guy I got to see in his prime.

Mamola sat out the 1991 season before making a comeback the following year, riding for a privateer Yamaha team. He took 10th in the standings, with his best finish a third at the Hungaroring. This would be the final podium of Randy Mamola's glittering 500cc Grand Prix career, one that had seen him win 13 races in 13 seasons. He stayed involved in the sport for several more years as a test rider for Yamaha, while making his charity work a larger focus of his life.

Philanthropist

In 1996, Mamola helped found Riders for Health, an organization that provides motorcycle-based medical outreach efforts in Africa. The



A familiar sight during any given MotoGP weekend: Randy Mamola and the two-seater 990cc Ducati. Here Mamola poses with motocross legend Ricky Carmichael at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway during the 2009 Indianapolis MotoGP weekend.

charity's mission statement is "changing the world through effective transportation," and it achieves these goals by ensuring that health workers in Africa have access to reliable transportation in order to help them provide regular health care across the continent. Riders for Health solicits donations from MotoGP racers, such as race-worn leathers, gloves, helmets, and other items, and then auctions them off to help fund the work. The donations from the racers are far from the usual eBay fare and reflect the riders' full support for this life-saving cause.

Mamola also remains part of the MotoGP circus in his role as rider of the two-seat 990cc Ducati MotoGP racer. These between-race demonstration runs are the ultimate thrill ride for any motorcycle fan, and riding along with Mamola might be best described as the two-wheel equivalent of bungee jumping. The high-speed experience has been known to leave even seasoned riders breathless. "It's amazing how much grip the tires have," recalls 15-time motocross and Supercross champion Ricky Carmichael. "But what impressed me the most besides the braking was the high-speed sweepers."

"It's a leap of faith," says multiple Supercross champ Chad Reed. "Not that I doubted him or anything like that. It was a blast. I'd do it again and recommend it to anyone."

The author recently asked Mamola to name his most memorable passenger. His answer came without hesitation: "That would be [Formula One supremo] Bernie Ecclestone, 73 years old. I'm sure the stock market was dropping as I let the clutch out."

Always the fan favorite, always with his heart in the right place, Randy maintains one of the most visible roles of any American GP racer and is a true ambassador for the sport.

BUBBA SHOBERT

Of all the riders profiled in this chapter, Bubba Shobert had the shortest Grand Prix career. Such a fate would never have been expected when Shobert was dominating flat track racing and winning the AMA Superbike Championship in the mid-1980s. One of the most talented riders of his era, he had his career cut short by a freak accident at the 1989 USGP at Laguna Seca.

Don Wayne Shobert was born on January 29, 1962, in Lubbock, Texas. Like so many others in this story, Bubba started out riding minibikes as a child. In 1980, he won AMA Grand National Rookie of the Year honors in his first professional season, and in 1982, he scored his first national wins at the Indy mile and won again at the Syracuse mile. "Bubba Shobert is one of my riders," Sandy Rainey explains. "He and I were probably the first independents to win the Indy Mile dirt track, and me and him did it—beat Springer [Jay Springsteen], Randy Goss, and the rest when we won that thing. We were in the winners' circle, and we were the only ones without a Harley factory shirt on, because we sell Bubba's jerky."

By the end of the 1983 season, Honda was courting Shobert, with an eye on hiring him as teammate to Ricky Graham. "I had finished fourth in the Grand National Championship, and Graham finished third," Shobert explains, "so Honda took the two top guys who weren't already taken by Harley."

"He left me for Honda," confirms Rainey. "But I have to admit that I was the first one he called."



Bubba Shobert maneuvers his Honda around the San Jose Mile. One of the great racers of his era, he never had a chance to make his mark in GP racing. Mahony Photo Archive

Road Race Debut

Shobert would get an opportunity to try road racing that year, albeit under unusual circumstances, as he explains: "In 1984, I won the San Jose Mile and short track, back to back. Later in the year, I had an altercation with Terry Poovey."

Sandy Rainey clarifies: "He hit him. He hit him right in the jaw."

Shobert continues the story:

So I had the opportunity to do the road racing because I got suspended for nine races. When I came back from that, I was way down in points. The only way to pick up some extra points would be to do some road races. It turned out Honda had an extra Superbike with an 850 engine that they couldn't run in the Superbike class. Honda asked if I wanted to run the bike so I could get some extra points. I said, "Sure, I'll try some road races." What did I have to lose? It was the Formula One class where the guys were running 500s, and I won Mid-Ohio in the rain.

It would be difficult to overestimate what a remarkable achievement this was. Racing an 850cc Superbike he had never ridden before, in his first race on pavement, *in the rain*, Shobert won. "It wasn't nothin' new to me, sliding around corners," he says, nonchalantly. "Of course, I was riding a four-stroke and 90 percent of the field was riding two-strokes."

Bubba Shobert had claimed his first road racing win, and the flat track superstar now had a new frontier to conquer. Meanwhile, he wasn't quite ready to give up on the flat track title, despite missing nine races:

When I got back from being suspended in 1984, I got first or second in every race I raced in. At Springfield for the last race, I was 14 points behind, so the chances weren't real good. Graham crashed and I saw him go down out of the corner of my eye. I thought, "I don't have to win." Second place would give me 16 points and I was only 14 behind. But other guys had broken earlier in the race, so Graham ended up scoring points anyway and he beat me by a point.

Shobert would make up for his near miss by winning the Grand National title the next three seasons. Meanwhile, the AMA had restructured its pro racing championships, separating dirt track and road racing. While Shobert was winning the dirt track Grand National title, he was also making forays into road racing. "In 1985, I was doing the road racing on my own," he says. "Honda didn't have a budget for me, but they gave me a bike for my own deal." In 1986, the same formula earned Shobert his second straight Grand National title, while he also finished fourth in AMA Superbike.

Fred Merkel's move to Europe left an opening at the Honda factory team. Shobert stepped in as teammate to Wayne Rainey for the 1987 Superbike season. "I was kind of the up-and-coming guy," Shobert recalls. "I was getting a lot of good lessons from Wayne. Being a close friend, he always gave me lots of insights that they don't give to other riders these days."

The 25-year-old Texan would make his international debut that year in the Transatlantic Match Races. It was a brief appearance: "I was on the team, but I crashed in the first race."

The epic Rainey-Schwartz duel that made up the 1987 AMA Superbike season has been covered earlier in the book. But it should be noted that Shobert was the only other rider to win an AMA Superbike race that year, the round at Laguna Seca. On the dirt track side, Shobert made it three Grand National Championships in a row.

With Schwartz and Rainey moving on to the World Championship for 1988, Shobert's key rival for the AMA Superbike title would be newcomer Doug Polen on the Yoshimura Suzuki. Shobert describes the season opener at Daytona: "I took off on the warmup lap and halfway around, my bike quit in the infield. I had to get off and push it back to the grid. By the time I got back, the race had started. My mechanics got it started back up; it was vapor lock or something. I started the race a lap down and finished third; Polen got second."

It had been an impressive fight back, to say the least. Meanwhile, a rivalry appeared to be brewing between Shobert and Polen:

The next race was at Road Atlanta, and Polen was pretty much faster than me all week. Come the race, Polen wasn't going as fast as he could;

he was just going to follow me around and then pass me late in the race. I don't know, but I thought he was kind of making me look bad by playing with me. On the last lap, on the back straight, his bike kind of hesitated or something coming out of the turn, and I passed him back. He got tucked into my draft, but at the end of the straight he missed the turn and went off into the dirt, so I ended up winning that race.

Shobert's win at Atlanta, along with another win at Laguna Seca, put him firmly in the title hunt. In fact, every race that season (with the exception of Daytona, where Schwantz had won) would be won by either Shobert or Polen. The duel between the two Texans included plenty of drama. Shobert explains what happened at Mid-Ohio:

Sunday morning in practice, I got off the bike and demolished it; the frame was wrecked. They had a rule that you couldn't use a spare bike, and I had a spare bike but we couldn't use it. The AMA watched my mechanics disassemble my spare bike down to parts and put it back together. It was the only way I could use it. I was following Polen on the last lap, and when he came around a corner, a lapper took him off the track. So we won that race, and that was a big one.

In the end, Shobert managed to squeak by with the title by a mere four points over Polen, a victory that helped to soften the blow of losing out on the Grand National title.

Meanwhile, Shobert made his World Championship debut that season in a one-off ride in the 250cc class at Laguna Seca. "I qualified like sixteenth and led the first lap," Shobert recalls. "I ended up in fifth." It was a staggering GP debut for somebody riding unfamiliar machinery, suggesting that Shobert was ready to follow in the footsteps of the many Americans who had found Grand Prix success.

What Might Have Been

For 1989, he signed for Honda to race in 500cc Grand Prix. "I didn't want to continue racing over here," Shobert explains. "And that was the year

they were getting the RC30 out; they didn't have any bike available. My contract was actually with American Honda."

The 1989 Grand Prix grid would be populated with more Americans than ever before or since, with a roll call that included Lawson, Spencer, Rainey, Schwantz, Mamola, and Shobert. The latter's GP debut came at Suzuka, where he finished in 11th place on a year-old Honda in the Japanese GP. "The second race, I crashed in Phillip Island," Shobert recalls. "I just tipped over."

Round three was held at Laguna Seca, one of the Texan's favorite tracks and a place where he had always found success. The race itself went reasonably well, and Shobert finished ninth, his best top-class GP result to date. But then it all went horribly wrong during the cooldown lap. Wayne Rainey, who had won the race, explains what happened to his best friend, the man who had been best man at his wedding:

Kevin Magee was racing Eddie [Lawson] for third, and going up the start-finish straight for the checkered flag, his bike sputtered and Eddie passed him. So going around the track, Kevin [Magee] stopped out of frustration, and he decided to do a burnout. He was well off the race line, way over to the inside in turn five. Well, Eddie and Bubba were looking at each other going up the straightaway out of turn five and were shaking hands. Eddie said that the next thing he knew, Bubba wasn't there! What had happened was that when they were looking at each other, Kevin was doing the burnout, but they never saw that, and Bubba just ran into the back of him. I didn't know about it; actually Schwantz told me on the podium. Bubba was in a coma for nine days and never did race again after that.

"It was just one of those deals, I guess," says Shobert, who has no recollection of the incident. "I have memories of practice. I remember pulling off on the main straightaway where we'd do a plug chop. I remember that and where we were pitted at, our pit setup. I remember all that, but I have no memory of the actual race. Even now there is some stuff that I've forgotten about, but then somebody will start talking and bring things up, and then I remember it now."

From conversations, it is obvious that Bubba recalls most of the precise details of his career, with the USGP in 1989 being the one exception.

The 27-year-old Shobert recovered sufficiently to pursue a normal life outside of riding racing motorcycles, and he would go on to manage racing teams, most notably in the AMA 250 GP class. And while Bubba Shobert's GP racing career will always be associated with the question "What if?," his prowess as a flat track racer is part of American motorcycle racing legend.

"Bubba was my childhood idol growing up," says Nicky Hayden, who paid tribute to Shobert by wearing a replica of the Texan's helmet at the 2006 USGP at Laguna Seca. "He was my hero, and he was the guy I looked up to. I watched as he made his transition from dirt track to road racing, and it just seemed fitting [to wear the helmet], as this was the track where he ended his career. It helped make the weekend special. It was a big honor to wear his replica and to take the win; it was one of the highlights of my career."

DOUG CHANDLER

Among the generation of flat track–racing Californians who would go on to make their mark in road racing, John Douglas Chandler was perhaps the most versatile. Born on September 27, 1965, in Salinas, California, Doug got into bikes at an early age.

"We had a neighbor at the time that raced," Chandler recalls. "I thought he was the coolest guy ever. He persuaded my parents to let him bring me to one of the local races, try it out. I kind of got hooked and started racing when I was five on a Honda Trail 50."

He would quickly rise through the ranks up to the Grand National Championship series: "I won my first National on an Illinois short track and missed being the youngest rider ever to win by about a week." Doug was on a vertical career path, and in 1983, at just 18 years of age, he capped off his first full professional racing season with the AMA Rookie of the Year award.

Road Racer

"At that time, I wasn't even looking at the road race stuff," Chandler explains. "I wanted to be Grand National Champion. The following year, we got picked

up by Honda, and back then road race and flat track were combined for one championship. Honda had the idea that if we weren't doing a flat track that maybe we could go to one of these road races to pick up extra points."

Chandler would start at the top. His first professional road race was in the premier Superbike class in 1984 at Loudon, New Hampshire. He finished a very strong sixth. This introduction to the road racing world would have a profound effect on Chandler:

Going to the road races and seeing all those other manufacturers there, it really opened my eyes as to how much further you could go by road racing. In flat track, we had Harley dominating with Honda trying to get in there; they were the only two. At road races there were a lot more, so I thought this was something I could try, with what was going on over in Europe with World Championships.

Chandler would spend the 1984 through 1988 seasons competing in both flat track and road racing. Among the highlights of those years were five Grand National wins in 1986 and 1987; he would finish third in the standings both years. In 1988, he took his first road racing win, in the Pro-Twins class at Mid-Ohio. The feat earned him a spot in AMA history as the fourth and most recent rider to achieve the AMA Grand Slam (in 1989), the others being Dick Mann, Kenny Roberts, and Bubba Shobert.

After finishing the 1988 AMA Superbike season third in points behind Shobert and Polen, Chandler decided to shift his emphasis from dirt track to road racing. He says, "1989 was the first year that I put road racing over flat track. Kawasaki was going to come out with a new 750 Superbike, and Rob Muzzy was going to do a team. So we did a deal."

"We had done a real minor little thing with Kawasaki in 1988," Muzzy explains. "It was a 500cc single dirt track bike that Ricky Graham rode at Daytona and the short track, and a 750 that was based on the water-cooled Ninja. They came out with a new bike, so in 1989 we took that new bike and hired Chandler."

"The 1989 season started off a little rough," Chandler recalls. "It was a new bike, new team. But we finished strong and won the last two races

[at Mid-Ohio and Topeka]. The thing was really good, and I knew we had something pretty good for the following year when it all came together.”

“Because he had won a couple of races,” says Muzzy, “Kawasaki got really enthused and ramped up the program.”

Things did indeed come together. Not only did Chandler earn the Superbike championship on the strength of wins at Mid-Ohio, Road America, Loudon, and Miami, but he also took four wins in the 750 Supersport class to finish second in points.

Going Global

Chandler also made his debut on the world stage that year, competing in the Brainerd, Minnesota, round of the World Superbike Championship. “We were just going to do the Brainerd round,” Chandler explains, “but we had success and won one of the legs [finishing third in the other].”

“We ran Brainerd and that was the year the track was falling apart,” Muzzy recalls. “Guys were putting cardboard in their leathers to keep from beating their chests up. In any event, we won one round and that caused quite a stir.”

It would be more than a one-off appearance in the series, as Chandler explains: “I think we had to prove our worthiness to the rest of the guys by going back over to Japan and doing the round there at Sugo to make sure that they didn’t see [the Brainerd win] as just an American guy on an American track.”

Muzzy continues: “Kawasaki was saying, ‘Why don’t you guys come over? Bring your bike and run our race.’ Of course, then we won a round there too. When Doug came back from Japan, that’s when he made his decision that he wanted to race in the GPs.”

Chandler describes how Kenny Roberts helped the next step in his career:

I’d known Kenny going back to the late 1970s. Kenny had sort of watched me since I was a little kid at one of the places where we were racing locally. Those years, 1988 and 1989, I’d go over there in the winter time and ride dirt bikes with Wayne [Rainey] and Eddie

[Lawson] and that clan over at Kenny's place, the ranch up there in Hickman. Kenny Jr. and Kurtis were riding minibikes with us as well. So, the connection was there, he was trying to put another team together, and they created essentially a "B" team for a first-year rider to kind of go over and get his feet wet.

Doug's debut Grand Prix season came in 1991. He says, "I was pretty much riding on year-old bikes, getting a sense for the tracks, the atmosphere, and all that. My first race was at Suzuka, and we were going pretty good, which was surprising to me. My rain experience was very low at the time, and to be out there right in the middle of it, I was gaining confidence as I went, which was a big plus."

For 1992, Lucky Strike Suzuki hired Chandler to partner with Kevin Schwantz on the 500 GP bikes. As chronicled in the Schwantz chapter, Chandler was able to make a big contribution to the team, especially when it came to developing the bike. "I thought it was a pretty good bike," he says of the RGV500. "Those bikes were either the best bikes you ever rode or the worst, and it really depended on how you had the bike set up for yourself as a rider. There wasn't any in-between. You were good or bad."

Chandler credits his good friend Wayne Rainey with teaching him about the sport's technical side:

Data acquisition was just starting to come on board. I would get on the computer with Wayne and just look at our traces—front suspension, rear suspension. To me, I never felt like I was the fastest guy out there. I was going to win the race by having a bike that's working a lot better and was easier on the tires, so I'd have something at the end. I wanted to have that thing set up the best I possibly could and understand everything.

Mert Lawwill is one man who appreciated the technical nous that Chandler could bring to a team: "He was probably the smartest rider, as far as giving me feedback about how it was doing this or that. I've only had a handful of guys who could actually assist with setup. Another was Kenny Roberts,

because of all his experience. But some of the other guys I won't bother to mention. It is an art form."

"I want to know as much as I can about the bikes," says Chandler:

I want to know all the mechanics. The gearboxes, I totally understood all of that, and I had a lot of help. I could talk to the suspension guys about what I'm feeling and suggest what I thought we needed to do about the valving in the shocks. I would stay out on the track until I knew what it was that I didn't like. Is the compression too harsh over the ripple bumps on a certain part of the track? Is it sitting too high on the ride height and putting too much weight on the front? I wanted to understand that stuff and give the technicians better data so we could have a better bike.

Rob Muzzy compares Chandler's approach to Eddie Lawson's:

Whatever the bike's limitations were, Eddie would take it right to that limit, or maybe just one hair past that. He would never try to do something that the bike wouldn't do, which is why he didn't crash very



Chandler on the Suzuki GP bike, en route to second place at the 1992 Japanese Grand Prix. Doug Chandler Collection

much. Doug was the same way. A lot of it was a comfort level with Doug. The whole purpose of setting the bike up was to make Doug happy on the bike. He was really good and he knew what he wanted, and in time he learned to communicate that between us. If Doug was comfortable on the bike, he would ride it as hard as he could ride, as fast as it would go.

Chandler had some success with the Suzuki, as he pushed hard on the development side:

That whole year of 1992, we just kept plugging away. At the end of 1992, I knew that 1993 bike was going to be good. In 1992, I sat on pole position at two tracks that I had never seen before in my life, the Hungaroring and Magny-Cours. I was pretty excited to be able to do that at that level.

Doug finished the season fifth in points, just five points behind teammate Schwantz. And Chandler had played a major role in developing the bike that Schwantz rode to the 1993 World Championship. Sadly, Chandler would not reap the rewards of his development work. Instead, he moved on to Cagiva for 1993:

That was a tough decision. It was one of those things. In the GPs, you had riders willing to go over there for basically no pay, just to get the opportunity to ride. You are going over there and are making NO money, putting yourself at risk of getting hurt. Kevin was their top guy, and they had no more money for anybody else. With Cagiva the money was night-and-day different. I'd made the Suzuki pretty good throughout the year, and I thought if these Italian guys will work with me, I know we can get this thing working pretty good as well. Ultimately the Cagiva ended up being really good. We just had some problems mechanically. We'd begin to make some power and then the bike would start letting go on us, which was a bummer. But as far as going around a racetrack, that was a really nice bike to ride.

Chandler's teammate for 1993 was fellow American John Kocinski. There was not the usual animosity between teammates. "I wanted to help him out, because I wanted to see the team do well," says Chandler. "A lot of times he'd kind of get out in left field, and they'd kind of come back and put on the setup I had."

Chandler sums up his two seasons with Cagiva before the team folded:

We were starting to lead a few races but had quite a few DNFs; it was kind of frustrating. I got second in Buenos Aires behind Mick Doohan, and John got third there. I was trying to get past Criville for the lead at Le Mans when it popped a cylinder. It was frustrating, but we had two years and the thing was getting better. We had a lot of misfortune, though, and right as we were ready to turn the page and get some good finishes out of it, that's when they closed the book.



Doug Chandler on the Cagiva GP bike in 1993. Doug Chandler Collection

The 1994 season would also be the final chapter of Chandler's Grand Prix career, in which he had achieved six podiums over four seasons.

Back to the States

Chandler returned to the AMA in 1995 but suffered through a confidence-shattering season on the Harley-Davidson Superbike. "It was a bad decision," he says of signing up with Harley. "And you just have to live with it and move on. I was pretty disgusted and was actually beginning to doubt myself. That Harley was back to the drawing board; I broke my collarbone twice."

The next year, Chandler reunited with Muzzy and Kawasaki to embark on some of the hardest fought campaigns in AMA Superbike history. In 1996, Chandler won his second AMA Superbike title, with wins at Laguna Seca and Las Vegas helping him to finish the season with a narrow lead over Miguel Duhamel.

Chandler repeated the feat in 1997, besting challenges from both Duhamel and Mat Mladin. This championship was particularly impressive, as it highlighted Chandler's consistency, persistence, and racecraft: Mladin and Duhamel had won four races each, while Chandler won just once.

The string of championships was broken in 1998, when Chandler had to settle for runner-up to Ben Bostrom. Unfortunately, the Chandler-Muzzy dynamic came to an end after that season when Kawasaki brought the team back in-house for AMA Superbike and Muzzy moved on. Doug did not understand the rationale for pulling the team from Muzzy, as it had gone from success to success across the years. "I think it was tough; we had a pretty successful team." Chandler stayed on with Kawasaki, winning three more races in 1999 and finishing fourth in points.

These days, Doug keeps himself occupied with leisure pursuits, such as competing with his kids in 24-hour bicycle races (they won in 2009) and running a school for motorcycle road racing. Doug Chandler can lay claim to being one of the greatest all-around motorcycle racers in U.S. history. Throw in the fact that Doug has won a round of the AMA Supermoto Championship (in 2003), and the depth of his talent is even more amazing.

Chandler believes that variety is part of what helped him enjoy such a long, successful career. “I think if I’d never gotten to try the road race stuff, I’d have been done and burnt out a long time ago. I’ve been able to kind of jump around, coming back to American road racing and then jump on the Supermoto. There was always something really cool. That’s an important part, being inspired.”

JOHN HOPKINS

John Thomas Hopkins is a rider of two nations. Born on May 22, 1983, in Ramona, California, he is the only member of his family who was born in the United States; John’s three older sisters were all born in England. Hopkins’ father raced the Isle of Man TT before settling into the rural Southern California environs east of San Diego. Growing up in the Golden State, it was only natural that John got his start in off-road racing:

I was a motocross guy since I was about six years old. Most of my racing was local, at Perris, Barona Oaks, Glen Helen—the local tracks. My first bike was a Honda Mini-Trail, and then I went straight to the PW-50s and eventually RM and Kawasaki 80s, then the YZ125. I was at Ponca City, Oklahoma, for the national and that was the first time I did road racing, funny enough. They have a go-kart track on their facility, and they were having YSR nationals for 50cc bikes. They had an exhibition where we could enter our PW-50 into the race, and I actually raced that with the knobby tires and lapped second place in every race I entered.

Meanwhile, John was also racing in the motocross events, his real reason for being there. “I raced in the same race against Roger Lee Hayden on his little dirt track PW-50. Nicky, who was a little bit older, was racing on the YSR50.”

Hopkins was a regular at the motocross championships held at each year at Loretta Lynn’s ranch: “I did them through when I was nine years old, and I had a few top-five finishes. We were a couple of years behind Ricky Carmichael, who was on 80s when we were on 60s, and a couple of years ahead of James Stewart.”

Going Ballistic

At age 12, there came a tipping point that led John into road racing full-time. It was the opportunity to ride a proper 125cc road racer at the Streets of Willow Springs:

I rode an Aprilia RS-125 for the first time. Going over 100 miles per hour was a pretty exciting experience. There was a guy, Al Lyons, who helped me out; my dad had just passed away and we didn't have any money whatsoever. We were having a hard enough time with motocross. Al Lyons ran a mini-moto racing series, and he always looked out for me and got everything for me with the 125. It wasn't until I turned sixteen that I could run on any other tracks than Willow Springs. The Hayden brothers had just been busted for lying about their age, so they completely changed the rules around just before I was about to turn fourteen and go into WERA. That completely ruined it for me, because they made it age sixteen. I was thinking that this wasn't going anywhere, and I was about to put all my focus back into motocross. At that point, John Ulrich picked me up and offered me a \$40,000 contract.

I was ecstatic over that, and I signed a contract for the next two years. He put me into Aprilia Cup just to get practice on the other tracks. We had a couple of really good races with Ben Spies in it; he got me at his home track at the old Texas World.

That first year with Ulrich was 2000, and Hopkins would win the 750 Supersport title in his first attempt at age 17. "I was actually riding the Formula Xtreme bike that year as well, to get a feel for it," he says. "Also in 2000, funny enough, I had just been riding the 600 and 750 four-strokes, and that was when Peter Cliford asked me to test the Red Bull Yamaha [500cc GP bike] over at Brno. They were pretty happy with how the test went, so they offered me a test the following year."

Hopkins' ballistic career path had taken him from track day RS125s straight to being a salaried AMA Formula Xtreme racer, while testing a 500cc two-stroke GP Yamaha at Brno.

Hopkins continues: “In 2001, Suzuki came out with a brand-new design and the team worked hard and put together a really good Formula Xtreme bike going into the season. It wasn’t far from what a Superbike was; we had a couple of really good races.”

Keith Perry is the crew chief for M4 Suzuki, and he was on hand when Spies and Hopkins were teammates in 2000:

I have a picture in my office of Ben and John racing back and forth on the Valvoline Suzukis in the 600 class. It’s pretty cool to see those guys and where they are now. Early on, John didn’t have a lot of feel for what the bike did underneath him; he rode to the setup. We would know from the stopwatch because John rode the bike to the ultimate. He didn’t learn that stuff about setup until later with the 750 and the Formula Xtreme bike, when he started giving much better feedback.

John won the 750 Superstock Championship for us first in 2000 and the Formula Xtreme Championship the following year. After John left for MotoGP, Ben Spies returned to run the 750 Superstock for us. It was clear that both of those guys were extremely talented, and if they kept their focus they were going to go places. One thing that impressed me is that Hopkins was so focused; he could truly dial everything out and really focus on the bike, the track, and the race. John Ulrich was a friend of the MotoGP team owner that Hopkins went to [Peter Clifford], and he asked about young kids coming up. Ulrich told him, “Hey, I’ve got one for you now.” Connections and luck with the timing played a huge role for both of those guys.

Hopkins’ final AMA race was memorable and helped serve as his springboard onto the world stage. “The Formula Xtreme title was up for grabs,” Keith Perry recalls:

In the race, a bolt broke on about lap three, and John lost maybe a second and a half for a lap or two, before he learned how to ride the thing with the top triple tree not even connected to the steering stem. There was a 30mm gap between the steering stem and the top triple

tree. He knew it felt funny, but he didn't look down because he didn't want to know. It was one of the most amazing things I've seen in my whole twenty years with Team Hammer, what John did to win that championship. John had the ability to turn whatever problems he had into a nonfactor and do it in a nonchalant way.

Hopkins won't forget the experience any time soon:

It was the toughest race to get through mentally, thinking that the entire front end was going to fall off. It was only about four or five laps into the race, and it had about an inch and a half of thrust, so every time I'd hit the brakes the thing would clank and shake like crazy. The deal with Red Bull Yamaha was still up in the air at the time; I think my performance in that race was what clinched it.

Straight to MotoGP

Hopkins was still just 18 years old when he joined the Red Bull World Championship Motorsports (WCM) 500cc GP Yamaha team for the 2002 season:

My teammate was Garry McCoy, and the bikes were more based on Garry's riding style. McCoy had the thing sliding around all the time, even with Michelin tires, more than anybody. The way that Dunlops moved around all the time and slid, Peter Clifford thought it would be a better option for the team to go to the Dunlops. It completely backfired, on McCoy as well, because the Michelins weren't supposed to slide, but when they did, they were still driving. Despite that, we had some really good races. I qualified sixth in a couple of places . . . took seventh at Assen. I was consistently one of the top two-stroke finishers throughout the year.

The inaugural MotoGP season had been a transitional year. Teams had the option of running the new four-stroke 990cc bikes or continuing to race the 500cc two-strokes. The Red Bull Yamaha team had opted for the

latter and would struggle as a result, as the season was dominated by the new 990cc machinery. It did, however give John Hopkins an appreciation for racing the two different kinds of machinery with advanced electronics that he rode in later seasons. “Back then on those machines it was purely just riding dumb. There was so much more throttle control involved; a 500 was just a pure beast with such limited traction.”

Hopkins finished the season 15th in points. Although he had finished 25 points ahead of his teammate, he wasn’t optimistic about his future in the World Championship: “I thought, okay, this has been fun, and thought for sure I’d head back to the AMA and race Superbike. Gary Taylor of Suzuki approached us and offered us a ride on the Suzuki. For sure I wanted to remain in Grand Prix.”

Hopkins spent the next five seasons with Suzuki, where he developed a lot of respect for his crew chief. “Stuart Shenton was my crew chief the entire time I was there; he’s a really good guy and we had a really good relationship throughout the entire time we were working together.” The first three years were marked by a lot of growing pains and the occasional glimmer of promise. The 2003 season included his crash with teammate Roberts Jr. and a one-race suspension for an on-track incident in Japan. The young American dropped to 17th in the final points standings, although this finish still put him seven points ahead of Roberts. The 2004 results were little better, as Hopkins finished 16th, ahead of Roberts in 18th. The teammates would finish even in points in 2005, with Roberts winning the tiebreaker, relegating Hopkins to 14th.

“The Suzuki was always quite at bit down on power in comparison to the other machines,” Hopkins explains:

One thing I learned is that you are only as good as the bike you are on. Still, I was in Grand Prix, and I’d climb off the bike happy with myself because I knew that I’d done absolutely everything that I could in every race that I was in. I always had to over-ride the Suzuki even to get a top-ten position. The style I developed was super late braking; we’d lose so much ground on the straightaway, I would have to make it up somewhere. I’d brake really late and have the front pushing

everywhere; it was a style I adapted from over-riding the machine. I guess my thing is late braking; I'm really late on the brakes. Suzuki put in a lot more development, changed a lot of people, and we started making some big headway in 2005 and 2006.

In 2006, Suzuki brought in World Superbike champion Chris Vermeulen as Hopkins' teammate. This was the year when Suzuki began the turnaround in results, as Hopkins finished tenth in the points. Suzuki brought the air valve pneumatic valve closure system into its new 75-degree V-twin 990 engine, typically known for giving less valve float, less friction, and allowing more extreme cam profiling than conventional valve spring engines.

Suzuki was thinking ahead, and the pieces were being put into place, with the air valve engine just being one part of the puzzle. "We had 990 motors in the 800 chassis for the entire year of 2006," Hopkins recalls:

So when we came out with the 800 [in 2007], it was really good. It had a smoother, more manageable throttle connection—that was the most substantial thing. There was a lot of refinement; corner entry, corner exit was a lot smoother, and it wasn't jumping around as much. In comparison with a lot of the other machines, it was right there, dead even in the beginning of the year. Unfortunately a lot of the



John Hopkins on the Rizla Suzuki in 2007, the year in which he finished fourth in the MotoGP World Championship.

other teams got a lot more engine power midway through the season, around Brno, so we started losing ground.

Riding a competitive bike at last, Hopkins finally broke through in 2007, taking his first World Championship podium—a third place in China. This was followed by three more podiums and fourth place in the final standings, ahead of Melandri and his Suzuki teammate Vermeulen.

The Switch to Kawasaki

Things were looking up for Suzuki, but Hopkins had already decided to move on long before the end of the 2007 campaign:

I was happy with the way the bike was running, but it seemed we were on a plateau a lot of the time, and I was ready to take a new look at racing. I'd been in GPs as a part of that family for so long, and I wanted to change it up a little bit. For the last two years or so, it seemed like Kawasaki had made quite a few improvements; we had a lot of confidence in the beginning of the season that they would do this or that in the following years. We signed the Kawasaki contract early in the 2007 season, for two years [2008 and 2009].

Hopkins' experience at Kawasaki was miserable and culminated with the manufacturer abandoning its MotoGP program after the 2008 season:

Coming off the podium at Valencia in 2007, the best finish I'd ever had for a season, I went to Kawasaki and it was just a disaster. I've hardly been able to ride; looking back, I'm not sure if Kawasaki knew they were going to pull out. One thing that was strange is that we never got one part throughout the year. It was identical to the bike they raced in 2007.

To make matters worse, Hopkins suffered a damaged vertebrae in 2008 and then endured ankle and leg fractures after making impact with a tire wall at Assen. Between injuries and Kawasaki's departure, John Hopkins found himself without a seat for the 2009 MotoGP season. He eventually took a ride

with the Stiggy Honda World Superbike team at midseason. "I got the call to do World Superbike and was really excited," Hopkins explains. "I didn't want to be here just sitting on my butt all year and not racing a motorcycle."

Speaking to Hopkins in 2009, he was optimistic about his future and excited to be involved in the Superbike World Championship:

I'm happy with what I'm doing, as I'm racing a motorcycle for a living. To be honest, I wouldn't even consider going back to MotoGP unless it was on a bike that was competitive and could be winning. 90 percent of the MotoGP racers on the grid are about 90 percent of my size, and I'm not exactly the tallest guy in the world [five feet, ten inches, 140 pounds]. The bikes are built completely around these tiny guys. That was one of the biggest issues that I had at Kawasaki; it was one of the smallest bikes on the grid and I did not fit on it whatsoever. Between that, and with the electronics, there is no movement on the machine; they've taken a hell of a lot of the fun out of riding the bikes. I think every rider on the MotoGP grid would agree that World Superbike would be more fun from the rider's point of view.

Unfortunately, 2009 would be another tough year. A shattering accident at Assen in his second event with the team left Hopkins with a dislocated hip. He returned a few months later to race at Donington, where he finished a fighting eighth. But a few weeks later, he was run over in a crash at the Nürburgring, suffering a brain injury that was at first undiagnosed. Once the severity of his injuries had been determined, his season was over.

Despite two difficult years, Hopkins appears immune to the psychological effects of such continuous adversity. Still just 26 years old at the start of the 2010 season, and with nearly a decade of experience racing at the highest levels, John Hopkins returned to his road racing roots for 2010, to once again ride for John Ulrich and team M4 Suzuki, this time in AMA Superbike. "Nothing is more fun than sliding a Superbike around," says Hopkins. One can only wish Hopkins an enjoyable and successful return to American racing, perhaps providing the basis for an eventual return to Grand Prix.

CHAPTER 10

The World Superbike Champions



Ben Spies in action at Miller Motorsports Park in 2009, where he swept to victory in both races and broke Doug Polen's record for consecutive World Superbike pole positions.

IN THE EARLY 1970s, the advent of large-capacity production four-stroke motorcycles led American race promoters to create a Heavyweight Production class, which was eventually embraced by the AMA to become a new road racing class: Superbike. By 1976, the American series had its official debut, and over the years it would go from strength to strength. What set Superbike racing apart from GP racing, Formula One, and other classes was that Superbikes were production-based—fans were more or less watching the same bikes they could buy off the showroom floor. No other class made such a strong connection between marketing, sales, and on-track success like Superbike. In comparison, the bikes that dominated the American Formula One series and the Daytona 200 were such exotica as the Yamaha OW-31 or the Kawasaki KR750. The disconnect was the same in Grand Prix: The dominant four-cylinder two-stroke 500s, with very rare exception, never found their way to the showroom floor. By 1985 the status of Superbike had reached the point that the Daytona 200 had become a Superbike race.

The time was ripe to create a world championship for the popular class. American rider and entrepreneur Steve McLaughlin, who had been instrumental in the creation of the AMA Superbike series, would play a similar role in the founding of the World Superbike Championship. Large minimum production numbers for the new class resulted in an era of quickly escalating production bike performance, with homologation specials such as the Honda RC30 and Ducati 851 being coveted by a generation of riders. And from its very beginning in 1988, the new series would become a magnet for American road racing talent. American dominance of GP racing was at its peak, and the new production-based series would go on to have more than its fair share of American champions, starting with the first World Superbike champion, Fred Merkel.

FRED MERKEL

Fred Nels Merkel was born on September 28, 1962, in Stockton, California. Yet another in a long line of gifted California racers, he rose rapidly through the ranks of dirt track and road racing in the early 1980s. Signed by Honda for the 1983 Superbike campaign, he exploded onto the national

scene, taking his first win at the midseason race at Portland and finishing with a victory at the season finale in Daytona to grab third in the points standings behind Wayne Rainey and teammate Mike Baldwin.

Merkel was just getting started. In 1984, he dominated the AMA Superbike series, winning 10 of 13 races to run away with the championship. Perhaps of more importance to Honda, he and Mike Baldwin won the 8 Hours of Suzuka that year as well. Merkel would take his second straight AMA Superbike title in 1985 on the strength of six wins to Kevin Schwantz's three, while also giving the Texan a run for his money in the Transatlantic Match Races, where Merkel finished a close second. For 1986 in AMA Superbike, Merkel's main challenge came from his new Honda teammate, Wayne Rainey. Despite six wins for Rainey to Merkel's two, it was Merkel who came out on top to take his third consecutive title.



Fred Merkel (left) with a young Kevin Schwantz. DMT Imaging

Having moved to Italy for the 1987 season, Merkel was perfectly positioned to carry his dominance across to Europe with the creation of World Superbike for 1988. The flamboyant Merkel and the new Honda RC30 found immediate success in the new series, winning the tight 1988 World Superbike Championship with two wins and numerous strong finishes, despite strong competition from the likes of future five-time GP world champion Mick Doohan (Yamaha, three wins), longtime Ducati World Superbike team manager Davide Tardozzi (Bimota, five wins), and 1981 GP world champion Marco Lucchinelli (Ducati, two wins).

Merkel would repeat as champion in 1989, once again fending off intense competition from several different directions. The Californian started strong with a sweep of the Hungarian rounds to move into the championship lead. He remained atop the standings until Stephane Mertens (RC30) began a strong midseason run for the title, as did GP veteran Raymond Roche (five wins) when the Ducati didn't let him down. The battle between Merkel and Mertens came down to the final event, and with a catastrophic brake failure for Mertens in race one, Merkel's third-place finish gave him a commanding lead in points. Mertens did everything he could by winning race two, but Merkel rode to a podium finish to secure his second straight World Superbike Championship.

Having achieved the Superbike hat trick in the United States, Merkel was now attempting to do the same on the world stage. The 1990 season unfolded as a battle royale between Merkel, Roche, and Mertens. With three wins and a second in the first eight races, Merkel started strong, but Roche started stronger, with three wins and four seconds. Sadly, Merkel would not get a chance to properly defend his titles: He was seriously injured at the midseason 8 Hours of Suzuka 8 race.

Merkel recovered to return to action in 1991 riding for Yamaha. However, his three seasons with the team would prove comparatively fruitless. He headed back to America in 1994, where he won seven of ten races in the 1995 750 Supersport series. But this would be his final campaign, as Fred suffered grievous injuries when he crashed against a barrier in the season finale at Firebird Raceway. He would eventually recover from his wounds, although he retired from racing and now lives

in New Zealand. Fred Merkel, the first World Superbike champion, blazed a trail in the series that many Americans would follow.

DOUG POLEN

Frenchman Raymond Roche won the World Superbike Championship in 1990 aboard the factory Ducati 888. He remains the only European to win the WSB Championship. Roche would not retain his title a second year, however, as he was soon overtaken by another American, Doug Polen, who had some of his first professional motorcycle racing experience as Freddie Spencer's mechanic. Starting a professional racing career on the world stage at the age of 30 is an unusual path to success, but much like Argentina's Juan Manuel Fangio (who started his European racing career in his late 30s), both were to find immediate success. The 1991 and 1992 World Superbike seasons would be dominated by the man from Texas.

Doug Polen was born September 2, 1960, in Detroit, Michigan. His family would eventually settle in Texas, and Doug would be one of several riders from the Lone Star State to take the racing world by storm in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In 1987, he would compete full-time in the AMA Superbike class and finish an impressive fourth in points behind Rainey, Schwantz, and Shobert. He would also win the 600 Supersport title on the strength of eight victories out of nine races.

For 1988, Polen switched to Suzuki. He would be the busiest guy in the pit lane that season, riding in 600 Supersport, 750 Supersport, and Superbike. In the top class, he would fall short in a season-long battle with fellow Texan Bubba Shobert. In 600 Supersport, Polen successfully defended his 1987 title, taking two wins along the way. And in a near sweep of America's three premier series, Polen nipped Scott Russell by three points in 750 Supersport, winning five of the nine races, including Daytona.

Doug was ready to step onto the world stage, and in 1989 he moved on to race for Suzuki in Japan. While racing in the 1989 Japanese national series, Polen got the opportunity to do a one-off appearance at the Japanese round of the World Superbike Championship at Sugo, where he would make an immediate impact by winning race one. For 1990 Polen

continued to race in the Japan series, but the following year he made the switch to Eraldo Ferracci's Ducati team in WSB.

The rest would be history, as the Superbike world was unprepared for what was surely the most dominant season in World Superbike history. Polen destroyed everyone in his path, winning 12 of the first 16 races in dominant fashion. Roche and Mertens managed to scratch out a few wins as the season rolled along but almost always when Polen struck some sort of mechanical problem. Polen started almost every race from pole, and his record of six straight pole positions stood for 18 years before fellow Texan Ben Spies broke it in 2009.

In 1992, Polen made an attempt at an unheard-of double, going for both the World and AMA Superbike Championships. Moving over to the factory Ducati team, Polen won nine races to again claim the World



Doug Polen, 1991 World Superbike Champion aboard the Ducati 888.
DMT Imaging

Superbike crown, albeit in a considerably closer race than the previous season. In the United States, Polen was unable to achieve his ambitious goal despite three wins in the nine-race schedule. The AMA crown would go to his great rival, Scott Russell.

The careers of Scott Russell and Doug Polen will forever be intertwined, their head-to-head duels among the greatest in the history of Superbike racing in the United States. Their most memorable confrontation came at Daytona in 1992. For 200 miles, the pair battled on the track and in the pits in a race of speed and strategy. Russell knew he had a top speed advantage over Polen, but he never showed his hand until he made a surprise move to slingshot past Polen on the run to the finish. Polen was denied the Daytona win he coveted, and Ducati has yet to win the Daytona 200.

For 1993, Polen narrowed his focus to the AMA Superbike series. Larry Ferracci recalls the Texan's AMA championship season: "When he got on the bike, he got it done. He was at a career point where everything jelled for him; he had total focus, everything was racing. He'd had such a run with the World Championships, he was relaxed and focused." Polen won six of the first eight races on his way to joining Fred Merkel as the winner of both AMA Superbike and World Superbike championships.

Polen returned to the world stage in 1994, that time riding on Honda's RC45. It was not to be a successful move, and Polen finished the season without a win but pulled out an impressive fourth in points. Doug returned to race in America and eventually moved on to success in World Endurance racing, becoming the World Endurance Champion in 1997 at the age of 37. Doug Polen continues to race. He is a regular in the MotoST series and occasionally makes forays into AMA Superbike. In 2009, the 48-year-old finished 13th at Road America in the Superbike class.

SCOTT RUSSELL

Raymond Scott Russell was born in East Point, Georgia, on October 28, 1964. He started from humble beginnings. After high school, he worked long hours in a trash bag assembly plant. In 1985, Russell attended Daytona Bike Week as a spectator. There he watched Freddie Spencer dominate the week as nobody has before or since, sweeping Superbike, 250 GP, and

the Daytona 200 races. The 20 year old Russell, inspired by seeing the American World Champion at the peak of his abilities, began to practice by riding the mountain roads of Georgia on a Kawasaki Ninja 600. By the following year, he was appearing—and winning—at various racetracks through the south. Russell progressed quickly, and in 1988, he took his first pro win, and a sweet one at that: On his home track at Road Atlanta, riding his own Suzuki, Russell defeated Doug Polen on his Yoshimura Suzuki. The following year, Russell himself was riding for Yoshimura, and the up-and-coming young Georgian notched his first Superbike win, once again at his home track of Road Atlanta.

The 1990 season brought a switch to Muzzy Kawasaki, and from 1990 to 1992, Russell would rule the AMA 750 Superstock class, winning the championship three straight years. In 1992, Russell won the Daytona 200, considered by many to be the greatest 200 ever.

Russell's crew chief, Rob Muzzy, recalls the race: "We knew through tire testing and practice that if we were within drafting distance on the last lap, we could pass him. But we didn't want [Polen] to know that. So, the entire weekend, if Scott was near Doug, he would never pass him on the straightaway." It turned out that Polen had been holding something in reserve as well, as Russell explains: "I was just sitting on him, thinking I've got this in the bag, waiting for the race to be over. As it turned out, on the last lap coming through the chicane, he came out of there a lot faster than he had the whole race. I learned from one of the best following that guy around."

It came down to a timely draft from a lapped rider to launch Russell past right at the finish. For Scott Russell, the Mr. Daytona legend had begun.

Russell would win the AMA Superbike title that year, while also taking a few podiums in a handful of exploratory rides in World Superbike on the Muzzy Kawasaki. Ironically, Russell and Polen would switch their priorities for 1993, as Russell headed off to World Superbike with the Muzzy Kawasaki and Doug returned to the United States to again ride the Fast by Ferracci Ducati in another attempt at the AMA Superbike title.

Narrowly beaten at Daytona by Lawson (0.05 seconds), Russell made up for it by winning the 8 Hours of Suzuka for Kawasaki—the first, and still only, win for Kawasaki in this most important of races.

Moving into World Superbike full-time, Russell soon found himself involved in yet another epic rivalry, this time with the Ducati-mounted Carl Fogarty. "Fogarty was the opposition, the extreme rivalry," says Muzzy. "And the press made a big deal of it. I don't know if it was anywhere as personal as the press made it out to be, but the rivalry was between the two."

"We got along quite well with all the Ducati guys," Kawasaki WSB team manager Peter Doyle recalls. "It was just a thing between Russell and Fogarty, and we didn't help the situation with Fogarty because we'd bait Scott up with things. We'd push that along a bit."

There were enough differences between the riders and the teams to make a good rivalry: the British Fogarty versus the Georgian Russell; the



Russell on the Muzzy Kawasaki Superbike exiting the final turn at Laguna Seca's AMA National in 1993, the same year he was to become World Superbike Champion. DMT Imaging

all-conquering Italian Ducati factory team versus Muzzy's much more humble organization. "By comparison, our program budget-wise was nowhere near theirs," Muzzy explains. "It was Scott's determination, will, and consistency that ultimately won the championship. It wasn't that we had a better bike than Ducati, because we didn't."

"In 1993 we were running WSB out of the back of a box truck, basically," says Russell. "It wasn't like the Ducati setup with ten different motors ready to slap into the bikes."

The championship might never have been so close but for Fogarty's win-it-or-bin-it approach. The Brit won 11 of the 26 races in 1993, but his other results would ultimately leave the door open for Russell. The American's five wins would be less than half of Fogarty's total; it was Russell's 12 second-place finishes that made all the difference. Much of the drama came at Donington Park. "Scott had a big one in practice," recalls Doyle. "He was lucky that he could ride. His teammate Aaron [Slight] was probably the quickest guy, but slowed and he helped Scott."

Russell swept both races at Donington Park to take a commanding lead going to the penultimate round at Portugal. There, Fogarty was only able to take three points back from Russell, and the American carried a 29-point lead into the final round at Mexico City.

An intense and exciting season would come to a bizarre and chaotic end in Mexico. "The whole thing was just a disaster," recalls Doyle:

Soccer balls on the track, trucks going across the track in front of your riders. Aaron [Slight, Russell's teammate] got hit in the head by a soccer ball going through the esses around back. The track was dangerous; there was no security. Our tires didn't turn up; they wouldn't let the American teams through the border; it was just a disaster. Michelin had its tires there, but there were no Dunlops."

The Mexico City race was at the same circuit where the 1970 Formula One Mexican Grand Prix saw spectators climbing over the fences, sitting trackside. In that event, the drivers eventually raced to avoid a riot after unsuccessfully pleading their case to the assembled spectators. In the race

Jackie Stewart hit a dog with his Tyrrell. In the 1993 version of the asylum, between dodging dogs and garbage, Scott Russell had a pickup truck cross the track as he closed at 190 miles per hour. The race was eventually abandoned for safety reasons, and Russell was the World Superbike champion.

Bizarre ending or not, Russell, Muzzy, and Kawasaki had managed a remarkable accomplishment. "What a great rivalry that turned out to be," Russell says proudly. "Ducati had such a stranglehold on the series, and for us to come in there and beat them was unheard of." Peter Doyle told the author that the celebrations were equally impressive: "Scott, Aaron, a few of the mechanics . . . after the race we went down to Acapulco for a week of drinking beer, laying around on the beach, and playing golf."

The author asked Doyle if he remembers much of that week: "No [laughs] . . ."

Russell was the first rider on an inline four to win the World Superbike title, in an era dominated by V-twin and V-4 low-volume production racers. Russell's title meant that Americans had been World Superbike champions for five of the series' first six seasons. "You could see a little bit of Spies in him," says Doyle. "They are highly different people, Spies and Russell, but similar as far as the racing goes, quick to pick up tracks and always fast."

The 1994 season was another epic battle between Fogarty/Ducati and Russell/Muzzy Kawasaki. On paper at least, the determined Fogarty, armed with the new Ducati 916, looked to be the overwhelming favorite. But Russell and the Muzzy Kawasaki effort continued to punch well above their weight. A broken wrist would sideline the Englishman for several races, and Russell took advantage. After six races Russell had four wins and a 62-point lead over the Englishman. Upon his return, Fogarty won five of the next six races and the battle was on. Russell responded with two wins at Sugo in the Japan rounds, to which Carl responded with two wins at Assen. They split wins at San Marino, and Russell swept Donington Park to close within five points going into the finale at Phillip Island. Fogarty would win race one and take second in race two to seal the title, but it had been an unforgettable season.

Russell got some measure of payback at Daytona in 1995: "I fell down and still won by 45 seconds over Fogarty, which was the best thing in

the world. He was in the papers going on about how he hates the Yanks, he hates Daytona, blah blah blah. So we sent him home. Come on, dude, I've seen the Isle of Man. You did what you did there, and you are scared of this place?"

Unfortunately, a third straight season of Russell versus Fogarty was not in the cards for 1995. The new Kawasaki that was introduced post-Daytona was well down on power and off the pace. "I tried as hard as I could, and in the first three races," says Russell, "I had my ass handed to me."

Meanwhile, Kevin Schwantz's abrupt midseason retirement left a spot open at the Lucky Strike Suzuki GP team. Russell was offered the chance to do a test on the GP bike. Seeing this as his once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to race in Grand Prix—which it likely was—he rode the unfamiliar bike for all it was worth. Russell clocked faster times than Schwantz had previously and Scott was offered the ride, to the dismay and anger of Rob Muzzy.



Scott Russell today. If he hadn't been a motorcycle racer, he would have made an excellent court jester . . .

While his Lucky Strike Suzuki teammate, Daryl Beattie, won two Grands Prix and finished second in the 1995 title chase, Russell was unable to match that kind of form. "I didn't know what I was doing," Russell says with the benefit of hindsight. "I didn't know anything about two-strokes. And here I am on the baddest motorcycle in the world."

Russell had shown enough to warrant another season with Suzuki, and he improved his form in 1996, finishing in sixth place in the championship and taking over as team leader after Beattie suffered serious head injuries in preseason testing. Russell would never really come to grips with the 500cc GP Suzuki; he returned to World Superbike in 1997 and 1998 riding for Yamaha, but he was unable to recapture the form of 1993 and 1994. He would, however, cement his reputation as Mr. Daytona by winning the 200 both years, making it five wins.

Russell's career spiral led him to race the Harley-Davidson VR1000 in AMA Superbike for two wasted seasons before signing to race the Ducati in 2001. A horrendous crash when the stationary Russell was collected by the pack at the start essentially ended his racing career.

Inducted into the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame in 2005, Russell made a one race return to motorcycle racing in 2008 at—appropriately enough—Daytona. Russell currently offers his knowledge, wisdom, and trademark southern charm to Speed TV's AMA racing broadcast team.

JOHN KOCINSKI

John Kocinski was and still is the only American rider to earn the title of World Champion in both GP racing (250cc in 1990) and World Superbike (1997). A rider of unquestioned and at times unsurpassed talent, some say that watching Kocinski ride a 250 GP bike was to witness the ultimate expression of riding on the limit. Blessed with otherworldly riding skills, it may have been his off-the-bike demeanor that held him back from achieving his ultimate ambition: to become 500cc world champion. "John was, I think, a very talented man," says Steve McLaughlin:

He has also probably got some sort of issues, but we have our quirks. Like many of the guys who came up, he was young, probably shy, and

in some ways the communication skills weren't there. He didn't come off as the good guy that he probably was. He never really had management; he did it all on his own. If he had any management, it wasn't very good. A lot of people have stories about him that were less than flattering, but I never saw him that way.

John M. Kocinski was born on March 20, 1968, in Little Rock, Arkansas. Like most of the riders profiled in this book, he started young and soon demonstrated an uncanny knack for two-wheeled racing. McLaughlin remembers the first time he saw him: "In 1980, when I ran Team Honda, I was at Brainerd. [Former Kawasaki factory racer] Walt Fulton came up and introduced me to this little kid. He told me, 'This kid is really fast.' That was when I met John Kocinski."

King of the 250s

Kocinski had a meteoric rise through the ranks of racing. In 1987, at the age of 19, he won five of the nine rounds of the AMA 250 series to earn his first AMA 250 Grand Prix Championship. In 1988, he raised the bar even higher, winning six of seven races to repeat as 250 champion, and he was the pole-sitter at the World Championship 250 USGP. In 1989, Kocinski won six of eight races in 250 GP, while also taking a dominant win in 600 Supersport at Daytona. He also competed in some 250cc World Championship races that season, winning both the Japanese and U.S. 250 Grands Prix.

It was obvious that Kocinski deserved a full-time World Championship opportunity, and Kenny Roberts brought him on board his Yamaha 250 GP team for 1990. The young American continued his winning ways, taking three of the first four Grands Prix of the season. He would face a spirited challenged from Spain's Carlos Cardus, who won four races midseason, but Kocinski was up to the task, taking the final two races to clinch the title. In all, he had won seven of the fifteen Grands Prix, leaving little doubt that he was the master of the 250 GPs on both sides of the Atlantic.

With nothing left to prove on the 250s, Kocinski was ready to move up to the premier class. Once again, Kenny Roberts gave him the nod, bringing

Kocinski up to ride alongside the defending 500cc world champion, Wayne Rainey, for 1991. At age 22, Kocinski found himself riding for the sport's top team with a chance to learn from the best rider of his era. It looked like a dream scenario, but things did not turn out as planned.

Personality Conflicts

The campaign started out well enough for Kocinski. In the season-opening Japanese Grand Prix, he was right in the middle of a furious four-way battle with Schwantz, Doohan, and Rainey. Kocinski finished fourth, but only one-half second covered the four riders at the finish. At the second GP of the season in Australia, Rainey won over Doohan, with Kocinski a few seconds behind. A tense rivalry was brewing between the Yamaha teammates, and their worlds would collide at round three at Laguna Seca.

A teammate is perhaps the only yardstick by which a rider can measure himself, given the admittedly hypothetical premise that the equipment is equal. Kocinski was accustomed to being the fastest rider in every



John Kocinski in 1991. DMT Imaging

series in which he took part—and he was not bashful about pointing it out.

"Kocinski was the 250 world champion, and he thought he was going to come into the 500 class and beat everybody," says Wayne Rainey:

Well I wasn't going to let that happen. Every qualifying session, every practice session, I made sure I was quickest, even if it was only by a tenth [of a second]. It all started unwinding for John when we came here to Laguna Seca. I was on the pole over him, I think by less than a tenth, and I remember reading in the newspaper on race day where Kocinski had said, "We're going to see who the real king of Laguna Seca is this year and from now on." You don't want to say that to your fellow rider who is going to kick your ass. Before he said that, I didn't need motivation to beat him, just having him there was enough. But after he said that . . . Well, now I was just going to have fun doing it. So, in the race I got the hole shot, and I just took off. I think I had about a five-second lead, and he threw it away. Never heard from John much after that again.

Rainey repeated as 500cc world champion, although Kocinski salvaged a somewhat humbling season by winning the season-ending Malaysian GP over Honda teammates Mick Doohan and Wayne Gardner. (Both Rainey and Schwantz sat out the race with injuries.) There have been comparisons drawn between Howard Hughes' obsession with cleanliness and similar tendencies in Kocinski. Doohan and Gardner took great delight in unloading their podium champagne on Kocinski, who was less than amused. As McLaughlin had said, "We all have our quirks." Kocinski's win provided the tie-breaker that enabled him to clinch fourth in the championship over Wayne Gardner. This was a very successful year for a rookie 500cc GP rider by any standard of measurement. The sky was still the limit for John Kocinski.

He opened the 1992 season with a pole position at Suzuka, although he would fail to score any points in the race, crashing from the battle for the lead. Injuries kept him out of two races, but he bounced back to take four podiums before once again winning the season finale, this

time from pole at Kyalami, South Africa. Kocinski finished the season third in the World Championship, behind only Rainey and Doohan. Meanwhile, the atmosphere within the Yamaha team had reached a poisonous state. One rider was going to have to go, and it certainly wasn't going to be the three-time defending world champion.

It was never a difficult decision for Kenny Roberts, who clearly understood Rainey's strengths and Kocinski's weaknesses:

I think that Wayne could do his lap time all day long, and John had to really work hard to do that lap time. John had a little flaw in his makeup on corner speed, and he couldn't overcome that. He was always rushing, and Wayne never had that. John, in another era, would have been a 500cc world champion, but not against Rainey. You're talking about fractions of an inch. He wasn't going to beat Wayne.

Kocinski moved on to Suzuki for 1993, but in 250cc, not the premier class.

If the 25-year-old was expecting a more benevolent scenario at Suzuki, he was disappointed, as he would soon draw the ire of the team's top-class superstar, Kevin Schwantz:

He [Kocinski] was a lot like Cadalora [known as The Enigma]. If he had everything right between his ears, you would struggle to see which way he went. Knock on wood, it didn't happen very often. He was one of those guys who was pretty erratic; he'd win one race, then wouldn't be in the top six the next three races. I made the mistake that I thought I could be John's teammate for 1993, and they put him on the Suzuki 250. We were on the same team, but he wasn't riding the 500. Once I got to know a little bit more about him from what he did, how he tested, and what he was like from a behind-the-scenes viewpoint, I couldn't stand him. He definitely has his own little quirks about him, and there is a lot of that in this sport, but John took it to a little bit different level.

Schwantz would torment Kocinski at every opportunity, and he describes one example: "His girlfriend was a Spanish girl and was an

okay person. But any time you'd talk with her, he would come over and stand between you, and say how you couldn't talk to her. He was really protective of her. So, at one point I put a \$10,000 bounty on whoever could sleep with his girlfriend." Kevin took no quarter when it came to John.

Kocinski's deal with Suzuki imploded midseason, and he eventually found his way to Cagiva, where he finished out the year in the 500cc class. It should be noted that his teammate, Doug Chandler—an easier going personality than most—had no issues with Kocinski. Chandler says, "I got along with him, but I had known him since 1988 when he was still racing 250s over here. I'd go over to Kenny's in the winter, and we'd all ride dirt bikes together. In reality, he wasn't a bad guy . . . He'd win, which is what you want your rider to do."

And win he did. Although the personality conflicts and behavior tended to garner headlines over the years, the key point in hindsight was that John Kocinski was blindingly fast. In 1994, he won the season-opening 500cc GP in Australia and would take Cagiva to a very impressive third in the World Championship. Sadly, Cagiva withdrew from the sport at the end of the year, and Kocinski would end up sitting out the 1995 season.

World Superbike

The Castiglioni brothers, who had been behind the Cagiva GP effort and were also the ownership group behind Ducati, brought Kocinski into the Ducati team for 1996. The American was brought in to replace Carl Fogarty, who had gone to Castrol Honda. From the very beginning, the American was on the pace, winning both races at the opening round at Misano and taking a victory in front of the home crowd in race one at Laguna Seca. The season unfolded as a four-horse battle between Kocinski, Australian Troy Corser, Aaron Slight, and Carl Fogarty, with Kocinski eventually settling for third in the points. But once again, personality conflicts arose as the season went on, and the relationship between Ducati team manager Virginio Ferrari and Kocinski deteriorated to the point of no return.

Kocinski and Fogarty essentially traded places for 1997, with the Briton returning to Ducati while the American moved to Castrol Honda. If the press had eaten up the prodding between Fogarty and Russell in the mid-1990s, they would feast on the open animosity of Fogarty versus Kocinski, circa 1997. Fogarty would bait Kocinski with comments about how the Ducati team had hated John to the extent that in 1996 they had asked Carl to please beat their own rider. John's comments about how Carl was riding for the Mafia were equally scathing. It went downhill from there.

The American quickly adapted to the Honda RC45 and won a race in each of the first two events to open the season. Fogarty hung with him and would hold the points lead for much of the season. As the season began to wind down, Kocinski swept the Laguna Seca races, cutting Fogarty's lead to just four points. After race two in Austria, Kocinski took the title lead for good, winning four of the final eight races to become world champion once again.

John Kocinski was again a world champion yet brought scorn upon himself by his aggressive moves in the final races in Indonesia, taking himself and Simon Crafar on the Kawasaki out of race two during a failed pass for the lead. What should have been the story of the RC45's promise finally being fulfilled by an American Grand Prix ace turned into yet another volley of concerns raised about Kocinski. Doug Chandler says, "I think he was his own worst enemy."

Kocinski's success for Honda in WSB enabled him to return to 500cc GP racing in 1998 with the privateer Movistar-Honda team, and then in 1999 for Erv Kanemoto's 500cc GP Honda team with mixed results. John then returned to the AMA for a final year riding for Vance and Hines on the Ducati. Retiring from racing, Kocinski became involved in the Beverly Hills real estate scene, where he found as much or more success than he ever had racing motorcycles.

"I understand he has made a fortune designing houses for rich people," says Steve McLaughlin. "He fixed up a house next door to Will Smith or somebody, Will told his friend, who told his friend . . . The next thing you know, he was the guy you had to have in Beverly Hills."

One day in 2003, it crossed the motorcycle news wires that Kocinski had sold his home in Beverly Hills for nearly \$7 million. It appears that John's lifetime story of success and conflict will likely have a prosperous ending, and his entry at the 2009 AMA Pomona flat track finale shows that the Kocinski story may yet have additional racing chapters to be written.

COLIN EDWARDS

Colin Edwards II has followed in the footsteps of fellow Texans Schwantz, Shobert, and Polen to become one of motorcycle road racing's biggest stars. Born in Houston, Texas, on February 26, 1974, his racing roots were similar to Kevin Schwantz's—he grew up riding the motocross circuits of the Southwest, and he started racing at age four. "My first bike was a JR50 Suzuki," Edwards recalls:

I did the Loretta's [Loretta Lynn's Amateur Motocross Championships], but I always had bad luck at Loretta's running 60s and 80s. But we ended up winning three or four national championships on the minibikes. If I'd started racing motocross at maybe age six or seven, I might have continued with it forever or until I retired, but I just burned out. I didn't really have a life: It was get out of school, get picked up, go ride two or three hours, come home and clean the filter, clean the gear, do some homework, eat some dinner, and go to bed.

"I took a two-year hiatus," Edwards continues, explaining how he got involved in road racing when he was 17. "What prompted the switch was there was a guy I used to ride motocross with that I used to beat pretty handily. He was road racing and he was winning. I thought, 'If he can do it, I'm certain I can do it.' The first bike I had on track was a Ninja 250, and then we played around with some YSR stuff."

It wasn't long before Edwards was enjoying success as a professional road racer. In 1992, he won the AMA 250 GP class on the strength of five victories in nine races, including a win at Daytona. At that point, he had the opportunity to follow in Randy Mamola's footsteps by jumping straight up into the 500cc World Championship. "Cagiva had written me a proposal



Colin Edwards, the Texas Tornado, sporting his Tech 3 Yamaha MotoGP bike with special patriotic livery for the 2008 USGP.

to go ride the 500s midway through my 250 year in the AMA," Edwards explains. "We said no, because I wanted to see my contract out with Yamaha. Mat [Mladin] went over and did it, and crashed his brains out. He had a few big ones. I was quite happy I didn't do it after seeing that."

Instead, Edwards raced in the AMA Superbike series in 1993, finishing sixth in points for Vance & Hines Yamaha. A second season followed, with Edwards taking sixth in points, but more importantly winning three of the last four races to attract the attention of Yamaha's World Superbike program.

"Yeah, right about that time, I had already been signed by Yamaha here, and Yamaha decided to do this World [Superbike] effort," Edwards recalls. "When the guys from Japan came over, we had a little meeting, and they asked, 'What do you think about going to World Superbike instead of staying here?'"

"They were definitely hot on having him," says Terry Vance. "While he was here, for the last four or five months, he was unbeatable. I remember

we went to Road Atlanta, and coming down the hill toward the start line, he was sliding both tires coming out of that corner and he was picking two or three bike lengths on everybody in that corner. It was unbelievable how well he was riding the bike."

And so Colin Edwards, age 21, went straight to World Superbike for the 1995 season. He would endure some struggles in his debut campaign, and the worst of them came late in the season at Assen, when his teammate, Yasu Nagai, was killed after being struck by his own bike. The Yamaha team withdrew from the series for the remainder of the season.

Edwards took his first international victory the following year when he teamed with Noriyuki Haga to win the 8 Hours of Suzuka for Yamaha. Similar success in World Superbike was not to be; he finished a distant fifth behind the Corser-Slight-Fogarty-Kocinski battle.

The 1997 season would be even worse, as Edwards explains: "Another Yamaha rider at the time, Jean-Philippe Ruggia, he took me out at Monza and broke just about everything I had. I only did four races that year; I was out the whole year."

Coming into 1998, the young Texan had few prospects:

I was out the whole year in 1997, so I wasn't out there showcasing talent of any level; I was swimming a lot in my pool trying to get better. Unfortunately, there are no cameras around so nobody can see that. Luckily, Kocinski had a deal in his contract that if he won the championship, he got to go back to 500s somehow, someway. So, I went [to Castrol Honda to take his place].

Back from the brink, Edwards was ready to break through in 1998, and he would do so in style, taking the double at the hallowed grounds of Monza. "Probably it was the only time I was kind of teary-eyed on the podium," he recalls. "That place has so much history, and the devil left me that weekend and I won my first and second at a World Championship event." Edwards finished fifth in the standings, and the future was looking bright.

In 1999, Edwards enjoyed his best season yet, winning five races and finishing second behind a dominant Fogarty. For 2000, many

observers expected a repeat. While the Fogarty-Ducati combination looked unbeatable, Honda was debuting its new VTR1000 twin cylinder. The new machine was impressive, but teething problems are always expected with a new bike. These predictions turned out to be incorrect, as Colin Edwards, the Texas Tornado, rode the new bike to the World Championship.

World Champion

"Once we got on the twin, it was like mano e mano, a level playing field," Edwards recalls. "We had some teething problems that first year with the V-twin; we bookended it with wins in the beginning and in the end." Indeed, Edwards started his 2000 campaign with a sweep of South Africa, followed by wins at Donington and Monza. Both Corser (Aprilia) and Haga (Yamaha) answered, bringing the fight to Edwards. After trading wins at Assen in September, Haga and Edwards were tied at the top of the points chart. The Texan raised his game to sweep the German round to go into the final round at Brands Hatch with a 32-point lead. Haga's challenge ended on an anticlimactic note when, after months of legal wrangling, he was given a two-week ban as the result of a positive test for ephedrine.

At the completion of race one at Brands Hatch, Colin Edwards became the fifth American to become World Superbike champion. In order to dispel any doubts about whether he deserved the honor, the Texas Tornado put an exclamation point on his title by winning race two.

Edwards made a strong defense of his title in 2001 but ultimately came up short to the talented Australian, Troy Bayliss, who made 15 podiums across the season, 6 of them wins. The Texan's 4 wins and 12 podiums were enough for second in the standings.

The next year was a tale of two seasons. Bayliss, riding the factory Ducati, made a brilliant start to the season, winning 14 of the first 17 races. With just 9 races left, it appeared that Bayliss would cruise to the title. Edwards had other ideas. Throughout the Australian's dominant run, he had been staying close behind, finishing in second in 10 of those

first 17 races and winning twice. And he went on to dominate the second half of the season in spectacular fashion.

"The bike that year was just awesome," Edwards recalls:

The chassis was incredible. I think they weakened it forty percent, and it was much softer; we never had chatter. So, in 2002 we had a really good bike, but Bayliss was awesome. Pretty much, we were fighting tooth and nail, both of us, only he was always getting the upper hand. We were just lacking a little bit of acceleration. After the Eight Hours [of Suzuka, Honda] came through . . . You never got anything new before the Eight Hours; you always get development parts AFTER the Eight Hours. We went back to the double exhaust; we got some little parts that made it run a little better . . . and then we were even.

From race two at Laguna (the 18th race of the season), Edwards ran the table to finish out the season, winning all nine of the remaining races.

"At Laguna, we didn't have the new stuff," he explains:

That was just do or die. I knew I had to do it. At Brands Hatch, we doubled and I didn't have the new stuff there either, so that was three in a row. And then we went to Oschersleben [in Germany], and then we got the new stuff. I just knew we would win every race out, and it was up to [Bayliss to beat me]. I needed to push hard enough to try and push him into a mistake. He could have gotten second in every race and still won the championship, but he made a little mistake when he crashed in Assen. That gave me twenty-five points, and it all came down to the last race.

The final battleground was Imola, the site where Kenny Roberts and Freddie Spencer had vied for glory nearly 20 years earlier.

"That was a special weekend at Imola," Edwards recalls:

That rivalry . . . the air, the atmosphere, you could just cut it with a knife. Because of how well he had ridden, and how well I had ridden,

it was kind of a mutual thing. We were just going to throw it out there and whoever wins, wins. If you give away a championship, you will be upset with yourself, but if you give it everything you have . . .

Edwards would go on to sweep both races, earning his second World Championship. It had been an epic season, and the two rivals had competed without bitterness:

[Bayliss] was the first person to say “congratulations” to me. Sportsmanship that weekend was like no other, and I would have done the same. I had said, even before the race, “You know what, it was just awesome to be here and whoever wins, I’m not going to be upset either way.” It had to go down as one of the best Superbike races in history.

Of the 26 races that season, Bayliss and Edwards would win 25. Colin Edwards’ astonishing late-season charge had once again confirmed that old saying, “It ain’t over, ’til it’s over.”

Grand Prix Racer

Given his extraordinary season, Edwards had high hopes for moving up to Honda’s factory MotoGP team. But that ride would go to Nicky Hayden. This was a tough blow, but Edwards was already mulling other options:

I was pretty much locked in with Ducati to stay [in WSB]. Bayless was going on to some other project. At the eleventh hour, Honda had this Bridgestone project going on, and they asked if I would come ride this privateer Honda with Bridgestones. I had been with Michelin developing tires with them for so long...the idea of going to Grand Prix... I wanted to go there smoothly. I was on a high, having won the championship and didn’t want to go there at that time, to a privateer-type team. At the end I declined the Honda offer—money was an issue, too, as what I was asking for wasn’t there. Then Aprilia said they’d like me to come, and they were one of the few factory efforts with the four-stroke bikes. There was a lot of press about how fast the Aprilia was. I

wanted Michelin and I think Aprilia thought I might be the tie that could get [Michelin] for them."

At first look, it seemed like a good fit. Edwards would get his shot at MotoGP on Michelin rubber riding the Aprilia RS3 Cube, a seemingly state-of-the-art three-cylinder prototype with a pneumatic valvetrain developed in conjunction with legendary race engine-builder Cosworth. On closer inspection, 2003 would turn out to be a nightmarish season of organizational ineptitude:

The way it was, it wasn't all handled in-house. You had chassis stuff in-house, you had little things in-house, but the motor stuff wasn't in-house. Some of the requests and some of the ideas that we had weren't really possible. You might request five or six things, and they'd say, "What's the number one thing we need to focus on, change, or fix?" And that would go on race after race. It was a valuable experience, and I rode my ass off that year. We had some moments, but [the season opener at] Suzuka was the best race we had all year.

Edwards finished sixth at the Japanese Grand Prix, making sure to come out ahead of Nicky Hayden. It was all downhill from there, however, and he ended the season 13th in points, just ahead of his teammate and former World Superbike rival, Noriyuki Haga.

Better days were to come, though. In 2004, the Texan signed on as teammate to Sete Gibernau at Telefonica Movistar Honda, one of the best rides in the pit lane. Edwards took full advantage of the opportunity, supporting the Spaniard in his bid for the World Championship and taking his first two GP podiums, second places at Donington and Qatar. The Texan finished the season fifth in points, only eight points behind Alex Barros on the Repsol Honda and ahead of Nicky Hayden, who had ended his sophomore season in eighth place. Edwards earned Gibernau's respect in their one season together:

Colin is an easygoing guy. He enjoys riding, and it's a pity he has not been winning in MotoGP because he's a cool guy and he's fast.

When I started riding with Kenny Jr. in the early 1990s, I remember getting to know Colin because he was here riding in the AMA, and his understanding of racing is like Kenny's, and being a World Superbike champion, he's got a whole bunch of talent there.

Edwards was a hot commodity, and when Yamaha called on him to join its factory team as teammate to Valentino Rossi, he accepted. "Everything was right," says Edwards. "We had been eight-hour teammates [at Suzuka, when both were riding for Honda], and he had been pushing to have me as his teammate. It all worked out good, for three years."

There was never any doubt who was the number one rider on the team, a fact that Edwards accepted in his typical amiable fashion: "I knew my place in the team. I knew where the money was spent, and mine was purely a supporting role. But I still was riding my ass off; I was still trying to win every race. But yeah, if Valentino was near, I'd give him another inch or two [laughs]. It was good, he was great, and I enjoyed it."

The admiration is mutual, as Rossi explains:

Ah! Racing with Colin was always fun and we are great, great friends. He could always make me laugh and we had some good parties! We would talk a lot together about the setting, tires, and things, and we always tried to help each other. My favorite memory is maybe Laguna 2005, both [of our Yamahas painted] in yellow for the anniversary, and Colin passes me into the corkscrew. On the final lap, I was close enough to try, but then I thought of two yellow bikes in the dirt and thought "better not!" Colin was very determined!

Rossi was referring to the USGP at Laguna Seca, where Yamaha had painted the factory bikes in the yellow and black bumblebee paint scheme as a tribute to the 1970s U.S. team and Kenny Roberts. Edwards would finish second in the race, behind Hayden and in front of Rossi. The Texan would end up with three podiums on the season—not the results he had hoped for. But his fourth-place finish in the standings is still his best through the 2009 season.

The 2006 season was troublesome for Yamaha. The bike was problematic and at times unreliable. Edwards managed just one podium and a seventh-place finish in the points, putting him behind not only world champion Nicky Hayden, but also behind the resurgent Kenny Roberts Jr. Perhaps the most memorable moment of the season was Assen, when Edwards looked set to take his first win before crashing out of a final-lap duel with Hayden.

The Texan's third season with the factory Yamaha team was the first year of the 800cc formula. Casey Stoner and Ducati would run away with the title, leaving even Valentino Rossi without an answer. For Edwards, 2007 went much like the previous two seasons, with flashes of brilliance and speed but only a pair of podiums and another midpack championship finish, that time in ninth.

Edwards prefers the 800s over the 990s:

I think the 800s more suit my style to be honest. I've always been a front-end guy, kind of a 250-style, sweeping style. I never really felt right with the point and shoot of the 990s; I always felt like I was making a mistake; I was always trying to learn how to make that time back up. With the 800s, you make a mistake and you lost time, everybody did. It suited my style more, there is more precision involved in it.

With the arrival of two-time 250cc world champion Jorge Lorenzo to the Yamaha factory team for 2008, Edwards signed on to race for the Tech 3 Yamaha satellite team.

At age 34, and now racing for a smaller outfit, few expected to see a career resurgence from the Texan. But Edwards came out strong to put together an excellent first half of the season. With a third-place finish at Assen, he moved into the top five in points; it was clear that riding the Tech 3 bikes was not much of a disadvantage. Unfortunately, the momentum did not last through the season. "The first half of the season was great, but then we got let down," Edwards explains. "Come to find out that through budget cuts or development, things got run in a different direction from where we wanted to go. Laguna, Brno, Indy was a disaster."

Despite the setbacks, Edwards appeared to have settled in with his new team. He signed a contract extension for 2009, announcing the new deal at Laguna Seca with his trademark humor. "I'm here to say that I will be here next year as well. I think the deciding factor was probably when [team owner] Herve [Poncharal] came to my motorhome, he was on his hands and knees, crying a little bit . . . He pulled his wallet out, he had five Euros in it, and I took it . . ."

The Texan's career resurgence continued in 2009. His best result of the season was a second place at Donington, a race in which he charged through the field on cold slicks in semi-damp conditions. Edwards has



Colin Edwards: 2000 and 2002 World Superbike Champion, MotoGP star, and favorite of the motorcycle racing press.

nothing but praise for his team, and he is quick to express his appreciation of how Yamaha treats its satellite teams:

We might not have one hundred percent of what [the factory team] has, but it's not like 2004 with the other brand. They have treated us as a part of Yamaha and it doesn't do them any good to give us subpar stuff to run around in tenth. They like what happened in Assen, with four Yamahas in the top six.

Edwards finished the season fifth in the standings, best among all satellite team riders. He signed on for 2010, which will be his third with Tech 3 and his eighth in Grand Prix racing's premier class. His teammate will be a fellow Texan, the 2009 World Superbike champion, Ben Spies, who will be making his debut as a full-time racer in MotoGP. The two will no doubt be providing a double dose of "Don't mess with Texas."

BEN SPIES

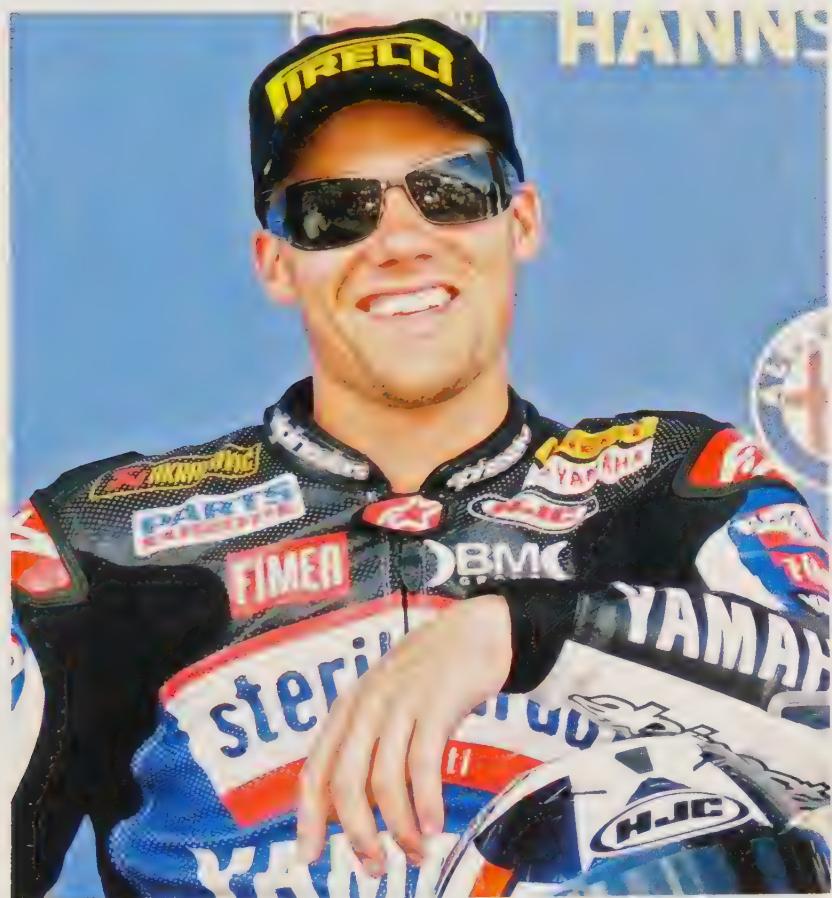
Benjamin Spies was born July 11, 1984, in Germantown, Tennessee, but he is a true-blue Texan. "I pulled up stakes when I was about six months old," he explains. "I didn't hang out there long . . . I'm a Texan."

Spies got his start racing a Yamaha YSR50 and quickly climbed the talent ladder. However, his experience did not include dirt ovals or motocross: "I rode dirt bikes, but I didn't race them. The CMRA [Central Motorcycle Roadracing Association] organization they have is very good. There are some good riders."

Ben won his first CMRA Championship at age 11, encouraged, as always, by his mother, Mary Spies, who is also his personal manager. It wasn't long before Ben was racing in the Aprilia Cup. "That was just kind of a fun deal that I got into late," Spies says. "I went in to have fun and ride a different bike; it was a small series and it was pretty cool." Racing the Aprilia against John Hopkins, Ben had finished behind John in Portland and ahead at Texas World. Both riders would soon join Valvoline Suzuki, mostly riding in different classes, and Ben stayed with the team for 2000 and 2001.

"Ben was not so focused, but he had tons of talent," recalls Keith Perry. "And you knew that if the focus came, there would be no stopping him. Regarding his riding style, Ben used a lot of elbows and a lot of up, forward, body lean like he still does. Ben probably knew and felt the bike under him more so than John did. You had that feeling that Ben was better connected to what the bike was doing early on."

"I just kind of ease my way into stuff," says Spies. "Some guys, they just jump in and rip it. That's the way John [Hopkins] is; he's just a natural talent. I think about everything, and I think that's a good trait."



Ben Spies, 2009 World Superbike Champion.

Both Spies and Hopkins are known for hanging well off the inside of the bike, but that was not always the case. "I didn't ride like I do now, back then," Spies explains. "My style evolved in the last four years; I don't really know why but it did. I don't know where it started, but I think it was when I started having problems with the front end on a bike and I was always leery." Spies' trademark style of hanging off, combined with elbows out and forward lean, earned him the nickname "Elbowz."

Racing in 750 Supersport, the rookie finished ninth in points behind his champion teammate. His performances earned him the AMA Horizon Award for the newcomer with the best potential. In 2001, the young Texan took his first pro win, a victory in the 750 Supersport race at Pikes Peak Raceway. The 16-year-old would put together a fine season, overcoming injuries to take second in the standings, enough to earn him a step up to Formula Xtreme, racing for Attack Suzuki.

"I had a really great teammate in Jason Pridmore, and he taught me a lot," Spies recalls. "I think 2002 was one of my strongest years of learning. I was seventeen or eighteen years old, riding a 200-horsepower Formula Xtreme bike. The thing was a monster and it taught me a lot, getting on a bike that fast and that big, early on."

Spies Versus Mladin

For 2003, Spies signed with the strongest team in AMA road racing, American Suzuki/Yoshimura Suzuki. He would remain there for six years, enjoying success upon success.

Tom Houseworth would become Spies' crew chief with the team. He remembers being instantly impressed with the teenager: "After couple of laps, he was very precise on his feedback even at his young age. I told them, 'We've got to keep this guy, sign him up, he's good.' It's kind of weird, but you just know."

"From 2003 on, it's been good ever since," says Spies. "We won five championships, between the three in Superbike, Superstock, and Formula Xtreme, had some really good years with a great team, and learned a lot."

Spies' last four years with Yoshimura Suzuki featured some of the most memorable racing in AMA Superbike history, as the young Texan battled

with his wily veteran teammate, Australian Mat Mladin. Spies reflects upon his former teammate and rival:

He's a special guy, He's a different guy, but at the end of the day talent-wise, he's a great talent. Even more so, he's very smart with bike setup. Racing him changed a lot of how I race and how I deal with people, and racing against him I think it brought my talent out quicker than later. He had never had anybody beat him on the same motorcycle; it was hard for him. But he stepped up and started training like crazy and stepped up his speed. The fastest he's ever been was when we raced each other, and I think he will admit that. The last three years he'd made a big step, and he made me push just as hard. The Suzuki is a great motorcycle, but me and him pushing each other is why the results were the way they were.

"I know how he can ride," Mladin says:

I've been around a long time and I've seen a lot of young kids come and go. As far as anyone I've ridden against or raced against, Ben is at a higher level than any of those other racers. Of the four years we raced together on Superbikes, he won three championships and I won one. I miss the competition with Ben; he is a talented rider. I wouldn't give up those last few years with the three second places and my six championships for anything. They were the best years. The best riding that I've ever done has been in the last couple of years.

Looking back on the inter-team rivalry with Mladin at Yoshimura Suzuki, Spies sums up the experience:

I wouldn't have wanted to do it for my whole career. Racing against him is pretty exhausting and hard. But, I wouldn't take away those three years either. They were some of the best learning years. With the green flag, it was 45 minutes on the edge, and when the checkered flag

flew, you just took a big breath that you didn't crash. There was some hard racing going on.

In the midst of winning his third AMA Superbike Championship season in 2008, Spies made his MotoGP debut in a one-off ride for Suzuki in variable conditions at Donington Park. Spies was fortunate enough to have a former world champion there to provide some advice and moral support. "Ben and I are still pretty good friends," says the King of Donington Park, Kevin Schwantz:

For the eight years he spent riding for Suzuki here in America, we rode bicycles together, and we rode motocross bikes together back before he had ridden any real motocross. Now, anything he does, he absolutely destroys me at. It does me proud to see him over there [in Europe in World Superbike,] handing those guys their asses regularly, and a reflection upon our program right here. He's had a tough guy to try and beat in Mladin.

Spies, having qualified eighth and finished fourteenth at Donington Park, earned two more wildcard rides for Suzuki that season. Naturally, these came at the two American rounds. At Laguna Seca, Spies finished eighth despite medical issues; he survived the wild conditions of Indianapolis, coming home sixth ahead of both of his Suzuki teammates.

Taking on the World

The conventional wisdom had Spies being groomed for the Suzuki MotoGP team in 2009, but this turned out to be incorrect. Instead, the Texan surprised a lot of people by taking a ride with Yamaha in World Superbike for 2009. One might have expected the young American to experience some culture shock, coming to Europe and riding for the Italian Yamaha team, especially given how long he had spent at Yoshimura. But he fit in very easily. "It is very different, more relaxed and more of a family environment," he told the author during his 2009 campaign. "We've had our ups and downs, but I've had the most fun racing

that I've had in a long, long time. It's brought back the fun of it. Racing with Mat—it was great, and not to take anything away from that—but it was business; it was a job and we were fighting for everything. Every day it was just mentally exhausting; here it is just a little bit different."

The fact that Spies immediately established himself as the fastest rider in the series certainly made the adjustment easier. His former competitors in AMA Superbike were not surprised. Ben Bostrom, for years America's shining hope in World Superbike, concurs: "Ben can win on any bike. It wouldn't matter, he would win. Riding for any of those teams, he would blow their fenders off."

Spies took pole for round one at Phillip Island, but got shoved off on the first lap. He bounced back to win race two, fulfilling the promise shown in qualifying. "It was a great surprise for us," said Yamaha team manager Massimo Meregalli. "It was the first time for Ben there and he did a really good job." Spies had been quick in the preseason testing, but years of experience have led Massimo to take such things in stride: "Yes, but tests are tests, and the racing weekends are completely different. I had seen in preseason tests that he was really fast, but until the traffic lights go out . . ."

Coming straight out of the box with the new 09 Yamaha, it appeared that the team had done its homework, and the pace of the bike and rider had been a welcome surprise. "Most don't understand that we are doing most everything by ourselves," Merengalli explains. "The bike is new, the team is new, and the riders are new . . . unfortunately things can happen."

Ben followed this up with pole position and his first World Superbike double at Qatar. Moving on to Europe, Spies took his third consecutive pole at Valencia. After retiring from race one, he came back to finish second behind Noriyuki Haga in race two. More ups and downs would come at Assen and Monza. At Assen, Spies took Superpole again, and his battle with Nori Haga and Leon Haslam in race one may well have been the best moment of 2009. "In all honesty, I had really good pace that whole weekend," Spies recalls:

But I had some weird feelings from the front tire in the first half of that race; I was riding it as hard as I could. I let [Haga and Haslam] by and

sat on the back, letting them set the pace. I went to pass Haslam the first time and couldn't get it done. I came across the finish line and it was like [three laps] to go. I was like, "S**t! I have to pass him this lap, wherever, I've got to do it." I went for it, I gave him room, he gave me room, and in those three corners where we were side by side, we only lost two-tenths of a second. Then, I caught up to Haga. I got the big run out of that fifth-gear corner and got the big slingshot draft and I was going—I'm going on this access road here to the right. You never make a pass there, really, but you've got to surprise them. And Haga you could tell wasn't ready for it, it about scared him off the bike. I held it to the end.

The elation of race one was matched by the frustration of throwing the bike down the road in race two. A pattern of win or DNF was starting to develop. It would continue at Monza, in most painful fashion.

Spies' race one finish at Monza could have served as the "agony of defeat" clip for any modern version of *Wide World of Sports*. For the fifth time in five races, he started from pole. "It started out okay in the race," he explains:

We were good. I had a go midway through the race and got a gap; everything was working fine. I opened up a gap, but on the last lap, coming through the second Lesmo, it bogged. I could feel the bike starting to run out of gas and I was just thinking, "You've got to be kidding me, there's no way I'm going to make it! S**t, this is not good!" At Ascari, I went in there and I could tell on the backshifting that it was trying to die, and when I went through the last left on the side of the bike, it cut out. I got it straight up and down again, and it came back on and fired it all the way down the backstraight. Then I knew as soon as I turned into Parabolica, it was done. I tried to change my line. I was trying to keep it as straight up as possible instead of really going in there and getting it on its side. I was going to try to make a real big arc, but as soon as I tipped in, it cut out and died, there was nothing left. I got out of the way best I could. But yeah, it was really hard to swallow."

Showing impressive maturity, Spies bounced back to win race two:

For race two we made some changes, put a rain map in the bike with a little less power and better fuel economy. I told [my team] that I know we have the pace to win; this weekend we were the strongest. I'll sit behind [the Ducatis] and then with five laps left I'll go. I got a good start and got to the lead in turn three. I was going to put together two hard laps to separate everybody, so that whoever was going to go, I'd get behind them and just stay there and get everybody sorted out a little bit. I came around and by lap two I had one and a half seconds. With eight to go I had it up to six seconds and flipped it to the rain map . . . about 2000 rpm lower.

Ben Spies' WSB racecraft matched his sheer speed.

For years the Yamaha had always been a contender, the eternal bridesmaid. "Always close," says Meregalli. "What we realize now is that you can never give up until you win the title. Honestly, at the beginning of the Monza weekend I was not expecting this, but Ben said to me, 'Don't worry.' I think the gap he showed in the second race was because he was pissed off." Wise beyond his years, Spies wasn't showing his hand.

The ups and downs continued in round six at Kyalami in South Africa. After taking pole yet again, Spies finished third in race one, then posted a DNF in race two. Meanwhile, Ducati's Noriyuki Haga was taking full advantage of Spies' misfortunes, racking up a formidable points lead.

For round seven, the series moved to Miller Motorsports Park in Utah. On home soil and racing on a familiar track, Spies shattered the competition, taking his seventh consecutive Superpole and winning both races by significant margins while Haga finished ninth each time. The result brought Spies to within 53 points of Haga—still a huge gap, but Colin Edwards had been in a similar situation behind Troy Bayliss in the 2002 World Superbike Championship. "I've heard this story," Spies said at the time. "I'm gonna try. I want to be like Colin."

"About Ben, I can only speak very well," Meregalli said at the time. "He is fast, and he's a really good guy. He is only twenty-four years old but goes

about his job like he was thirty. We are really satisfied about all that he is doing. I think with him, everything is possible."

Yamaha had never won the World Superbike Championship, but the synergy of Ben Spies, crew chief Tom Houseworth, Massimo Meregalli's dedicated team, and the potent new Yamaha R1 would prove to be the right combination for an upset over the perennial favorite, Ducati Corse. The second half of the season would be an emotional thrill ride, but Ben Spies, the 24-year-old rookie, overcame Haga's points lead at the final races in Portugal to be crowned World Superbike champion. His strike rate of 14 wins in 28 races and 11 poles in 14 events is staggering, especially when you consider that, with the exception of Miller Motorsports Park and Donington, he was racing on entirely unfamiliar tracks.

The Next Big Thing?

Meanwhile, as the 2009 season was winding down, Spies signed with the Tech 3 Yamaha to give the team an all-Texan lineup. Spies made his fourth MotoGP appearance at the 2009 season finale at Valencia. Qualifying ninth, he finished an impressive seventh.

If the future brings Ben Spies to the pinnacle of MotoGP glory, he will be the latest in a long line of American Grand Prix champions. Wayne Rainey, for one, likes the Texan's chances: "I'm thinking Ben Spies could be the next guy to put America back on the map," Rainey told the author early in 2008. "He's somebody that's got the speed to do it."

It is a safe bet that World Superbike will continue to provide the launching point for American careers into Europe, despite the continued cynicism of the world when it comes to the United States as a training ground for future talent. Steve McLaughlin told the author in 2009 that the European attitude hasn't changed very much over the years. "At Assen the Europeans come up to me and say, 'How is it possible that Ben Spies does so well?' The truth is that they've forgotten that five of the first six World Superbike Champions were Americans. The truth is that we have the ability to turn out good riders, and if you think we don't, you're stupid." Future generations of American racers will again drive home that point.



At the 2008 USGP at Laguna Seca, the FIM presented tower trophies to the seven American Grand Prix world champions. Back row, left to right: Eddie Lawson, Freddie Spencer, Kenny Roberts Jr., Nicky Hayden. Front row, left to right: Wayne Rainey, Kenny Roberts, Kevin Schwantz.

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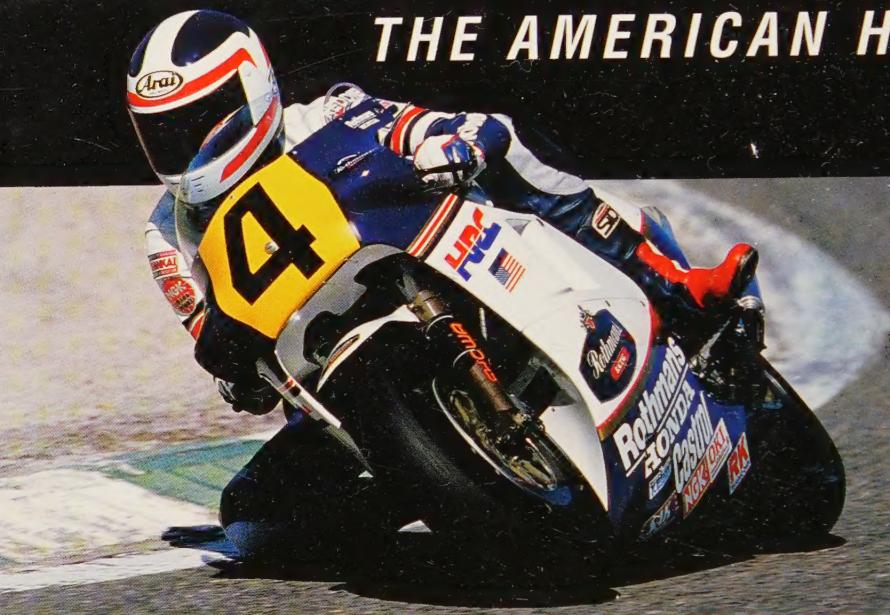


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For decades, Grand Prix motorcycle road racing was a world championship in name only, a distinctly European sport run on road courses in the European tradition, with little connection to the dirt track roots of American two-wheeled racing. Then everything changed in 1978 when a hotshot American racer named Kenny Roberts arrived in Europe and proceeded to thrash the establishment, beating the Europeans at their own game and kicking the door open for a generation of racers who would go on to dominate the sport. *Grand Prix Motorcycle Racers: The American Heroes* profiles the lives and careers of the legendary riders who rewrote the world championship history books. Author Norm DeWitt, with input from the champions themselves, tells the story of Kenny Roberts, Freddie Spencer, Eddie Lawson, Wayne Rainey, Kevin Schwantz, Kenny Roberts Jr., and the most recent American title-winner, Nicky Hayden. With additional chapters profiling the American champions of World Superbike and the top American stars who competed in but never conquered the world championship, this book is a must-have for every motorcycle racing fan's library.



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