



GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH



Photography DAVE COLLISTER

Manx GP 2023

The Centenary Manx Grand Prix had the makings of an outstanding event – and it didn't disappoint, with the world's fastest TT riders thrashing everything from Manx Nortons to Ducati 916s. Plus there were fascinating oddballs throughout the field – and in the pubs...

TT hero Dean Harrison carves the Key Racing Ducati 916 through Keppel Gate on his way to a mind-boggling 125.7mph lap in qualifying. By our calculations, that was the second fastest ever lap by a rider on a Ducati, beaten only by Michael Rutter's 128.7mph in 2011 on a 15-years-younger British Superbike-spec 1098



MANX GRAND PRIX Classic Superbike



The massive pipe under the seat is the Norton's ejector exhaust, which sucks air through the centre of the rotors to cool the bearings



Classic Superbike

THANKS TO NEW RULES allowing superbikes made before 1997, this year's entry was deluged with super-fast exotica. Outlandishly trick Kawasaki ZXR750s and Suzuki GSX-R750s dominated the field, but the *Classic Bike* team was spellbound by the maverick teams who turned up with bikes that surely wouldn't survive the Isle of Man treatment. Top of the list was Wiz Norton with their RCW588 rotary (above). Watching from Hilberry, we could hear the screaming nutcase before seeing it – and were left inhaling a gorgeous two-stroke aroma for minutes after it passed (like the original John Player Nortons, it runs on pre-mix). “When it's going well there's nothing like it,” Wiz Norton boss Andy Wilson told us

before the race. “But it's like a two-stroke – there are days when they don't go well.” The engine is a water-cooled twin-rotor unit from an F1, complete with ejector exhaust which draws cooling air through the motor. “Because of that, we have to run pre-mix and an pump oil,” explained Andy. “All that oil gets dumped into the exhaust, so they're filthy out the back. Anyone who follows one of these for half a lap needs a visor change. The other side-effect of the ejector exhaust is that we can't slow the exhaust speed, so we can't silence them.” So could the rotor tips last four laps? Andy sighed wearily. “The big issue is the heat on the rotor bearings. You can put this in capital letters – **THE ROTOR TIPS DO NOT WEAR OUT.** But the engines do get



Shaun Anderson launches the Wiz Norton 588 rotary over Ago's Leap

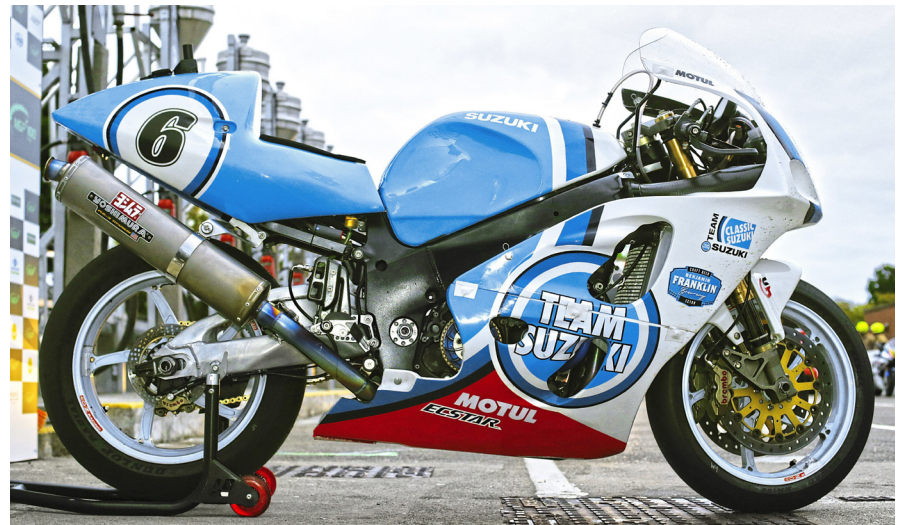
very hot in the core, so you have to get as much air over them as possible.” Shaun Anderson brought the Norton home in ninth place at an average speed of 120.6mph, beating 33 Japanese bikes. Alas, our other underdog favourites fared less well, with the Ducati 916 stopped by a failed alternator (see p10), and Sam West's flying Bimota YB4 (top right) running out of petrol on the last lap, right in front of us. Still, watching Michael Dunlop tonk a 1996 GSX-R750 round the Isle of Man at a race-winning average speed of 124.5mph was one hell of a consolation.

RACE RESULTS

RST CLASSIC SUPERBIKE	
1	Michael Dunlop Team Classic Suzuki GSX-R750
2	Davo Johnson Alasdair Cowan Kawasaki ZXR750
3	Rob Hodson Greenall Kawasaki ZXR750
4	Brian McCormack Greenall Kawasaki ZXR750
5	Nathan Harrison Ashcourt Honda RC45
6	Craig Neve Alasdair Cowan Kawasaki ZXR750
Fastest lap Michael Dunlop, 126.7mph (lap 1)	



◊ SAM WEST steers his Bimota YB4 past Baz Furber's GSX-R750 at the Bungalow. By this stage Sam looked good for a top 15 finish, but unfortunately his efforts meant the Yamaha YZF750 motor used more fuel than predicted and he ran out of petrol at Hilberry, just two miles from the finish.



◊ AND THE WINNER IS... this Team Classic Suzuki GSX-R750. It was built from a 1996 factory endurance racer and has all manner of goodies: factory dry slipper-clutch, lightweight generator, magnesium offset sump, close-ratio six-speed gearbox, factory Yoshimura exhaust system...



◊ BEST NOISE OF THE RACE? Ashcourt Racing's RC45 got plenty of votes – shut your eyes and it was Joey coming through Guthries rather than Nathan Harrison. The team lost their number one engine in practice week and worked silly hours to get the second bike ready. Fifth place was a decent reward.

MANX GRAND PRIX Classic Superbike & Lightweight



THE KAWASAKI ZXR750 was not only the most popular Classic Superbike (they made up almost half the field), but also the most successful – seven of the top 10 finishers rode ZXR. The fastest one was Davo Johnson’s (seen here flashing through Guthries), but last year’s winner couldn’t quite match the pace of Michael Dunlop and eventually finished 43.6 seconds behind. He was joined on the podium by Rob Hodson on – you guessed it – another ZXR



Key Racing and their very trick 916. Left to right: Gary Vickers, Alister Russell, John Collier, Tim Keay



Solitary 916 taking the battle to the Japanese hoards

Key Racing’s preparation for the Manx couldn’t have been better – TT-winner Dean Harrison hopped on the team’s Ducati 916 and beat all-comers at Oliver’s Mount.

“That was his first ever go on the bike,” explains team boss Tim Keay. “He broke his own lap record on the second flying lap, then took another second off it, and won all three Superbike races. Not bad, considering he hadn’t even seen the bike before then.”

Clearly this is no ordinary 916. Based on a British Superbike, it has a 996cc engine stuffed with the most exotic of mid-1990s tuning parts. “We’ve got competition pistons made by Pistal that increase the compression ratio to about 13.5:1, factory race cylinder heads, titanium valves, race cams like the ones used in World Superbikes and BSB back in the day,” adds Tim.

To try and make a fearsomely tuned short-circuit bike last four laps of the TT course, Tim

knocked 3000rpm off the 14,500rpm redline. This left the V-twin with a power deficit over the fours (it still made 150bhp, mind), but Harrison was making up time in the corners.

Lap one of the race went to plan, with the Ducati leading Dunlop’s Suzuki by 0.5sec. But half way round lap two, the alternator blew. “There was nothing we could have done to prevent it,” says Tim philosophically. “It’s just one of those things. Next year we’ll win it!”



Laylaw Racing’s Eddie Laycock amid his fleet of astonishing Yamaha TZR250s

Lightweight

WATCHING THE Lightweight was an aural and olfactory joy, with a mixture of 250cc two-stroke twins, 400cc four-stroke fours, Moto3 bikes and the odd 690cc single thrown in. It was a distillation of everything that’s brilliant about the Manx – wildly different bikes from different eras all going 19 to the dozen.

The two-strokes were dominant though, taking the first three places, with Mike Browne (right) and 60-year-old Ian Lougher (who first rode in the Manx 40 years ago) coming first and second on Yamaha TZR250s. Dan Sayle was third on a Honda RS250.

Irish race legend Eddie Laycock was in charge of preparing the victorious – and notoriously finicky – TZs. “There were lots of kit parts available, so over the years we’ve picked up cylinders, heads and wheels. We’ve also converted our bikes from unleaded to Avgas so we can read the spark plugs – they’re very hard to read when running on unleaded. That’s fine for GPs, but not round the Isle of Man where safety is so important – we like to have them slightly on the rich side.

“We get 450 miles to a crank, so two per bike over the week, plus two sets of pistons

and three sets of rings. It depends how things go – this week we’ve destroyed two kit cylinders, and they’re like hen’s teeth.” And the suspension is as exotic as the engines: “They’ve got original Ohlins Grand Prix forks and factory Brembo calipers – that’s a £30,000 front end. These are made for GPs – not for the bottom of Barregarrow. For them to get round and survive is so impressive.” Indeed it is.

RACE RESULTS

SURE LIGHTWEIGHT	
1	Mike Browne Laylaw Yamaha TZR250
2	Ian Lougher Laylaw Yamaha TZR250
3	Dan Sayle Baz Gas Honda RS250
4	Shaun Anderson Kramer EV02 690cc single
5	Adam McLean Laylaw Racing Yamaha TZR250
6	Stuart Hall Whippet Yamaha TZR250
Fastest Lap Mike Browne 113.4mph	



Lightweight winner Mike Browne on his Laylaw Yamaha TZR250. He’s wearing an Eddie Laycock replica helmet as a tribute to his team boss

Ted Woof's Craven Manx Norton with Dean Harrison on board was a sight – and sound – to behold. They proved you don't need a twin to win the Classic Senior



Classic Senior

DEAN HARRISON and his Manx Norton stunned the super-fast Paton twins by not only winning the Classic Senior by 52 seconds, but clocking a 111.4mph lap in the process – the fastest ever lap by a 500cc British single.

It was an astonishing performance by bike and rider, especially considering that the man chasing him on the Paton was a certain John McGuinness. “That was so much fun,” said Harrison after the race. “Winning the Manx on a Manx ticks all the boxes... I could have gone quicker on the last lap and maybe done 112mph, but I could see on my boards I had a good lead so knocked a bit of pace off.”

The singles were on fine form further down the field too, with Mike Browne coming third on another Manx and – perhaps most impressive of all – Adam McLean coming fifth on the Flitwick

Motorcycles Royal Enfield Bullet.

“It’s making in excess of 50bhp,” says Flitwick boss Steve Linsdell, who’s developed the bike over the last 25 years. “This bike has the Enfield frame rather than the Seeley, and Adam prefers it – I think it’s because it pitches more on the brakes and under power, so you get more grip. Modern riders tend to prefer that.”

“He was on for a 110mph lap on the last lap, but suffered a bit of fuel starvation. That’s phenomenal for a British single. For a while the people with the singles thought we could never beat the twins, but Ted Woof (who built Harrison’s Manx) has showed us that we can. And now the twin people are moaning because they have to ride so hard to go that fast.”

As you might imagine with such highly tuned singles, there was an equally high attrition rate – only 16 bikes finished, with seven going pop on the first lap. ☹️

RACE RESULTS

CAROLE NASH CLASSIC SENIOR

1	Dean Harrison	Craven Manx Norton
2	John McGuinness	Winfield Paton
3	Mike Browne	Grantham Lodge Manx Norton
4	Shaun Anderson	Peter Beugger Paton
5	Adam McLean	Flitwick Royal Enfield
6	Michael Russell	Izzard Manx Norton
Fastest Lap		Dean Harrison, 111.4mph

RIP IAN AND GARY

Sadly, two riders were killed at the Manx. Gary Vines, 33, died at Ballagarey after an accident during qualifying. He was an experienced racer, having won the Newcomers B Race at the Manx in 2015 and clocked a 118.5mph lap at the TT. Ian Bainbridge, 69, also died after an accident during qualifying, this time at Kirk Michael. Ian was a Manx regular, having made his debut in 2005. Everyone at *Classic Bike* sends their heartfelt condolences to Ian and Gary’s friends and family.

It’s not all glory and champagne

► **MOST RIDERS AT THE MANX** are there for the sheer joy of racing round the Isle of Man and rock up with caravans rather than motorhomes. That’s certainly true of Stephen Walsh from Kerry in Ireland, who we found working on his CB350 with his mate George Stanson (obscured by the bike). “We’ve done the pre-TT, Armoy, Cookstown – we had good fun. We’re just clubmen and riding round here is great, really good fun. George and the guys in the Classic Racing Association gave me a big hand – we’ve got a CB750 front end in the bike now, with 35mm fork legs and a CB750 hub. George made the exhausts, but apart from that it’s pretty standard.” Alas, the bike blew up at Crosby in practice (that’s the engine in the foreground), and Stephen didn’t make the start because of a lack of laps. Next year...



► **FLITWICK MOTORCYCLES’ ROYAL ENFIELD** is, without question, the world’s fastest Bullet, averaging an astonishing 109.6mph in the Classic Senior and clocking 139.4mph down the Sulby Straight. “That’s not bad for a pushrod single,” says Flitwick’s Steve Linsdell. “The biggest issue is that you have to make absolutely everything – there’s not one bit of that bike that’s standard.”



Stephen Walsh plumbs a new engine into his CB350 while Ron Robrey (holding glass of wine) offers some sage advice