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A spirit reborn

The TT, the world's most famous road race series, was in the doldrums until the revitalising reappearance of Mike Hailwood in 1978, and again in 1979.

It had been ravaged by the remarks of star international riders, and by boycotts, scathing criticism and, finally, by the Fédération Internationale de Motocyclisme decision to emasculate it by removing its Grand Prix status.

That august body, founded in 1904 and based in far-off Geneva, saw fit to support the condemnations heaped upon the circuit by seasoned professionals like Giacomo Agostini (15-time world champion and many times a TT winner) and Phil Read (once Agostini's MV-Agusta team-mate and another superb TT expert), and sliced the Isle of Man venue off its road race Grand Prix calendar.

Whatever the motives of the famous riders instrumental in forcing the FIM to its controversial decision, the effects soon began to bite; the TT, with its fine history of classic racing and Grand Prix combat, looked a watered-down version of what had always been a glittering occasion. In truth, it began to look doomed, even though the Manx authorities and the Auto-Cycle Union, the British organisers of home racing and the TT, the showpiece of their year, were prepared to fight tooth and nail for its survival.

The people of the Isle of Man, fearful that their prosperity might falter if their renowned race suffered many more withdrawals, were desperate to find a saviour. The ACU had done their level best, but had failed to come up with a name that could counter the loss of popularity the island was in danger of suffering. Indeed, there was only one man, one name beloved by everybody in racing, who could reverse the trend. That man was Mike Hailwood who had last competed in the TT in 1967, the year Honda, his team, announced it was quitting racing.

Mike was 38. He had suffered an horrendous Formula One Grand Prix car crash that had left one of his legs bent like a banana and his right foot locked into a flagrantly flat position with little or no movement in it. It meant he could not drive a racing car, with its need for heel-and-toe action, and be as competitive as he would like. But he could still ride a motorcycle, with the gear change switched onto the left side of the machine; and as foot braking did not come too much into play he could, taking the dust covers off his dormant talent on two wheels, probably be as competitive as anybody around. And he knew as much about the rises and dips and vagaries of the TT's 37³/₄-mile circuit as the island's Director of Highways.

Steve Wynn of Sports Motorcycles and Mike on the start line, F1 TT 1978.



MIKE THE BIKE – AGAIN

It was still to be a cloak and dagger operation, for the deal with Yamaha was still to be swung and there was Mike's October date with the six-hour race in Sydney, the final fitness hurdle that would prove to him that he was in good enough shape to withstand the gruelling rigours of the TT course.

There was not much doubt that Yamaha would come through with the machines we wanted, and Steve Wynne was well under way with sorting out the Ducati Supersport for the Formula One class. It was now just a matter of time and filling in the gap between announcement and participation in the most useful, viable way possible. That meant another look at the TT course.

That is where the Manx Grand Prix came in useful; it is a race for amateurs over the TT course and held in the first week of every September. I arranged with the Clerk of the Course, a former TT rider, Jackie Wood, that we could slip Mike in among the practising riders as anonymously as possible on the pretext of his doing some filming. Indeed, he did have a camera set up on a machine and helped with some footage for a pseudo-American movie-maker who promised Mike a fee and insurance cover of £125, and came up with neither.

The most vital factor was that Mike was able, through the infinite kindness and understanding of the MGP organisers, to get in some vital laps in his September reprise of his earlier records.

A famous race family, the Padgetts, as Yorkshire as they come but based in Douglas in the Isle of Man, offered to lend Mike two bikes for a try-out. So we went to Jurby, an old Royal Air Force air strip on the north-west of the island, though with its gravelled main straight and moving surface it was maybe not the best of places for a test run. But it was the only one, really, before Mike could be turned loose among the Manx Grand Prix hopefuls.

Right from the off, when the beefy looking OW31 750cc Yamaha was unloaded from the Padgett's van, Mike was invaded with doubt and apprehension. He did not like the look of it and stood distanced from it for a moment or two, eyeing it warily like a man who expected it to roar into life by itself and bite him. And when Peter Padgett, the family sage, finally persuaded him to give it a shove he struggled for ages to get it started, filling the air with frustrated curses. It was certainly not love at first sight.

When it eventually fired up, and that terrifying 120 brake horsepower bit into its power band, Mike was whirled up the straight in a blur, faster even than he believed the thing would be. But he persevered and after two or three bursts finally got his head down.

'He's enjoying it now,' said Peter Padgett, smiling with relief, 'he's really going good on it. And he LOOKS good on it, too. The lad's having a grand old time now. Just look at him – he's lost nowt of his old flair. And there's no way he's going to let that bugger beat him.'

The wind was whistling across the flats of the airfield when Mike wheeled the big OW31 in a wide circle to head back to the spot from which we are all watching.



1978 Senior TT race. The American Pat Hennen on lap four. Shortly after, his race ended in a 165mph crash that left him in a coma for three months and ended his racing career.



Charles (Chas) Mortimer, winner of the Junior TT 1978, with Charlie Williams and Tom Herron.



After the F1 race, Mike with business partner Rod Gould and Phil Read.

Mick Grant, 1979 Senior TT, riding with a broken pelvis.

