



The Return Of The King

Mike Hailwood. Ten years ago, and for most of the ten years preceding that, this name was on the lips of every road racing fan in the world. The lean, balding Briton was the acknowledged king of the road racing scene. Now, for one week in June, the king has returned. Returned to the scene of some of his greatest conquests...the legendary Isle of Man.

It was over a decade ago that Hailwood quit the world of Grand Prix road racing, when the Honda team pulled

out of the World Championships at the end of 1967. Such was Hailwood's ability at that time, the peak of his career, that Honda allowed him to keep their factory machinery for non-Championship International events and paid him a fortune NOT to ride in the World Championships. They couldn't stomach the thought that, despite the official Honda withdrawal, Hailwood might well win the title on machines without any factory support, thus leading

fans to believe that the man, rather than the machine, had been mainly responsible for their World Championship successes. Or, even worse, Hailwood might switch to another factory and add to his string of nine World Championships without the aid of Honda.

So, for the whole of 1968, Mike ran his "private" Hondas in lucrative International events and missed the Grands Prix in favour of building the foundations of a successful car racing career.

Now, ten years later, Hailwood is back at the place where he first captured the imagination of the motorcycling public...the Isle of Man, with its winding, climbing, 37¼ miles (60.4kms) of asphalt known as the "Mountain Circuit".

It was eleven years ago that he lapped the Island at a record-shattering 108mph plus. Since then, with smooth re-surfacing on much of the public roads that make up the track, with super-sticky "slick" tires, half as wide

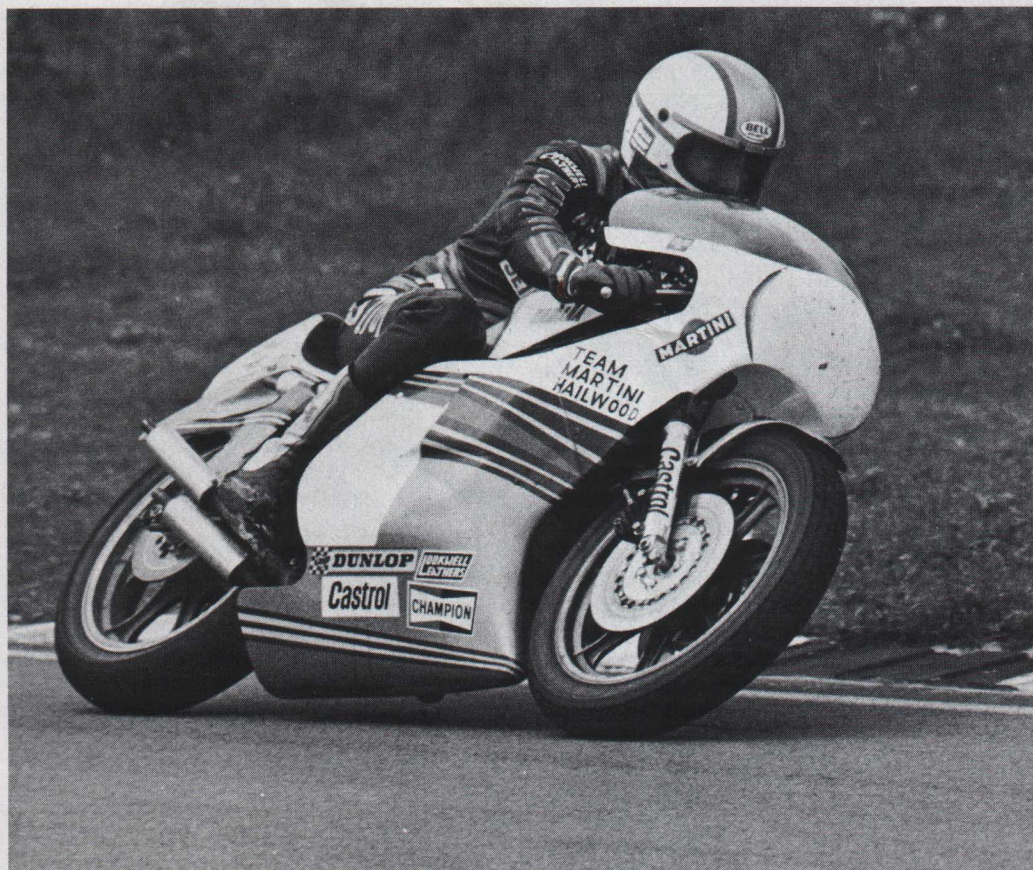
again as the skinny rubber on which Hailwood rode, with 750cc engines pushing out over 130bhp (probably 40 or more horsepower up on Hailwood's Honda four), with all of the handling advances that suspension developments have brought, with giant disc brakes and better aerodynamics, with all of this... today's riders have been unable to put more than 5mph on Mike's record. That, indeed, is a measure of the man's immense ability and talent.

That talent has remained a legend. So much so that, when Mike wheels out his 250cc, 500cc and 750cc Yamahas for his TT comeback, he will be cheered on by young fans who never even saw him ride. Though they may never have seen him, however, they all know the name. His fame has endured ten years away from motorcycle racing and the charisma is still as strong as ever.

This year you can't get a flight or boat booking to the Isle of Man during TT week...and even if you could, then you wouldn't be able to find anywhere to stay. Every hotel, boarding house, campsite and even the guest rooms of private houses, are full up for the TT week...a happy circumstance for the hotel owners who will all tell you that the presence of Mike Hailwood is one of the key reasons for their good fortune.

For the reasons why Hailwood's name is still such a draw, 11 years after his retirement from Grand Prix racing, we must take a quick look at his incredible career on both two wheels and four.

It all began over 20 years ago when Mike was a skinny, 17 year old. He was the son of Stan Hailwood, a character in his own right, who had made a millionaire-sized fortune from a chain of motorcycle dealerships. Despite being born with the privileges of the wealthy, Mike was no different from most teenagers of his day. He had completed a public



school education with very little distinction and from that upper-crust atmosphere, Stan had brought him down to earth with a bump, pulling some strings to get him an apprenticeship at the Triumph motorcycle factory, doing rather boring and menial work for very little reward.

It was Stan's insistence that Mike made his own way in life which probably made the young Hailwood so dedicated to proving that it was his own ability that won him races, and not his parent's money. Tragically, Stan died earlier this year otherwise his silver-haired profile with its prominent nose would certainly have been in evidence back on the Isle of Man where he and Mike experienced some of the greatest moments of their lives.

On Easter Monday, 1957 the pair turned up at Oulton Park where Mike was to race a borrowed 125cc MV Agusta against the cream of the lightweight racers of that era. He finished 11th and the die was cast. For three months after that debut race he never finished lower than fifth and soon the press was dubbing him a 'teenage wonderboy'.

A winter racing (and winning frequently) in South Africa added valuable experience and in June 1958 Mike appeared in the Isle of Man for the first time. At that time even he probably wouldn't have thought that he would be racing there again, twenty years on!

In 1958 he was the only rider entered in all four solo classes - 125cc, 250cc, 350cc and 500cc. It was a more than satisfactory Isle of Man debut. He finished third in the 250cc race, behind the two Italian superstars, Carlo Ubbiali and Tarquinio Provini, seventh in the 125, 12th in the 350 and 13th in the 500cc race.

The next year he was back in the Island and marked 1959 with a third place in the 500cc event. En route to this placing he posted one of the first-ever 100mph laps of the Mountain circuit on a single cylinder machine.

That same season he won his first Grand Prix (the 125cc Ulster) and finished third in the 125cc World Championship and fifth in the 250. Also that year he failed his motorcycle driving test three times!

It was in 1961, however,

that he wrote himself firmly into Isle of Man history by winning three of the four solo classes and missing a clean sweep by a hairsbreadth.

Mike took Hondas to victory in 125 and 250cc races and won the 500 with his Norton. Leading the 350cc race by a comfortable margin on his AJS, a piston pin broke with just 13 miles to go...a heartbreaking failure after over 200 miles of racing.

Consolation came later in the year, however, when he won his first World Championship, clinching the 250cc title at the Swedish Grand Prix.

The 1961 season saw the name Hailwood entered in the record books for the first time as a TT winner and a World Champion. He was to finish his GP career with 12 TT wins and nine World Championships.

For 1962 Mike got his first factory ride, on the near-invincible MV Agustas. For them he won several 350 and 500cc World Championships and carried on winning titles when he switched to Honda in 1966. Mike is convinced, however, that it was Honda's inability to wrest the 500cc title from MV Agusta that led to their pull-out from racing in 1967 to concentrate on commercial ventures. He had come so close to winning the coveted 500cc title for them but broke down with just three minutes to go in the last race of the 1967 season. The championship went to Giacomo Agostini and the MV Agusta and the disillusioned Honda team went back to Japan and have not been seen in Grand Prix racing since.

For several seasons Mike had dabbled in car racing and Honda's disappearance from the scene gave him the chance to expand this ambition.

He had first tried four wheels in 1960 when he tried a Lotus Climax F1 car and crashed during some wet-weather testing. That tempered his enthusiasm for a while but two years later he bought a Formula Junior Brabham, took fifth in his first race and then won three more in succession.

This prompted him to try Formula One but it was a costly and disappointing experience. He owned a share in the Parnell team with their Lotus-BRM vee-eights but all that he had to show for the

1963/4/5 seasons was a single World Championship point from a sixth place finish at Monaco.

Mike pushed his F1 ambitions aside to concentrate on winning motorcycle titles but his retirement from GP bike racing in 1967 allowed him the time to devote the necessary concentration to a car racing career. He established himself over the next couple of seasons as a fast and winning long-distance sports car driver and then, in the early nineteen-seventies, became one of the leading Formula 5000 drivers. The F5000 cars were single seaters with big, powerful American V8 engines and from the way that Hailwood handled them, it was obvious that he would soon be back in Formula One.

One of the high points of his car racing career was winning the European Formula Two Championship for Surtees in 1972...from which it was but a short step into the Surtees Grand Prix team.

After two years with Surtees, Mike's F1 talents were finally fully recognised when he was signed for McLaren...then, as now, one of the top teams in the business. But just on the threshold of what looked like

being his best car racing season ever, disaster struck. Mike crashed at over 140mph at the Nurburgring, shattered his ankle and his career was over.

Nursing the slow-mending ankle he retired to New Zealand to invest in a boat-building business with former World F1 Champion, Denny Hulme and former McLaren team manager, Phil Kerr.

Mike had never won a Formula One Grand Prix but was often one of the front-runners and a consistent finisher in the top six places. To be reckoned as one of the best half-dozen Grand Prix car drivers in the world is achievement enough.

Throughout his car racing days, Mike had retained a love of motorcycles and on two or three occasions had ventured back on to two wheels to race BSA/Triumphs at Daytona in 1970 and 1971 and a Yamaha at Silverstone. In each case, he was in contention for the win before being either slowed or forced out by mechanical bothers.

Now he's back again! "Eleven years is a long time away from a track as demanding as the Isle of Man" says Mike. "Still, as long as I enjoy myself, I'll be happy".

