

WHEN THE "PRODUCTION" RACERS RULED . . .

As road racing moved into the 1970s, Yamaha began the new decade in a vastly different fashion to their glory years of World Championship road racing from 1964 through 1968.

The complicated and incredibly fast vee-fours that had taken control of the 125 and 250cc classes had been outlawed by the Federation International Motocycliste who felt that, with the departure from the scene of Honda and Suzuki, the lower capacity classes were becoming a one-horse race.

From 1969 onwards, Championship racing in the 125 and 250cc category was limited to twin cylinder

125cc and four cylinder 250cc machines with a maximum of six gearbox speeds. Yamaha, therefore, pulled their GP team out of racing.

Gloomy pundits forecast a boring time for lightweight fans but they couldn't have been more wrong. Instead of watching the rest of the pack lag way behind a couple of privileged factory runners, the first half of the '70s brought some of the toughest Championship battles ever seen.

One of the main reasons for this was that the greater percentage of the riders were on equally-matched Yamaha "production" racers that anyone could buy.

And, amazingly to all concerned, it was only a matter of a couple of seasons before the relatively-simple Yamaha production racers were breaking the lap records set by the complex rotary valve vee-fours.

At that time Yamaha's over-the-counter racers carried the TD prefix in the 250cc class and were designated TR for the 350cc category and TA in the 125. They were obviously based on the roadsters of the period. Simple, two-stroke twins with no complicated rotary valves . . . just piston-controlled induction like any other two-stroke on the street.

In making these production racers, however, Yamaha had pulled another gem from their seemingly inexhaustible supply of two-stroke tuning secrets. The new motors were called



Phil Read was the first private rider ever to win a 250cc world title.

YAMAHA ROAD RACING WORLD CHAMPIONS

1964	Phil Read	250cc
1965	Phil Read	250cc
1967	Bill Ivy	125cc
1968	Phil Read	125cc
	Phil Read	250cc
1970	Rod Gould	250cc
1971	Phil Read	250cc
1972	Jarno Saarinen	250cc
1973	Dieter Braun	250cc
	Kent Andersson	125cc
1974	Kent Andersson	125cc
	Giacomo Agostini	350cc
1975	Giacomo Agostini	500cc
	Johnny Cecotto	350cc
1977	Steve Baker	750cc
	George O'Dell and Cliff Holland	Sidocar
	Takazumi Katayama	350cc
	1978	Kenny Roberts
1979	Rolf Biland and Ken Williams	Sidocar
	Johnny Cecotto	750cc
	Kenny Roberts	500cc
1980	Rolf Biland and Kurt Waltisberger	Sidocar
	Patrick Pons	750cc
	Bruno Holzer and Klaus Meirhaus	3-Wheeler
	Kenny Roberts	500cc
1976	Jon Ekerold	350cc
	Jock Taylor and Benga Johansson	Sidocar
	Victor Palomo	750cc

FIM FORMULA 750 PRIZE

(This series preceded the 750cc World Championship. Yamaha winners are listed along with the capacity of machine they used in the series.)

1974	John Dodds	350cc
1975	Jack Findlay	750cc
1976	Victor Palomo	750cc

"five port" engines and the performance difference between them and the "normal" two-stroke was simply incredible.

At that time, the two-stroke was what was termed a "three port" engine . . . induction, transfer and exhaust ports. Actually a misnomer, as there were four ports in total . . . inlet, exhaust and a transfer port on each side of the cylinder.

The so-called "fifth port" was, in

passages through the cylinder walls in the same manner as the original side-positioned transfer ports and gained even more power.

Nowadays, the "five port system" is an integral part of just about every two-stroke on the market. Its benefits were so great that it has become an accepted part of two-stroke technology rather than a "performance option."

Evidence of the performance

US events, which culminated in a factory ride at Daytona for both Kawasaki in the 250cc class and Triumph in the big category. While racing the fast Kawasakis, he had cause to notice that the Yamaha USA team Yamahas were even faster! He obtained a TD1C engine and sent a blueprint of the engine dimensions back to his friend and well-known tuner in the UK, Ron Herring. By the time Rod got back to England in

YAMAHA'S KING OF SPEED

A three-part series on the superstars who brought World Road Racing Championships to Yamaha.

PART ONE: THE NINETEEN-SIXTIES

In the past seventeen racing seasons there have only been three in which Yamaha did not field at least one World Champion . . . 1966, 1969 and 1976. And in one of those years (1976), they had the consolation of taking the FIM Formula 750 Championship prize, a series which was to move to full World Championship status a year later. In that seventeen-season span, seventeen riders and four sidocar passengers have earned a total of 27 World Championship medals with Yamaha. Plus three FIM F750 prizewinner's medals in the three-year existence of that series.

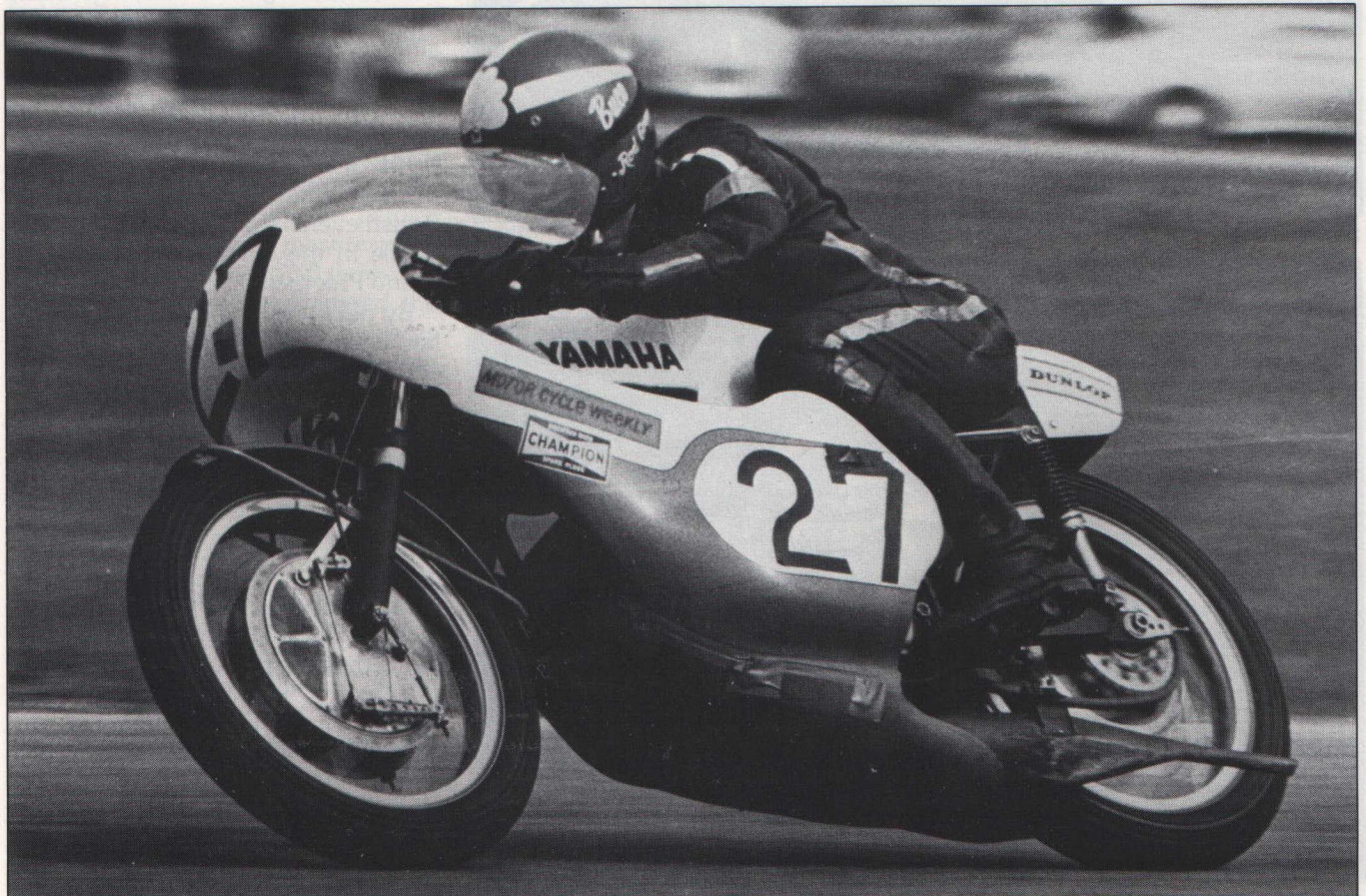
This three-part feature gives "Circuit" readers a look at those Yamaha "kings of speed."

fact, a set of added transfer passages positioned at the back of the cylinder. Originally they were simply grooves in the cylinder liner from the base, up around the inlet tract, to a point on a level with the original transfer ports. They provided extra transfer area and better scavenging and filling of the cylinder. The power boost, even in the five-port system's first form, was amazing. Later Yamaha actually cast the extra transfer

potential of the TD1C Yamaha 250cc production racers had been seen in Europe late in the '60s with one of the most amazing efforts being that of a gritty little red-headed Englishman by the name of Rod Gould.

He spent the winter of 1967-68 in California after establishing himself as a front-runner in both England and Europe with 350cc and 500cc Nortons. While in California he scored several successes in West Coast

March, with the Yamaha engine as part of his baggage, Ron had a Bul-taco chassis ready to house the Yamaha engine. Total cost of the whole bike came to less than 300 pounds and by the end of the 1968 season Rod had taken fourth place in the World 250cc Championship behind the factory V4 Yamahas of Phil Read and Bill Ivy and the factory East German MZ of Heinz Rosner. One incredible ride was at Mallory



Rod Gould was the first rider to take a World Championship with a bike based upon a street machine—the Yamaha TD2 production racer.

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Park where, for most of the 250cc event, Rod diced side by side and occasionally ahead of Read and Ivy on the factory fours. They finally bested him but there was no more than a couple of bike lengths between the three of them at the chequered flag.

It was Gould who really brought the "production" Yamahas to the notice of the British public when, in 1969, he made another trip to America and purchased a pair of the latest twins . . . the new TD2 250 and TR2 350. With them he gained a second place in the 250cc race at Daytona and led the Daytona 200-mile race until broken exhaust pipes dropped him to fifth.

The bikes were then airfreighted back to the UK and Rod won every 250cc and 350cc race that he contested over the Easter weekend . . . winning every race at Brands Hatch, Mallory Park and Oulton Park by at least half a lap margin!

One of the highlights of his career came later that season when, with the 350cc twin, he beat Giacomo Agostini on the 500cc MV Agusta GP machine at Mallory Park. Up until that point, Agostini had not been beaten by anyone, anywhere, for almost two seasons!

That performance earned Rod the admiration of the British public and they voted him the Motor Cycle News "Man of the Year."

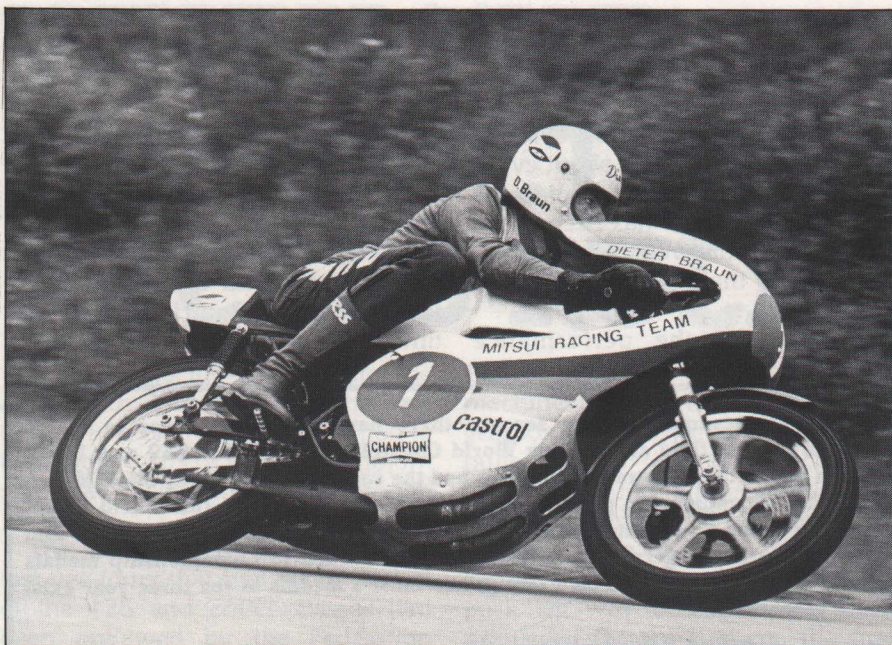
The Yamahas totally dominated British events that season but proved fragile in the long-distance world of Grand Prix racing.

By next season, however, the bugs had been ironed out and Gould reaped his just rewards by taking his Yamaha to the World 250cc Championship, snatching the title away from Kel Carruthers on the last bend of the last lap of the last race of the season!

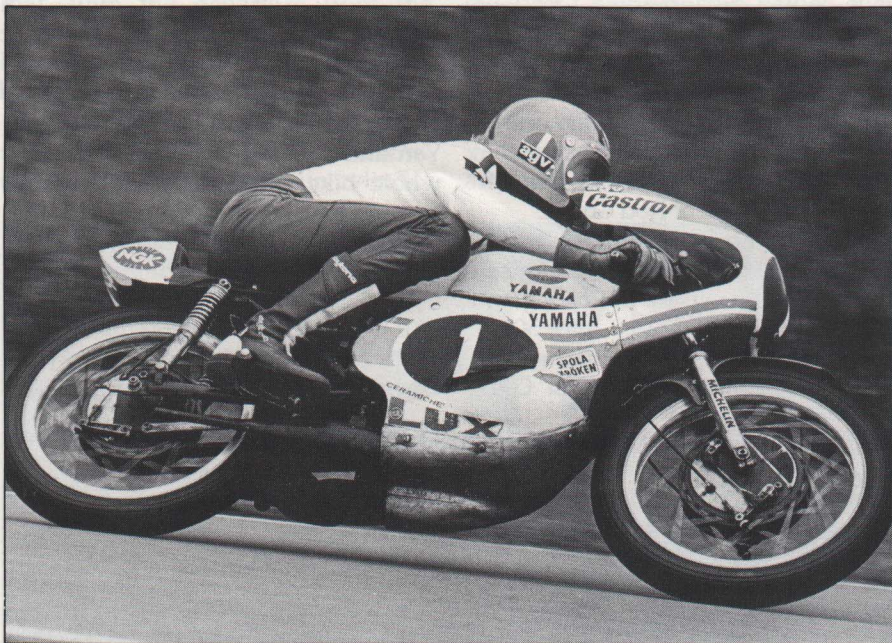
Rod, at this time, was being supported by Yamaha Motor NV, Amsterdam, as a sort of "semi-works" rider along with Sweden's Kent Andersson.

Actually, this support worked against him on occasions as the Amsterdam team was also a development effort and had to keep experimenting with new, and sometimes fragile, parts.

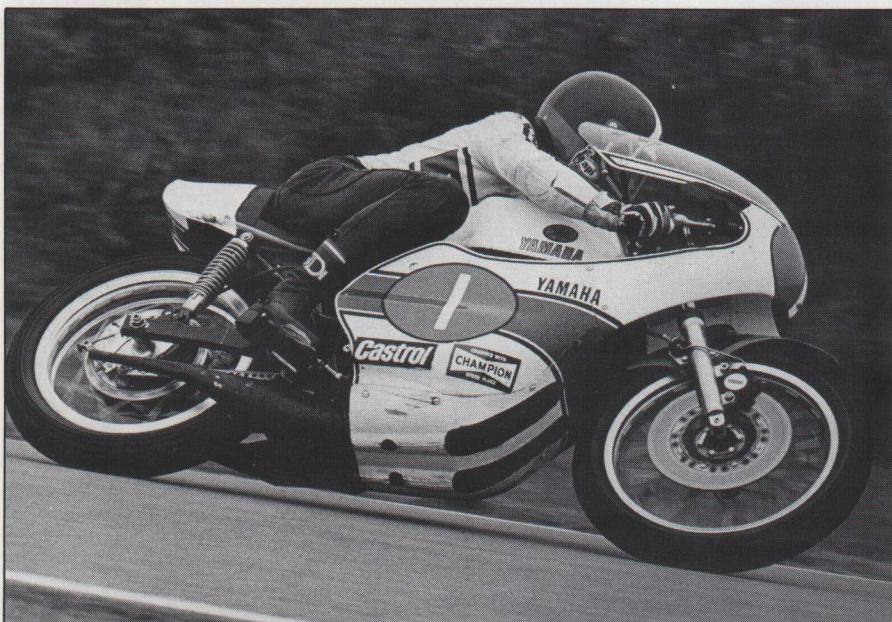
In fact, in 1971 Rod saw the title slip away by a matter of a few points . . . back into the familiar hands of



Dieter Braun was Germany's first World 250cc Champion since the 1950s.



Sweden's Kent Andersson—twice a World Champion.



Giacomo Agostini made much-publicized switch to Yamaha in 1974 and celebrated his move with the 350cc world title.

four-time Champion Phil Read.

Read used a standard TD2 and, with the help of ex-sidecar World Champion and tuning wizard, Helmut Fath, became the first truly "privateer" rider to win the 250cc World title.

By this time the production Yamaha had got a really strong grip on the 250cc class and were even threatening the supremacy of the hitherto-invincible Giacomo Agostini and his MV Agusta in 350cc Grand Prix racing. Doing most of the threatening was a sensationally-fast Finn who was still a relative newcomer to the Grand Prix scene.

In 1971 Jarno Saarinen had shown more than a hint of his exceptional talent and, with some help from the Finnish Yamaha importer, Arwidson, in 1972 he dominated the World 250cc Championship as well as making "Ago" keep one eye over his shoulder in the bigger class. The production Yamahas were by now even creeping into the 500cc class . . . some riders were boring them out to 354cc and scoring big-class Championship points with them. The simple, street machine-based twins were by now the backbone of Grand Prix racing, replacing the British Norton, AJS and Matchless racers as the foremost weapon in the privateer's armoury.

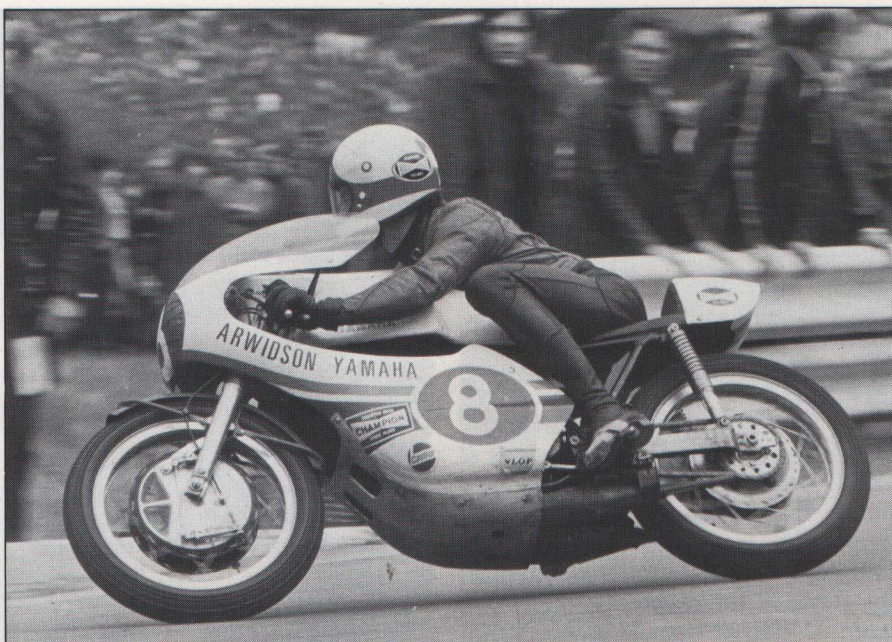
Saarinen's massive talent tragically never got a chance to totally manifest itself.

Nineteen seventy-three looked like being one of the greatest years on the Grand Prix scene for some time. Yamaha was back in with a full factory effort, using an all-new 500cc four. Not a vee-configuration like the old bikes of the '60s but an across-the-frame motor that in most respects was a double-up of the 250 twin.

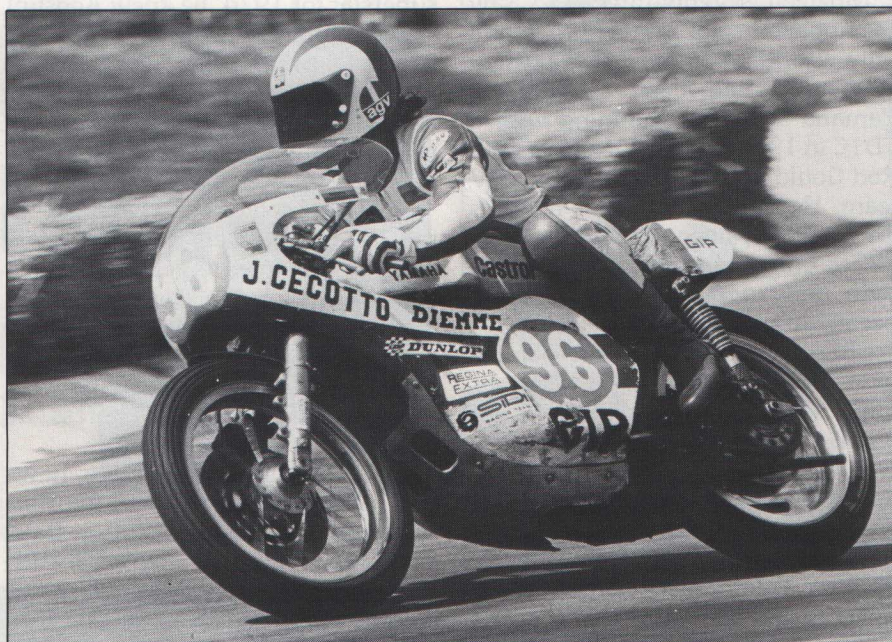
Saarinen and Agostini shared the spoils in the season's opening races but it seemed that the odds were on the Finn to take the title away from Ago's seven-year grip.

Jarno was at the top of his form in 1973, opening the season by beating 750cc opposition on a 350cc Yamaha twin to win the prestigious Daytona 200!

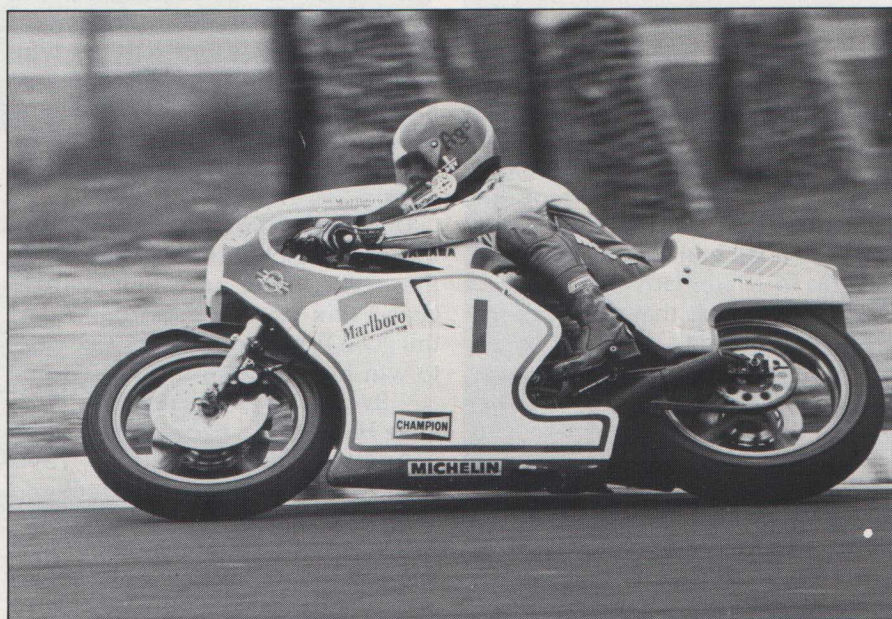
Less than two months later, tragedy struck during the Italian Grand Prix at Monza. A competitor in a previous event had spilled oil on the course and on the first lap of the 250cc race, there was a multiple crash on one of the fastest corners. About a dozen riders went down in the spill and, when the wreckage was cleared, two of the greatest talents in road racing, Jarno Saarinen and Renzo Pasolini, lay dead.



A sensational talent so tragically eliminated—Jarno Saarinen.



Johnny Cecotto absolutely erupted onto the World Championship stage in 1975.



In 1975 Agostini made his 15th and final World Championship in the toughest class of them all . . . the 500cc category.

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Yamaha immediately sidelined their Grand Prix team until late that season as a mark of respect for Saari-nen and their feeling that there was no other rider really capable of doing justice to the new Yamaha 500.

Two world titles did come Yamaha's way that year. Popular German, Dieter Braun, had won the 125cc Championship in 1970 on an ex-factory Suzuki. Three years later he wore the champion's crown again . . . taking the 250cc title on a Yamaha supported by Yamaha's importer in Germany, Mitsui Maschinen GmbH. He was the first German to hold a World title over 50cc since the days of the all-conquering NSU team of Werner Haas (1953-54) and Helmut Muller in 1955.

Nineteen seventy-three also saw the appearance of Sweden's one and only World Champion so far. Kent Andersson had been a long-time Yamaha stalwart, beginning with a TD1C in 1968 and then teaming with Rod Gould on the Yamaha Motor NV team. He finally reaped his rewards for brand loyalty when he won the 125cc Championship on a neat little twin derived from what originally began life as a 100cc street bike!

The potential of the little parallel twin had been seen as long ago as 1967 when the Yamaha factory team went to the Canadian Grand Prix with their vee-fours and were backed up by a number of Canadian riders on racing versions of the 100cc street machine. The bikes were actually built for a domestic Japanese racing category but the Canadian importer had brought a few into his country for local racers and one or two of them even proved quick enough to get on the leader board.

Five years later, in 1972, the bikes appeared in Europe as full 125cc GP machines ridden by Andersson and Chas Mortimer. Chas won the Isle of Man TT with one and Kent repeated his 1973 World Championship success with another title in 1974.

It was in 1974 that Yamaha pulled a sensational coup that staggered the entire racing world.

Giacomo Agostini had taken over the mantle from Mike Hailwood as leading rider in the world and emphasized his claim with no less than 13 World Championship titles!

The handsome Italian took 500cc World Championships in 1966-67-68-69-70-71 and 1972 as well as 350cc titles in 1968-69-70-71-72 and 1973. But by the end of the 1973 season he was beginning to get

a little disillusioned with the Italian MV Agusta team.

He was under pressure from Yamaha in the 350cc class and for some reason, MV had signed Phil Read to team with Ago in the 500cc category. Agostini couldn't understand why the team needed anything other than a back-up rider for him. Something which a guy like Phil Read would obviously not be content with.

Sure enough, Read actually beat out Agostini for the 500cc title in 1973 and this sparked off a thought in the mind of Rod Gould, who had earlier that year retired from racing and joined Yamaha Motor NV as public relations director.

Rod knew that Yamaha needed a superstar for 1974, he knew Agostini well from their racing days and reasoned that the Italian's pride might well have been slighted by the signing of Phil Read by MV. The time might well be right, thought Rod, for a discreet approach to Ago.

He was absolutely right and during the 1973-74 winter, Rod and Agostini flew to Japan to get the Italian's name inked onto a contract. When the news broke, the motorcycle world went crazy. Italian press and fans were so angry that Ago was publicly pilloried in the press as some kind of national traitor!

Italians being what they are, however, all was forgiven when Agostini appeared on a Yamaha 750 at Daytona and, at his first attempt, totally dominated what was possibly the world's most glamorous race at that time!

It wasn't all a fairy-tale season, however. Though he added world title Number 14 to his tally by winning the 350cc Championship, Ago had to give best to the tough-riding Read in the 500cc class, which was, of course, the title he most wanted to win.

During the next year he made no mistake. Despite the appearance on the scene of a new four-cylinder Grand Prix racer from Suzuki, Agostini got a firm grip on the 500cc class to win his 15th and final world title . . . five more than his nearest rival, Mike Hailwood.

Agostini's 500cc title in 1975 marked the end of an era in World Championship racing. The familiar names of the '60s and early '70s were gradually being replaced by new, young stars like Britain's Barry Sheene and America's Kenny Roberts.

One of these new names came from a country never before associated with top-level motorcycle racing—Venezuela.

At Daytona in 1974 no one really noticed a young South American by the name of Johnny Cecotto, who trailed his 350cc Yamaha twin around in about 50th place, eating the dust of the big 750's.

Next year, they couldn't help but notice him. He qualified third fastest and then suffered the setback of oiling a spark plug on the start line as the race was about to get under way.

He was moved to the back of the 100-man line-up to change the plug and finally got away well behind the field in last place.

Throughout the 200-mile race, Cecotto sliced through the field until, with just a few laps to go, he blasted his private Yamaha TZ700 past the factory bike of Agostini to settle into third place behind Gene Romero and another youngster soon to make his mark on World Championship motorcycling, Steve Baker!

Now the question was . . . what was going to happen on the Grand Prix scene? Would Cecotto prove that a new superstar had risen, or would his effort on the comparatively easy track at Daytona turn out to be just a flash in the pan?

The answer wasn't long in coming. The French Grand Prix opened the season in Europe, just a couple of weeks after Daytona.

Johnny Cecotto won both the 250 and 350 events on privateer Yamahas, handsomely beating the factory 350 of Giacomo Agostini. Then he won the Imola 200 Formula 750 race in Italy and there was no doubting the fact that here was one of the most incredible eruptions of natural talent that the motorcycling world had ever seen.

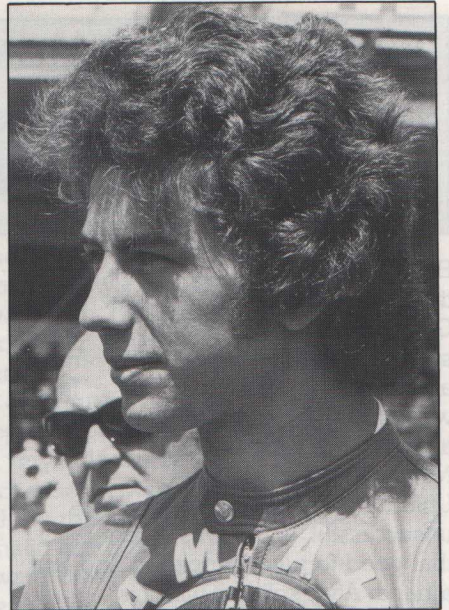
By the end of the 1975 season, Cecotto had taken his production Yamaha 350 twin to a World Championship at his very first attempt.

Road racing's "new wave" was about to kick the old guard unceremoniously out of the door. Hungry young stars with no respect for old reputations were demanding their place in the sun and, for the first time in World Championship history, were prepared to travel across the Atlantic to claim it. □

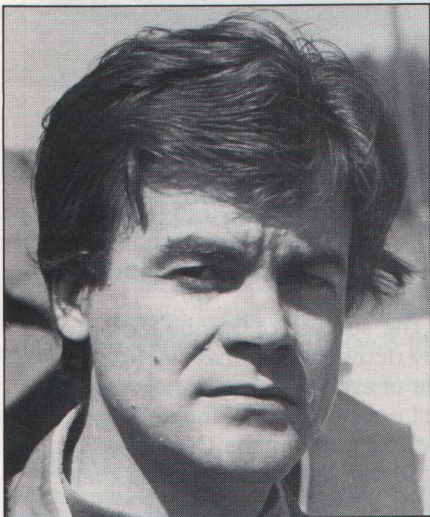
Next Issue: TransAtlantic Invasion. The 1976-1980 World Championships.



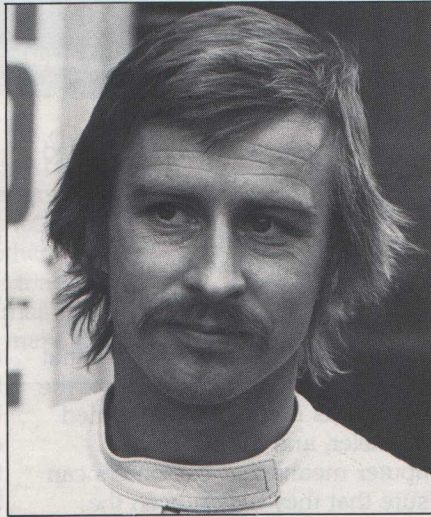
Two of Yamaha's champions—Giacomo Agostini and Rod Gould.



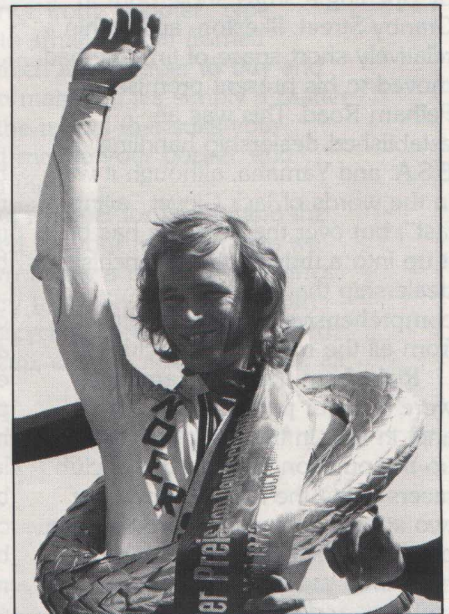
Johnny Cecotto



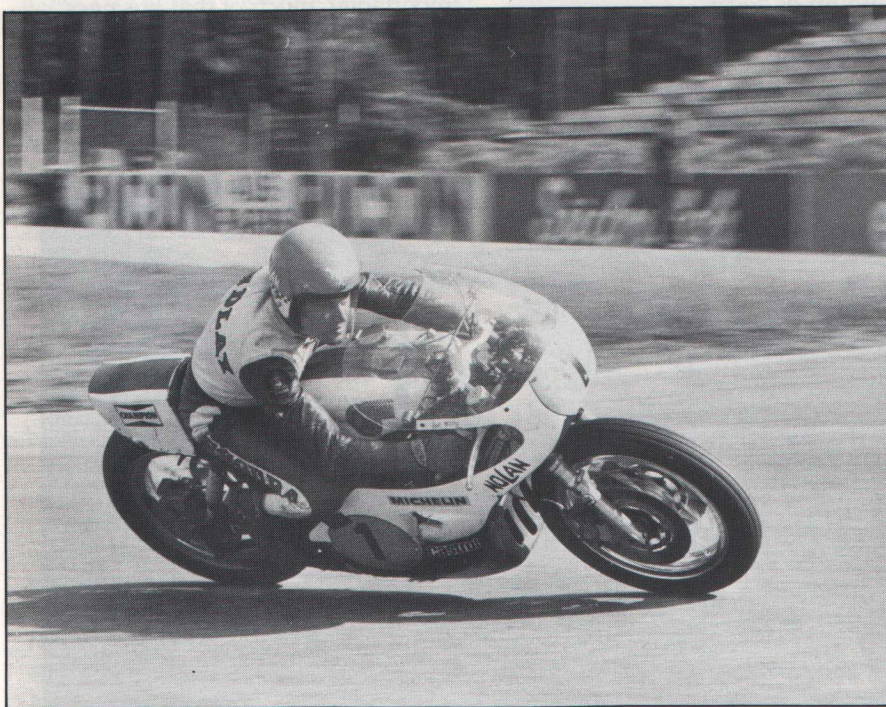
Dieter Braun



Jarno Saarinen



Kent Andersson



Popular veteran, Australian Jack Findlay, set the seal on a solid career in Grand Prix racing by topping the world 750cc standings in 1975 and winning the FIM F750 Prize.



Jack Findlay