Hailwood

● MIKE HAILWOOD, I NEVER KNEW HIM. HIS achievements, yes; the man, no. World Champion in Road Racing, ten times over; fourteen victories in the Isle of Man; more Grand Prix wins than anyone can remember; and a list of racing victories strung through three decades. And perhaps four decades had he lived. Mere speculation, that last point. Hailwood died following a traffic accident in England in March 1981. He was forty.

He was also forever.

Hailwood was an institution in England and Europe. Here in America, in the early 1960s, he had a presence transmitted through motorcycle magazine media. Hailwood represented quality, status, importance; precisely those things motorcycling in America did not have in the early sixties. In 1961, the year young Hailwood won three out of four Isle of Man TT races and came as close as a broken wrist pin to winning the fourth, motorcycling here was a minority, almost backwater, sport practiced largely by those who wore funny little uniforms with dumb little caps, by fanatics who had dirt permanently implanted under their fingernails, by hell-raisers who loved noise and good times, and by priggish two-wheeled dilettantes who hoped motorcycling would mature into a polite sport with as much tweed and starch as the old Sports Car Club of America. The condition of collars and fingernails notwithstanding, this diverse collection of motorcyclists read the magazines, and they all could see that motorcycling was understood and appreciated Over There.

There it was successful. There motorcycling was important. No doubt about it. Tens of thousands of spectators would turn out to watch a race; courses had Armco barriers made of straw bales and human beings. Crowds, you see, have always been the official barometer of events. The Rule Of The Crowd applied. It held that the number of witnesses to any event determined the importance of that occurrence in human history. Then there was The Rule of Distance. It held that the importance of any given event was directly proportional to the square of the distance from the event to the magazine reader. Motorcycling was Big Time Over There, and it was almost nothing in the United States.

In America we needed reassurance about motorcycling's status, its importance, its quality. Mike Hailwood was living proof of everything we wanted to believe about motorcycling. Hailwood signed more autographs in an hour than the total attendance, competitors and spectators, at the Peoria scrambles. His presence was real.

So was his talent. Americans saw precious little of Hailwood, man and racer.

Late in 1961 he ran once at Willow Springs in California; he sparkled at the United States Grands Prix in 1963 and 1964 and 1965 at Daytona Beach, dazzled at the Canadian Grand Prix in 1967 at Mosport, and came out of "retirement" to race BSA triples at Daytona in 1970 and 1971.

Those who saw never forgot. In 1967 Hailwood was at his zenith. My mind's eye will always carry an imprint of the 1967 Canadian Grand Prix. Maybe because it was the first time I'd ever seen a real collection of Grand Prix bikes. Or because I'd never heard a six-cylinder 250 Honda or a four-cylinder 125cc two-stroke Yamaha. Or because for the first time I saw those individuals who had lived in newsprint and photographs for so long: Bill Ivy, Phil Read, Ralph Bryans, Giacomo Agostini and, the world's premier rider, Mike Hailwood.

Funny, isn't it, the dumb things you remember thinking. Good Grief, only Hailwood and Read were full-sized people; the rest were compact and intermediate models. It had never struck me that riders came in sizes. Then there was Hailwood's leathers, his boots, his helmet—the stuff looked second-hand, or maybe third-hand.

I looked at the celebrated works Honda 250 six-cylinder racer. I had expected it to burst in jewel-perfect splendor from an 18-wheel semi-tractor/trailer. Instead, the battered and dinged Honda looked as if someone dropped it into Mosport Park from a Flying Boxcar. For Crying Out Loud, you could see where the cases had been welded up after a connecting rod had taken a 19,000-rpm buzz right through the case wall. I told myself I understood why Hailwood was something of a shabby racetrack dresser: 250 World Championship Honda or not, who'd get dressed up to ride that thing? Underneath the Honda might be a Chariot of the Gods, but on the outside it sure was the heap of the week.

The scene so glamorous on the pages of the magazine seemed frayed and tatty close-up. Did the Rule of Rainbows apply here? That which was magnificent when viewed from great distance would vanish with every closing step.

Seeing Hailwood on the track dispelled my myopia. Hailwood and the 250 Honda six. Hailwood and the 500 Honda four. Perhaps later I would see things equally magnificent on a race course, but none would be stamped so boldly in my mind. Comprehension dawned. For years I had thought Hailwood was important to motorcycling because he was a celebrity, a great symbol of success in a sport that always seemed to struggle for respectability. At Mosport, watching him ride, I got things straight in my mind. Hailwood was an attraction, not because he was a celebrity, but because he could do

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things with motorcycles, and make them do things—especially that squirming, malevolent Honda 500 four-cylinder—that surpassed his contemporaries. His brilliance was riding a motorcycle better, faster than anyone else.

He shined. His mighty ability was the force that drew crowds to him. The condition of his leathers, the quality of his helmet's paint, the wear and tear of the machinery: that stuff, so important in photographs frozen on magazine pages, was absolutely peripheral to the real life force. I was united with those millions of spectators in England and across Europe who had seen Hailwood and knew him no better than I. The crowds came to witness his ability. There could be no greater attraction than that.

His special talent carried him across several generations of machines. He began racing in 1957, a teenager on a 125 MV Agusta. He won his last Isle of Man race, the 500cc Senior, in 1979, at 38, on a 500cc Suzuki. The technology separating those machines is more than a feature of time. It's one of space. It's as if Orville Wright had endured long enough to be Neil Armstrong, too. Only Hailwood's special talent made that journey across decades in racing equipment possible.

Racing today belongs, at the top at least, to the technocrats, to riders who approach motorcycle racing as engineering work: gathering information, establishing categories, sub-dividing those units, building relationships, testing theories. By all accounts Hailwood was no technocrat; his abilities were more impressionistic than analytical. Because the mechanical dimension didn't involve him, he didn't lower lap times by subtle reconstruction or adjustment of the equipment. His power was sheer riding genius, the ability to extract time out of distance when all states—rider, machine and pavement—became dynamic. His was the difference, perhaps, between science and artistry.

Hailwood took so little out of motorcycling and gave back so much. He gave life to racing's impossible dream: that success could come early and develop as naturally as growing up. He showed that awesome talent, tied to a man confident of his own self-worth and comfortable with himself, would not lead to consuming egotism. He verified the secret hope of all men aging: that time could not gut the talent and force of youth. He demonstrated that motorcycle racing could be heroic theater. Outside motorcycle circles he was widely recognized as a winner, and motorcyclists everywhere shared in that recognition. This man at ease with himself reassured this sport of its own importance. But most of all he gave motorcycling his majesty.

Godspeed.

—Phil Schilling