

Hailwood's Greatest Race

Everyone knows about Mike Hailwood's 1978 TT comeback.
But then came Mallory



Mid-race and Hailwood (4) has briefly got in front of Cowie to challenge Read (3) for the lead

When I was a kid, life was in black and white. The flicks, TV, magazines – even heroes were in black and white. In those days the past held everyone in its grip. Those were the rules. Mike Hailwood broke them.

He had retired in the age of pudding basins and black leathers, Elvis and teddy boys. He came back when the Beatles were a memory and punk was in its death throes to win against the best riders on the toughest circuit on the planet, the Isle of Man TT. On a five year old bike. The feat was incomprehensible. Along with the Island's stars, Hailwood was booked for that year's Mallory post-TT meeting.

I'd missed the Island—I wouldn't miss Mallory. Nor, it would seem 30,000 others and their step ladders. My view took in most of the straight, Gerrards, the back straight and the esses. Enough.

Races came and went. I only remember the one: Hailwood v Read. Read, seven times world champion, on a Honda 998cc factory four. Hailwood, nine times world champion, on his already legendary Ducati. A bunch of Britain's best in the pack.

The warm up lap, Read first into view, followed by John Cowie, a fast-rising star on his 998cc Kawasaki. Then the man himself.

He was instantly recognisable. The wilder boys were all over their machines like adolescents at their first party. Hailwood was implacably still and for a big man, always surprisingly neat. But the Duke looked like a piece of farm machinery. Its pipes were practically at ground level. What was he thinking?

They tipped into Gerrards, the pack untidily behind them. The Duke shuddered alarmingly over the bumps. At least the pipes didn't seem to scrape. Must be the camber. The last straggler misfired through the Esses and all the noise subsided into that extraordinary hush only a big crowd can create when it collectively draws breath. Then the sudden roar of what sounded like a bomber squadron, and the bunch thundered into view led by Read, Cowie and already a couple of lengths down, Hailwood.

The pattern was set. Lap after lap, Read led Cowie, or Cowie led Read, with Hailwood in tow, usually several lengths back. Once, Hailwood was between them and the roar could have started a bush fire on a wet November in Grimsby. But the next time he was back to third. They seemed to close as they entered Gerrards but that was just perspective. They stretched out on the back straight, then concertinaed into the esses: Read impressively determined, Cowie leaning to both sides of the bars as if trying to see past him, Hailwood rock steady, bending the recalcitrant Duke to his will.

Midway though and the pundits, looking for any sign that Hailwood had something in reserve, concluded that he hadn't. 'That Honda's got so much power he just pisses off along the back.' 'And it steers so much quicker, he'll be taking yards out of them at the hairpin' 'Yeah but Cowie's all over Read when he gets close.' Imperceptibly, the focus of interest changed. Hailwood had not lost face: third behind two of the strongest riders in the UK after so many years out - that was

a result.

Of course we'd love him to win, but now we were rooting for Cowie - Read was always more respected than liked. But Read dominated. Cowie might have headed him once or twice, but no one thought he could stay ahead. 'He's an old fox Ready.' 'He knows he's got him.' And it seemed he had. On the last lap they came past us in the familiar formation. Read pulled a couple of yards round Gerrards and the pundits exchanged knowing glances. The trio, now with two or three clear lengths between each of them, hurtled along the back straight.

Then, inexplicably, everything changed. Read and Cowie braked in concert into the Esses. Hailwood forty yards down didn't! We all froze, time itself froze as, shocked into silence we watched the big Ducati rocketing towards the inevitable crash. It didn't happen. Instead, Hailwood swept majestically between Read and Cowie as though they were stuck in quick sand and left them for dead.

Astonishment turned into a continuous riot of yelling and cheering, to confirm what we could only guess at: that he'd kept that lead to the finish and won.

It was over. In one heart-stopping manoeuvre Hailwood had shown why he had dominated. We had seen it and still couldn't take it in. 25 years later I still can't. Ten seconds of genius had illustrated a career and an entire generation.

In that moment, as in so many others, Hailwood showed the rare gift he had of leaving the world brighter than when he found it.

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