

DICK MANN

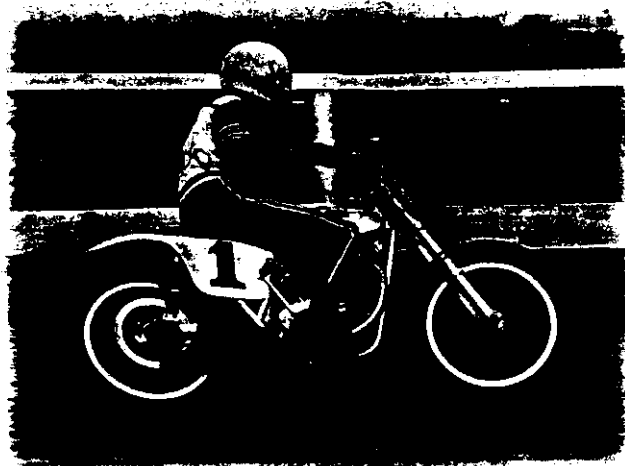
Dick Mann is and always has been just a motorcycle racer.

That's a rare thing these days. In the '90s, there are road racers, dirt-trackers and motocrossers. Sure, there's the occasional crossover—a dirt-tracker landing a factory ride in Superbikes or a motocrosser taking up hare scrambles and enduro competition. But mostly, racers fit into niches.

Not Dick Mann. From the early 1950s into the '70s, he not only competed in just about every type of racing on two wheels, he excelled.

Mann is best known as a two-time AMA Grand National Champion, winning that prestigious title in 1963 and 1971. In those days, the Grand National Series challenged a rider on five different types of racetracks—quarter-mile, half-mile and mile dirt ovals, rugged TT steeplechase courses and asphalt road-race circuits. In 1972, Mann became the first racer in history to complete the "Grand Slam," winning at least one race on each of those courses.

He won 24 Grand National races in all, perfectly balanced between 12 dirt tracks and 12 road races. His first win in 1959 and his last win in '72 both came on the rough-and-tumble Peoria TT course. But in between, he also tamed the smooth asphalt of Daytona for back-to-back victories in the 200 in 1970 and '71.



REFLECTIONS OF A RACER'S LIFE

That was just the start of Mann's versatility, though. In 1969, he helped bring motocross to America, and won the AMA's first professional MX race. Two years later, he was representing the U.S. in the famous Trans-Atlantic Match Races, a road-race series pitting the little-known Americans against established pavement stars from Great Britain.

And when his days as a pro were over, he got interested in the International Six Days Trial, the most challenging event in the off-road world. In 1975, he qualified for the American

team and finished his one and only ISDT, held on the Isle of Man.

Now 63, Mann is still a motorcycle racer, competing in vintage motocross events. He also has a small business building and selling vintage race bikes—not restored museum pieces, but hopped-up old machines like the ones he raced during his days as a pro.

Recently, photographer (and former American Motorcyclist staff member) Rick Kocks discovered a trove of classic Dick Mann photos in his files. And when Mann came to Ohio to serve as grand marshal of AMA Vintage Motorcycle Days, Kocks and



Contemplating a rainout in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, 1971: "It's as hard to learn how to lose as it is to learn how to win."
page: Circling the track at the 1972 San Jose Race of Champions.

It was basically a very long oval with two mile straightaways. But the corners were only a little bigger than a quarter-mile track.

You had to be careful, because as you sat there on the start, you sunk in the sand. A lot of guys would dump the clutch and stall out. Then you'd be going down the wet beach, and there was just a big giant fog from the spray, a total vapor bank, so you couldn't see the first turn. About 15 or 20 guys would go straight up the beach and not make the first turn.

You'd been out testing and you thought your motorcycle would run 116 mph, but then you'd be in this giant pack and it'd run 120, and you couldn't see next to you and you couldn't see around you.

There was a giant transition coming off the clay in the north turn, which was very tight, onto the main road, where Highway A1A is now. And the road was very rough pavement, undulating quite badly.

Toward the end of the paved straight, the speeds everyone talked about always seemed inflated because they were determined by RPM. If you were doing 7,200 and you did the math with your wheel diameter, boy, you were running 132 mph! But basically a lot of that was wheel-spin, because you were off the ground so much.

The first two-thirds was slightly uphill, and you went downhill near the end. No one I knew who didn't lie said they went down the paved stretches wide open the

At the AMA's first pro motocross, with Gunnar Lindstrom: "As it turned out, John Penton and I wrote the rules for professional motocross."

first time.

It's hard to describe how rough that road was. We would buy surplus foam rubber 4 inches thick and put it on the tank, but even then you were totally black and blue on your arms and chest by the end. And all the motorcycles there, even the very best ones, wobbled. The worst of them violently wobbled. All the standard Harley KR750s models wobbled the whole race, and they just rode them.

Today they'd black flag 'em and tell them to get off the track.

On dragging knees:

In Mann's day, the pinnacle of American racing was flat-tracking. When it came to road racing, our best riders were considered novices in comparison to the Europeans. But that would change when Americans started venturing overseas in the '70s.

Our first style of road racing in the '50s was that we put our feet down wherever we needed to. We weren't bound by tradition. If you could go faster by putting your foot down, you put your foot down.

The Europeans laughed at us for that.



But when we finally went to England in '71 for the Match Races, when the race was in the rain, we'd beat 'em. We'd ride right around them. And that was a giant surprise to all of us.

Prior to that, all you heard and all you read was that we were a bunch of cowboys, and we believed it, too. We didn't have any way to tell. But now the best in the world drag their knees harder than we ever dragged our feet.

On Kenny Roberts:

Mann's career was nearing its end when Kenny Roberts, who would become the first of many American road-racing heroes, appeared on the scene. From the beginning, his natural talent and will to win wowed more than the fans.

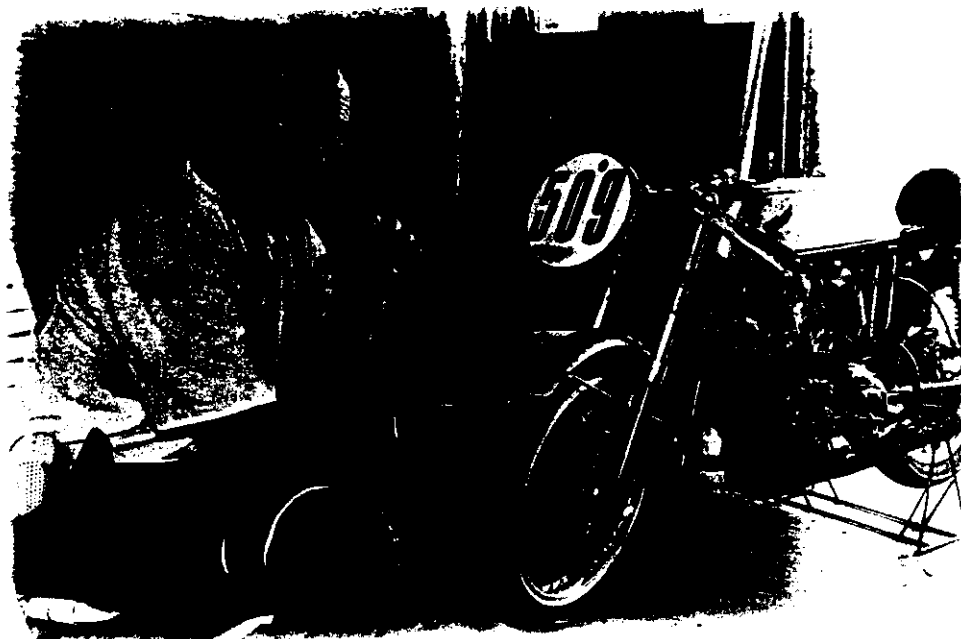
Kenny was fantastic from the day he came to the racetrack. I hadn't seen anyone like him before, and I doubt we ever will again.

If you rate guys on plateaus, there's one little narrow plateau at the top with Kenny Roberts. Below that there's a second narrow plateau with a lot of others. They're still 20 levels above the guys who are just really good.

I think he'd progressed far enough by Daytona in '72 that he was quite a bit better than us. By then he had picked up a lot more of the modern style. The bikes and tires weren't good enough to skid around on yet, but he did it anyway.

About that time, I realized this was no longer a feasible way to make a living. I had always thought I could do this for a long time. But suddenly a bike was slow because it only went 176

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Taking a break at Vintage Motorcycle Days, 1997: "I don't really consider myself a winner. When you were looking at the list of guys who would win, I wasn't on it all the time."

MANN: Continued from page 28

mph or so. I was almost 40 years old, but age had nothing to do with it. Experience was the worst part, because the older you got, the more experience you had, and more of it was bad.

On motocross:

By the late '60s, American racing was beginning to fracture into separate disciplines. Road racing was developing its own identity, and people in America were starting to talk about motocross, a rougher version of American scrambles racing. Typically, Mann liked every part of the expanding range of competition.

I lobbied the AMA really hard to start some motocrosses. I even rode some outlaw events. They pulled my license and fined me. John Penton (originator of the Penton motorcycle) did the same, and they pulled his license, too.

But as it turned out, at the next AMA Congress meeting, John Penton and I wrote the rules for professional motocross. The first event was put on by (three-time Daytona winner) Dick Klamfoth in 1969. Gunnar Lindstrom (who would go on to finish third in the AMA's first professional 250cc National Motocross Championship in 1972) was working for Husqvarna then and was traveling in the area, so he showed up to race in the 250cc and 400cc class.

I was working for Yankee (a short-lived American bike maker) at the time, doing development for them. So I rode it. Lindstrom won the 400, and I won the 250.

We raced three 20-minute motos in the 250 class. He won one, I won one, and it came down to the third. He crashed near the end and I got the champagne.

On the ISDT:

Mann had just retired from professional racing in 1975 when he took on a new challenge, the International Six Days Trial, now known as the International Six Days Enduro. Woods riding wasn't high on Mann's resume, but he entered the Six Days, held that year on the Isle of Man, anyway. The scoring system for the Six Days is complex, with a percentage of the fastest riders getting gold medals, slightly slower riders getting silver, and those who survive to the finish getting bronze.

All the best stories about the Six Days are from the guys who get bronze medals. If you got a gold, it means everything went well and you didn't have bad luck.

Bronze means something really bad happened and you made it anyway.

I got a bronze.

I was riding an Ossa, and I was doing all right, but on the fourth day it rained and snowed. Before the first check, I put the brake on, and the rear backing plate just exploded.

I got another backing plate at the second check and put it in my jacket, but I barely made it in on time, so I couldn't put it on. I got to the next check as hard as I could go, and got there just within my grace period, too. It was that way all day.

The day before, I had broken my toe, and the front fork check valve broke and pumped the oil out, so the forks were bottoming and beating my hands. At the next-to-last check, I was on pace for gold. But on a long uphill to the final check, my chain came off. By the time I got it back on, I had lost a minute and was on silver.

I made a big decision that night that I had to fix the bike. The next morning, I put the backing plate on in the 10 minutes before the event, and when I got to the first farmhouse that had a driveway, I went down it, hid behind a tree and took the fork apart. Basically, I overhauled the bike and did all the maintenance I should have been doing for the first four days.

The choice was either fix it and take a bronze or don't finish.

On Dick Mann:

For all his accomplishments, Dick Mann remains a very down-to-earth guy. He'll talk for hours on all aspects of racing, but coaxing a boast from him is impossible. After all the years, he still considers himself just a motorcycle racer.

I don't really consider myself a winner. I didn't win a lot of races, and when you were looking at the list of guys who would win, I wasn't on it all the time.

Sometimes, that made it easy. Even when I was No. 1, nobody thought I was going to win. If it was a road race, it was always (Cal) Rayborn or (Kenny) Roberts. My style of road-racing, it always looked like I lucked into it, and maybe I did. If things went right, then I might win.

It's as hard to learn how to lose as it is to learn how to win. But if you don't learn how to lose, you'll have a hard time.

Believe me, I know how to lose. I got it down perfect.

If you think I did well, I'm flattered, but if you think I think I did well, I'm embarrassed. ■