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Nixon
Iron man's untold story



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CLASSIC MANX GRAND PRIX - **ALL THE ACTION**

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*On occasion a racer becomes so well known that their number becomes a trademark. Today Valentino Rossi is number 46, and Barry Sheene will forever be number 7. But for race fans the world over number 9 will only ever mean **Gary Nixon**. **Norm DeWitt** talks to the hard man of racing.*



Gary was an athlete in his youth, playing all the usual sports, until he stopped growing. "I was pretty good at basketball, didn't get taller, pretty good at football, didn't get bigger, playing baseball I got hit in the head so decided that was too dangerous," reflected Nixon. Coming to the conclusion that it was safer to drag race motorcycles, at the age of 15 the 4ft 11in, 89lb Nixon was a champion on a 1953 sprung hub Triumph Thunderbird owned by a bootlegger.

Gary moved into scrambles with a 500 dirt track Triumph twin formerly ridden by Sammy Tanner. "The first place I rode it was in the state championship scrambles and took second, so I kind of got the bug. The next year I cheated on my birth certificate and signed up as a professional in 1958, right after I turned 17."

Gary honed his craft racing for a couple of years at Santa Fe, Illinois,

and the other dirt short tracks at various county fairgrounds in the Midwest. Dennis Mahan provided a bike for Gary to have his first Daytona 200 experience, in 1960 on the beach, the wrong track to be racing on a bike without top end. "Well, the top bikes were going about 120mph, and I was going about 89, partly because of ignition problems. I got lapped on the fourth and then the ignition quit."

Racing AMA pro on a 500 Triumph, Gary had a strong debut at the 1962 Springfield Mile. "Markel was leading and I'm in second when the gas line came off. I came into the pits and they filled it back up with gas. I took off; hell it was running so fast the clutch wouldn't even hold it. I think I ended up sixth. Anyway, I come in and I was saying how fast it was; so the guy where they got the gas from said, 'oh boy, don't let 'em test that gas', the Triumph Illinois guys were running 'fuel' in it or something."

Gary Nixon

that famous number 9



For once not racing under the number 9, Gary Nixon (18) dives into Devil's Elbow ahead of Tony Jefferies.

On the banking

Daytona 1964 was the first year of motorcycle racing on the high banks. Gary led the 200 for much of the race but a botched pit stop from overfilling the oil tank cost him his chance at victory, finishing second behind repeat winner Roger Reiman. At Daytona 1965 it was very much a question of survival, with the race held in miserable conditions. Gary remembers: "We were bad-ass all week, but before the race we put a new tyre on for the main event and it was just so slick, it was like riding on ice. We didn't crash and got fourth."

Despite the high winds, low visibility and wet conditions, Roger Reiman averaged over 90mph, a three time Daytona winner for good reason.

At Daytona in 1966, Nixon led the race, until being caught by Buddy Elmore. "It was the first year we had the factory stuff over, the things were blowing up all the time, and we took all the broken crap we had and were building engines on Saturday night." Elmore, who had blown up five engines in practice, had started in the back and had a trouble free run to the finish. Gary still held a strong second place, but a flat tyre near the end of the race dropped him to ninth.

At Springfield it came together for Nixon. "There were 14 of us in the lead pack; the only lap I led was the last. Going down the back straight I looked over at Markel and realized 'God, I won that thing' and then threw up in my helmet."

In 1967 Gary Nixon had his greatest season, winning five National races, including what was to be his only win in the Daytona 200 on Doug Hele's Triumph Tiger T100R. He had a furious race-long battle at Daytona with team-mate Dick Hammer; until near the end when Hammer crashed in turn one, finishing seventh with a broken collarbone received in the tumble. The 67 factory racer was a Doug Hele tours de force, with six Triumphs finishing in the top 10. Gary also won the 250GP race.

Nixon recalls "In '67 everything just went perfect. We won the short track (Santa Fe), Carlsbad, Daytona. At Carlsbad it looked like rain was coming in, so I talked them into running the 500 race first. In the 250, I had blown up my Yamaha in the heat, and just got it fixed before the race. They forgot to mix oil with my gas and it was so fast, I was passing everybody until it seized up on me and I crashed, ended up breaking my thumb. I had a National the next weekend at Oklahoma City, but couldn't turn the throttle. Dick Bender, my mechanic, took a door spring, wound it backwards and put it on the handlebar to hold the throttle open. When you let the throttle go, it would open up. With my broken thumb I could shut it off, but I could not turn it on, it was a great idea.

As it turned out, I got second behind Freddie Nix in the race, and won the Championship. So, going down the back straight 'Showoff' Nixon's doing this wheelie on this rigid frame, with two or three inches of fork travel and a broken thumb. I let the front wheel down pretty hard and it hits on the front end, my hand came off the handlebar and you know what happened then? There's the turn three fence right in front of me!" Somehow surviving the victory lap, Gary Nixon had won the 1967 National Champion over George Roeder.



Master on the dirt – with the #1 plate secured Europe became the target.

The Trans Atlantic Match Races proved a great stepping stone to Europe.





"He was just a cool guy to hang out with, cruising around in his Rolls-Royce. Barry and Steve Parrish were the only guys I'd trust going fast in a street car with."

International opposition

The following season brought an international flavour and two-strokes to the Daytona 200, with Phil Read, Peter Williams, Rod Gould, and Mitsuo Ito. The Triumphs were not competitive that year against the Harley-Davidsons; Cal Rayborn won the first of his two Daytona 200s. "We were running 135mph, the Harleys were running 150. I told them they needed to put a mirror on the thing, so I could see which side they were going by me on."

Harley-Davidson's Freddie Nix was untouchable on the mile races, sweeping all four events. Gary, with more consistent performances but only two National wins, took the title fight down to the finale at Ascot Park in California. Gary Nixon finished ahead, the National Championship his for the second consecutive year.

In 1969 Triumph was allowed to increase capacity to 650cc, which should have been in Nixon's favour, however at Santa Rosa, they didn't have hay bales on all the 4x4 fence posts. Gary recalls: "We were having problems with the bike running way too lean in the midrange with the GP carbs, so I'd come into turn three and punch it down into third and turn it wide open."

When I shifted down it caught neutral, I laid it down and hit that 4x4 fence post. My leg was broken and my left femur was sticking out thru my leather pants, with blood squirting out. I had an 18in metal rod, a 'nail' they called it, put in my leg. They had to cut a lot of muscle away, and I just wasn't that good on the dirt tracks anymore."

Gary was one of the first Americans to race in England, being the precursor of the Match races that would follow the next season. Gary recalls: "In 1970 we kind of started it, when Yvon (Duhamel) and I went over for the Race of the Year at Mallory Park. I was on the Triumph triple, one of the factory spares. You had to push start 'em, and Mike Hailwood was the flagman. I had an 18in stainless steel rod in my leg and I'd never done a push start before. Mike and I were buddies, so when I started pushing he threw the flag, so I got to the first turn with the pack."

For 1971 BSA-Triumph was determined to win Daytona, running 10 bikes. The US team, unaware that upgraded bikes were coming, expected more of the 1970 design. The existing bikes were prepared for the established team riders, and Gary was assigned one of the new bikes, the others being for BSA's Hailwood and Emde, and Triumph's Paul Smart. The 'low boy' bikes were a revelation, lower and lighter, a much more compact aerodynamic and nimble package.

The joy was shortlived, as management needed the top riders on the new bikes. National champ Gene Romero was reassigned the Triumph version, at Nixon's expense. When asked for a comment about giving up the superior 'low boy' Triumph, Gary clearly recalls the situation. "Well, I was out training on a 250 BSA, I'd just had the 18in nail taken out of my leg, and when I put out my leg, it broke it."

I called Doug Hele and told him that I couldn't bend my leg very far. I need you to lower the pegs," I said. They gave the bike to Burrito, I could have won that race. I went to (team manager) Danny Macias and called him a #%*\$# (a string of expletives that could easily fill this magazine).





Taking on the best of the Brits at Mallory Park on the Suzuki

Making buddies

At the first Trans-Atlantic Match races in 1971, Gary Nixon was the only American who had raced in England, but at Brands Hatch in practice, it all went wrong for Nixon. "Brands Hatch, that's what the Dunlop triangular tyres were made for. I put my Goodyear tyres on, and coming out of Clearways, the thing lost traction and high-sided me. The doctors diagnosed me as having a broken wrist, but when I returned to America, it turned out it was just a sprain."

Looking back, Gary Nixon recalls how stacked the deck was against the Americans. "We'd get over there Tuesday or Wednesday, jet lagged out. They'd be at the tracks all the time, and they'd all this equipment, and no jetlag. It was just really unfair for us, and they never came here."

The British riders were equipped with the latest low-boy Rob North chassis with short circuit racing spec tanks, where only two of the American riders had the latest spec bikes, Dick Mann and Don Castro, the others with the 1970 chassis with big Daytona tanks.

These inaugural Match Races saw the beginning of a lifetime friendship between Gary and Barry Sheene. Gary – "I had met him the year before; he was the only English guy that came to our hotel, and ended up being friends with us. He was just a cool dude, the only one of their Match Race guys to hang out with us. At the '71 Race of the Year, I was running the spare Triumph 3 cylinder. The BSA/Triumph riders had a big crash at Devil's Elbow, and it messed Smart's bike up so they took my bike. Barry loaned me his 350, he had just won the 350 race. The thing wobbled so bad, I couldn't even ride it"

Gary describes Barry as the best he ever raced with, a great guy and close friend. "He was just a cool guy to hang out with, cruising around in his Rolls-Royce. Barry and Steve Parrish were the only guys I'd trust going fast in a street car with." Gary Nixon – "There are a hundred stories I can't tell you. At Daytona back in '77, they were doing a 'Barry Sheene – this is your life' thing. I was, "well one time we were, uh, no I can't tell you that one, another time we were, uh hell there wasn't much I could tell 'em."

Gary has fond memories of working with BSA/Triumph's resident genius, Doug Hele. "A real race guy, that three cylinder (the 1971 low-boy factory Trident) was the best four-stroke bike I ever rode until the MotoGP Kawasaki I rode in 2006."

At Ontario during practice Doug Hele comes up to me with a slide rule and says, 'Hey, we don't have to stop, don't tell anybody'. Me and Yvon are battling back and forth in the race, and he stopped for the fastest gas stop there ever was, so they are waiting for me to stop. I won the first race and in the second I was leading and John Cooper is right behind me (on the bike about to be claimed by Bob Bailey) when Reg Pridmore on a Honda blew up right in front of me in a third gear 100mph corner. John was behind and over to the right, so I hit the oil and he missed it."

On to the stokers

1972 brought Gary to Team Hansen Kawasaki, an unproductive year, memorable for continual reliability problems. For 1973, Erv Kanemoto and Gary Nixon raced an H2R Kawasaki for the AMA National championships. Erv Kanemoto – "I was paid 1000 dollars per race by Kawasaki, and had to pay for the tyres and all the expenses of running the bike." When asked how on earth he made that work, Erv answers: "Basically you couldn't. We were counting on a little bit of prize money, but for me it was trying to get started so that things would be better in the future."

Erv recalls: "The bike was close to standard, although there were some changes to the machine." One of the more ingenious features was when they noticed that the tyres could have a better contact patch with a wider rim. Machining the available rims into three sections, Erv welded up special wider rims that gave the tyre that desired wider contact patch.

For '74 Erv and Gary moved on to Suzuki for two years. To say that riding the 750-3 Suzuki was a challenge, likely does not properly tell the tale. Merv Wright (Suzuki USA team manager) recalls: "Right after Daytona we did some testing at Road Atlanta. We had Paul Smart, Cliff Carr, and Gary; to ride three identical bikes fresh out of the crate from the factory. Smarty came in all white faced and said he couldn't ride the damn thing. They had built these things in Japan with a Japanese rider who was 98lb soaking wet, on a test track that was smooth, then they'd say they were wonderful and ship them over here. For Loudon, we secured a special frame with an adjustable steering head angle and stiffer swingarm designed by Erv Kanemoto, and built by C and J.

"We disguised the frame as best we could to make it appear like the normal factory frame, going to great lengths to fit the standard fairings. Gary Nixon got to ride the bike at Loudon, and ran away from the field, while his team-mates were left floundering about. I got myself in the wringer for that one, but on the other hand, the bloody thing won! Needless to say, the Japanese management figured out what we had done, and it was awkward to say the least."

Gary's trail of tears at the Trans-Atlantic Match races continued. "I think it was 1974, we were at Oulton Park, the team was winning the Championship and on that last lap coming down that big hill, I ran out of gas." Score it England 416, America 401. Gary's adventures with Sheene continued. "Barry was working on his helicopter licence, Steve Parrish was with him. Going out for a test, he had one with pontoons, which was heavier. With me on, it wouldn't get off the ground, so he asked if I didn't mind staying behind. So he lifted off; he gets to 10,000ft and shut the engine off. He wouldn't have told me, it just would have happened. I would have freaked out. Another time, he had a chopper they'd loaned him while they worked on his, so he could get to Mallory Park and back. We're on the way back from Mallory when I notice the gas gauge. I asked

him what happens when we run out of gas? Barry said, 'Well, it gets real quiet' they finally let us land at some Air Force base."

Erv and Gary had also been working on the concept of a two-stroke triple for the dirt mile tracks. Gary recalls: "In 1974, the last dirt tracks I rode with Erv Kanemoto, we built a Kawasaki three cylinder triple, which is where Roberts and them got the idea for that one (the TZ750) that he won with at Indy in '75. I rode it at the San Jose mile the week before I had my big crash in Japan. A chain ended up breaking and I didn't make the main, but Scott Brelsford rode it the next time and just blew 'em away."

Gary got the opportunity to partner Sheene at Assen at the 1974 Dutch GP, but before was off to Japan for testing the latest GP weapon, the RG500. Factory test rider Ken Aroka had just set the lap record the week before at the Suzuki Hamamatsu Test Track. Nixon – "Well, I go out; he comes past me and motions for me to follow him. It's his track and he wants to show me the good way around. Well, stupid-ass me, I passed him back. On the second time through I'm in fifth, as I'm coming up into this corner I've never been around fast before. My bike had been too lean, and seized just as Ken made a move to pass me on my left, knowing he could go through there wide open. He was so close; he hit my real wheel, and my bike de-barked a tree 12ft in the air at 120mph, tearing the bike in half. Ken hadn't done anything wrong, s**t happens. I broke my arms, my leg, my back, my teeth, and my pocketbook. I wasn't insured on the 'racetrack' but this was the test track, so my insurance paid for most of it."

Merv Wright continues: "I've seen x-rays of Gary after that crash, with all the plates, screws, and god knows what all he had in both forearms. He nevertheless showed up at Daytona (1975), and actually qualified." As Gary says: "I ran at Daytona, but my arm broke apart again; with a

broken arm I qualified in 29th place. My left arm came apart driving my Z car and my right arm came apart in practice at Daytona, so I didn't start the race. I only broke 33 bones in 50 years of racing; that's not too bad."

As if Gary wasn't already well acquainted with the potential for injury in the sport, in 1975 he almost had a ringside seat to the severe downside of running flat out around Daytona with the Suzuki when Barry Sheene had a massive accident on the banking. "We were testing at Daytona in 1975. I was like 10 seconds a lap slower than Barry. Barry was going to do a 200 mile run and said 'Hey Nixon, come on out with me and I'll get you back up to speed.' so I went into the pits to get my bike and there was something wrong with the gearbox so I didn't go out.

"If I'd have been there, I would have been right behind him drafting. When it crashed him, he had my T-shirt on. If it had been me, I would have said, 'Whoa, I'm never gonna wear that again, that's unlucky' but because he didn't get killed going about 178mph, he figured that shirt and his blue pants was his lucky stuff, he wore 'em every race after that.

"Texaco and others would say, 'here, we'll give you £100,000, wear our shirt' and he would say, 'no I have to wear this', often driving 1976 Suzuki GB team manager Merv Wright to the point of complete distraction."

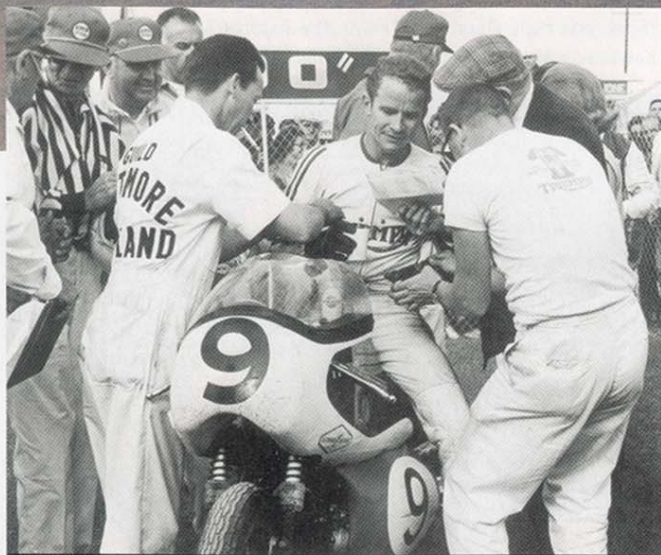
Making his comeback after a full year of recovery, Gary had a special Suzuki that Erv had assembled for Ontario with shorter 250 motocross rods that revved to almost 11,000rpm when the normal triple would only turn 8200. Roberts won the race; with Gary Nixon running in second with the Kanemoto modified Suzuki until flywheel rivets came loose near the end. At the end of 1975, US Suzuki closed road racing operations, so the Erv and Gary show again had to find yet another team. The frustration factor was high. Gary says: "I won the road racing championship and Kawasaki quits; I come back with a killer bike and Suzuki quits."

Nixon pushes the ill handling Suzuki to the limit at Daytona.





Nixon works hard to stay ahead of Dave Potter in the Silverstone Formula 750 race.



In the victory circle with the Triumph at Daytona.

Moral victory

Erv Kanemoto, Kawasaki, and a still healing Gary Nixon again teamed up, running the new, large diameter tube frame with superior suspension; to cradle the powerful water cooled two-stroke triple, for an assault on the FIM F750 Championship in 1976. Nixon started off with a solid second to Cecotto on the dominant Yamaha OW31 at Daytona, Gary's last podium in the 200. He followed that up with a win in the obscene heat of Venezuela, however the officials later gave the race win to Steve Baker on the Yamaha, a decision that would prove crucial to Nixon's championship hopes, a controversy that continues to reverberate through the racing community to this day.

Merv Wright – "I was right there, Steve came in, parked the bike against the pit wall. A little while later he comes back out again, but the idiot scorers had him on the same lap, which is absolute nonsense. I talked to the Yamaha distributor who was sponsoring both the race and Cecotto. I asked him 'what in the hell are you playing at?' He looked at me rather surprised and told me to my face 'You know, it's very important that Yamaha wins this race'. I gave the FIM my scoring sheets, which proved to have been a mistake."

Nixon is even less diplomatic: "On the second or third lap, of a two minute long course, Baker is running second, I'm running sixth, and then

Baker pulls off into the pits. They take off part of the fairing, bang on the carburettor, put it back together and then he supposedly pulls back out right behind me in seventh if you can believe that, and ends up 'winning' the race. It was the FIM European Mafia, the guy from Yamaha Venezuela told them that winning on a Kawasaki wasn't good for business.

Erv was busy running the lap board and keeping track of Gary's progress. Erv said: "I saw when Baker came in the pits, and he was coasting in, with fuel pouring out of the fairing. My instinct was 'well, I don't have to worry about him'. I think it was the next morning they posted the new result. They said he (Baker) came in and then immediately came back out, but the guy that worked for Cycle News back then had pictures of the fairing off. I thought that Merv's lap chart would clear everything up, but it probably disappeared."

Gary Nixon – "Erv got sick in Venezuela, and I was supposed to go to the airport to make sure the bike got shipped properly, but I didn't have my own car and didn't get there. To screw with me, they shipped my bike to Australia instead of Imola, so the next week when I showed up at Imola, my bike wasn't there. Kenny Roberts and Kel Carruthers had a spare bike and let me ride it, but the shift was on the wrong (left) side, Sheene and I shifted on the right side. I was 41st, a non-qualifier."

Nixon had been in a season long point battle with Spain's Victor Palomo (Yamaha) and upon hearing Nixon's appeal, the FIM threw out the supposedly 'confused' results of the Venezuelan race, giving Palomo the Championship. Gary reflects: "Roger DeCoster told me to be sure and go over, if nothing else I suppose just to see just how they were going to screw me. I go to the FIM meeting at Brussels in November and you could clearly see from the lap chart they had, that Baker was in the pits all that time. They screwed me and the horse I rode in on, and it's still being talked about."

As a minor consolation, at the end of the year the AMA Athlete of the Year award was given for the first time, taking into account all disciplines of motorcycle racing. Gary Nixon was given the award. Again to Gary and Erv's complete disbelief, Kawasaki quit racing, because they had a contract with Yvon Duhamel that paid him 100,000 dollars for any year that the team raced. For 1977 and 1978, Gary and Erv switched to the dominant TZ750 Yamaha.

Handing over 9

In 1971, the AMA adopted the rule where former champions would run with single digit numbers. Toward the end of 1979 Gary approached Jay Springsteen about running his number 9, as Jay was looking for a single digit number. The 1978 season had been difficult for Gary, and the long adventure for championships was near an end.

"Springer's a hell of a nice guy and I thought 'what better dude could you have running your old number than Springer?' Now I've got a race team with him. A fan said to me, you should call your team 'Pair a Nines'." This year will be the third season for Springsteen riding 'Pair a Nines' bikes.

Gary never formally retired, he just never showed up for the next race. In 1992, Gary Nixon was invited to the inaugural 1992 BMW Battle of the Legends race at Daytona. He won the first race, and then came back to win two of three races again at Daytona in 1995, taking the overall win against some of the greatest riders of a generation. The last year for the series was 1997, and again Nixon won at Daytona, showing that he had not lost his touch. At Mallory Park in '95, Gary had a vicious 100mph highside, the third and hopefully last major crash of his long career. In vintage racing, Gary won the 2005 AHRMA National Championship in Formula Vintage at the age of 65.

Erv Kanemoto also has had his share of success after the years racing with Nixon. He was first contracted by the HRC factory WGP team from 1982-88, and then fielded his own GP team from 1989-02, prior to his position of technical director with the Repsol Honda Moto GP program in 2005. His machines have won a total of 64 Grands Prix and seven World Championships.

Gary's great friend Barry Sheene passed away in 2003. "In July of 02, he asked me to check on some cancer stuff in the Bahamas. I asked him what's that all about, and he told me a friend of his got cancer. He called me a month later and told me what it was, that he wanted me to hear it from him, and not online or something. About a month before he passed, I called and we had a long talk. Steve (Parrish) was going to go down, I was going to go along and hang out. He was a great dude, left this place way too early."

2006 brought Gary an opportunity to sample DePuniet's Kawasaki MotoGP racer. "I was at Springfield and Brian Catterson (editor of Motorcyclist) was riding a couple of miler bikes. We were sitting around having a beer, and I said: "You guys get to ride those damn MotoGP bikes, I don't get to ride 'em and I'm better than you guys. Brian says, 'OK, want to ride the Kawasaki in Valencia?' Uh, hell I'd have to bring my leathers, and I'd have to, uh."

Calling his bluff, a few months later Gary was astride the state of the art machine. "That thing is so fast. A 170-plus fifth gear wheelie and I wasn't trying'. It was a sixth gear straightaway but I just didn't have balls enough to put it in sixth gear because I wasn't getting out of the last turn as fast as Nicky (Hayden) and those guys.

"I never saw any signs, I never saw the shutoff markers, I never saw the lap board, I never saw the chequered flag. At that speed you are going so damned fast you couldn't take your eyes off where you are going. Those things are unbelievable, them guys aren't just from different countries, they're from different worlds. It was so bitching; I did what I wanted to do."

There is not a closing sentence that could better describe Gary Nixon.

Words **Norm DeWitt**

Photographs **Mortons Media Archive – Nick Nicholls and Norm DeWitt**



The spoils of victory (right) for the man with the gun-fighter eyes.

