

HUGGIN' THE CORNER

The legendary John Surtees is all concentration as he practices for the 1957 Nations Grand Prix at Monza, Italy.

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World **JOHN** SURTEES Champion

on two wheels and four

STORY BY: Mark Dill

Only one competitor in the long history of motorsports has claimed the Grand Prix World Championship for both cars and motorcycles. John Surtees, seven-time world champion motorcyclist, also won the Formula One World Championship with Ferrari in 1964. Through a career of triumph and challenge, the 74-year-old legend remains a force in motorsports.

Born in the English village of Tatsfield on Feb. 11, 1934, John Surtees posed for photos on his father's B14 Excelsior-JAP motorcycle by age two. It's not out of order to compare his relationship with his father, Jack Surtees, to the well-publicized bond between Tiger Woods and his dad.

With the end of World War II in 1945, Jack Surtees opened a motorcycle garage and resumed racing the sidecars he rode in the 1930s. In fact, son John's competition debut came at age 14 riding sidecar for his father, hanging fully outside the vehicle on left turns and draping himself over the

rear wheel on right corners. Jack won the race but officials disqualified them because John was underage for competition.

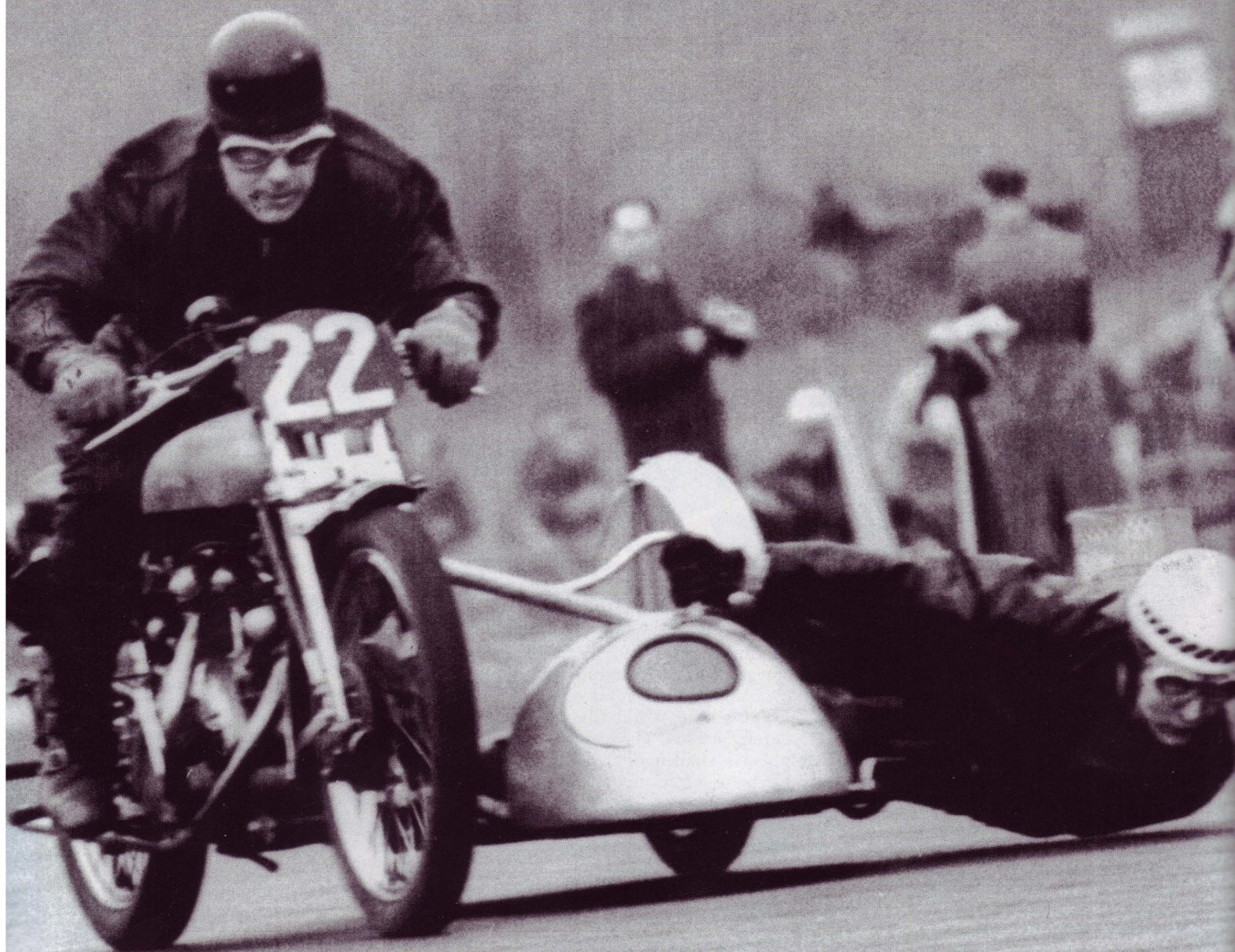
John first competed as a rider at age 16 on Easter Sunday in 1950 at Brands Hatch on a Triumph Tiger 70. He fell on a wet track late in the feature — the first of several that year — as he learned his craft.

With father Jack guiding him, John's next bike was a 499cc Vincent Grey Flash. June 3, 1951 proved a terrific day as young Surtees won three events at Brands Hatch. He picked up two more victories that year, as well as five second-place finishes.

Most impressive was his inspired run in rain at the Thruxton circuit in August 1951, when the 17-year-old prodigy finished second to World Champion Geoff Duke on the factory Norton. His old-school father kept him grounded. A needless risk might be met with a "hearty wallop" or stern warning. "Motorbikes are not made to fall off," Jack said, "and that is that."

ON THE EDGE

Jack Surtees leading a sidecar race at Brands Hatch in 1952 with C. Rous in the sidecar. John's father Jack introduced the younger Surtees to motorcycle racing at an early age. By 14, John was riding sidecar in races with his father.



It was Duke who Surtees measured himself against in his early career. Between the 350cc and 500cc classes, Duke won six world championships from 1951 to 1955.

Surtees once said, "We thought Geoff was so far ahead of all of us that a race of which he took part was only of interest to see who finished second."

In 1952, Surtees established himself with 16 wins in 28 races on Vincent and Norton bikes in British "short course" meets. He ran his first world championship race in the 500cc class at the Ulster GP in August, finishing sixth.

Surtees suffered his first significant injury in 1953. It came in his first attempt at the historic Isle of Man Tourist Trophy (TT). He had the opportunity to run for the Norton factory team in the 350cc and 500cc classes, but also accepted a private entry 125cc EMC-Puch ride.

During practice with the small bike, the forks collapsed and he broke his wrist, which required a month to heal. Still, Surtees finished the season with 23 victories in 36 races.

Surtees spent 1954 as a private entrant, mostly on Nortons. With 54 wins in 66 races, he earned a factory ride with Norton for the 1955 season but the ride was limited to races on the British Isles.

The results were fantastic. He picked up his first world championship win in Ireland's Ulster GP in August. In October, he finally defeated Duke in head-to-head competition at Silverstone. By the end of the season he racked up 70 wins in 84 races.

Despite retiring with engine problems, his one-off performance on a factory BMW bike at the German GP in June captured the attention of Count Domenico Agusta, head of MV Agusta motorcycles. A meeting with the Italian manufacturer produced Surtees' first full-season factory ride for 1956. Despite breaking his arm in the German GP 350cc race in July, 1956 was his breakthrough year. In 16 races, he won 13. His performance was so dominating he won the 500cc championship despite missing three of six races due to injury. He also scored his first Isle of Man TT win with his 500cc MV Agusta.

Mechanical failures plagued Agusta in 1957 and Surtees could not repeat his championship. He did collect 22 wins, mostly on private Norton and NSU entries.

What followed were three years of dominance. Surtees earned world championships in both the 500cc and 350cc classes from 1958 through 1960. In 1958 and 1959 he won 38 of 41 races, including five Isle of Man TTs.

The accolades flowed. In 1959 he was named a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), and that following season he was voted Sportsman of the Year by the London Daily Express and the English Sports Writer's Association. He was also named BBC Television's Sportsview Personality of the Year.

Despite success there was friction. Count Giovanni Agusta had forbidden Surtees from racing private bikes, reducing his schedule. Unhappy,



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TWO WORLDS

(Left) John Surtees flies high over the Ballaugh Bridge at the Isle of Man TT in 1957. (Right) Surtees in the bright red Ferrari at Spa-Francorchamps for the 1966 Belgian Grand Prix.



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A RACER'S PORTRAIT

Surtees sits in preparation for the start of a race.

Surtees considered other options. Among them were calls from Formula One teams.

With nothing in his MV Agusta contract prohibiting him from racing cars, Surtees competed in four Formula One GPs for Team Lotus in 1960, finishing second in Britain. He retired from motorcycles at the end of 1960. He also moved from Lotus to Reg Parnell's team for two years, finishing fourth in driver's points in 1962.

A move to Ferrari produced three turbulent years of infighting in the face of some outstanding success. Surtees won the German GP in 1963 followed by his World Championship season in 1964. He nearly lost his life in 1965 in a sports car accident at the Mosport Circuit in Canada.

The effects of spinal fractures were with him for years.

He left Ferrari after only two races in 1966 despite a victory in Belgium. He finished the season with Cooper-Maserati scoring another win in Mexico.

Unfortunately, much of the rest of John Surtees' Formula One career was an uphill battle. There were moments of glory, such as his triumph in the 1967 Italian GP for Honda, but mostly he struggled.

He had enjoyed success elsewhere, winning the 1966 Can-Am sports car championship and victories for Ferrari in the 1963 12 Hours of Sebring and the 1000 Kilometers of Nürburgring. An accomplished engineer, Surtees began a cooperative effort with Lola's Eric Broadley in 1965 starting with Formula Two cars, sports cars and later Formula 5000.

This blossomed into a Team Surtees Formula One effort in 1970. Surtees continued to drive for two years, retiring in 1972.

While highly respected for its engineering, Team Surtees struggled with sponsorship in the increasingly expensive sport. The stress of holding it together compromised his health in the 1970s. There were victories in Formula Two and Formula 5000, but Team Surtees was closed in 1978.

Surtees resurged in the 1980s, restoring motorcycles and autos. Currently, he owns a property management business and a motorsport consultancy.

Surtees now works with China's Haojue Company to produce a GP motorcycle team. Among other activities he helps groom young talent, including his 17-year-old son, Formula Renault's Henry Surtees. On June 14, 2008, John Surtees earned the title of OBE – Officer of the Order of the British Empire. ●



THE PRANCING HORSE

Surtees once again behind the wheel of the Ferrari 158 V8 in 1965. The previous year, he captured the World Championship for the prancing horse.

JOHN SURTEES Q&A

INTERVIEW BY: Mark Dill

John Surtees, world champion auto and motorcycle racer, remains active in motorsports at age 74. Surtees is sought after from all corners of the world for advice. He lobbies the United Kingdom government to support motorsports. He promotes karting for youth, consults Alabama's Barber Motorsports Park and is building a 125cc team with Haojue of China. When John Surtees speaks, racers listen.

Q: You must be pleased with MotoGP's high profile. What are their opportunities for growth?

Surtees: I'm a very interested spectator, and it is a great sport. To grow, the authorities need to strike a balance between technology and entertainment. We can't allow the electronics to overshadow the rider. The coming together of the rider and machine is what makes the sport. Making that connection stronger could bring closer racing at the front.

The balance is that top-grade racing should always be the test bed of technology. What we can't have is technology all down the category. Young riders need to learn how to come together with their machines.

Q: Are motorsports series doing enough to develop technologies for efficiency and alternative energy?

Surtees: I believe they always have. If you look back just a few years, you see great improvements in the efficiency of machines. Racing is so competitive, and much of it is about developing

people as well as technology. These people will make many different contributions in their careers. The racetrack has much to do with research and development. Keep in mind, though, that the objective of racing is to be quick.

Q: How is your project to launch a Chinese motorcycle race team going?

Surtees: It is in its very early stages. We are developing a 125cc machine and have tested in the UK and Italy. For now, the Chinese want to use motorsport to develop their technical knowledge and their people. I can imagine they will expand in the future.

Q: How does motorcycle racing today compare with the 1950s?

Surtees: Basically, the same type of person that raced then races today. The biggest difference is the amount of rubber on the track. We were running with less rubber, so there was a need for the rider to have more sensitivity to the machine. But I can't take anything away from riders today. (Casey) Stoner was magnificent in the wet in Germany.

Today we have the electronics, which is different. And we used to push our bikes to start. But racing with more rubber is the big difference. Today, the car and the motorcycle have come closer.

Q: Do you think it is still possible for a racer to win world championships with both bikes and cars?

Surtees: It is more possible now. We live in an age of data. The data helps so much in getting acquainted with a different machine. To

succeed, they have to stop one sport when they are getting better, not when they have passed their prime. But the opportunities exist. (Valentino) Rossi tested with Ferrari. Leaving your sport at the right time is a big decision.

Q: Two of your Formula One contemporaries, Jim Clark and Graham Hill, won the Indianapolis 500. Did you consider racing at Indianapolis?

Surtees: I was supposed to drive Graham Hill's winning car in 1966. I helped develop it with Lola and did much of the testing. I had a very serious accident in Canada at the end of 1965, and while I recovered, I suggested to owner John Mecom that he hire Graham. Later, with Honda in 1968, we considered coming to Indianapolis, but Honda decided to withdraw from racing.

Q: Motorcycles last raced at the Speedway 99 years ago. With narrow tires and light frames, what do you think were their challenges?

Surtees: Whenever you start something new, it comes from ignorance. They built on what they knew, and at the time it was bicycles. Any tire needs pushing through the air, and it simply is not a good aerodynamic shape. The engines were low power, and the wheels had to be narrow. The same applies today; the tires are smaller on the 250cc machines. They learned as they went along, but they had the same challenge, to take the machine to the limit.

Q: Any closing thoughts?

Surtees: I'm glad to see MotoGP at Indianapolis and would like to come see them. I like to see European-style road racing in America, and I wish Formula One was still at Indianapolis. I'm hopeful that will change. ●

