

# Legends of Motorcycling

## America's First World Champion

**I**N 1933, a sharp, level-headed young businessman named Jack Milne took a calculated risk that changed his life. Just four whirlwind years later, he became America's first World Champion motorcycle racer.

Born in Buffalo, New York, in 1907, Jack moved with his family to Pasadena, California, in the early 1920s, where he and his younger brother, Cordy, went to work for Western Union as messengers at the onset of the Great Depression. Both young men saved what money they could, and Jack eventually purchased a gas station, while the more impetuous Cordy purchased a motorcycle, which he converted into a speedway bike and went racing. A bona fide playboy and thrill seeker of the same ilk as the aviation barnstormers of the day, Cordy soon began bringing in \$15-30 per night in an era when the average wage was \$3.75 per day. That caught the attention of the business-minded Jack, who realized that motorcycle racing could provide a great living.

But it is doubtful that even mild-mannered Jack could've resisted the thrill of racing speedway, a sport that remains essentially the same today as it was during its loose formation in Australia in the early 1920s. It was there, on tracks made of shale, that riders began engaging in four-lap sprint races on methanol-burning single-cylinder machines stripped of all but the most essential components, namely the engine, frame, a tiny fuel tank, a seat, handlebars and controls.

And there were no brakes. In speedway, riders power-slide their motorcycles in the turns, using only the throttle and body positioning for control. Modern speedway bikes weigh a mere 170 lbs. and put out over 70 horsepower to the rear wheel, accelerating from 0-60 mph in under three seconds as the riders battle for supremacy in incredibly close racing. Watching a pack of four to six riders race inches from each other, during an intense four laps on tracks ranging from 1/8 to 1/4 mile at speeds from 50-85 mph is an amazing spectacle.

After selling his gas station in 1933 and ordering a pair of JAP speedway bikes from England, Jack was soon racing with Cordy up and down the West Coast in front of crowds as large as 18,000 people at stadiums in Los Angeles and Sacramento.

"There were six or seven stadium tracks in Southern California, and an equal

number up north...and they were regularly filled," Jack once told the LA Times. "California didn't have other pro sports, and motorcycle racing was big time."

Jack's fortunes almost turned tragic in 1934 when he suffered near career-ending back injuries, but he miraculously recovered and returned to racing in 1935,



finishing runner-up to Cordy in the American Speedway Championship before the brothers moved to Australia to race. Jack would go on to finish third in the 1935 Australian Speedway Championship, but he was just beginning to hit his stride. Returning home, he beat Cordy to land the American title before heading Down Under again and claiming the Australian National Championship. The next stop was England—a six-week boat trip from Australia—to race in the lucrative British League, a professional racing circuit that consisted of six-rider teams competing in races organized similar to a track meet.

"The London area alone had eight major tracks, ranging from a tenth to a third of a mile," Milne said. "During the late 1930s, speedway was Britain's major spectator sport. We raced as much as six nights per week. It was a grueling schedule."

The Milne brothers became instant celebrities in England, and they were in the right place at the right time when the inaugural World Speedway Championship was scheduled to take place before a crowd of 65,000 at London's Wembley Stadium in 1936. The top 16 riders in the world would face each other in five rounds of four-man heat races for the title. Both Milnes qualified for the 1936 World Final, but neither made the podium. Cordy finished fourth, while Jack finished a distant 10th in the event, which was won by Australia's Lionel Van Praag, but the 1937 World Final would provide a spectacular turn-about and a historic triumph for America.

On September 2, 1937, over 85,000 fans jammed into Wembley Stadium for the World Final. Van Praag would not repeat, as he suffered a mechanical failure in the second of his five races and scored zero points, later electing to pull out of the meeting. It hardly mattered, as Jack was unstoppable, going undefeated in every one of his races to become America's first World Speedway Champion. To add to America's glory, fellow Americans Wilbur Lamoreaux and Cordy Milne were second and third, respectively, marking the only time that Americans have ever swept the podium in World Championship speedway competition.

Proving that his 1937 title was no fluke, Jack returned to Wembley in 1938 and defended his title admirably, finishing second to England's Bluey Wilkinson. He was again a contender for World Championship in 1939 before the outbreak of World War II halted World Championship speedway for a decade.

Making their way aboard "a ship that was lit up like a Christmas tree and covered with American flags in hopes that the Germans wouldn't sink a neutral ship," the Milne brothers returned to Pasadena and prospered, opening up a bicycle shop, then a motorcycle shop and later a multi-line car dealership and a grandstand business that provided seating for such events as the annual Tournament of Roses Parade and the Long Beach Grand Prix. They continued to race, too, but just as with many other forms of racing, speedway died out when television came into vogue.

Nearly 20 years later, however, Milne played a huge part in the revival of American speedway by helping one of his entrepreneurial motorcycle shop employees, Harry Oxley, find a permanent venue in which to run speedway. They struck a deal with the Orange County Fairgrounds in Costa Mesa and began running weekly races in 1969. The tiny bullring known as Costa Mesa Speedway has been holding races every summer since for the past 41 years and has spawned subsequent American individual World Speedway Champions Bruce Penhall (1981, 1982), Sam Ermolenko (1993), Billy Hamill (1996) and Greg Hancock (1997).

Jack Milne quietly passed away in December of 1995, leaving behind a legacy and a legend that cannot be overstated. He is greatly missed even today.

—Scott Rousseau