

# Legends of Motorcycling

## Finland's Shooting Star

**Y**AMAHA'S SOON-TO-BE all-conquering TZ700 (later 750) in-line four-cylinder two-stroke road racing engine was in development but still not quite ready for the 1973 AMA Grand National road racing season, so the "tuning fork" brand elected to continue with its already successful 350cc twin program even in the face of the much larger Kawasaki and Suzuki two-strokes as the season-opening Daytona 200 loomed.

Don Emde's 1972 privateer victory aboard a Yamaha TZ350 twin had been a triumph of David among the Goliaths that were the Kawasaki and Suzuki factory teams. For '73, however, the Goliaths were not only returning, they were bringing friends. Proof came in Kawasaki's decision to field no less than six factory riders aboard its 750cc two-stroke triples, including former Daytona winner Gary Nixon, Yvon Duhamel, Cliff Carr and Hurley Wilvert. Suzuki had four riders, with New Zealand Road Racing Champion Geoff Perry and defending Daytona 200 Champion Emde as its top guns.

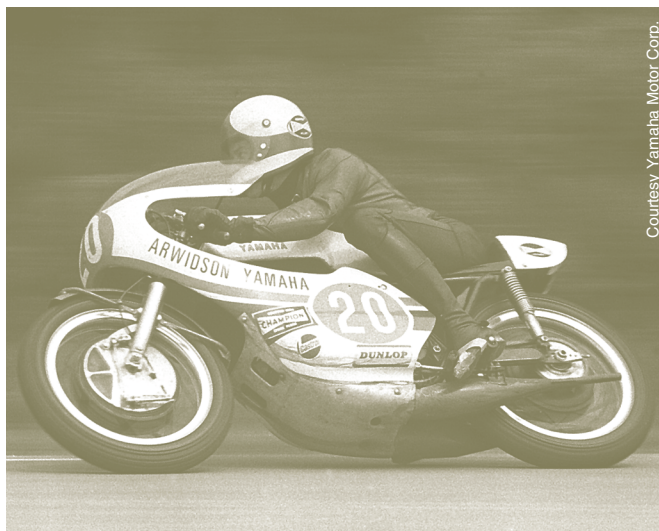
While it had attempted to improve the reliability of the TZ350 by introducing water-cooled versions, Yamaha played its cards a little closer to the vest. The company had an ace up its sleeve, however, in the person of road racing sensation Jarno Saarinen of Finland, the 1972 250cc World Road Racing Champion.

Seemingly predestined to become a mechanical engineer, Saarinen's rise to the top in the sport of road racing was nothing short of meteoric. With a style that some would argue was better suited to motocross racing than road racing, Saarinen's pin-it-to-win-it aggression had vaulted him from a relatively unknown privateer to factory rider and World Champion in just three years.

Fourth in the 1970 250cc World Championship in his rookie GP season, Saarinen improved to third in the 250cc World title chase and finished even better—second, behind the legendary Giacomo Agostini—in the 350cc class in 1971. Then, bolstered by a Yamaha factory ride in 1972, he reeled off four wins, including three in a row in Belgium, East Germany and Czechoslovakia, to claim the 250cc World Championship. Italian ace Renzo Pasolini finished runner-up to Saarinen in the 250cc title chase, the irony there

being that the two would forever be linked in tragedy less than a year later.

Responsibility for the preparation of all Yamaha's factory road racing machines in the US fell on the shoulders of 1969 250cc World Champion Kel Carruthers, who had come to wear several hats for Yamaha since moving to America on a permanent



**Finland's Jarno Saarinen was on the verge of becoming the next Grand Prix superstar before his tragic death in 1973. After winning the 1972 250cc World title, he won the 1973 Daytona 200 and also dominated the early 250cc and 500cc GPs that year.**

basis in 1971. By 1973, the Australian was Yamaha's race team manager, crew chief, rider coach and a factory racer. As if preparing the stable of factory bikes for stateside factory riders Kenny Roberts, Don Castro and Gary Fisher was not enough, Carruthers also had to get a machine ready for Saarinen to ride in the 1973 Daytona 200, which made for an extra-busy time in Carruthers' El Cajon, California-based racing shop.

On race day, the normally hard-charging Saarinen hardly seemed to be a factor, as the big Kawasakis of DuHamel, Baumann and Nixon left the field behind quickly. DuHamel and Baumann both crashed out of the race on lap nine, moving Nixon into a lead that only lasted another 10 laps before Nixon was also out with engine trouble. Suzuki's Perry led for a brief time before ignition woes ended his chances, placing Fisher atop the leaderboard. But then Fisher lost the lead during a pit stop, and a blown crankshaft left him stranded by lap 30. Suzuki's Ron Grant held the lead after that, but like teammate Perry, his ignition failed, dropping him out of the hunt.

Saarinen quietly made his way into the lead on lap 32 and held it for the rest of the race, taking the win. Carruthers slipped

into second place for what would be his best Daytona 200 finish. And for the second year in a row, Yamahas ruled the podium, as 1972 Daytona 200-winning owner/tuner Mel Dinesen enjoyed a second consecutive podium appearance after Jim Evans finished third.

After winning the Daytona 200 and also the prestigious Imola 200 in Italy, Saarinen began to really make his mark, winning the first two 500cc Grands Prix aboard Yamaha's newest factory machine, the OW19, causing the MV Agusta-mounted Agostini to lament, "Yamaha has built a beautiful machine. Saarinen and the bike are fantastic together. We cannot hope to compete with them." As if to validate Agostini's fears, Saarinen went three for three in the 250cc class as the World Championship series headed to Monza, Italy, for round four on May 20, 1973.

The circumstances behind that horrible day in Monza are still the subject of some debate. There are those that say that oil left on the track from the 350cc race held earlier in the day was the culprit, and there are accounts that Pasolini suffered an engine seizure that created the ensuing disaster. What is known is that in the first corner, the *Curva Grande*, Pasolini went down and Saarinen could not avoid him. Before it was over, another dozen riders were involved and Pasolini and Saarinen were both killed in perhaps the most infamous crash in motorcycle World Championship history. As a result, Yamaha pulled out of the GPs for the rest of the season, citing the declining safety margins afforded at many of the GP racing circuits.

Saarinen was only 27 at the time of his death, but he had already become a national hero in Finland, and those who saw him compete in America say that there is little doubt that he was on his way to many more World Championships before fate intervened. Finland has since become a dominant force in the World Rally Championship, with 14 driver's championships in that series' 32-year history, and it has revealed in Formula 1 World Championship driving titles won by Mika Hakkinen and Kimi Raikkonen. Heikki Mikkola and Pekka Vehkonen have earned World Motocross Championship titles for Finland. But Jarno Saarinen remains as the only Finn ever to hold the title of World Road Racing Champion.

—Scott Rousseau