

Legends of Motorcycling

Daytona's Cinderella Man

AFTER FINISHING THIRD in the 1971 Daytona 200 aboard a factory BSA, 21-year-old Don Emde felt good about the possibility of joining his father, Floyd, as a winner of America's most prestigious motorcycle race in 1972. Then he got sacked.

The once-mighty BSA and Triumph brands, now linked together in a struggle to survive the onslaught of cheaper, faster and more reliable competition from Japan, downsized to just one factory rider per brand, leaving BSA's Dave Aldana, Jim Rice and Emde, and Triumph's Gary Nixon, Don Castro and Tom Rockwood out of work.

"We all just went scrambling for rides," Emde says. "So first I made a swing through all the other factories, and no one had any room. They were all full. Then I called Mel Dinesen."

The two had a history together. As a Novice, Emde had raced for Dinesen, a Bakersfield, California, motorcycle dealer with a fine reputation as race tuner, to win the 1969 AFM road racing number one plate. In fact, Emde was so fast aboard Dinesen's machinery that he was bumped from Novice to Expert without even having to pay his dues in the Amateur ranks. The two had parted only when Emde was hired by BSA. Dinesen agreed to help Emde.

"Mel had already put together a deal with *Motorcycle Weekly*, the paper that was the competition to *Cycle News* in those days, and they were going to sponsor Jim Evans in the Amateur class. Mel also had one of the new six-speed Yamahas coming, so he put me on that."

But compared to the competition, Dinesen's 350cc Yamaha two-stroke seemed downright spindly; hardly the right machine with which to compete against the rugged 500-750cc machines that had been dominating Daytona for the past several years. Going into the race, Emde expected to be as much as 10 mph down in top speed compared to the British and Japanese inline triples and fours, but he also figured the lightweight Yamaha would actually have some advantages of its own.

"I had a little information from talking to the guys at Dunlop that the big Suzukis and Kawasakis that were coming down there that year were going to have a lot of motor on us, but that there were going to be some problems with tires," Emde says. "As it turned out, the problems they ended up running into weren't tire problems. Engine problems took them out before they got too far down the road."

Gary Nixon, Yvon Duhamel, Ron Grant and Paul Smart were among the big names on the big factory Kawasakis and Suzukis for '72, but they didn't scare Emde as much as the team of Kenny Roberts and Kel Carruthers, who were mounted on machines similar to Emde's and backed by the Yamaha factory.



Don Emde (25) celebrates with his father Floyd Emde (center) and team owner Mel Dinesen (center, right) after becoming the first man to win the Daytona 200 aboard a two-stroke.

"Kenny really didn't have that much experience yet," Emde recalls. "Kel Carruthers was really the guy that I thought I'd have to beat. I was worried about him because I knew that he was going to be on the same bike that I was going to be on. I just focused on how to come out of it being the number one Yamaha guy."

Emde's 1972 Daytona story almost ended before it began, though, when he crashed hard during the International Lightweight 100K event the day before the 200.

"I ground the exhaust pipe and just high-sided," Emde says. "We really thought that I had broken my shoulder, but we went to the hospital and had it checked out, and it wasn't broken. So I went back to the track and told Mel to have that 350 ready to go. Then I went back to the hotel and soaked in the bathtub all day and into the night to get the shoulder loose as I could get it."

The shoulder was still smarting plenty when Emde suited up for the Daytona 200 on Sunday. He found that he could reach forward to grab the handlebar and work the throttle, but the effort was painful.

Emde came off the grid in 10th place amidst the charging herd of big bores and the lightweights of Carruthers and Roberts. Then Carruthers ran over a downed motorcycle at the end of the first lap, ruining his

chances for victory. At about the same time, Emde's Yamaha faltered.

"It started to seize on about the third lap, on the East Bank," Emde remembers. "I saw the tach start to lose rpm, and it was obvious that it was seizing up, so I pulled in the clutch and started coasting toward the pits with a dead engine. I was so focused that I remember thinking, 'If I go in, I am not going to win. It'll be over.' So instead of going into the pits, I veered to the right, rolled down along the apron of the racetrack toward the finish line and let the clutch out. And it just started running again."

From 30th place, Emde tried to work his way back into the fray, but it would take a miracle to get his dream of winning the race back on track. The miracle came in the form of GP star Phil Read and the John Player Norton.

"I don't know how Phil was so far back there, but he and I just started working our way through the field, and that's when stuff started happening," Emde says. "A couple guys crashed, and Kenny [Roberts] went out with a flat tire. The big Kawasakis of Nixon and Duhamel had ignitions go out. Jody Nicholas was still leading on one of the Suzukis, but his race ended after he wore his tire through to the chords. Then I came in for my stop, and it only took us about nine seconds to complete it. Read came in, and his crew nearly drowned him in gasoline."

Emde pressed onward, his only competition in the remaining distance was to be Ray Hempstead, who simply could not hold Emde's pace. Emde passed Hempstead for the lead on lap 48 and led it the rest of the way for a historic victory. First, he joined his father, Floyd, as a winner of the race; to this day, the pair is the only father and son to have recorded Daytona 200 victories. Second, it was the first time a two-stroke had ever won the race. And third, Emde crossed the finish line aboard the smallest displacement motorcycle ever to win the Daytona 200.

Dinesen passed away in 2006 at the ripe old age of 93. Emde, now 58, continues to work in the motorcycle industry on several levels today, including retailing, distributing, product development, marketing and publishing. A renowned motorcycle historian, he has authored *The Daytona 200. The History of America's Premier Motorcycle Race*, which is available through his website, www.partsmag.com —Scott Rousseau