

# Legends of Motorcycling

## "Little John"

FOR A MOMENT, the scene at the 2009 AMA season finale half-mile dirt track in Pomona, California, was a window back in time. Mixed into the practice schedule for the Grand National competitors, Gene Romero's West Coast Flat Track Series' Saddlemen Open Vintage class took to the track, capturing the sights and sounds of the sport's heyday, when ordinary men became extraordinary heroes while racing motorcycles purchased from showroom floors, stripped of their street equipment and massaged into competitive flat track mounts. Those classic BSAs, Triumphs, Nortons and Yamahas bore little resemblance to the outrageously expensive contemporary "kit-racer" Harley-Davidson XR750s that have been kept on life support by the AMA and Harley-Davidson for decades since.

But at Pomona, the boom of the Harleys mixed with the grumpy growl of BSAs, the shrill howl of XS Yamahas and the unmistakable bark of Meriden Triumphs once more. And for Triumph-mounted John Hateley, it was like taking a steel shoe'd step into his past.

A popular Southern California-based AMA Grand National competitor throughout the 1970s, Hateley, now 57, last attempted to make a serious run at a national-level vintage race at the Del Mar Mile in 1996—13 years ago. Moments before heading out on the track for practice on a borrowed Triumph, Hateley had his doubts about competing again.

"What went through my mind as I sat there in the practice line was, 'What am I doing here?'" Hateley said. "I wondered if I even got up to speed down the back chute, was I just going to scare myself?"

When Hateley was a kid, motorcycles were all that mattered. The son of celebrated Triumph tuner Jack Hateley, "Little John," was predestined to race.

"We had Triumph of Burbank in 1964, and then Dad teamed up with Eddie Mulder through Johnson Motors to build Mulder's national bikes for him," Hateley remembers. "I started on a 1964 Yamaha Trailmaster 80 and raced it in scrambles and desert events. Then Jack Smith of Power Research in Santa Barbara gave me a Yamaha 50 in an Italjet tube frame to road race. They took me out to Riverside Raceway, and I won my very first road race. That thing was so fast that they had me clocked at 94 mph on the back chute."

For Hateley, who was all of 12 at the time, road racing was fun, but dirt track held his heart even then.

"I had been fascinated with the brakeless era of the sport, when the BSA wrecking crew of Jack O'Brien, Sammy Tanner and Neil Keen ruled Ascot Park, and I knew that's what I wanted to do," he says.

Cutting his teeth at the legendary Ascot half-mile, Hateley eventually hit the AMA Grand National trail, where he would score



Scott Rousseau

"Little John" Hateley at the 2009 Pomona 1/2-Mile.

two national victories in a professional racing career that lasted through 1979. Interestingly enough, those two victories came five years apart—to the day—not at Ascot but rather in a domed football stadium 1500 miles away, in Houston, Texas, on January 28, 1972 and 1977.

"When you walked into the Houston Astrodome for the first time, it was like going to another planet," Hateley says. "You walked down the ramp and walked inside, and there was this beautifully groomed short track and TT with this dirt that looked like it was made in a test tube—it was perfect. There were grandstands 360° around. It was awesome."

The competition in Houston was more cutthroat than anywhere else on the AMA circuit, too, with 200 riders attempting to qualify for the TT and 350 riders attempting to qualify for the Short Track.

"To qualify for the TT was tough enough, but to qualify for the Short Track, everybody was on the same second," he remembers. "You had one flying lap to qualify, and it all came down to one hundredth of a second. One little bobble, one little mistake or wrong choice of gearing meant the difference between one guy qualifying and the other guy loading it up to go home."

Despite the intense pressure at Houston, Hateley recalls that his 1972 TT win there was the easiest of his career, as he outran Mulder and Kenny Roberts for the victory. Five years later, winning was a lot harder, as Hateley found himself being the pur-

suer rather than the pursued, running behind John Gennai in the TT main event.

"I didn't figure I was going to catch him, but I must have been putting enough pressure on him because he went down," Hateley says. "He low-sided in turn one, and there I was. Hey, you have to keep it upright for 25 laps."

Hateley began scaling back his racing after the 1977 season, partly because his beloved Triumphs were becoming less competitive and partly because he was finding "safer" work as a Hollywood stuntman where he is still in demand today, having recently worked on the as-yet-unreleased *Iron Man 2*, starring Robert Downey Jr. He lives in Agua Dulce, California, with Candace, his wife of 21 years, and two sons, Keenan, 20 and Ajay, 16. He once faced a battle with cancer, but is happy to report that the current score is, Little John: 1, Big C: 0.

Even if that scare hadn't reinforced the notion that life is precious, there almost always comes a time when fast guys wonder if they are as fast as they used to be. Some return, only to find out that they are not, and they end up tarnishing their reputations. For Hateley, who sat in that practice line at Pomona, it didn't take long to find out where he stood.

"By the time I clicked it into high gear, it was like I'd never left," Hateley says. "That was something that will probably stick in my mind for as long as I live."

For those who watched him gracefully arc that thundering Triumph through Pomona's treacherous, hairpin curves, a roostertail of dirt fanning off its back tire, it was easy to forget that he was 57 and not 18. As he was doing it, Hateley, no doubt, felt the same.

But there was no Cinderella story for Hateley at Pomona. Racing in the Open Vintage main event, he finished second after leading the race at the start of the last lap. Still, Hateley should have been happy just proving that he could still ride, let alone win, shouldn't he?

"Actually, I was very disappointed," he says. "I know why I lost, and I tend to beat myself up over things like that. It kind of bothers me because a lot of people consider me a TT-only rider. David Aldana and I are tied for the most wins, six, on the Ascot Half Mile. I had a national number in motocross, and I rode professional speedway and raced Baja. I'm already chomping at the bit for next year. I'll be back, and I'll be on my own bike."

If there is moral to "Little John" Hateley's story, it's that old guys do, in fact, rule.

—Scott Rousseau