

Legends of Motorcycling

Jeff-Of-All-Trades

WHETHER ON TWO wheels or four, dirt or asphalt, Jeff Ward has proved that he can run with the best in the world. Over a racing career that spans four decades, “Wardy” has displayed a unique versatility.

Born in Scotland before moving to America at the age of four, Ward was just 10 years old when he burst into American motorcyclists’ consciousness long before they even knew his name, with a cameo appearance as the wheelie-riding minicycle youngster in the timeless Bruce Brown motorcycle documentary, *On Any Sunday*. By 1979, he was a Kawasaki factory-backed professional motocross racer, and he earned the first of seven AMA national titles, becoming the only rider in history to win AMA National motocross championships in the 125cc, 250cc and 500cc classes as well as two AMA Supercross Championship titles (1985, 1987). And almost all of them

came in a golden era of the sport when the talent pool was deep, including multiple champions such as Mark Barnett, Bob “Hurricane” Hannah, Broc Glover, Johnny O’Mara, David Bailey, Ron Lechien and Ward’s most bitter rival, Ricky Johnson. These riders and more were in the hunt with Ward for the 1985 AMA Supercross Championship, perhaps the most intense championship chase in motocross/supercross history.

“There were eight different winners that year, and it was all about getting the start,” says Ward, now 49. “If you got a 10th-place start, or even a fifth-place start, you were screwed. You needed to be first, second or third off the start because you weren’t going to get by guys every corner and every lap to catch up to the leaders.”

And you had to get good starts twice each night, because 1985 was the year that the AMA changed Supercross from a heat/semi/main format to an MX-style two-moto format. Rather than one 20-lap main event, there were two 10-lappers, and the rider with the best two moto scores was declared the winner of the event. Ward remembers having to beef up his training regimen in anticipation of an all-out war with his title rivals. In all, eight different riders—half of them former AMA Supercross Champions—would win rounds during 1985, setting a record for the number

of different winners in a single season that still stands today. Ward won just a single round, at Houston, Texas, but when the smoke cleared at the season finale Rose Bowl Supercross in Pasadena, California, he claimed the championship by one point, 218-217, finishing second in the

to have earned the reputation as someone who really knew how to get around that place is really special to me.”

Ward left the Indycars after a nine-year career, but even at 41, his competitive fires were far from quenched. Joining forces with longtime friend and world-famous custom

painter Troy Lee, he was able to find the perfect outlet for his love of motorcycles, motocross and asphalt racing in the hybrid sport of AMA Supercross, where he instantly became the man to beat. Blowing off riders several years his junior, he earned the 2004 AMA Supercross Championship at 43 years of age, making him the oldest rider ever to win an AMA National Championship, a record he extended by earning a second AMA title in 2006, the same year that he won the prestigious X Games Supercross before a huge national television audience. Competitive to the

end, Ward also became the oldest person ever to win an X Games gold medal when he won the Supercross race there in 2008—at the age of 47!

“The coolest thing about all that for me was that my oldest son was born in 1991, and I retired from motocross in 1992, so none of my kids ever got to see me race motorcycles,” Ward says. “So to be able to have them see what it was all about and to be able to race against guys I never would’ve raced otherwise, like Doug Henry, Travis Pastrana and Max Biaggi, it was a great time. I really enjoyed it.”

With such tremendous success already, most riders/drivers Ward’s age would consider calling it a day, but Ward is back on four wheels again, driving in the Lucas Oil Off-Road Racing Series, where he easily earned Rookie of the Year honors in 2009 and missed out on the series championship by one point! In fact, he is now busier than ever, as he was also recently appointed as a rider liaison and advisor for AMA Pro Racing.

“My career has been so fulfilling, way more than I ever expected,” Ward says. “I still love racing the off-road trucks, which are basically motocross bikes with a cage, but the best part is that now I’m doing it with my sons, who love it as much as I do. I really couldn’t ask for more than that.”

—Scott Rousseau



Jeff Ward’s greatest racing success came as a factory Kawasaki motocross star (upper left). He was also a winner in Indycars (above), Supercross (upper right), and off-road truck racing, which he continues today at age 49.

race, one position ahead of his main title rival, Glover.

“Consistency is what wins championships,” Ward says. “There’s fast guys out there, but you have to be consistent.”

Ward retired from the sport in 1992 and turned his attention to four wheels. His talent quickly came to the fore in open wheel Indycar racing, where he not only qualified for but finished third in the 1997 Indianapolis 500 as a rookie. In 1999, he led the race but ultimately finished second, and in 2000 he was fourth. Quickly earning a reputation as a cool customer with an excellent sense of traction, pace and race strategy, Ward eventually landed a ride with Chip Ganassi Racing, one of two powerhouse teams in the sport (Penske Racing being the other), where he earned his first and only Indycar victory in 2002 when he overtook Al Unser Jr. just inches from the finish line to win the IRL Boomtown 500 at Texas Motor Speedway. Ward’s .0111 sec. margin of victory over Al Unser was, at the time, the closest finish in IRL history.

“I’m really proud of what I accomplished in Indycar racing for someone who came from a motocross background and to not have been a kid who started in karts, I think I made a mark. Car racing is just so tough, and so many things have to go right, and I was fortunate enough to get some great rides, especially at Indianapolis, and