

Legends of Motorcycling

Ago Captures America

VALENTINO ROSSI'S HEROIC victory in his very first attempt aboard Yamaha's previously confounding factory YZF-M1 MotoGP racer at the season-opening Grand Prix of South Africa in 2004 did not mark the first time that a man recognized as motorcycle racing's absolute best had abandoned the relative safety of the best team in the sport—in Rossi's case, Honda—and journeyed into uncharted territory with a different brand and an unproven motorcycle. On March 10, 1974, the inimitable 13-time (later 15-time) World Road Racing Champion, Giacomo Agostini came to Daytona Beach, Florida, under even more pressure-packed circumstances than Rossi experienced in South Africa.

In 1973, Agostini had repeated as 350cc World Champion, but he had seen his seven-year reign as 500cc World Champion end at the hands of his MV Agusta teammate, Phil Read. In a shocking decision that may have been influenced by his contempt for Read—arguably the most hated man ever to set foot in a Grand Prix paddock, Agostini left the Italian factory and its proven four-stroke GP racers behind, signing a new contract with Yamaha. At the start of 1974, Agostini's first test would perhaps be his biggest, Yamaha electing to enter him in the Daytona 200 aboard its all-new TZ700, a machine with far fewer combat miles under its belt than Rossi's M1. Much of the R&D for the new machine had been carried out by American Yamaha race team manager and 1969 250cc World Champion Kel Carruthers, who, upon first riding the banshee-like inline four-cylinder two-stroke racer,

effectively announced his retirement rather than attempt to race it in competition. As delivered, the prototype TZ700 was effectively a rocket engine shoe-horned in a flimsy chassis more suitable for gardening work.

"At anything over about 160 mph, the thing would start doing tankslappers," Carruthers once said of the TZ700.



The pressure was definitely on Yamaha to fix the TZ700, as it was slated to replace the giant-killing TZ350 twins, which had won Daytona in '72 with Don Emde and in '73 with the late Jarno Saarinen. Reliability concerns with the 700 engine included a nasty penchant for engine vibration to break the exhaust pipes, killing the performance of the mighty inline four. If Yamaha didn't get it right, its streak would be over. Worse yet, Agostini would lose on the biggest stage in American motorcycle racing, and his iconic reputation would be tarnished, a moment that wouldn't go unnoticed in Italy, either. Just as the eyes of the motorcycling world were on Rossi at South Africa in 2004, where over 45,000 spectators witnessed the event, so too were they on Ago at Daytona in 1974, where the crowd count for the race was an estimated 48,000.

The gravity of the situation wasn't lost on the World Champion. "To me, it [winning] was very, very important," Agostini recalled. "I had just left MV Agusta, and I was used to the four-stroke engine...I was scared when I left MV, because that was my family...Daytona was my first time with the two-stroke, my first time with Yamaha and my first time in the USA."

Carruthers and the Yamaha crew worked feverishly to ready the TZ700 for Daytona, and for Ago, lengthening its swingarm to add stability and sorting out its hand-grenade engine so it would go the distance at Daytona (the

race was actually shortened to 180 miles due to the US energy crisis).

The plot thickened as Bike Week began. Agostini qualified only fifth fastest—the last rider on the front row—behind Suzuki's Paul Smart, fellow Yamaha riders Hideo Kanaya of Japan and Kenny Roberts, and Englishman Barry Sheene on another Suzuki. As the race loomed, Ago appeared beatable.

But when the green flag dropped, the Italian pulled a glorious holeshot on the rest of the field and quickly began stretching his lead through the infield to build a 20-yard gap over Kanaya on the first lap. Ago set a torrid pace, turning lap times in the 2:04s, then an incredible 2:03 on the fifth lap. Kanaya crashed out of the race on the same lap while trying to match Ago's pace. Agostini then slowed, with Sheene taking the lead on lap 10. After such a great start by the World Champion, were the TZ700's anticipated problems rearing their ugly heads? Ago pressed onward.

Sheene's good buddy, Gary Nixon, would take the lead by lap 20, only to have to surrender it to Ago during a pitstop. Ago gave it right back to Nixon when he stopped a lap later.

Nixon had 11 seconds on Agostini by lap 33, when the former AMA champ made his second stop, but four laps later, Nixon's dream of another Daytona 200 win ended when he crashed while exiting the infield toward the West Banking. Agostini pitted again but returned to the track with his lead intact. According to *Cycle News*' published account of the race, "From lap 39 to the 47th and final go-around, the only question hanging over Daytona Speedway was how far ahead of Roberts would Agostini be at the finish."

In the end, Agostini won the Daytona 200 by over 30 seconds, a performance befitting the sport's best rider. Roberts finished second on his TZ700 after suffering a double whammy—the dreaded exhaust pipe breakage and an overheated engine. Kawasaki's Hurley Wilvert finished third.

Against all odds, Agostini had won the Daytona 200 on a brand-new motorcycle in his first attempt at Daytona and in his first ride on a Yamaha. Afterward, Agostini made a comment that beautifully capped the emotion undoubtedly shared by Valentino Rossi in South Africa all of 30 years later. Indeed, it could just as easily been uttered by Rossi. It was a simple statement but one that spoke volumes.

"The first I ride Yamaha," Agostini said, "I win."

—Scott Rousseau



Multi-time World Road Racing Champion Giacomo Agostini gambled his career on a switch to Yamaha in 1974 and wound up winning the Daytona 200.

