

Bob McIntyre breaks 100mph lap at TT 1957



Photo courtesy of McIntyre family

Bob McIntyre thrilled motorcycle racing spectators wherever he went. He possessed an incredible determination to win, astonishing concentration levels and his racing style was to go flat out to test his machines and his rivals to their limits.

His career is most memorable for his one-hour speed record at Monza in 1957 and his Isle of Man Junior and Senior TT wins that year, when, riding a Gilera 500cc, he also became the first rider to complete a lap at an average speed of over 100 mph.

But McIntyre offered more than that – he was a proficient mechanic, and helped to design the bikes he raced. He was a popular figure at race meets, forever signing autographs and encouraging inexperienced competitors.

What has been fascinating researching this piece on “Bob Mac” is with just how much affection he is remembered over 40 years after his death, aged just 33. “Ah, Bob McIntyre? Now you're talking!” and “The man was pure class” have been typical of the remarks about his racing ability and his gentlemanly conduct.

Ewen Haldane, along with Alistair King, Sandy Bowie, Jimmy Davie, Jimmy Buchan and Jimmy Drysdale, were McIntyre's Scottish racing contemporaries in the 1950s. Haldane took part in 15 TT races and remembers McIntyre with great fondness. “He had a smashing sense of humour. He was the type of guy who would help anybody. When I started competing at the TT, I remember Bob going around giving me and the new riders his notes on the gear ratios we would need to tackle the course. He once spent over four hours taking me and three other Scottish riders over the first 15 miles of the course to point out where we could gain a few seconds. That was the type of man he was.

“Bob's popularity was such that after races were over and the spectators allowed into the pits, his site would be mobbed! To give you an idea of just how popular he was, there was this one time a chap came to me in my isolated pit section and asked me to pass on a message to Bob that he should come and stay in this man's bed and breakfast the next time he was in the Isle of Man, and make use of his workshop facilities, for free! A total stranger! Needless to say, I slept in my van the next visit!”

Robert McGregor McIntyre was born in Scotstoun in Glasgow in 1928. He worked in the shipyards on the Clyde and then for motorcycle dealers Cooper Brothers of Troon, who were also his first racing sponsors.

Like most motorbike racers, Bob McIntyre cut his teeth in scrambling at local events at the weekends in the late 1940s, and even when he had moved on to bigger and better things, he would sometimes pass up the chance of making good money in professional races to appear at Scottish events just so that he could please his Scottish fans.

Indeed, one newspaper article from the time of McIntyre's death tells the story of how he had just returned from competing in a Grand Prix race and turned up at a cross-country scramble organised by his first motorbike club Glasgow Mercury in a farmer's field near Newton Mearns.

McIntyre's first step in his racing career came when he made an appearance at Balado Airfield in Kinross in 1951. He won three out of the four races that he entered. Just a year later he won the Clubman's TT at the Isle of Man and in doing so broke the lap record.

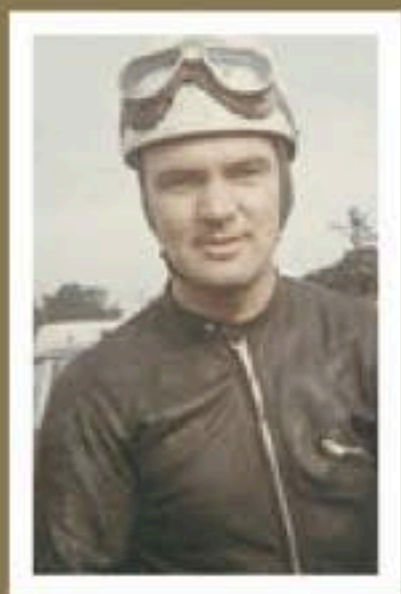


Photo courtesy of McIntyre family

He rode AJS bikes, joining the works team in 1954, but became increasingly exasperated with the bikes' failings, particularly the suspension units. He teamed up with former motorbike racer Joe Potts, who ran funeral undertaking and engineering businesses, and in Potts' Bellshill workshop they tuned the bikes to suit McIntyre's racing style. Mac worked as a mechanic for Potts and in return was sponsored and supplied with bikes for racing, most often Nortons. McIntyre found that the single-cylinder Nortons handled well, but were out-powered by the foreign bikes such as the Italian Gileras and the Japanese Hondas.

Mac's racing career was not made easy by the Scottish authorities and the poor racing infrastructure north of the border. He and the Potts team would need to drive down to England to test out their bikes on airstrips and racetracks. He once told a reporter: "It takes a minor miracle for any Scot to get places in racing. We've got plenty of good lads, but they have to fight every inch." Sometimes, it was not possible to test the machines properly and so McIntyre would be racing on bikes that were not running or handling optimally.

It wasn't just the distance to the race events that was the problem for McIntyre, but the fewer commercial opportunities and poorer industry support too that put Scottish riders at a disadvantage. It took a while for the contracts for using certain brands of oil, brakes, plugs and tyres to come through.

With sponsor and tuner Joe Potts and his team mechanical team of Charlie Bruce and Pim Fleming, the Bellshill team would take Norton works bikes and calibrate them in such a way so as to maximise their power. McIntyre had a great instinct for motorbike engines. At the 1959 TT, for example, in horrendous conditions, after the first lap McIntyre was lying third.

Pim Fleming in an interview he did with Gordon Small in *Classic Motorcycling Legends* in 1992 remembers: "Bob stripped the complete clutch, rectified a fault and rebuilt it in 12.5 minutes. He then went out and lapped 8mph faster than John Surtees, which in the conditions was quite phenomenal. He had dropped to 23rd place and finished fifth."

For all the stories about his quietness, modesty, good humour and generosity, there can be no doubting that once he was on a racing motorcycle he was a different character. Ewen Haldane remarked that "winning was everything to him", while five-times TT winner and six-times world champion Geoff Duke said: "He was the most determined rider that I came across."

Bob Mac was an unmistakable character on a motorbike. With his stocky frame, outstretched arms, tucked in knees, clenched jaw, white helmet with Glasgow-based Mercury Motorbike Club sticker on the front, the crowds were left in no doubt who was flying by.

Bob McIntyre's career was chequered: for every Grand Prix win there was another race where technical faults would let him down and let the trailing field overtake him. Legendary racer Geoff Duke says of McIntyre: "If Bob Mac had the opportunities I had I'm sure he would have been world champion. He was an outstanding rider."

The general consensus is that Mac drove his bikes hard, and some would say too hard. It is argued that if he had just let up a little, he would have finished and won more races than he did. But McIntyre always rode to win and always sought perfection.

There is a full list of all Bob's races at the end of this article, the information having been compiled by TT racer and Bob Mac fan Robbie Allan. However, here it is worth focusing on the TT win and the events at Monza in 1957 achieved when Mac was 28.

Gilera's number one rider at the time was Geoff Duke, but he had been injured at Imola. Duke recommended that the Italian outfit sign up McIntyre as team leader, which they duly did.

McIntyre had only a few races on the Gileras by the time of the Isle of Man TT's 50th anniversary gathering. Mac had known some success already on the island, of course, but as he once told a reporter about the most dangerous circuit in the world: "You never really master the Isle of Man circuit."

He did, however, come closer than any of his fellow racers to mastering the course. He won the Junior TT on his Gilera four-cylinder 350cc in a record average speed for the mountain course of 94.99mph. The second-placed rider finished 3.5 minutes slower than McIntyre.

Going into the Senior TT the following week, McIntyre's confidence was high. He had recovered from the physical strain of keeping the bike on the road at such high speeds. There was a sense of expectancy about the race, as evidenced by a column in the TT programme. Jimmy Simpson, who broke lap records on the Isle of Man in the '20s and '30s, wrote: "In this Golden Jubilee Year let us also hope that we shall have the Golden 100mph lap." Geoff Duke in 1955 had come agonisingly close to breaking the ton, registering 99.97mph fastest lap speed on a Gilera. Interestingly, the first TT in 1907 witnessed a fastest lap speed of 41.81mph!

McIntyre, with racing number 78 on his red and white Gilera, got off to a great start in the race and it soon became evident that barring technical problems, as had happened all too often to Mac, no-one was going to catch him.

In fine conditions, Bob McIntyre broke the 100mph average speed on four of the eight laps. The fourth lap was the fastest at 101.12mph. Not surprisingly, he won the race to add the Senior title to the Junior victory. Quite a double!

At the end of 1957, Gilera and the other Italian (Mondial, Moto Guzzi and MV) teams pulled out of Grand Prix races. McIntyre was left without a team or sponsor and went back to riding the Potts' Nortons. Gilera focused their energies on breaking speed records at Monza and targeted the classic hour, where a rider goes as far as he can in 60 minutes round a track.



Photo courtesy of McIntyre family

The Italian riders were unable to give Gilera the results they were looking for, so in stepped McIntyre. He found that the 500cc Gileras were just too powerful to control for an hour in a speed bowl, so he insisted that he try it on the lighter 350cc machine. Part of Mac's mechanical team, Charlie Bruce told Gordon Small in *Classic Motorcycling Legends* what happened:

"Bob screwed up the friction damper so the throttle couldn't shut and sometimes he had to stand on the footrests to hold the bike down.

"Before Bob was specially summoned from Glasgow to do the job, several other Gilera riders had tried it. Bob noticed that they had ridden round half way up the curved banking of the speed bowl where it was very bumpy. So he went right to the top of the bank where it was also very rough but the wall was virtually vertical."

McIntyre broke the one hour record, travelling 141 miles in 57 gruelling laps of the track. This was seven miles further than the best efforts of the Gilera riders.

Why is that McIntyre was able to go faster than other riders, even without the backing of large motorcycle manufacturers? What makes a motorcycle champion? For Geoff Duke, it is a combination of factors: being born with riding ability; balance; ability to control the throttle, especially under slippery conditions; and general judgement. It is only when pressed on the issue of bottle did he add: "I suppose courage does come into it."

For Ewen Haldane, "A great rider possesses finesse. It's all down to technique." McIntyre was once asked if he ever felt fear, racing at such speeds: "When I do, I'll quit."

Bob McIntyre was very seriously injured in a motorcycle accident at Oulton Park racetrack in Cheshire on 6 August 1962. He had been trying to catch the race leader Derek Minter in the 500cc event. According to his engine specialist Pim Fleming, "At Clay Hill corner, the bike went straight into the bank with Bob still on it. The front wheel went into a hole, catapulting Bob into a tree."

Mac died nine days later in hospital, his condition having steadily deteriorated.

Geoff Duke recalls the tragic event. "Bob had won 250cc race earlier in the day so he knew the track well. But there had been a very sudden and very heavy downpour and a pool had developed at a very fast part of the track. There was no way Bob could have known about it. Unfortunately, his machine aquaplaned and Bob Mac came off the bike at a terrific speed."

Duke feels that McIntyre should have taken longer away from the track after crashing at Monza in 1961 and breaking his collar bone. "I think he came back to racing before he was just right. I think his balance had been affected slightly."

One desperately sad aspect of Bob McIntyre's early death was that he had become a father to a baby girl just weeks before. His daughter Eleanor lives just west of Glasgow and occasionally is asked to present trophies at the Bob McIntyre Memorial Classic Races. Eleanor remarked: "It never ceases to amaze me just how much people loved my dad. I get people coming up to me at race events to tell me my dad was their hero – 40 years ago! It's incredible. It's really nice."

We will never know if Bob Mac would have gone on to become world motorcycle champion. Only an injury at the Dutch TT stood between him and that crown five years before his death. What is also intriguing is that McIntyre had become interested in motor racing and had met with Jackie Stewart to discuss moving from two wheels to four.

Perhaps a simple statement made to The Glasgow Herald in August 1962 by a Mr AJ Stephen, editor of the Scottish Clubman magazine, best sums up the racing great Bob McIntyre: "No-one was more loved in the game inside and outside Scotland."

Racing career of Bob McIntyre (Information courtesy of Robbie Allan in his book "A Tribute to Bob McIntyre")

1952 Isle of Man TT, Junior Clubman's – 2nd, riding a BSA
Junior Manx Grand Prix – 1st
Senior Manx Grand Prix – 2nd (riding an AJS)

1953 Coronation Race, Silverstone, 350cc – 2nd
Mettet – 1st

Isle of Man TT, 350cc – retired

1954 Silverstone, 350cc – 2nd

Blandford, 350cc – 2nd

Blandford, 500cc – 1st

Pau, 350cc – 1st

Pau, 500cc – 2nd

North West 200, 500cc – 2nd

Isle of Man TT, 500cc – 14th

Isle of Man TT, 350cc – retired, engine trouble

Ulster Grand Prix, 350cc – 3rd

Belgian Grand Prix, 350cc – 6th

Belgian Grand Prix, 500cc – 4th

Dutch TT, 350cc – 4th

Dutch TT, 500cc – 6th

Swiss TT, 350cc – 6th

(AJS pulled out of racing at the end of the season)

1955 Began riding Nortons entered by Joe Potts

Isle of Man Junior TT – 2nd

Isle of Man Senior TT – 5th

1956 Won all three classes at Oulton Park

Isle of Man Junior TT, retired due to technical problems

Isle of Man Senior TT, retired due to technical fault

1957 German Grand Prix – 2nd

Isle of Man Junior TT – 1st (record lap of 97.42mph, on a Gilera)

Isle of Man Senior TT – 1st (four laps at over 100mph, on a Gilera)

Dutch TT, 350cc – 2nd

Dutch TT, 500cc – crashed

Ulster TT, 500cc – 2nd

Monza, 350cc – 1st

Finished season as runner-up in 500cc World Championship

Monza, broke one-hour record, travelling 141 miles

1958 Isle of Man Junior TT – retired while lying 2nd

Isle of Man Senior TT – retired while lying 2nd

Isle of Man Southern 100, 350cc – 1st

Isle of Man Southern 100, 500cc – 2nd

Ulster Grand Prix, 500cc – 2nd

1959 Isle of Man TT:

Formula 1 500cc – 1st

350cc – retired (on an AJS)

500cc – 5th

Ulster Grand Prix, 500cc – 2nd

1960 Isle of Man Junior TT – 3rd (on an AJS)

Isle of Man Senior TT – retired due to ignition problem

Mallory Park, 500cc – 1st

Mallory Park, 350cc – 1st

Isle of Man Southern 100, 350cc – 2nd

Oulton Park, 350cc – 1st

Oulton Park, 500cc – 1st

1961 North West 200, 350cc – 1st

North West 200, 500cc – 1st

Isle of Man TT, 250cc – retired in 1st place on last lap (on Honda)

Isle of Man Junior TT – retired due to gear box trouble (on Bianchi)

Isle of Man Senior TT – 2nd (on Norton)

Ulster GP, 250cc – 1st

1962 Oulton Park, 500cc – 1st

Mallory, 500cc – 1st

Isle of Man TTs – retired in Junior and Senior races

Spanish Grand Prix, 250cc – 2nd

French Grand Prix, 250cc – 2nd

Belgian Grand Prix, 250cc – 1st

Oulton Park, 250cc – 1st

Oulton Park, 500cc – crashed and died nine days later