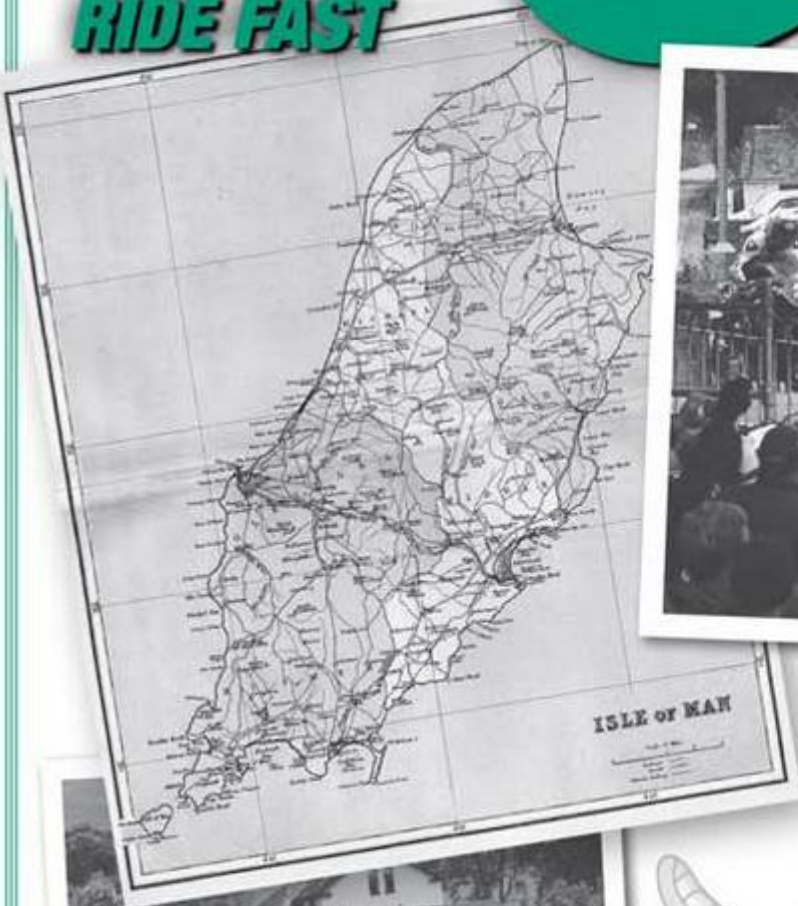


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*Journey
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the Isle*

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Isle of Mankind:

Words and Photos: Courtney Olive

Flying to the Isle of Man this summer, I re-read Mark Gardiner's *Riding Man*, trying to get a sense of what lay in store. Gardiner, a middle-aged advertising executive with a road-racing habit, visited the TT for the first time as a spectator in 2000. Two years later he cast aside all else, moved to the Isle, and began a totally devoted effort to qualify for, race in, and survive the 2002 TT. A powerful read, the book was an introduction to the type of people I'd meet on the Isle and the passion that motorcycles invoke in them.

Northern Ireland

Before getting to the Isle, my first stop is Belfast, Ireland at Phillip McCallen Motorcycles, a dealership where I'd arranged to rent a KTM Duke 690. When you want to take a bike out of country and ferry it to the TT for a week, it helps to rent it from an 11-time TT winner. McCallen is truly "roadracing royalty," as a couple Irishmen later told me at the TT.

After McCallen crouches for a final check of the Duke's chain tension, I depart for a day of riding Northern Ireland's Causeway Coastal Route. My goal: get to Ireland's premier road-race course, the Northwest 200,



Dad's old leathers

The People Who Make The TT Special

and "have a lap." No sooner do I hit the Coastal Route than three bikes appear in the mirrors.

One of the riders, on an early-90s Honda 400 Super Four, has long grey hair flapping from under his helmet. We pass a few cars together then I wave them by, hoping to have some "local knowledge" leaders to follow. A spirited 75 miles later we pull over at a pier in Portrush; helmets come off and we're instant friends.

The riders are Josh, Sparky, and Peter—he's the one with the grey hair, and he's Josh's Dad. Peter tells me the Super Four was Josh's first bike and, now that Josh has elevated to a new CBR600, Peter takes the Super Four out. Peter is clearly pleased at the loan of Josh's old ride, and happy to be back on a bike.

I tell my three impromptu Irish roadracing instructors of my plan to hit the Northwest course for a lap and they gladly volunteer to lead. We roll across the starting blocks freshly painted on Portmore Road,

since the Northwest had just been run two weeks prior. We blur through the 11-mile course. Afterwards Peter says he's sorry

they were slowing me down, I say I doubt that very much. Very much.

Over burgers and chips on the shoreline, we talk about bikes and how, as a kid, Peter used to holiday in the '50s at one of the flats right behind us. Feeling that I should let them be on their way, I re-enter my Aerostich, a process at which they all marvel and, rightfully, snicker a bit. Peter reaches out a gloved hand for a farewell shake and says in his kind way, "safe journey home, Courtney."

Alone again, I ride down to Ballymoney—the current family hometown of the Dunlops who moved there from Armoy several years back. In the quiet memorial gardens on main street sit bronze statues of Joey and Robert Dunlop.



Joey Dunlop memorial in Ballymoney, Northern Ireland

Joey is relaxing on his trademark Honda, helmet on the tank, gloves behind the fairing. Thick head of hair, longish and flowing, as in life. A crack of a smile and a deeply-satisfied gaze in his eyes. Nights later, on the Isle of Man, I meet a white-haired Welshman who has been coming to the TT for 57 years. I tell him I visited the memorial, and he lovingly recounts the bronze of Joey. He is a stout man and his words come from a place deep in his chest, he grasps his pint and says with conviction

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"There'll never be another Joey." A tiny shine in the corner of his eye betrays him.

Preparing to leave the memorial, I chat with a passing couple. The woman, Ruth, does most of the talking and explains that her cousins were all



boys who raced all their lives so she's grown up around motorcycles. Racing is important to her.

We talk about this year's Northwest 200, bemoaning that all but one of its races were canceled due to heavy rain and, sadly, a bomb hoax. Ruth is disgusted by the hoax; she looks around and lowers her voice "at the height of The Troubles we never had such a thing at a roadrace. Never in 40 years. That's the thing with motorcycle racin', doesn't matter where ya come from or what ya are. We're all the same." With the conviction that a racecourse transcends religious differences, the recent hoax brought shame.

I say goodbye to Ruth and ask the way to Joey's Bar, which the Maestro opened several years before he died and is still run by the Dunlop family. She motions a block off Main Street, past a humble stone church and down a quiet lane.

High School Spring Break and High Tea

The next morning at the ferry terminal, the electric atmosphere of the Isle of Man

begins in earnest. Bikes far outnumber cars. Though the riders are of all ages, each is as excited as if he or she were headed to high-school spring break. Despite steady rain, some stay outside the depot and just sit on

their bikes, helmets on, poised in the boarding line.

Aboard the sold-out ferry of full leathers and race boots, the throng chats feverishly and gestures wildly with imaginary throttle hands and lean-angle displays. One approaches and introduces himself as Steve; he is curious about my first-timer impressions of the TT. On paper,

My riding buddy Jason, the town barber in Ramsey

Steve's a husky, 20-something hooligan. But he buys us both a tea and as we chat I discover he's a level-headed guy who

holds down two jobs, one as a driver's ed teacher. He plans to run his GSX-R 1000 in the 'sprints' (drag races) that are open to all riders. He's brought extra clutch plates because last year, when it came time to go home, his plates were so fried he had to push his bike to the ferry.

Nearby are three wizened older fellows who've been having a small reunion, crouched-in close and quietly chatting about the good times "with Joey." I strike up a conversation with one and mention the "Armoy Armada," the hometown name for Joey and his racing pals in the '70s. He acknowledges this with a knowing smile, leans in, and reveals that he and his buddies

were Joey's arch rivals from the town of Dromara, the "Dromara Destroyers." These brushes with historic greatness, and not-so-secrets bequeathed to willing listeners, became classic on the Isle of Man.

Rolling off the ferry, Steve kindly agrees to escort me to the paddock. The TT paddock is magical. Anyone can wander amongst the factory teams, ogle the bikes from inches away, ask questions, maybe even get handed a souvenir. Days later I strolled the pits on a quiet evening and found Conor Cummins' mechanics completing a few final tasks to prep his bike for the Senior race the next day. We chatted while one swapped out Conor's brake pads, worn from that day's racing. Finishing the job, the Irish mechanic winds down our conversation with a smile and asks "do ye want a sooveniir?!" Before I know what's happened, the worn brake pads are in my hand and have been signed by Conor. All without prompting; just typical TT friendly.

From the paddock I head for the town of Ramsey and



ggGLLLLAAAACCK! goes James Hillier's knee slider over the storm-drain at Parliment Square corner

cap off my first night on the island at The Swan pub. There, sitting at a side table and dressed as though they could be taking high tea, were Charles and Vera—all smiles and soaking up the



Courtney poses with Charles and Vera

scene. Charles is a Manxman from birth, slight of stature with a twinkle in his eye and a giggly sense of humor that says he's having the time of his life every minute. He can scarcely sit still as he recounts his days riding two-strokes, the kind with two external magnetos on both sides of the crankcase. He'd stop along The Mountain to clean the carbon from the spark plug, then carry on.

Now he likes to take Vera for drives in his car over The Mountain, but he teases that she closes her eyes when the speedo hits a hundred. She smiles and blushes. About four years ago Charles took to courting Vera after both their spouses (multiple for her) had passed on. They'd been love-birds when Charles was in the service in WWII and now they've re-lit the flame after 64 years of not having seen each other. Vera is 82, Charles is 84.

After midnight I finally wave off Charles' relentless pint-buying and walk them to their car. Charles says to me as he unlocks the door for Vera "I've only got-a-go just across thee way" and motions a few blocks. We all laugh, but I'm glad for his little reassurance. I submit to their insistence that I promise to join them at the pub the next night, feeling all is right with the world.

Vantage Points

Watching the TT firsthand is visceral. There are hundreds (if not thousands) of vantage points around the 37.7 mile course; you could come to the TT for a lifetime and never watch it from the same place. All vantage points are amazing, shocking and awesome in their own way. At a couple of special spots I was the only actual 'spectator,' just standing on the shoulder,



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watching and cheering alongside the Course Marshalls stationed there.

The first morning, Wayne, a gentlemanly gas-station attendant in Ramsey, clued me in to a pole-position viewing spot: "Joost folla ya nose" to the Swan pub's patio, it's directly inside the apex of Parliament Square corner. On the patio this bluebird-clear morning I can look up the course and see the racers from about 1/4 mile away arriving at the Square from a small side street.

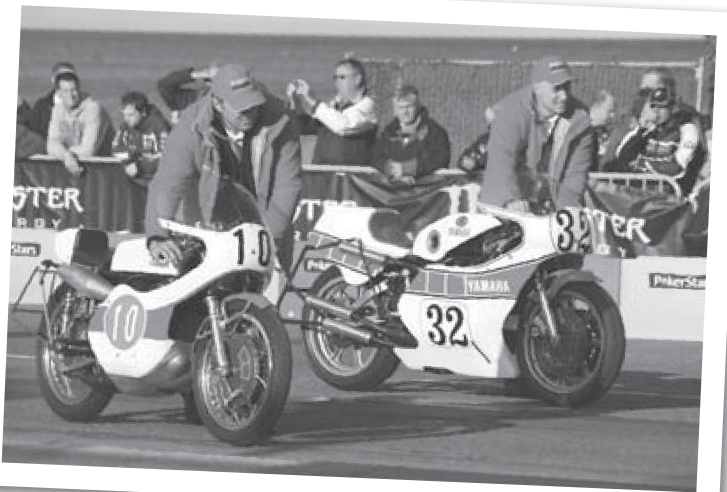
Coming in they're doing about 120-140. Two blocks before the intersection they dynamite the brakes and bang downshifts like an automatic pistol. Many lift and skip the rear from side to side. Some even get a little wild with a leg coming off the pegs. Then they throw into the 90-degree right turn and drag knees, just inches from

could extend my arm, lean forward slightly, and touch their helmets.

Many grasp for an explanation of the TT, or wonder why anyone would race in it. No justification is flawless, but in Belfast I'd seen a peace mural with a quote from Pearl S. Buck. "The young do not know enough to be prudent and therefore they attempt the impossible and achieve it... generation after generation."

Side-Shows

Part of what makes the TT motorcycle nirvana are the events during the days between the week's five races. Besides the sprints that Steve likes, there are motocross races, trials events, track time in Jurby, the roving comedic stylings of the Purple Helmets, scores of bike shows, bike shops, bike galleries and bike museums. And of course, as a Scot told me, there's "all that craaap on the



Yamaha #32 is the mighty OW31 better known in dirt-track trim as the TZ750. Aboard the OW31, Steve Baker became the first American to win a world championship in 1977.

hitting the curb. In fact, there's a storm-drain in the gutter, right along the elbow of the sidewalk curb. Some make a fraction of a second sound — GGCCLLAAACK!!! — as their right knee-slider zips across the grate of the storm-drain. Despite disbelief, I know it must be real because I'm standing about five feet back from the storm-drain, I

Dooglass prom" referring to the nightly ball-of-death minibike stunts and other exploits Fueled-By-Monster-Energy, the one regrettably commercialized component of the TT.

I generally avoid the Douglas promenade, but did spend a day in full hobnobbery at the 'hospitality tent.' There I found GP stars Nicky Hayden, Cal Crutchlow, and Mick Doohan after they finished a parade lap of the course. A whole different vibe from them than the TT racers. No conversations. It was good to have experienced the tent, but it was the one place at the TT where I didn't make new friends.

Leaving the tent, I slip a final free Stella Artois into my knapsack and re-emerge to the real TT, the paddock. I wander and spot a man wearing an iconic Phil Read helmet and performing a small, polite burnout in a grassy area. Walking past him I see that it is Phil Read. He waves goodbye to the handful of onlookers and zips away, just another rider on the island's roads.

Parade lap, after parading Nicky Hayden said his brothers would REALLY have something to top now.



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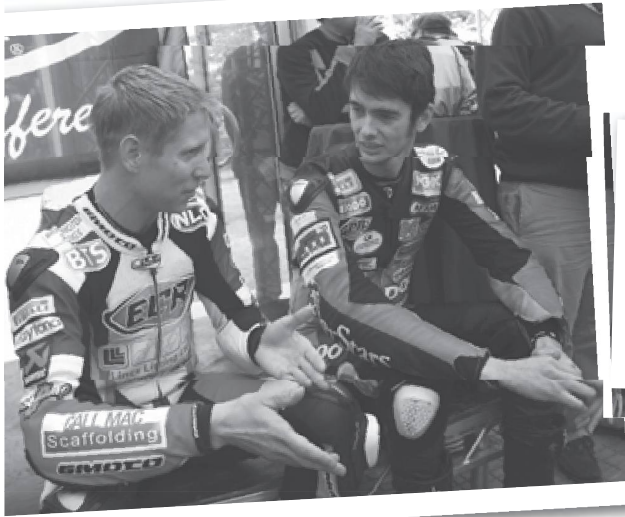
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Gary Johnson and Conor Cummins talk over the course

Racing Team announcer warns that Steve likes to ride the 750 a bit too fast so they've fattened up the jetting. Even so, Steve lofts several wailing wheelies.



Peel, IOM - best mackerel on the island

After the castor-oil smoke clears I make my way out to Peel, a harbor town on the other side of the island. The Isle of Man is far enough North

the Senior TT. Dave is solidly qualified to pilot the commemorative Indian since he is the first American ever to win a TT, the 1984 Senior Classic. The four of us mill around the Peel docks for a while, talking about Dave's experience racing a borrowed Honda 160 at my home track, Portland International Raceway. We're also chatting up a Welsh couple who have sailed into Peel Harbor on a friend's antique wooden sailboat. They explain, much to our awe, that their friend made the giant masts himself. The evening air cools and Roper

Dave Roper & Co. laugh at my un-broken-in Aerostich

This year he rode his beautiful

year, with sunsets that last for several hours. On this sunset evening the Peel Harbor could scarcely have been more breathtaking. As I snack on a mackerel sandwich along the shoreline, three guys on foot stop to chat. On seeing my gear, the first one strikes up the conversation with "Got a 'Stich on, he must be an American." Two things the Isle of Man has little of are Aerostichs and Americans, so it was good to finally encounter a group of fellow Yanks. These were good ones, too, Dave Roper and his photophile pals Ken and Bill.



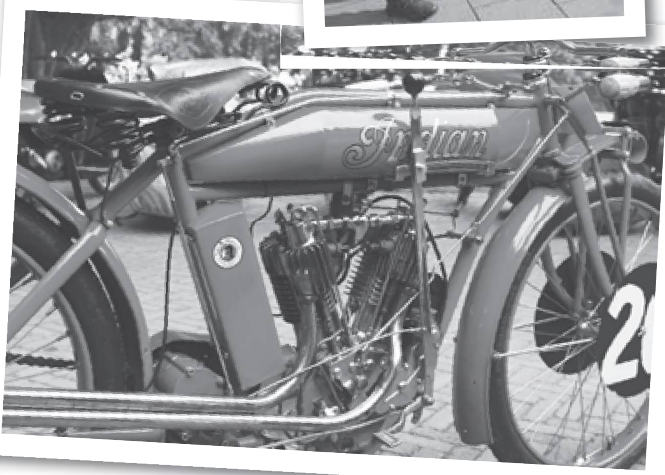
Past Phil's burnout I find the Yamaha Classic Racing Team. This year is the 50th anniversary of Yamaha's first appearance at the TT. Earlier that day, I bought a newspaper just to get change—I'd hoped to score some of the Isle's famous 50-pence pieces with motorcycles engraved on them. My change came back with a handful of this year's coins, featuring vintage Yamahas.

While the Yamaha Classic Racing Team prepares (Tommy Robb and Luigi Taveri have just ambled past and are smiling eagerly), I meet Sean, who has been coming to the TT for 37 years in a row. "I can't very well stop now, can I?" he asks rhetorically.

Yamaha AS1, a 125cc two-stroke twin. Sean fills me in about the original checkered flag badge that is on the bike's sidecover - it signifies that Yamaha won the 125 GP World Championship in '68 (a notorious title for the rider, one Mr. Read, but that's another tale). Sean and I watch the Yamaha Classic Racing Team together.

The Team fires up the bikes one at a time, then Steve Baker, Tommy Robb, and, naturally, Phil Read whiz up and down the Promenade on them. For fun, Phil locks the front as he wheels the bike back into the makeshift pits. Tommy, age 76 and all of 95 lbs, literally casts aside his walker and hops on a YZ623C (a racer based on the production engine in Sean's AS1). Tommy is careful to restrict the bike to first and second gear so it screams sweetly to impossible revs. Finally, Steve Baker reunites with his trusty old OW31, better known in the U.S. as the mighty TZ750. They may not have paid King Kenny "enough to ride that thing," but in 1977 Steve climbed aboard it to become the first American to win a road-racing World Championship. (Respect to the King, his TZ750's dirt-track frame and suspension were entirely different and far squirmier than Steve's ride.) Today, the Classic

Dave Roper's ride, a 1911 TT-winning Indian. In addition to being the 100th anniversary of The Mountain portion of the course, 2011 was the 100th anniversary of "The Red Indian" massacre, in which Indians won all classes at the TT. The following year the British unsuccessfully tried to have them banned from the TT.



Dave has come to the Island to ride a 1911 Indian on Friday's parade lap. Not only is 2011 the 100th anniversary of The Mountain portion of the course, it's the centenary of Indian's sweep of the top three places of

& Co. head off to continue their project of rebuilding the Indian's transmission for Friday.

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The Senior

The last race of the week is the Senior TT, which the TT organizers dub the "Blue Riband" event of the week. Prior to 1977, the Senior TT was a part of the GP World Championship and its prestige as a race is still apparent. Riders seem to rise to their finest hours during the Senior. John McGuinness' 2009 trip around the Senior at an average of 131.578 mph stands as the fastest in any TT race. Whether you're a racer or not, that speed strains comprehension.

My vantage point for the Senior is a couple hundred yards above the Gooseneck. The morning before, I'd come through there around 5:30 am, out for a lap on the Duke. Powering through the beautifully-banked righthander, I felt the rear slide more than I've ever felt before. It felt good! I went with it and motored hard out of the turn then, straightening the bike up, could not resist fist-pumping. But today when the boys come through here they're in no position to be lolling about with fist pumps. Exiting the Gooseneck, they're pinned, climbing through the gears. They're doing 110 when they come into view, then 150-160 by the time they blast past.

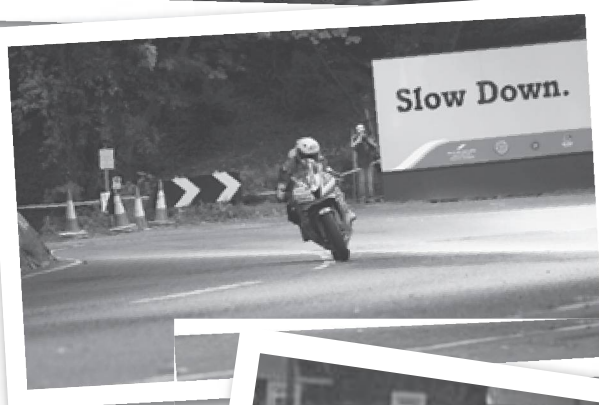
I watch the Senior with a group of three Scots. They roll their Rs as they jokingly tell me they're from a "rrrrredneck" part of the country. We are stationed along a stone wall on the inside of a very gradual left-hander. The left is so long that it's one of those where you gently touch in and out of the apex, making it multiple corners, essentially. At the speed I went through the other morning it was practically a straight. At the racer's speeds they are leaning intensely.

One of the two Scots lies atop the wide wall, stretched out on his side, propping his head up in his hand as though relaxing on a beach. A little boy lies in front of him. They look down the course at the racers coming toward us. Hurling past, their helmets are maybe a foot from the boy's ear, maybe. The boy has short, buzzed hair but it still blows around madly for a couple seconds after each bike blasts by.

The six-lap Senior takes over an hour and 45 minutes to complete. At those speeds, in these conditions, it is absolutely astounding that racers can concentrate so long and perform as they do. Kinda makes the 45-minute MotoGP races look like a casual



Ramsey Hairpin, racers don't read road signs



Sulby Bridge, steering with the rear

trip around the block. Over nearly two hours of racing, I have time to concentrate on the sounds. A great deal of the joy of the TT comes through the ears.

A few days earlier, I'd watched near Sulby Straight, the fastest portion of the course, where they're pinned for an eternity at 185-plus.

The sound of this is powerful. It starts like the faintest ringing in your ear. Just barely a sound at all. It is always distant but becomes steadily more audible as the bikes approach, a high-pitched whine with the slightest warble. In Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, an identical sound is used during an intense sci-fi moment to place

Ballaugh Bridge, Guy Martin blasts by as Keith Amor pursues

the viewer on pins and needles. It worked then, and it does now. For miles around Sulby Straight, you can hear the steadily growing wail-whine of a lone bike for at least 30 seconds before it comes into view. It is symphonic.

Back on the wall with the Scots, we're listening to the racecourse in the valley below. It can be several minutes from the time we hear a bike in the distance, until it passes us and its exhaust note finally disappears. But sometimes there's enough distance between bikes that all goes quiet, except the tinny voice of an excited announcer on the Scots' transistor radio. In these calm moments we hear sparrows and crows calling from various perches

around the neighboring pasture.

I've spent most of the race behind the wall but, after several laps and countless bikes pass without incident, I work up the courage to join the Scotsmen atop the wall. Before climbing up I pre-plan my emergency jump, if need be. As with most viewing spots around the TT course, moving a few feet leads to an entirely new and different experience. Our perch atop the wall is like a marker for the apex of the corner, thus the racers are very close to us and the wall as they come by. Inches close.

Near the end of the race, the riders have established significant gaps between each other. McGuinness has led nearly the whole race. His line past our corner is absolute art. Rather than dipping in-and-out making it multiple apexes, he does an ever-so-gradual, rock-solid, smooth arc, creating one very long, very fast turn. Complete control. A few of the other leaders nail it nearly as well, but not every

lap as he does. The mid-pack guys and backmarkers bob through, changing lines 3-4 times through the length of the bend. Yet they are still faster than belief.


On the final lap, the Scots and I ready for McGuinness to come into view. Even without the radio to tell you who is where on the course, you can always tell when the leaders are approaching. First you hear the low hum of the medic and camera helicopters following them. Then you hear their engines. Depending on the section of course, you might hear furious up-shifts, or fierce downshifts.

We hear the helicopters, followed shortly by McGuinness' engine as he shreds out of Ramsey hairpin in first gear. The gears go up as he smoothly and steadily accelerates through all the bends leading up to the Gooseneck. Approaching the Gooseneck, he's almost to us and we can hear him downshift. We'll see him at any second and the Scots and other small groups along the wall begin to clap. We hear him pin it hard out of the Gooseneck and the up-shifts begin.

He comes into view and starts his final perfect arc past us. Just as he's nearly even with us he turns his head precisely in our direction and gives an appreciative nod. It's as though he were just out for a friendly afternoon joy ride and we were fellow bikers waving from the side of the road. I guess that's pretty much what this is: the TT. 🍷


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