

THE GODFATHER OF PHOTOGRAPHY

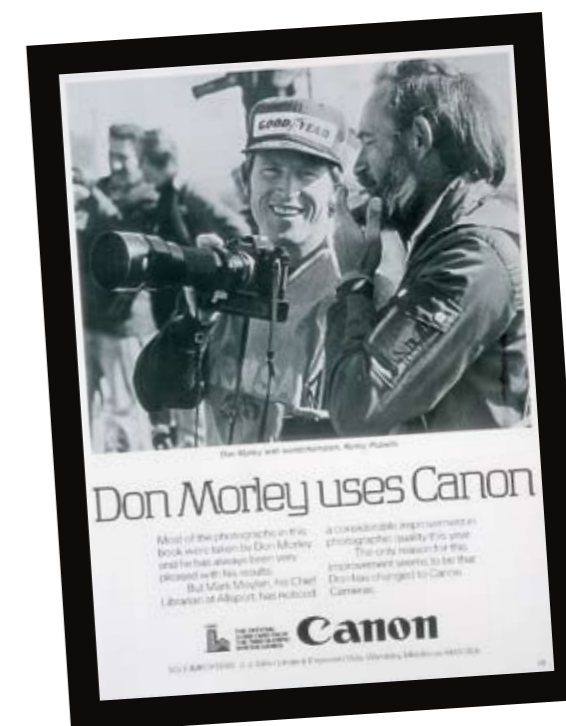
WORDS: JON URRY PICS: DON MORLEY

Don Morley has been photographing the world's top sporting events for the last fifty years but his real passion has always been motorcycles. He has seen everything from terrorists attacks to Muhammad Ali naked and captured everything on film, apart from Ali's manhood...

When I was about twelve or thirteen I cycled to a motorcycle road race in Derbyshire with a mate at a place called Osmaston Manor. It was the 1950s and at that time road races happened in the grounds of country estates. To be honest, I had no interest in going but my mate was very keen. I can't describe the atmosphere when we got there, the smell of fuel and Castrol R oil, the noises and the sights. I was hooked and from that moment onwards I what I wanted to be a motorcycle racer."

Don Morley's eyes light up as he recounts his first sight of a motorcycle race. Despite being well into retirement age, Don's memory and enthusiasm remains as keen as ever. His isn't a name that many outside his profession will have ever heard of, but within photography circles Don is quite simply a legend. He was top of his game when photographing bikes was all done by hand, auto focus didn't exist, and you shot onto film with magazine editors monitoring your hit rate as film development costs were sky high. Only the very best had the skills to capture the likes of Sheene and Roberts at the frighteningly fast and treacherous circuits of the 1970s, and Don was the best in the business, driven by his memories of that first motorcycle race.

"Well before the age we could ride, myself and a mate bought a 1928 BSA Sloper with the plan of entering the TT. That was our dream. Unfortunately I got caught on the road by the police and ended up in court. I was possibly 15, and my dad didn't even know we had it. As I was a juvenile he was called to court rather than me and I got one hell of a good hiding, lost the licence I wasn't old enough to have and the bike was scrapped. Dad was always anti bikes and also anti me becoming a photographer. Anyway, when I was old

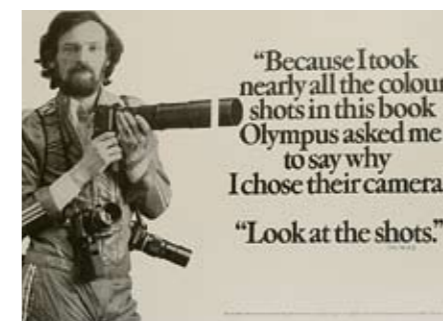


“ Racing changed when the Americans came over in the 1970s



THE WORLD CUP

"Extra time was almost over and I thought it would be great to get a crowd shot of people throwing their hats up in the air. How was I to know about the famous 'they think it's all over' goal? I missed the shot and very nearly got fired as a result!"



► enough I got my licence, did a bit of trials and was always aiming at road racing, but I needed cash. Dad entered me into a six-year engineering course, but rather than go to night school three nights a week studying engineering I changed courses and learnt photography. I got away with that for several years before he found out, at which point he threw me out of the house. To cut a long story short I was offered a job with Rolls Royce when the course finished and freelanced at the weekends taking pictures for local papers, dinner dances, weddings, etc. Then in 1957 Motor Cycle News started. I wrote to the editor offering my services and when I was over at

and tried to throw me off the plane. Luckily enough, Barry Sheene and a few other riders were on the plane returning home. Barry and myself never really saw eye to eye, but on this one occasion he stood up and said 'if Don gets off we all get off.' Eventually they gave in and I was allowed to fly."

In the 1970s the GP circus was very different to MotoGP nowadays. Not only was the paddock much more open, the riders were a different breed. "Racing changed massively when the Americans started to come over in the late 1970s, before then even Mike Hailwood would be sleeping in a single tent in the paddock, everyone was accessible. When the likes of Kenny Roberts arrived they drove huge motorhomes and everyone soon copied. But it was fantastic to watch and be a part of, the racing was spectacular and every

“ THE RACING WAS SPECTACULAR, EVERY CHAMPIONSHIP WAS SO HARD FOUGHT ”

the TT I saw him and as it turned out their photographer was taken ill, so I ended up working for MCN. I stayed there for a number of years before working my way up through magazines before ending up in Fleet Street in 1970 and in 1975 I set up All-Sports International Photographic Agency."

All-Sports became the place to go not only for photographs of major sporting events, but also advertising photography. Don's list of clients included Marlboro Yamaha and Rothmans Honda as well as clients such as Phil Read and Premier helmets. But outside the studio Don was free to follow the major sporting events, which meant following the motorcycle GP series around in what many consider its heyday, his major passion in life alongside the TT and racing and riding bikes.

"Racing bikes was always a worry because if you got injured then work suffered, something I found out at the Spanish GP one year in Jarama. I had broken my leg and had a cast from hip to ankle. I worked at the GP but on the way home the stewardess spotted this

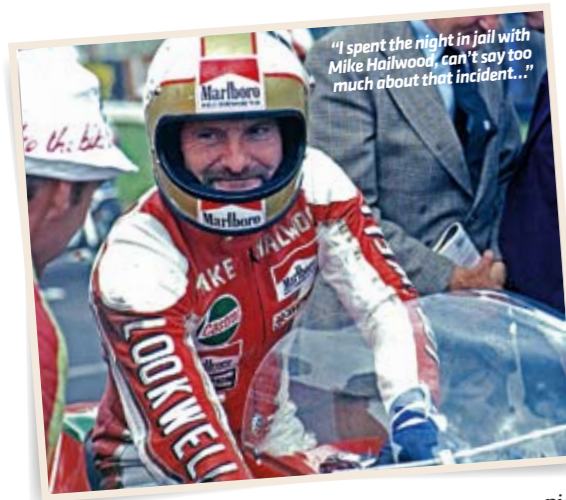


The chap with the beard at the front wheel is Jerry Burgess!



ON ANY SUNDAY...

"That was such a special shoot, I was good mates with Kenny but he was mental. The shoot was with Kenny, Malcolm Smith and Bruce Penhall, who later starred in CHiPs. I was staying with Kenny and the madness started when we went for a game of golf. What I didn't know was that he had stuck a TZ750 engine in his golf buggy! He told me to sit on the back then proceeded to wheelie the thing down the main road trying to chuck me off the back, this was just the start. The bike for the actual shoot was a TZ750 engined crosser Kenny had made and the location was about two miles into the Mojave desert. Kenny tells me to get on the back. I had all my camera kit and he just gunned it, we roared across the desert then hit this dune flat out. We flew about 70 feet through the air and when we landed snapped the bike in half, he thought it was hilarious but I was talking with a high pitched voice for a while after..."



"I spent the night in jail with Mike Hailwood, can't say too much about that incident..."

► championship was fiercely fought. And the variety, 50cc, 250, 350, 500 championships, sidecars, the grids were full and so were the grandstands. But photographing it was so hard. The camera was manual everything and only a very few had the skills to do it; luckily my days at MCN taught me well. At that time I shot on plates, not film. You had twelve plates for all weekend and if you used them all you got fired! You had to return with one in reserve just in case you saw an air crash on the way home. Accuracy was everything and you had to process the film yourself. By the 1970s I was using 35mm film but everything still had to be processed and with no email, the pictures had to be delivered by hand. The room for error was zero, every picture had to

be sharp, and the time it took to process the film and get it on a plane meant you were limited to one roll whenever possible. That's four pics per race and every shot counted, that's real pressure and no aids, such as auto-focus, to help you. I used to watch riders in practice, memorise their line and often used to put a cigarette paper on the track at a certain point to give me a focus point; anything to get an edge."

But it wasn't just hard for Don, it was even harder for the riders, accidents happened and often the riders that had become your mates didn't return to the paddock.

"I used to ride to circuits on my bike and leave my kit in a rider's caravan, more than once I came back at the end of the day and the rider was dead. That happened three times in one season, so I bought some panniers as it

► BARRY WOULDN'T TURN UP TO SHOOT, USUALLY BECAUSE HE'D PULLED A BIRD ◄



DENNIS IRELAND FLIP!

"This was so sad. Dennis had won a few races and was a real up and coming rider. He wanted some publicity pictures so I agreed to do them for his sponsors. We went to Brands and as he exited the pit the throttle stuck open, just look at his hand in the picture, he doesn't want to be pulling a wheelie. The bike flipped and Dennis was thrown across the track and hit a concrete post, it was terrible, I heard all the cracks. He broke so many bones. I was lying in the track for the picture and the bike hit me, I remember thinking, 'if this kills me I hope someone develops the film in the camera.' Ironically, I couldn't move as I already had a broken leg. The next day I saw Dennis in hospital, I was in a wheelchair, bashed up, and he was in a terrible state. He asked to see the picture and when he saw it he was so happy, he showed everyone. This picture won loads of awards and all of the money I made from that picture I gave to a fund for Dennis. Although he raced again he was never the same rider, but the nice twist at the end of the story was that he ended up marrying his nurse!"



The flag may have dropped on Morley's career, but the images are as sharp as ever

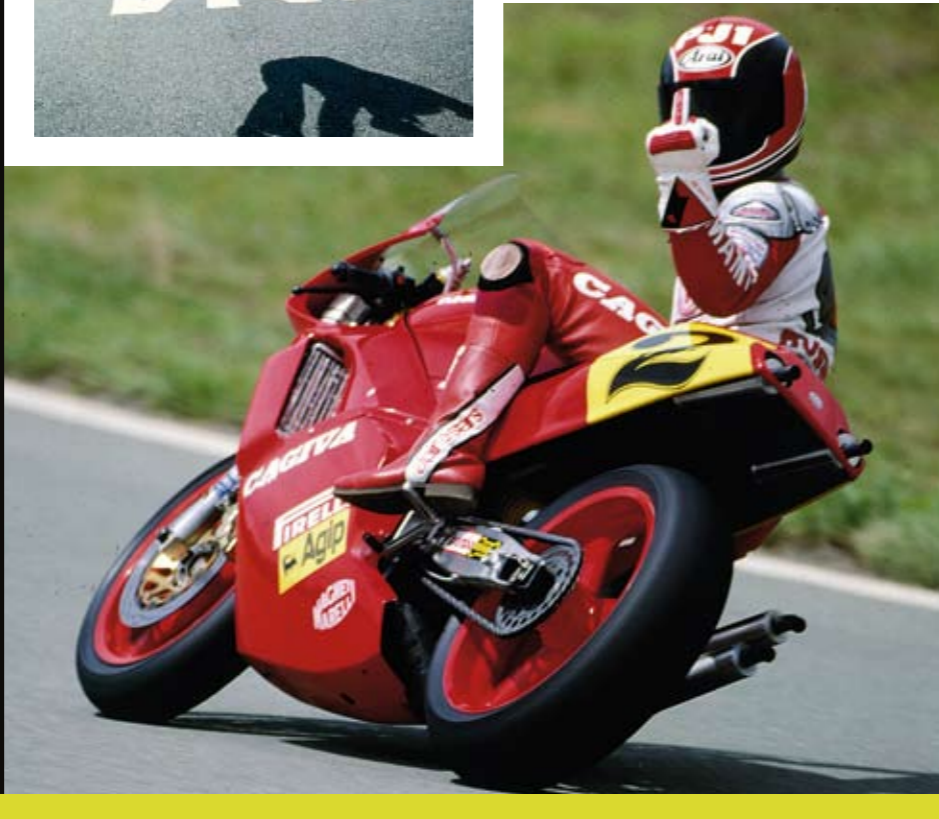
was too hard to deal with. A few races later someone stole the panniers and I had to ride back from Le Mans without a lid!"

But the good times outweighed the bad and Don was part of the GP furniture, a known face to both riders and GP bosses.

"I have no end of pics of Mamola and Sheene giving me the V sign, but that was the fun. You knew the riders and they knew the value of publicity and I could get them it, so they played up for the camera in practice."

Yet Don found his relationship with the riders wasn't always smooth.

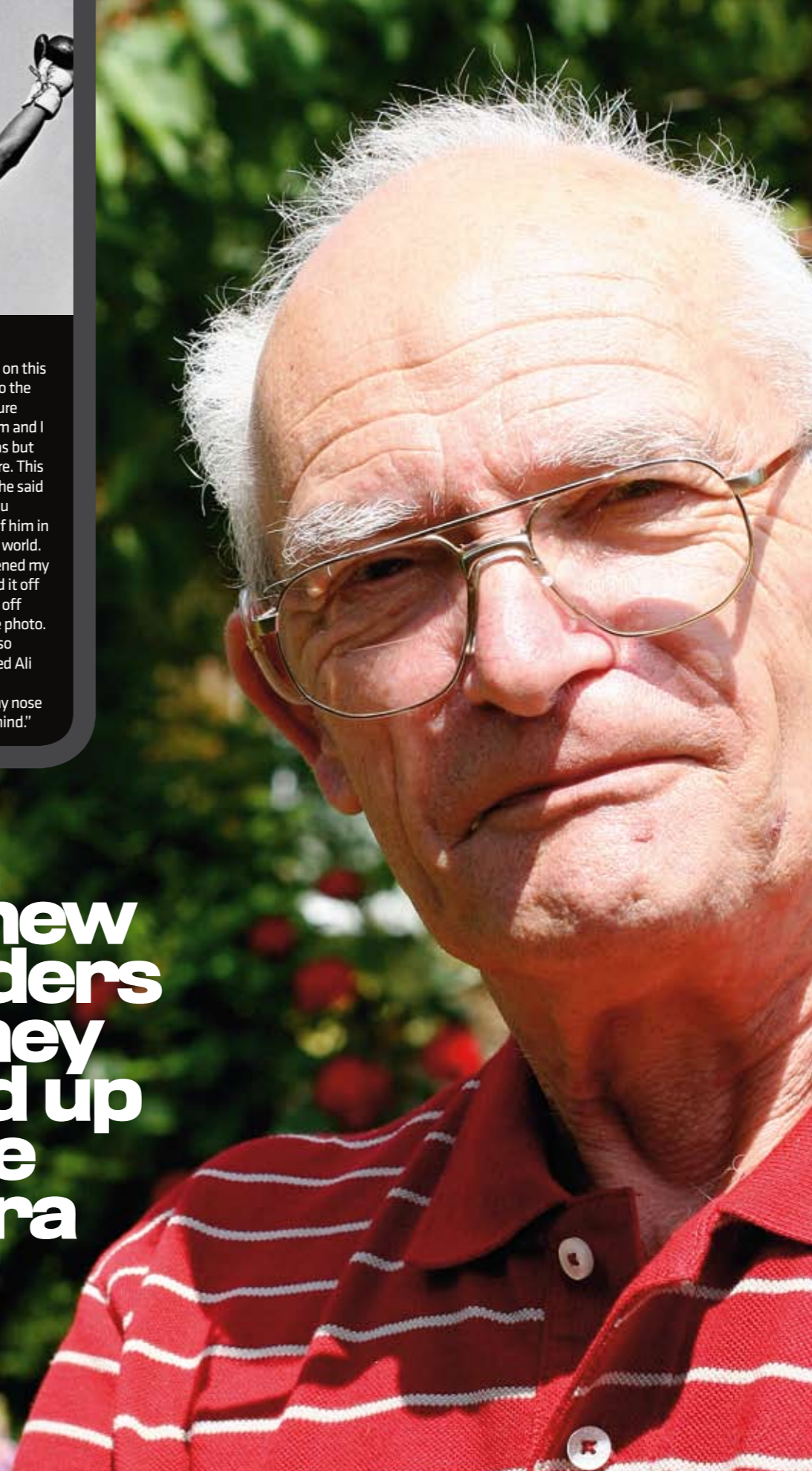
"I had a few run-ins with Barry, he wasn't very professional and wouldn't turn up to publicity shoots, usually because he had pulled a bird the night before. But we had a big fall out because I went to America and saw



MUHAMMAD ALI

"I covered a few of his fights and on this occasion he had refused to talk to the press and wouldn't have his picture taken. He'd go out running at 5am and I went with him. I took my cameras but he refused to let me take a picture. This went on for days and eventually he said 'OK, you've earned it, what do you want?' I said I wanted a picture of him in his kit on top of a hill, king of the world. He said 'I don't have my kit' I opened my bag and said 'I do.' I had borrowed it off his trainer every day. He stripped off there and then and posed for the photo. When he was there naked I was so tempted to take a picture, a naked Ali picture would have been worth a fortune, but a large paw under my nose dissuaded me, he had read my mind."

You knew the riders and they played up for the camera





► some of the US riders racing. I came home and wrote an article called 'The Yanks are coming' and it said something like 'Barry Sheene had better watch out.' That got right up his nose and we seldom spoke again, which was a real shame because he was a such a good rider and a great man, I admired him massively. A few years before he died I got a phone call at home at about 5am. 'It's Barry, I'm parked on your lawn.' Sure enough he was, he couldn't find my drive in the dark and just parked on the grass. He needed an old picture for some reason and we spent a few hours chatting and looking at pictures from the 1970s. He left and a few weeks later it was announced he had cancer. I like to think he came to make peace, draw a line in the sand."

During all his years photographing bikes Don's main love has always been the Isle of

paddock to see the riders. I worked for over 30 years in GPs and spent years working to make conditions better for people working at events. I felt insulted, so I handed the pass back and left. I've never been to a GP since."

A sad end to the career of a man whose images have recorded the golden era of motorcycle racing and inspired a generation? Not at all, in retirement Don is busier than ever, allowing access to his collection of over a quarter of a million pictures spanning half a decade of sport. But does he have any regrets?

"During my time I always made a point of destroying any pictures when a rider was killed and I now wish I hadn't. Not for personal gain, I have always made a point out of not making money from another's misfortune, but I feel that I have destroyed a little bit of history." □

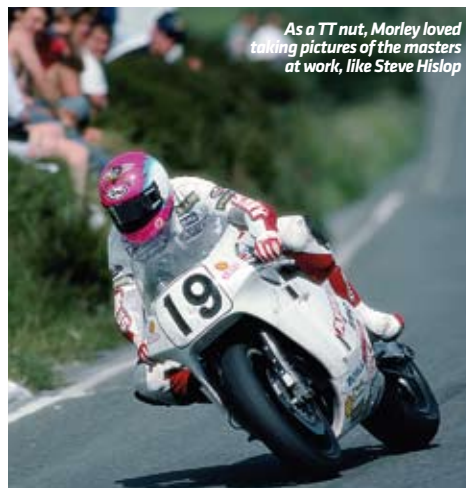
“ I'M A TT NUT. MY ONE REGRET IS NEVER MANAGING TO RACE THERE ”

Man TT. He has recorded on film the last 51 years of TT races, seen all the greats and got drunk with many of them.

"I'm a TT nut. Which other race in the world can you lean over a wall and almost touch the rider as he passes at over 180mph? It's man against machine against real roads that can bite back. It's such a special place and my greatest regret is that I have never managed to ride at the TT."

Having been top of his game for nearly 50 years, and with his passion for bikes still very much alive, what was it that finally swayed Don's decision to retire from professional motorcycle photography.

"I went to the British GP in 2000 and they gave me a pass that didn't let me to the photo locations and wouldn't even allow me into the



As a TT nut, Morley loved taking pictures of the masters at work, like Steve Hislop



"Kenny would only do two or three laps in practice then pull in and sit it out. I asked him why once, he said 'I do 100 laps, two out there and 98 in my head.' He was a phenomenal rider."

DAYTONA BANKING

"This picture got me arrested. Daytona is a terrible place and the organisers won't let the press go anywhere so I sneaked up to the top of the banking to get this picture of Kenny Roberts. I snapped a few frames before security caught me. They put me in jail for a few hours but eventually let me out. The next year I returned with some wire cutters to do the job properly!"



MUNICH OLYMPICS 1972 TERRORIST ATTACK

"I had a call from one of the English athletes who said 'Get over here Don, something is happening.' I went to the Olympic village and it was all closed, armed guards, the works. I decided to climb the fence to get in and the guards just watched me. I made it to one of the buildings alongside the block the terrorists were in and sat there no more than twelve feet from the hostages and terrorists. I stayed there and took pictures for about ten hours until it went dark. Every now and then the police came and flushed us out but I just swapped floors and carried on taking pictures. The terrorists didn't care, it was publicity. I called my news desk and gave a running commentary all day before sending the pictures back that evening. It was terrible, I'll never forget it, but I don't remember being scared."