AUSTRALIAN MOTORCYCLE NEWS



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IRISH CREAM

What the 2022 Irish road racing season lost in track time it more than made up for in drama and controversy

The Irish road racing season came to a premature end last month when a disgruntled member of the public sabotaged the Mid-Antrim 150 track during the early hours of race-day morning. Reportedly upset at the organiser's decision not to cancel the event out of respect for Queen Elizabeth II who had died 24 hours earlier, the perpetrators scattered quantities of glass, nails and diesel across the public circuit, causing the final meeting of the year to be abandoned.

Whether the meeting should have gone ahead or not – the Wilson Craig Racing Team withdrew, as did the event's most successful rider, Ryan Farquhar, who was lined up to perform parade laps – it was a real shame that the season should finish in that way. Would-be title challengers were denied the chance to knock rivals off the top spot and champions were crowned in the paddock (a day of







1. Glenn Irwin (#1) and Davey Todd (#74) in the North West 200

2. Michael Sweeney at Cookstown in 2021: this year he's the Irish Superbike champion

3. A hairpin on the Mid Antrim circuit

4. RIP Jack Oliver

5. RIP Davey Morgan

practice had already taken place). It was an anti-climactic end to what had been a wonderful season back racing on the roads after the long Covid-enforced hiatus.

If you're unfamiliar with the Irish roads scene, think Isle of Man TT with mass starts but on a smaller scale. In some cases, scaled right down to tiny proportions. The traditional season opener, the Cookstown 100 in County Tyrone takes place over a tiny 3.4km circuit which superbikes lap in under a minute and a half. That contrasts to the-jewel-in-the-crown North West 200, which is held over 14km with a lap record of 4m19s. Somewhere in between lie events such as Tandragee, Armoy and Skerries 100; each with their own unique history and identity – but all bloody dangerous.

The North West 200 is the traditional TT warm-up and is the biggest sporting event in Ireland. To the Irish fans, road racing is like a religion and it is estimated that 150,000 of them flocked to the North West this year. They fervently worship at the roadside as their heroes compete for honour and prestige. Enthusiasts congregate in gardens and the hedgerows, along a railway embankment and in church grounds, desperate for the best possible view of the racing. Ballyreagh golf course, on the coast-road section of the course becomes a fan zone and, opposite that, lie a series of caravan parks where holiday-makers barbecue and make merry while keeping one eye on the action.

The North West attracts international stars such as Aussie Josh Brookes, Glenn Irwin and Peter Hickman and is streamed live globally. With slipstream on the long straights, riders can achieve speeds upwards of 320km/h; it's a world-class event to rival any other on the planet.

Honda Racing's Irwin has won the last five Superbike races held on the circuit, an all-time record and he is typical of the calibre of rider who competes. But while the sight of BSB-spec Superbikes ridden by world-class riders laying it all on the line at the North West is one to behold, it is not a true representation of the Irish scene.







The rest of the season plays out at the smaller, national meetings that take place all over rural Ireland during the summer months. Once the razzmatazz of the North West has died down and the visitors have returned home, that is when the season really takes off. Local heroes such as Michael Sweeney, Mike Browne and Adam McLean are the star attractions at the back-to-basics nationals. They thrash their machinery along narrow country roads, over jumps and bumps, elbow-to-elbow, defying laws of adhesion – millimetres from disaster but always in pursuit of glory.

It's a serious business that no one takes lightly; everyone knows that one tiny mistake may have massive repercussions. This season saw one fatality on the Irish roads – 22-year-old Jack Oliver tragically died after losing control on a jump at the Kells races in June. It was just Oliver's fourth road-race event but he had already shown real talent and marked himself out as one to watch. At the other end of the scale, Irish stalwart Davy Morgan lost his life at the TT. Morgan had enjoyed a successful career spanning 30 years and was seemingly headed for retirement before fate cruelly intervened; proof if it was ever needed that anyone can pay the ultimate price when the cards are not stacked in your favour.

But the show must go on, and it unbelievably does in this padded and protected health-and-safety obsessed era we find ourselves in. The saying 'if it were invented today, it would be banned tomorrow' sums up road racing in a nutshell.

Yet banning it never seems to be on the cards, despite the many lives lost down the years. Of course, danger is part of the attraction and you never see a depleted grid in response to a tragic incident. But it must be said that some events have struggled in recent times due to financial burdens, particularly the

MID ANTRIM ANTICS

BY THE TIME the Mid-Antrim 150 was abandoned, a controversial day of practice had already taken place. The death of Queen Elizabeth II had been announced less than 24 hours prior to roads closing, and there was much social media discourse on whether the event should proceed or not.

With far-travelled competitors already established in the paddock, it was decided to respectfully press ahead with the races. Sporting events all over the UK were being cancelled and many labelled that decision 'shameful' and a 'disgrace'. It was clear the organisers were going to have to tread cautiously.

Bikes didn't take to the track until after lunch to allow for a 30-minute bell-ringing remembrance service at midday. It made for surreal scenes, with solemn race fans standing trackside as church bells eerily rang out across the Irish countryside.

But once machinery took to the circuit it was business as usual. Qualifying went on into the evening and it looked as though it was all systems go for the following day... sadly, that wasn't to be. Had it gone ahead, this would have been the first running of the Mid-Antrim since 2016. The organiser has been struggling financially and it took a huge endeavour to resuscitate the meeting for 2022.

While it's easy to conclude those responsible for the vandalism were protesting the decision to press ahead during a period of national mourning, it has to be said that a similar incident took place in 2011. That incident set the club back years and this may be the final nail in the coffin for the event, which first took place in 1946.

ENTHUSIASTS CONGREGATE IN GARDENS, ALONG A RAILWAY EMBANKMENT AND IN CHURCH GROUNDS

rising costs of insurance.

The Ulster Grand Prix was the fastest road race in the world, boasting a lap record average speed of 219.539km/h, set by Peter Hickman in 2019. First held in 1922, the Dundrod circuit showpiece should have been celebrating its centenary this year. And while there was a celebration of sorts, unfortunately financial problems dictated the anniversary race meeting could not go ahead.

The 'Ulster' was comparable to the North West 200 in terms of prestige and, along with the Isle of Man TT, the trio were known as the 'big three' – the Grand Slam events on the roads. However, despite boasting 100 years of history, including a regular spot on the Grand Prix calendar up until 1971, it remains to be seen whether racing will ever return to the magnificent Dundrod circuit.

One event that is not struggling is Armoy. Even though it's the youngest race in Ireland (the inaugural meeting took place in 2009), it is an event steeped in tradition. When Joey Dunlop burst onto the scene in the 1970s, the sleepy village of Armoy is where he called home and a devout passion for two-wheeled motorsport has forever burned strong in the area.

It regularly attracts top stars such as Guy Martin and Davey Todd. Up until this year, Joey's nephew Michael Dunlop was the golden boy of the event. He had won the feature race nine times in a row, he held the lap record and was undisputedly the star attraction.

However there was an unexpected twist this year. Just as the event was set to get underway,

IN DUNLOP'S ABSENCE, TODD ANNIHILATED THE ARMOY OPPOSITION



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THE DUNLOP DYNASTY

THE DUNLOPS ARE the Royal family of Irish racing and have reigned supreme between the hedges for half a century. Unfortunately, and somewhat unbelievably, Michael is the only remaining Dunlop still racing. Uncle Joey, father Robert and brother William have all lost their lives while competing in their chosen sport. Given all of the triumph and glory, it's difficult to process that tragedy should play such a strong hand in the Dunlop story.

Michael, nicknamed 'the bull', is famously strong-willed and, like the Dunlops who have gone before him, likes to do things his own way. MD has a reputation for jumping ship if things aren't right, but with his family history you can't really blame him.

He was due to take on the international Superbike races in 2022 armed with a PBM Ducati, but that deal fell through at the last minute. Hawk Racing came to his rescue just in the nick of time and supplied Dunlop with a GSX-R1000.

In the opening Superbike race at the North west 200, Michael's rear Dunlop tyre delaminated in dramatic fashion. Frightening phone footage emerged of Michael only just holding onto the Suzuki as the rear tyre blew into his seat. It was the catalyst that led to his namesake tyre manufacturer withdrawing its slick KR 108 from the TT a few weeks later.

Uncle Joey is still the rider with the most wins at the TT, 22 years after his death. But you would assume that Michael will usurp those famous 26 victories sometime soon. Michael scored a double this year and has now lifted the silver lady on 21 occasions. It's worth noting that if his Paton hadn't broken down while leading the Supertwins TT, Dunlop and Peter Hickman may well have left the island this year with a hat-trick apiece.

And one must wonder how many wins he could have had by now if were not for Covid?

Sadly, Michael now only makes a handful of appearances on the Irish roads each year. This year he contested the North West 200 and Walderstown Race of the South. While Michael is missed by the fans, there are no complaints from his rivals when he stays away...



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1. Michael Dunlop at the North West 200

2. Graham Kennedy finds air at Mid Antrim

3. In the burbs: Michael Rutter pushes hard at the North West 200

4. Michael Sweeney at Armoy, which ended the 2022 Irish season

5. Davey Todd

Dunlop announced that he had withdrawn from the meeting, stating that his own MD Racing Team had "not been treated on an equal and fair basis with some of the other teams taking part in the event".

Michael's withdrawal on the morning of the event caught everyone off-guard and was a real sucker-punch to the organiser as well as the fans. There was a time when Michael and his late brother, William, raced all over Ireland. Nowadays he only contests a handful of races each year. His Armoy no-show was particularly disappointing for that reason.

The exact reason for Dunlop's withdrawal was never officially confirmed, though it was strongly rumoured he had taken exception to money given to Padgetts Honda and Davey Todd to assist with their travel from England to take part. But we might never get to the bottom of what really happened.

In Dunlop's absence, Todd absolutely annihilated the Armoy opposition. The Englishman took four wins from four starts. His domination was mesmerising and there were few in attendance who didn't go home a huge fan of the Padgett's Honda star. The atmosphere was euphoric and there was a real sense among those who were there that they had witnessed something special.

Many are now of the opinion that Todd will step up to challenge the likes of Hickman at the 2023 TT. At the time of writing the number 74 is also leading the British Superstock









BROWNE'S COWS, AND TITLES...

MIKE BROWNE IS in the early stages of his career and there are signs that he may well be the real deal. He was involved in a nasty crash at the early-season Cookstown races and broke both his ankles. But somehow Browne made it back in time for the TT and impressed all with his tenacious effort – he came away with a top 10 Supersport finish and banked some very impressive lap times, despite struggling to walk. He then caused a shock at the Manx GP in August when he won the lightweight race on the Laylaw 250cc Yamaha. Now, with two Irish championships under his belt, many will be expecting big things from the dairy farmer in 2023.





A FOREBODING SENSE OF DOOM HAS HUNG OVER ROAD RACING

Championship ahead of Aussie rider Billy McConnell; proof the Saltburn man can do the business on both road and track.

What the fans didn't realise as they gazed on in wonder at the Armoy proceedings was that they were effectively watching the season's end. With the cancellation of the Mid-Antrim still six weeks away, championships were being wrapped up there and then and no one knew it.

Michael Sweeney finally achieved his long-held ambition to be crowned Irish Superbike champion after a decade of trying. The Republic of Ireland star has been around for a long time but this achievement firmly establishes him at the top table of Irish racing.

"I'd been after that one for a very long time," says Sweeney. "The Superbike was the only one (championship) I'd never won. It completes the set and keeps the sponsors happy as well."

Sweeney also took the 2022 Supertwins title. Fellow Republic of Ireland rider Mike Browne was crowned Irish Supersport and Moto3 champion, while Adam McLean bagged the Ulster Supersport Championship (for races in Northern Ireland only).

McLean is a real talent but has had many injury problems. This year, he missed the TT before splitting from the famous McAdoo racing team mid-season and will be hoping for better things in 2023.

Browne and McLean's presence on the grid, along with TT podium man Paul Jordan and other young talents such as Darryl Tweed lends hope for the future of road racing. But it's hard to predict what lies ahead for such a volatile sport when it evokes such extreme emotions and costs so much money.

For as long as anyone can remember, a foreboding sense of doom has hung over road racing, an inevitable acceptance that such a reckless pursuit must surely be on borrowed time. It almost seems too obvious sometimes that road racing belongs in the past when times were simpler and motorcycles were slower.

Perhaps it is that sentiment that keeps the scene alive. For those in love with the sport they throw everything they have at it. They fully immerse themselves, making the most of every second, terrified that the day will soon come when someone with commonsense intervenes and stops them doing what they love forever more. We can only hope that that day doesn't arrive, for just a little while yet. ■

1. Richard Cooper heads back inland at the North West 200

2. Triple (digit) treat: Michael Gahan at Mid Antrim

3. Mike Browne at Armoy

4. Is this the fastest dairy farmer on the planet? Browne in pre-race mode

5. Marcus Simpson

6. Senior Classic action at Armoy