

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Iron Man

By the 1930s, the tall board tracks of professional motorcycle racing were gone, and with them the irreplaceable spectacle of roaring packs of eight-valve Harley-Davidsons and their fierce opponents, the big-flywheel Indians. Most of the great names; Jake DeRosier, Shrimp Burns, and Ralph Hepburn were dead, maimed, or behind the wheels of race cars.

Over on the Pacific Coast new bike racing was breaking loose and fresh names were evolving, especially in Los Angeles. The racing was speedway, the volatile import from the cinder tracks of the UK and the convict isle of Australia. Two of the new names were the Milne brothers, Jack and Cordy, the one a world champion and the other the future spouse of the spectacular stripper Miss St. Cyr.

Yet another unknown was one Ed Kretz (1911-1996). This Kretz looked like no species of motorcycle racer. With his barrel torso and meat-hook arms, he resembled, really, a giant bale of hay. Appropriately, he was in that line of work. He was the chauffeur of a hay wagon who every morning toted 23 tons of fodder out of the Imperial Valley into L.A.



Kretz was so much a greenhorn to two-wheel culture that upon visiting Floyd Clymer to barter an outboard off a canoe in exchange for a motor-bike; received a royal swindling; and then, finally, a VLD Harley, a massive quadruped he rode to the Antelope Valley for the Big Bear Run but got thrown out.

Next the sly Milnes and their high-strung associate Lammy Lameroux decided to have some fun with this muscle-bound yokel off a hay wagon. So they entered Kretz, the big bumpkin, in a short-track meet at tiny Atlantic Stadium, and naturally he lumbered like a

clumsy rogue elephant in so claustrophobic an environment. But then Kretz caught his three tormentors in the Targa Florio at Legion Ascot Speedway.

Seniors residing in L.A. still remember deadly old Legion Ascot sitting up in the Soto Street hills until an arsonist fired it bleachers. Roaring through those same hills was the Targa Florio. And following a brutal afternoon's worth of jumps, falls, and other high-stamina steeplechase pursuits, Kretz lapped Cordy Milne and was taking aim to next lap Jack Milne and Lammy Lameroux until all his violent crash-landing blew out a tire. Forced to make an emergency pit stop, he was so far ahead he still finished second.



American motorcycle racing went to bed that night realizing that a new and startling star named Ed Kretz was in its midst. And over the following seasons and decades Kretz won all the great long-distance crucibles: Langhorne four times plus Savannah and Daytona. These were savage race tracks. Consider Daytona and its 200 miles, which wasn't really a race track but a dirty trick: better than four undulating, heaving miles per lap, the narrow rear

straightaway pierced a mile corridor of dense foliage including bushes as big as a house; one burning motorcycle careening into this jungle was apt to set the whole thing ablaze, A whole city block of Harley-Davidsons and Indians shot for the first corner which always was harrowing, with at least two dozen riders sailing over the handlebars. Blowing sand got inside the engines and blew them up. The tide always came in before the finish causing Daytona's starters and scorers to panic and flee.

Then there was Langhorne, out in the precincts of eastern Pennsylvania, a war theater infamous for its race car bloodbaths. Among mile race tracks, Langhorne was a dangerous oddity because it wasn't oval but circular. It was a ring of oiled, blindingly-fast dirt surrounded by a wood of sinister green trees. And what made the Langhorne faithful warm to Kretz was that, just like the bravest race drivers, he immediately maneuvered onto Langhorne's outermost fringe, up where it merged against the rampart of dark green trees.

Kretz would have won every Daytona and Langhorne - his domination could have ruined both races - but fortunately he murdered his equipment. Loading and unloading those 23 tons of hay per day, every day, had made him so strong that he was, truly, "Iron Man Kretz." Merkel, Pope, and Excelsior were gone from the game, and the winner's fight had been between Harley-Davidson and Indian. And after Harley refused to pay Kretz as much money as he wanted he chose Indian.



A racing Indian Chief or Scout in full battle dress was a sight to behold: hundreds and hundreds of pounds with primitive girder suspension, hand-shifter, and cast-iron drum brake. Kretz racked up victory after victory aboard them but also frequently blew them apart.

Kretz had a temper. But unlike riders who usually do worse in that state, he could race at his best while hopping mad. This happened at another Targa Florio when a stubborn electrical short-circuit cost him eight separate pit stops and he railed at his crew for all eight on them. At last he rejoined the Targa 19th, still finished sixth, and lapped the winner six times.

Throwing a temper tantrum again, this time on Laconia's ski-slope circuit, he plugged a carburetor with mud, sacrificed 45 minutes cleansing it, then afterward attacked so hard the running boards got bludgeon loose and he was forced to fry his boots against the engine cases. He wasn't wearing gloves either. So steadily he abraded the epidermis, the dermis, and was working on the final layer of skin when the spectacle ended and he was all by himself, four laps in the lead.

The 1930s was the decade of the carousing, hard-drinking motorcycle racer, and Kretz was a paragon even by those standards. Iron Man Kretz could drink the best of them under the table and once drank so much he was discovered passed out under a big tree. Carried to his Indian anyway, he won again, and then he stumbled back and collapsed under the same big

tree. He also was a voracious slugger and hitter, putting to sleep three jarhead marines in the same fight.

He was a hero to all, except his parents and 11 brothers and sisters. Pious Seventh Day Adventists all, they were convinced that motorcycle racing was a one-way ticket to damnation.

DO NOT COPY