

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Horse With No Name

Out in the middle of nowhere, on the trackless floor of the Mojave desert, at one of the fuel dumps, crew members waited to receive their riders in the great Barstow – to - Vegas. This particular dump was 100 miles from the start, in the foothills of an expanse of barren mountains. And at last the leader – a speck of fast-moving dust followed by a famous bark of Husqvarna exhaust – came flying down the mountains and into sight.



“It’s J.N.!” J.N. Roberts. A diminutive figure wearing protective knee and shoulder pads, and a helmet with a football mask, this Roberts abandoned the Husqvarna to his pit crew almost before he’d stopped. And while swarming men serviced and refueled it, he sat on the tailgate of a truck, taking slow sips of water. Although he’d just raced across the

California/Nevada state line, and over and sent a couple of hours negotiating roiling sand washes, rock canyons, and dry lake beds, Roberts didn't appear tired. And he was in no hurry. Already the winner of the Barstow-to-Vegas three times, he would also win this one.

His Husky was refurbished; his gang of mechanics were hollering at him to rejoin the race; but Roberts still sat there. Minutes lapsed. The situation was exasperating. Was J.N. ever going to leave? Finally one of us couldn't stand it any longer. "For God's sake, J.N. You're leading Barstow-to-Vegas! Get going!" Roberts looked at the person admonishing him, smiled, then pointed off in the direction of the far mountains, and explained, "When I see dust, I'll go."

But there was no dust. Incredibly, Roberts had been loitering at the fuel dump for a full five minutes, yet not a single rider was close to him. And this despite the fact that the Barstow-to-Vegas was the biggest desert marathon race of them all – dense with upwards of 3,000 motorcycles. How could J.N. Roberts be so much better than so many?

Then Roberts looked again toward the mountains. And now there was dust – second and third place finally arriving. Roberts pulled on his helmet with its protective football mask; fired the Husky and jumped aboard; nodded thanks to his crew; opened up to peak revs; and departed with vision of Indians chasing him and a hymn celebrating horse – heroin - echoing in his brain.

J.N.(Jimmy Nelson), almost 40 years ago was the icon of desert derring-do, and, before the whole Mojave adventure collapsed, was the last and fastest of the great long-distance gladiators being turned out by the south of California. He won 23 consecutive races across the Mojave badlands, which is believed to be the record, and the name "J.N. Roberts" continued resonating longer and louder than that of anybody else. Even on September 13, 1972, after the Los Angeles Police Department sent a pair of its elite skull-crackers to J.N.'s home in the middle of the night and they used their billy sticks to club J.N. senseless, and nearly dead, newspapers continued describing J.N. as "the King of the Desert."

For somebody born in a place where the closest desert was half a continent away that was quite a title. Rural Indiana, J.R.'s home, was where he pursued quirky athletic interests: he was a graceful and natural athlete, and a dead shot with a bow-and-arrow. Consequently, these disparate abilities fused into an uncanny aptitude for racing a motorcycle as fast as it would go across the open desert. Asked what he was thinking about while flying between boulders, dancing across cactus-topped valleys making heart-stopping leapfrogs over rock canyon, and always being so far in the lead he seldom saw another motorcycle, Roberts replied, "There was a song I really like called 'Horse With No Name.' It was supposed to be

about heroin, but that wasn't why I liked it. For some reason it kept my brain busy and I could concentrate on racing.”

J.N. departed rural Indiana forever while still in his teens. Courtesy of the Marines he was shipped out to Okinawa where, he once recalled, “They marched my ass off, ‘Hup, one, two, three, four!’ After that I said to myself, ‘No more walking, ever. I’m getting a motorcycle.’”

Upon returning to this country he settled in Los Angeles, America’s motor-bike capitol, where his priority was buying a two-wheeler as quickly as possible. To avoid starving he peddled vacuum cleaners and the products of Fuller Brush door-to-door, doing terribly at both endeavors. The movie studios of Hollywood saved his life. He got a job at Universal as a pseudo carpenter hammering together film sets.

This was in the 1960s when desert racing was blooming, Its stars including everybody’s favorite, Bud Ekins; Larry Berquist and Gary Preston of the Pasadena Buzzards, who almost won the inaugural Baja 1000, beating all the caged buggies; Eddie Mulder, winner of the Big Bear Run at 16; my high school pal Mike Patrick, champion of the Mint 400; and all the movie members of the exclusive Viewfinders club like Pernell Roberts of “Bonanza,” and, conspicuously, Steve McQueen of “Bullitt,” who learned the desert game from his brilliant mentor Ekins, and who spectacularly presented an Oscar with his right mitt all plastered up after his high-speed collision with a Joshua tree.

At the very first hare ‘n’ hound race that J.N. ever saw, he experienced an epiphany. Watching the line of bikes and riders – almost a quarter of a mile long – and listening to the sudden bedlam of everybody kick-starting their silent engines ,then disappearing hell-bent for the far horizon, made him think of a cavalry charge from the movies, and he remembered it afterward: “I always raced like I was part of some cavalry. And the Apaches were after me. And they’d get me if I ever stopped.”

J.N. acquired his first motor, a ponderous Scrambler model Honda, then got in with members of the elite Viewfinders, who plugged him into the mystique of the Mojave; this was a tightly-wound and accessible group – just roll your bike into the bed of a pick-up and tool out to Red Rock, Phelan or even Sand Canyon, barely 20 minutes from Universal Studios.

Recalling his first meeting with J.N., Bob Harris, stunt man, actor, sports car racer, member of the Viewfinders, and Mojave motorcycle zealot said, “Sand Canyon was a great gathering place for Mojave people, and one day J.N. was out there with his Honda spread all over an army blanket. We went riding together and he was sensational. Afterward he said he hoped he’d get better at it if he got a better bike. I told him that if he got a better bike it would

be ‘Curtains’ for the rest of us. ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘you really think so?’ Not long afterward he got that Husky, and, sure enough it was ‘Lights out.’”



“That Husky,” soon to a Mojave legend, was an outwardly innocuous Husquvarna from Sweden, where, just like in rural Indiana, they didn’t have any deserts. It didn’t matter. The Mojave was still the bailiwick of the “Desert Sled” - bulbous and mostly heavy-gauge 40-inch Triumphs and BSAs, and they stood no chance against J.N.’s sophisticated little Husky which was agile, nimble, and weighed an abstemious 450 pounds.

J.N. also represented the first of a totally new type of desert racer with a completely fresh riding style – looser, cooler, hipper. He’d been among the first to wear football-type protective gear, and with his Honda, had needed it. With the Husky he featured a minimalistic technique nobody could imitate. The heavy sleds tried pummeling the Mojave flat; J.N, by comparison, appeared to be dancing away from the very ground he was trampling And he never sat down; no matter how many miles or hours a hare ‘n’ hound lasted he’d be standing upright on the foot pegs. And he always kept the throttle jamming wide-open or else completely shut off Same with brakes; they were either locked up or not used all.

His riding thrilled his compatriots and one of them, the director/mogul Hal Needham, upon discovering that J.N, was a mere carpenter at Universal, decided he should become a well-paid stuntman. So Needham put J.N. to work on “Little Big Man,” where J.N., painted and dressed like the Sioux and Cheyenne who brought down General Custer, and already familiar with cavalry charges, got to ride horses instead of his Husky. In time moved from being a stuntman specializing in horses to one equally adept at violent car smashes and chases.

A recluse, who even among the other Viewfinders had few intimates, he domiciled himself, his wife, and young son out in remote and earthquake-ravaged Sylmar, where he could stable his stunt horses The day of his beating began as a quiet one. Police encircled his house, and, as the moon rose, they moved in, touching off a chaotic chain of smashing and hitting later reported this way:

Motorcycle Racer Held After Battle With Police

A 31-year-old motorcycle racer and movie stuntman was hospitalized yesterday in satisfactory condition following a fight with two policemen who had to subdue him with their nightsticks, they reported.

Foothill division police said James Nelson Roberts, of 13469 Gladstone St., Sylmar, suffered a possible skull fracture and a broken collar bone in his battle with officers late Tuesday night.

The incident began, authorities said, when Roberts

arrived at his home at about 10.30 p.m. Tuesday and began beating his wife Diane

Neighbors notified police and as they arrived, Roberts rode off on his motorcycle with his young son at a high rate of speed

While officers Gary Payne and James R. Haupp of Foothill Division stood questioning Mrs. Roberts, the suspect rode back up to the house and got into a verbal altercation with the officers, they said.

Authorities said Roberts then ripped off Payne's shirt and began fighting both policemen

Payne and Haupp said they finally had to knock Roberts to the ground with their batons.

Roberts was taken to the jail ward of County-USC Medical Center, where he was booked on suspicion of assault on a peace officer

Both officers were taken to Pacoima Memorial Lutheran Hospital.

Officer Payne was listed in good condition with chest, stomach and throat injuries. Officer Haupp was treated and released with minor stomach and groin injuries.

Authorities said Roberts is an accomplished motorcycle racer who is known among his friends as the "King of the Desert"



Almost a year passed, and then J.N., blowing off L.A. and desert racing, moved to the edge of the California High Sierra and took up residence in a small cabin on top of a 6,000 foot mountain at the end of a narrow and switch-backing road. Apparently satisfied with the companionship of a dog and two cats, he hardly ever left, except to fly to stuntman gigs in Toronto, Miami, Chicago, wherever.

J.N.'s timing, always good, didn't fail him. Even before he left it Mojave desert racing as he knew it was vanishing into history. Four decades ago the Mojave was still wide open desert – a treacherous and dangerous world. As such, it was a legitimate challenge to a brave man on a speeding motorcycle - a brave man, like, for example, J.N. Roberts who had to wear a helmet and football pads for protection.

Modern sensibilities – and legislation – changed everything. Now the Mojave is considered fragile and in need of protection from man and his motorcycles. Yet just for a moment, out there in the Mojave's vast and rolling wilderness, scene of many a forgotten pass and duel, it's still possible to imagine seeing and hearing the exhaust bark of a ghostly little Husqvarna and its enigmatic rider who raced like Indians were chasing him.