



THE GOLDEN ERA



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY GOLD & GOOSE

Rossi himself wished that he could race in the era of Schwantz, Rainey, Doohan, Lawson, et al—why?

KEVIN SCHWANTZ KNEW HE WAS IN TROUBLE. AT THE OTHER END of the 800-meter Suzuka Circuit front straight were Wayne Rainey, his teammate John Kocinski, and future five-time world champion Mick Doohan.

"I remember coming onto the front straightaway off the chicane and looking up and the lead trio was tipping it into one," Schwantz remembers more than 17 years later. "My pitboard said [I was] three-point something [seconds behind]. It was a long way back." He remembers "watching the guys in front riding away and thinking, 'Oh my god, what am I going to do?'"

Carmelo Ezpeleta, the genial but embattled CEO of MotoGP rightsholders Dorna, asked himself the same question in 2007 and again in 2008. The Spaniard is under increasing pressure to inject life into MotoGP racing. Once the most exciting racing

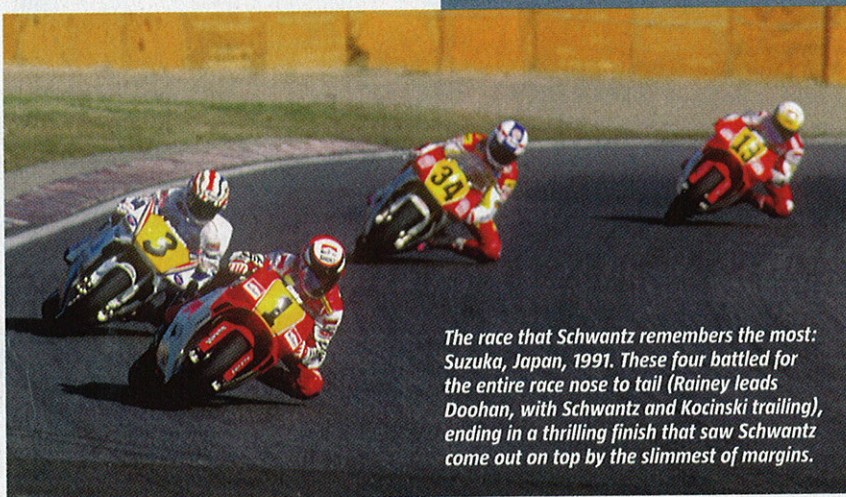
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in the world, MotoGP is a distant second to World Superbike as a spectacle and too often little more than a procession.

Part of the blame goes to the electronics and tires. The most efficient strategy on the four-strokes is to keep both wheels in line. Gone, for the most part, are the days of laying down signature stripes out of the corners. The pliable four-strokes seem docile compared to the violent two-strokes. "Now when you watch them you think, 'I think I could do that,'" Rainey says. "In the old days you used to go, 'Ah, that don't look like fun at all,'" Rainey says. "And most of the guys that rode those bikes would say that. A lot of guys would watch a race and after a race you'd



Schwartz (34) leads Doohan (2) with Rainey (1) close behind. During the "Golden Era" years of GP, these three world champions were never very far apart from each other at every race.



The race that Schwartz remembers the most: Suzuka, Japan, 1991. These four battled for the entire race nose to tail (Rainey leads Doohan, with Schwartz and Kocinski trailing), ending in a thrilling finish that saw Schwartz come out on top by the slimmest of margins.

just go, 'I don't know if I want to go to that class. I don't know if I want to ride those bikes.' I was one of those guys. When I first started riding those things I was not sure that's what I wanted to do."

The 500s, though tamed from their worst impulses, were violent, often unpredictable beasts. High-sides and worse were a common occurrence. Rainey's brilliant career was cut short by injury, as was Schwartz's, who quit early in 1995. Doohan became the third world champion in a row to suffer a career-ending injury. His end came after suffering a broken leg practicing for the third race of the '99 season in Jerez. Both Wayne Gardner, who won the title in '88, and Alex Criville, the quiet Spaniard who succeeded Doohan as world champion, were eventually forced out of racing by injury.

Watching the 800s doesn't produce the same excitement. "I mean they're going so fast, but it doesn't relate to like 'wow,' continues Rainey. "Now you leave the track and you know what you saw, but it's not that, 'Wow, man did I see a great motorcycle race today.' You used to hear the 500s warm up and you'd get nervous."

Rainey comes to his opinion having been part of the Golden Era of racing. In fact, it was his career that defined it. From

the late '80s through to his career-ending accident at Misano in 1993, Rainey, Schwartz, and Doohan were at the pinnacle of racing, with Eddie Lawson, John Kocinski, Wayne Gardner and others in the mix. The racing was brilliant, the finishes close, the rivalries real.

The most exciting race of the modern 800cc era, and the pivotal one in Valentino Rossi's run to his sixth premier class title, was the Red Bull U.S. Grand Prix at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca. It was hailed as a classic, and it was, by modern standards. But as the season drew to a close, Rossi himself voiced a nostalgia for the Golden Era and lamented the lack of competition. Rainey, Schwartz, Doohan, Lawson, and Gardner never had it that easy. From the late '80s to Rainey's accident in '93, the racing was often superlative. It wasn't uncommon for half a dozen riders to be hard at it halfway through the race and three or four racing to the line. Rainey and Schwartz often led the pack, but the others were there and winning.

If there is a single race that defines the Golden Era, it's Suzuka '91. The Japanese Grand Prix was the opening Grand Prix for a number of years and the factories, especially Honda, made sure the home riders had something special. More than

one career was launched with a brilliant Suzuka debut.

The '91 season began with only two riders on Michelin tires and neither was Schwartz. The French company decided to back only the factory Hondas, forcing Schwartz onto Dunlops for the only time in his Grand Prix career. In pre-season testing Schwartz remembers being "horrible. I don't remember going anywhere in testing and being even close to being fast. From what the other guys were doing on race tires and what we were doing, we were over a second, almost a second and a half off."

"I just didn't think we had anything that would work over race distance," recalled Schwartz. "I remember getting a good start and then the front started pushing. It got to where I couldn't steer the thing."

Steering was but one of his problems. "It was one of those weekends that during the race you pretty much saw all the big guys who were there and nobody's going missing. You had to figure out how to beat all of them the same day. I don't remember ever having such a big group of us at the front."

"After the first couple laps, once the pace actually got there, I couldn't do the times.



The competition during the Golden Era was major-league serious, and anything but first place wasn't acceptable. Can you tell that Schwartz (left) and Doohan (right) are happy to be counted among the three fastest riders in the world that day?



"When I raced there were three or four guys and you didn't know who was going to win most of the time," recalls Rainey (1), shown here at the start with fellow world champions Schwantz (34), Doohan (leading) and Wayne Gardner (background). Now the racing has become much too predictable.

And I remember trying different things: staying over the front more, getting some more weight on it. Braking harder getting in so that I could slow the thing down a little more through the center of the corner. I remember trying three or four different things to try and get it all to work.

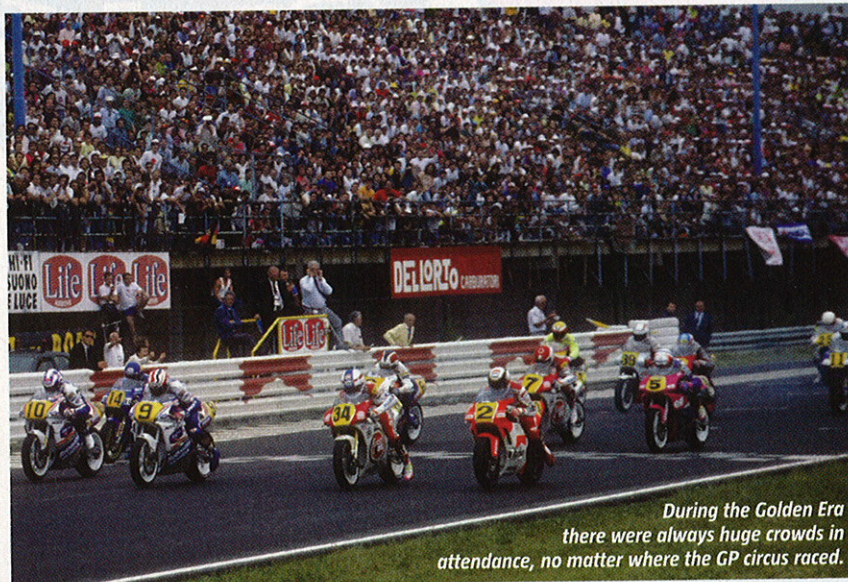
"But obviously the other guys had chosen a little softer tire that got good grip initially and then started to go away, because it kind of stalemated there at lap 11 and they didn't get away any further and I thought, 'Huh, is my stuff getting

better or have I found something that helped the set-up? And we started riding."

Now came vintage Schwantz, the Texan sliding the Suzuki on Dunlops like never before as he inched closer to the leaders. With three laps to go, Schwantz had not only caught up to the pack, but he was leading, with Doohan, Rainey, and Kocinski in near constant flux. Doohan put the Honda power to use with a pass of Schwantz down the front straight. Schwantz wasn't concerned. "It was one of those things at Suzuka that I felt like



Rainey leads the pack into the first turn, with teammate Kocinski (4), Schwantz (34), Gardner (5), Lawson (7) trailing. AMA racing is represented by none other than Miguel Duhamel (17), with fellow AMA champion Doug Chandler just in front to his left.



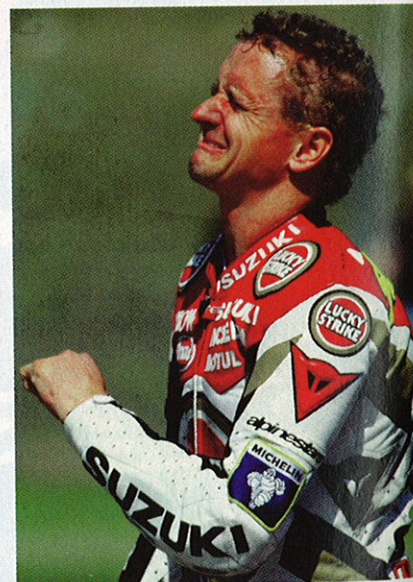
During the Golden Era there were always huge crowds in attendance, no matter where the GP circus raced.



MotoGP has never had a front row like this. At the '89 British GP, 1988 World 500cc GP Champion Wayne Gardner (10) lines up next to 1993 World 500cc GP Champion Kevin Schwantz (34), with three-time World 500cc GP Champion Wayne Rainey (1) obscuring four-time World 500cc GP Champion Eddie Lawson at the end.

if I was anywhere in with a shot coming out of the Spoon Curve and getting back up onto the back straightaway, as long as I was less than ten bikelengths behind, I was going to get them on the brakes going in."

On the last lap Doohan led out of the Spoon and used the Honda power to stretch his lead into the final fast left leading to the chicane. But he ran wide onto the curb and Schwantz swooped past. When Doohan came back onto the track,



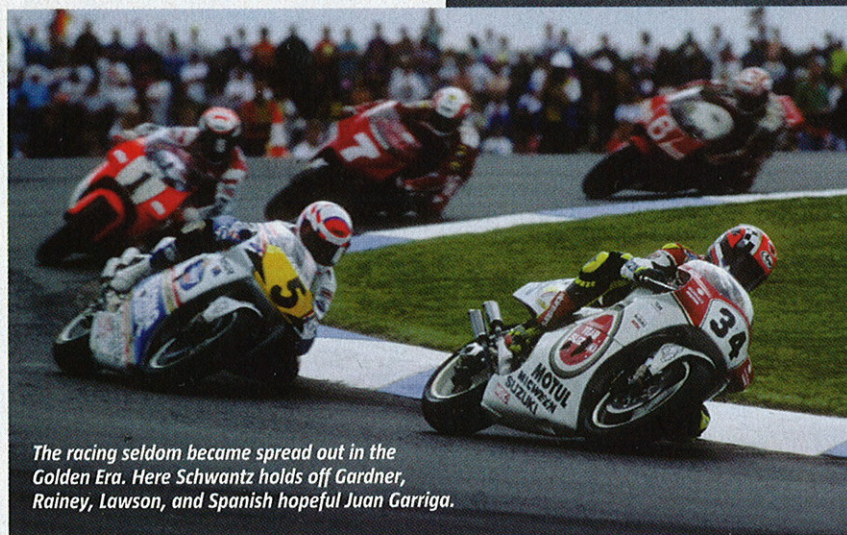
While they produced exciting racing, the 500cc two-strokes were also vicious, unforgiving beasts to ride. Rainey tumbles off into the grass (top) after high-siding at Donington, while Schwantz (above) grimaces in pain after suffering a broken wrist in a similar crash at the same circuit.

he and Rainey almost collided. By then Schwantz was already on the brakes getting into the chicane. The final order was Schwantz, Doohan, Rainey, Kocinski, all covered by .556 seconds.

"I think I was so happy that we had found a little bit of speed late in the race and those guys were coming to me and I didn't even really think about it until it was almost over. And then I was thinking, 'holy man, do I remember how far behind I was midway through this race?' And I think that's why I call it one of my best races ever, if not my best, because so many of the players were there."

Wayne Rainey doesn't agree. Why? For one, because he didn't win. He remembers his Yamaha YZR500 being undergeared; he was a gear higher in every turn than he should have been and running out of gear halfway down the straight. "So there was no way I was going to be able to draft anybody."

Rainey believes Suzuka '93 was more exciting, though an informal poll of the players and observers from the time don't agree. Schwantz was a player, as was a fast Honda, only it wasn't Doohan. The Australian had survived a harrowing practice crash, then chose the wrong rear tire and drifted back from the leaders. Instead it was Shinichi Itoh, the circumspect factory rider whose NSR500 was rumored to be fuel-injected—and it was a missile.



The racing seldom became spread out in the Golden Era. Here Schwantz holds off Gardner, Rainey, Lawson, and Spanish hopeful Juan Garriga.

"That thing was just, I mean, I could feel him coming up on me and I knew which side he was going to pass me on going down the straight because my bike would lean that way," Rainey recalls. "So when it would start to lean I'd just lean into that because he'd be coming by and I'd want to get behind as quick as I could. But he would pull us six or maybe eight bike-lengths down each straight."

The race was the third of the season, but the first for Rainey on the very rigid Mk III chassis. "That was when Yamaha

learned a whole lot about chassis and they built a chassis that was really stiff. The suspension was basically in the sidewall of the tire. Ohlins was going through some things with their seals and we had some stiction problems in the suspension, so the tires were not only giving me grip, but they were also my suspension. The chassis that we had was so stiff that if it wasn't for the tires I wouldn't have been able to even ride the bike."

Rainey's strategy was to use the advan-



The Japanese GP at Suzuka was always a barn-burner, due to the track layout that lent itself to great racing, and the fact that the factories always beefed up the grid with works machines. Here Doohan leads Schwantz in '94, with the late Norick Abe right behind. This was the race that sparked Abe's GP career.

on the final lap, "then I could gap them through the esses into the Keyhole. I could pick up a lot of time there to where they couldn't slipstream at all back to me. But if they led me into turn one, then no matter where I passed them throughout that next lap, they would still blow by us down those two straights. So, for me it was very important; I had to lead going into turn one to get the gap so they couldn't get all that back."

Rainey led into turn one, but he lost it all when the rear stepped out in the long fifth gear downhill leading to the Hairpin. "That's fifth gear flat and that thing stepped out on me in fifth gear and about threw me off. So I had to get, obviously, out of the throttle really quick gathering it all back, but they caught it all back on me. So the gap that I had made they got it all back right there." Beattie passed him at the end of the back straight, but he ran it in too deep and Rainey counter-punched in the fast left leading to the chicane. Schwantz dove past Beattie into the chicane but couldn't edge past Rainey, finishing in his shadow, officially .086 seconds and with the fastest lap of the race. Beattie

was just two-tenths behind, with Itoh crossing 1.5 seconds later.

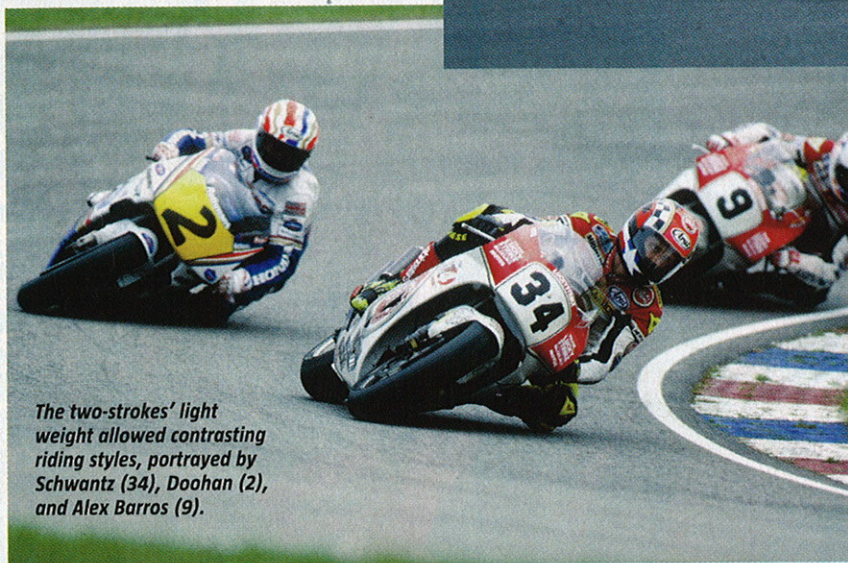
And as much as Rainey remembers that race, it's one of many that come to mind.

"It was always like that," he now says. "It seems like we were racing always to the very end with somebody. But that Suzuka race in '93 there was four or five of us going at it the whole way."

Rainey watches all of the MotoGP races, some on the MotoGP website. The only race he attends is Laguna Seca, about 10-15 minutes from the beautiful ranch



Instead of the one-line racing often commonplace today, there were a multitude of selections and opinions in 500GP's heyday. Sito Pons (8) tries to hold off Doohan (2) and Schwantz (34), with Darryl Beattie trailing.



The two-strokes' light weight allowed contrasting riding styles, portrayed by Schwantz (34), Doohan (2), and Alex Barros (9).

The move to four-strokes should have been done without electronic assistance, Rainey believes. Four-strokes make the bikes so much more predictable to race and ride hard at the limit that they don't need it.

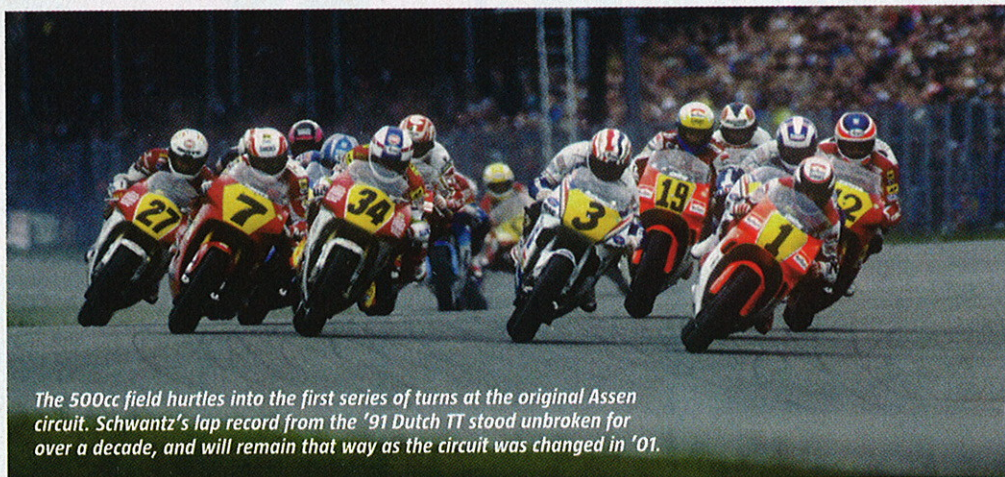
"These bikes, you don't have to be in the greatest shape to ride around mid-pack. But if you want to win you're going to have to put the effort in. I always thought the race should be the easy part. All the training and testing and practice, that's the hard part. The race to me was always

style home he built on the hills on the outskirts of Monterey. The Red Bull USGP "was how racing should be. It was clean, they didn't touch...much. And it was nice to see a couple guys going at it the way it seemed like we did every race.

"No matter what, it's the same: You're always going to have two, maybe three guys that are going to be there every race. But when I raced there were three or four guys and you didn't know who was going to win most of the time. Now you pretty much know it's going to be Rossi and then Stoner and Pedrosa and that's it. But they're not banging bars."

Rainey doesn't mean to sound like a curmudgeon when he makes the point the excitement level simply isn't there.

"The 500s were hard to ride, but to get to the checkered flag first, that was the hard part. Because those things were so much different to ride than anything else I had ridden before because they were a two-stroke. You basically had 3000 rpm that you rode that bike in, from 9000



The 500cc field hurtles into the first series of turns at the original Assen circuit. Schwantz's lap record from the '91 Dutch TT stood unbroken for over a decade, and will remain that way as the circuit was changed in '01.

to 12,000 rpm. If you went below that it didn't run and above that there was no power. So all that explosiveness was right there within 3000 rpm.

"Nowadays, they start at 5000 and go to 20000. You can ride it anywhere in there. You put it in any gear and the thing will work. It doesn't matter what you do to the gearbox. I remember after a practice session, I'd come in and say, 'You know what, I've got to find 50 rpm for turn two.' I was looking for 50 rpm; that's how close you always were with the limits that we had with those machines at the time."

the easiest part, but it's all the other stuff getting prepared for it, that's where the effort was."

Schwantz sometimes agrees with that assessment. In retirement he sometimes laments his lack of conviction, the laser-like focus and bulldog tenacity that defined Rainey's career. Yet on his best days, like at Suzuka in '91, he was nearly untouchable. Nearly, because Rainey was there to keep him honest, along with Doohan and sometimes Lawson, Gardner, Kocinski, Beattie, Itoh. The list goes on. The Golden Era, indeed. 🏁