

JOHN SURTEES CBE 1934 – 2017 AN APPRECIATION



The death of John Surtees a month after his 83rd birthday marks the passing of one of the most outstanding British motor sport competitors of the second half of the 20th century. Not for nothing was he bestowed the title *Il Grande John*, which best translates as John the Great, by the *tifosi* in his years racing for the MV Agusta team in the 1950s for, whether on two wheels or four, he was and will surely always be remembered as one of the all-time greats on bikes and in cars.

John's father Jack was a successful grass track racer of motor cycle sidecars before World War Two, sometimes with John's mother Dorothy as the passenger until John was old enough to take her place. Jack had a modest motor cycle business in Croydon and so John grew up in a world of motor cycles and racing. From his first grass track solo race in 1949 and his first tarmac race win a year later at Aberdare on his Vincent Grey Flash, the wins soon mounted up. In 1952 John finished sixth in his first world championship race, the Ulster Grand Prix at the Clady road circuit. In 1955 riding the 250 NSU Sportmax he won the Ulster Grand Prix, now at Dundrod, to take the first of his 38 victories in motor cycle world championship races. The first of six Isle of Man TT victories came in the 1956 Senior event on the 500 MV Agusta followed by both the 350 and 500 races in 1958 and 1959 and the Senior race in 1960, the last with a new lap record at 104.8 mph.

As a measure of John's superiority it is worth noting that in 1958 he won 23 of his 25 races, in 1959 16 of his 17 races and in 1960 nine from 14. From the beginning of 1958 to the French Grand Prix in May 1960 John won every round of the motor cycle world championships. His first world championship title was in 1956 on the 500 MV Agusta followed by both the 350 and 500 titles in each of the next three years. Such was John's popularity and stature in the sport that in 1959 he was voted BBC Sports Personality of the Year and *Daily Express* Sportsman of the Year. He was also appointed a MBE.

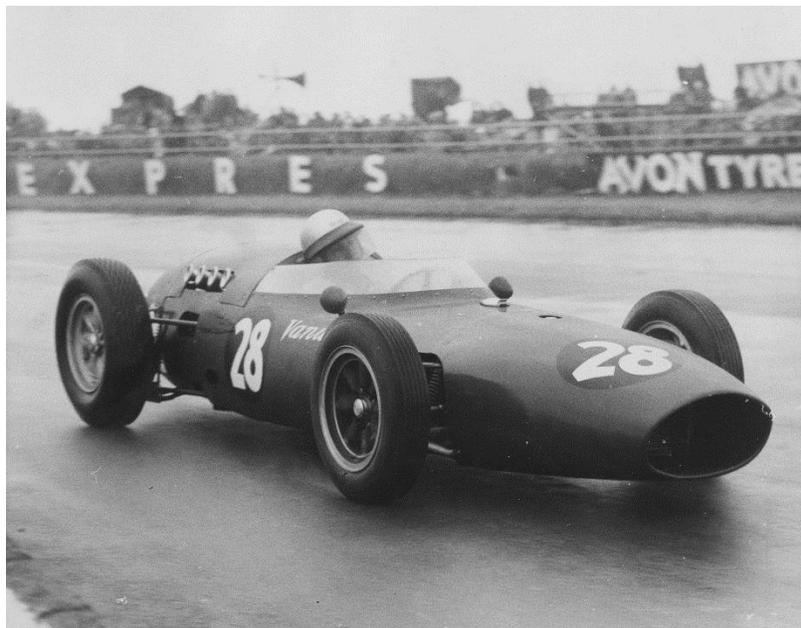


Both Tony Vandervell and Reg Parnell had encouraged John to switch to car racing, providing test sessions in Vanwall and Aston Martin DBR1 respectively at Goodwood, but it was Colin Chapman and Ken Tyrrell who hooked him. In March 1960 John took pole position at Goodwood in Ken's Cooper-Austin T52 for the first Formula Junior race of the year. Next to him was Jimmy Clark having his first race in a Lotus and only his second in a single seater. In the Lotus Type 18 Jimmy won but only after John had twice taken the lead. A fortnight later John finished second in his own Cooper-Climax T51 to Innes Ireland's state of the art Lotus Type 18 in a Formula 2 race at Oulton Park. This was followed by fourth place and a new F2 lap record in the Aintree 200 behind the three works Porsche 718s of Stirling Moss, Graham Hill and Jo Bonnier. His first Formula 1 race was in the BRDC *Daily Express* International Trophy from which he had to retire his Team Lotus-Climax Type 18 with an oil leak. Two more weeks and John was on the grid for the Monaco Grand Prix but retired with transmission failure. Motor cycle racing commitments kept John away from cars until the British Grand Prix at Silverstone in July in which he finished second to World Champion Jack Brabham's Cooper-Climax T53 and ahead of his team leader Innes Ireland. This was John's eighth ever car race.

In August John qualified on pole position for the Portuguese Grand Prix on the Oporto street circuit and was comfortably in the lead when his foot slipped off the brake pedal on account of a fuel leak. Colin Chapman had seen enough to offer John the role of number one with Team Lotus in 1961 with Jimmy Clark as team mate which upset Innes Ireland. John, still a new boy in the car racing world, decided to stay clear of politics and turned the offer down. Instead he spent two years driving for Reg Parnell's Yeoman Credit and Bowmaker teams in the 1500 cc Formula 1, winning the 1961 Glover Trophy at Goodwood in a Cooper T53 and the 1962 Mallory Park 2000 Guineas in a Lola-Climax Mk 4. The latter year also gave John his first taste of sports car racing with five races in a Ferrari 250GTO in one of which, the RAC Tourist Trophy at Goodwood, he was leading quite comfortably when Jimmy Clark spun his Aston Martin DB4GT Zagato at Madgwick Corner directly in front of the Ferrari as he was about to be lapped, both

cars crashing out. This was the nearest John came to being a TT winner on two and four wheels.

The next three and a half years were spent with Ferrari, John winning his first race for the Scuderia in the 1963 Sebring 12 Hours, sharing a 250P with Lodovico Scarfiotti. He also won the Nurburgring 1000 ks, sharing a 250P with his F1 team mate Willy Mairesse and it was at the same circuit a few weeks later that in a Ferrari 156 John won his first F1 World Championship race, a success which he repeated the following year with the 158 when he also delighted the *tifosi* by winning the Italian Grand Prix on his way to securing the 1964 Drivers' World Championship in dramatic circumstances in Mexico in the final round. The last year of the 1500 cc Formula 1 began well with second place in the South African Grand Prix but this proved to be the best result of the season; a couple of third places in the French and British GPs were the best of the rest although his mastery of the Nurburgring was shown with another victory in the 1000 Ks in a 330P2 shared with Scarfiotti. With Enzo Ferrari's permission, John had started running his own Team Surtees, using Lola T70s, which began well with wins in the Players 200 at Mosport Park and in the Guards Trophy at Brands Hatch but it all came disastrously unstuck at Mosport in September 1965 when a rear upright broke in practice, the ensuing crash inflicting such serious injuries on John that for a time there was concern that he might not survive.



By April 1966 John was sufficiently recovered to win his first race back, sharing a Ferrari 330P3 with Mike Parkes in the Monza 1000 Ks. Against modest opposition he then won the non-championship Syracuse Grand Prix in the new 3-litre F1 Ferrari 312 before winning the Belgian Grand Prix which proved to be his last F1 race for the Italian team. Having steered a course through the politics of both MV Agusta and Ferrari for many years, the machinations of the Ferrari team manager Eugenio Dragoni led to John parting company with the team at Le Mans. Switching to the Cooper team John brought the heavy, Maserati-powered T81 home second in the German Grand Prix and third in the United States GP at Watkins Glen before winning the final round in Mexico. A few weeks later John also wrapped up the inaugural Can-Am Championship with wins at Riverside and Las Vegas in his Lola T70.

For the next two years John drove for Honda with limited success, the highlight being victory in the Italian Grand Prix by a whisker from Jack Brabham's Brabham-Repco BT24. For this, and the remaining races of the year, John had instigated the construction of the 'Hondola', based on the Lola T90 design with which Graham Hill had won the 1966 Indianapolis 500, and using the rather heavy Honda V12 engine. The second Honda season produced best results of second in the French GP and third at Watkins Glen. A largely unproductive year with BRM followed, yet another third place in the US Grand Prix at Watkins Glen with the BRM P139 being the only decent result.

Encouraged by the success of Team Surtees with the Lola T70s in sports car racing, the Lola T100s in Formula 2 and the Len Terry-designed, Leda-originated Surtees TS5 in Formula 5000 where Trevor Taylor and David Hobbs finished as runners up in the 1969 European and American championships respectively, John decided to establish his own Formula 1 operation for 1970. The Cosworth DFV-powered Surtees TS7 made its debut in the British Grand Prix and, whilst it retired there with oil problems after running fourth and looked destined for third place in the ensuing German Grand Prix only to suffer engine failure four laps from the finish, John won the non-championship Oulton Park Gold Cup and went on to score the first world championship points for Surtees as a constructor with fifth place in the Canadian Grand Prix. With encouragement from Shell, John also made a short but sweet return to Ferrari in 1970 sharing a 512S with Peter Schetty to finish third in the Monza 1000 ks, with Jacky Ickx to finish second in the Spa 1000 ks, and with Nino Vaccarella to finish third in the Nurburgring 1000 ks.

1971 was John's last full season and began well. Rolf Stommelen in the TS7 won the first leg of the two part, non-championship Argentinian Grand Prix only to tangle with Chris Amon's Matra MS120 in the second while John was ahead of ultimate winner Mario Andretti's Ferrari 312B in the opening round of the World Championship in South Africa when the gearbox lost its oil. In other early season non-championship races, now with the new TS9, John was third at Brands Hatch in the Race of Champions and third in the Jochen Rindt Memorial race at Hockenheim. John's best result in the World Championship was fifth in the Dutch Grand Prix. Then Mike Hailwood, who had been doing great things for Team Surtees in Formula 5000 with the TS8,

was brought into the team for the Italian Grand Prix and finished fourth, just over a tenth of a second behind winner Peter Gethin's BRM P160. Mike ended the season as runner up to Frank Gardner and his Lolas in the Rothmans European Formula 5000 Championship.



John and Mike were very different personalities but they were true racers from the same bike racing background and the partnership gelled. For 1972 John decided to ease out of Formula 1 so that Mike and Tim Schenken became the drivers for what became Brooke Bond Oxo Rob Walker Team Surtees. The side-radiator TS9B started the season very competitively, Mike pressing Jackie Stewart's Tyrrell 001 for the lead of the South African Grand Prix until a suspension bolt broke. In the non-championship BRDC *Daily Express* International Trophy at Silverstone. Mike took the lead from reigning World Champion Emerson Fittipaldi's Lotus 72D and seemed to be untouchable until the radiator cap failed. John brought his TS9B home third in this, his penultimate Formula 1 race. The last one was, not inappropriately, the Italian Grand Prix at Monza with the new TS14 but ended in retirement although there was the satisfaction of Mike finishing second in his TS9B to Emerson's Lotus 72D which proved to be the best ever placing for a Surtees car at world championship level. John had intended to run the TS14 at Watkins Glen but an engine shortage meant that he was a non-starter. This last season was not devoid of success, however. On a personal level John won the Japanese Grand Prix, for Formula 2 cars in those days, with a TS10 and also the F2 Shell Trophy at Imola while in Surtees cars Mike won the European Formula 2 Championship with a TS10 and Gijs van Lennep took the European F5000 title with a TS11.

Over the next six years John's team survived in Formula 1 with some well-designed cars and some talented young drivers such as Carlos Pace, Alan Jones, John Watson and Rene Arnoux, the Brazilian taking third place in the 1973 Austrian Grand Prix to give Surtees as a constructor its other podium result. The Brands Hatch Race of Champions also saw some notable achievements, James Hunt finishing third (and second F1 in a race won by Peter Gethin's F5000 Chevron B24) on his F1 debut, Wattie in a TS16 was second to Tom Pryce's Shadow DN5 in the 1975 race whilst a year later Alan's TS19 in finishing second made James work for his victory in

the McLaren M23. By the end of 1978 John had decided to withdraw from the World Championship although he kept faith with his small team at Edenbridge by running the TS20+ in the 1979 Aurora British Formula 1 Championship for the American driver Gordon Smiley. The last race for Team Surtees as a Formula 1 entrant was the final round of the championship at Silverstone and Gordon won.

He might have retired from front line racing but John could not stay away from racing machinery. He became the driving force behind classic racing motor cycle displays, invariably participating in them himself. He raced historic cars, winning the Oulton Park Gold Cup in a Maserati 250F in 1981 to add to three which he had won in F1 and F2 'in period'. For many years he was one of the few drivers entrusted by Daimler-Benz to demonstrate the pre WW2 W125 and W154 Grand Prix cars. He was a member of the BRDC's General Committee from 1972 to 1974 and a director of the Club from 2000 to 2004 after which he became a Vice President.

Through karting and into racing cars in the Ginetta Junior Championship in 2006, John enthusiastically supported and encouraged his son Henry. Tragically Henry sustained fatal injuries through no fault of his own when hit by a wheel from another car during a FIA Formula 2 race at Brands Hatch in July 2009. He was just 18 years old. In Henry's memory John set up the Henry Surtees Foundation to provide support for accident victims, particularly those sustaining head injuries, to help them to be rehabilitated and able to return to the community and employment. The BRDC instigated the Henry Surtees Award which is awarded to the most outstanding performance by a BRDC Rising Star annually for which John made available the trophy presented to him by the Guild of Motoring Writers in 1964 as Driver of the Year.



Apart from his commitment to the Henry Surtees Foundation, less than two years ago John acquired the famous Buckmore Park kart circuit which is once more thriving. He was chairman of A1 Team Great Britain and an adviser to the Racing Steps Foundation. John was awarded the RAC's Segrave Trophy in 2013 in recognition of his multiple world championships. However, although he was appointed OBE in 2008 and CBE in 2016, for some mysterious reason the knighthood, which many both inside and outside motor sport thought he fully deserved, remained elusive. Ever present and active in one form of motor sport or another for over 60 years, John Surtees, *Il Grande John*, Big John or Shirtsleeves will be very much missed.

Ian Titchmarsh