



WORDS: John L. Stein PHOTO: Brian J. Nelson

# RAYBORN'S LAST RIDE

THIRTY-SEVEN YEARS LATER, THE TRUE STORY IS TOLD

**W**hen the lead pack came around on the first lap at Pukekohe Park Raceway on Saturday, December 29, 1973, no one could believe Cal Rayborn was right in the thick of it. After all, he was aboard a Suzuki TR500 twin while the others were on three-cylinder 750s—Ginger Molloy on a Kawasaki H2R, and Ron Grant and Pat Hennen on Suzuki TR750s. But there was Cal, tucked into a ball atop the shrieking Suzuki as the riders began the second round of the \$10,000 Marlboro International Series—the most important championship ever held in New Zealand. A magician at overcoming the deficiencies of slower

equipment, Rayborn had twice won the Daytona 200 on a Harley-Davidson KR750 flathead and then showed the British the way home in the Trans-Atlantic Match Races aboard an iron-head XR750. And now he was trying to do that here.

The aggressiveness Rayborn brought to the track contradicted his otherwise easy-going demeanor, but those who saw him ride never doubted the fire. It was this fire that brought him to grassy Pukekohe Valley, staring into the innards of a hastily rebuilt Suzuki racing engine.

"Everybody was running alcohol," recalls American racer Ralph Hudson. Alcohol provided more horsepower, was

perfectly legal for racing Down Under, and Rayborn's team, eager to win, was taking advantage of this.

"Dope is no more dangerous than race gas," explains Molloy. "What is dangerous is the uneducated mechanic who, in his enthusiasm for converting a gas engine, doesn't have the necessary skills to do so. As a consequence, there is always the likelihood of an imminent seizure should he get it wrong." Indeed, Rayborn's bike was having trouble. A piston seizure required the top end to be replaced before the main event.

Turn One at Pukekohe is a long, fast, flat, hold-your-breath right-hander

bordered by a meager grass strip and a guardrail. Champion Curve was known as the fastest corner in all of Australasia, and even today remains a breathtaking proposition. Rayborn never made two laps. Partway around the corner his engine seized again and the bike skidded off-course, its rider slamming into the guardrail and then bouncing back onto the track.

"The race was about 20 laps with a push start," Molloy explains. "They dropped the flag and I was leading, though I never looked behind me because I had a broken neck from a coal-mine accident. I came down the front straight at the end of the second lap and they shoved the red flag out—he'd crashed the lap before. I immediately sat up and braked. His body was on the outside of the track, 6 or 8 feet out. There were no haybales.

He had been there for a minute and 20 seconds. At that point I went into the pits—I knew it was Cal."

Murray Perry, a friend of Molloy's, had walked to Turn 1 for the main event. "Just before the race started, I went and sat at that end of the grandstand to watch," he recalls. "They took off and away they went. And when they came down, I can remember being amazed Cal was right up there in the bunch. I was thinking, 'Man!' And before I could even think about it, there was this huge impact. It was an indelible memory. I've always felt that [the bike] seized and high-sided him to the left into the Armco at probably the most critical point of the track, because he was neither upright nor laid into the corner."

It has been a source of intense sorrow to New Zealanders that one of the world's

best roadracers died at their track on that vibrant summer day. For Americans, the question has always been why was Rayborn there in the first place? The haunting press statement claiming he'd died in a meaningless race at some irrelevant track was painful. It was also flat wrong. The event was one of the biggest races of the year in the southern hemisphere, and Pukekohe was New Zealand's premier motor-racing circuit.

"One report said that he was killed at an 'obscene' little track," says Ernie Williams, an event grid marshal. "This is one of the best tracks in New Zealand. It's not the track's fault the guy was killed. It's just one of these racing accidents. I do think New Zealanders were a bit put out about it."

So why was Rayborn there? It turns out he was actually on a calculated mission—of the four-wheeled kind. Dismayed at the compensation he and Mert Lawwill were receiving from Harley-Davidson, the pair had decided to explore auto racing. They shared a car in several SCCA club events before Rayborn bought a Lola Formula 5000 open-wheeler. Eager to drive it during the U.S. motorcycle racing off-season (despite reportedly signing with Suzuki for '74), Rayborn flew to Auckland to contest the Tasman Championship, a well-known international car-racing series that included events in New Zealand and Australia.

Californian Harry Bokker, who prepared the Lola, knew Rayborn through Courtesy Chevrolet in San Diego. "He came to work at my shop as a mechanic and was going to be a car racer," Bokker says. "He knew Dan Gurney and Bobby Unser and had a lot of good support. He just needed some exposure and time in a car. The Tasman series was six consecutive weekends, so he could do the series and come home and do the year with Suzuki."

Coincidentally, the Marlboro motorcycle event was scheduled one week before the opening round of the Tasman series. With Rayborn available and in peak form, it was natural for the promoter to offer him a bonus for winning both the bike and car races. Rayborn accepted the offer but had nothing to ride. Both the Suzuki and Yamaha importers courted him, and Molloy recalls being contacted on race day for permission to use a Yamaha TZ350 that he had brought for the Junior race. Molloy's bike belonged to the Yamaha importer, W. Whites, Ltd., but since Molloy had personally prepared it, he didn't feel much like loaning it on a whim.

"Cal had been organized to ride the Suzuki before the race meet, I well remember," says Molloy. "Whites only became involved later in the day when it was obvious that they were having trouble. That's when Jerry Jones, their CEO, came around and said, 'We need your bike.'



They were desperate to get him on a Yamaha. I wish I had given it to them—he'd still be alive."

The Suzuki in question was a special Steve Roberts-framed TR500 prepared by fellow Marlboro Series entrant Joe Lett. It was the equivalent of the Harley and BSA/Triumph "lowboys" of the era, with a smaller frame to reduce frontal area. With a factory Suzuki racing engine, it was essentially a 500cc Grand Prix bike. It was also available—sort of.

"The promoter offered [Rayborn] a big carrot, like \$1000," recalls Lett. "The first I knew about him riding a bike of any sort was on Saturday morning at Pukekohe. I had driven through the night from Wanganui thinking I was riding, but was told that he would be riding instead of me. I was a bit peeved off. That was my bike. It belonged to [Suzuki importer] Rod Coleman, but it was *my* bike! I didn't ride at that meeting, obviously.

"My bike was on 'petrol' [gasoline] when I arrived at Pukekohe that morning, and after Grant approached me regarding Cal riding it, they decided it should be converted to alcohol to be more competitive. Practice was being run while the conversion work was being carried out, so Cal basically used the preliminary race as practice—he was obviously not on the pace. Then the bike nipped up. The top of the motor was stripped and brand-new pistons, rings, cylinders and larger jets were fitted. Carburetor mods were also carried out by Cal's tuner that were completely different than anything we had tried previously. He didn't get back out until the warm-up lap for the first race. He gave a thumbs-up, but it just went all horribly wrong after that. When I got the bike back, it wasn't a big seizure or anything. If he hadn't been dangled that carrot, it would never have happened."

The race was halted and delayed for about a half-hour while Rayborn's body and bike were removed. And as news of his death circulated, the shock and sadness mounted. The 8 O'clock sports newspaper capped the day by grimly running a photo of Rayborn lying lifeless on the track in its Saturday-evening edition. Even close to four decades later, everyone we spoke to was still upset about what happened, riding a perpetual wave of remorse over a day that should have been glorious but instead ended up grievous.

As required by New Zealand law, a formal coroner's investigation was launched to determine the reason for death, and the TR500's top end was removed for inspection. "The police grabbed it to make sure nothing out of sorts had happened, and I got it back three months later," Lett confirms. "The thing was still together and the heads were off it, so I rebuilt it and rode it for another season."

To this day, Molloy dismisses Rayborn's

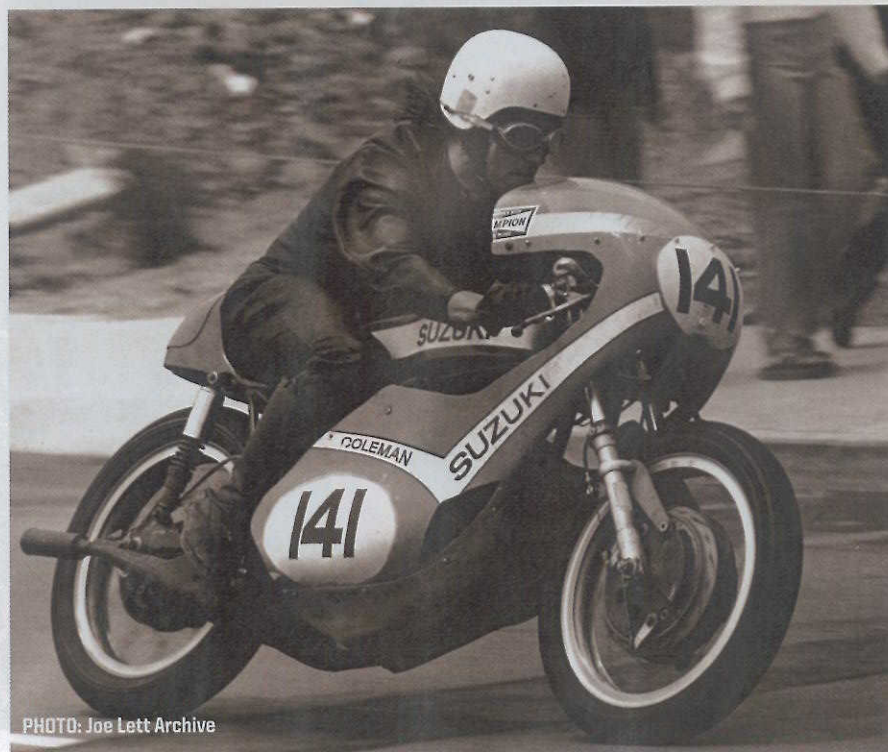
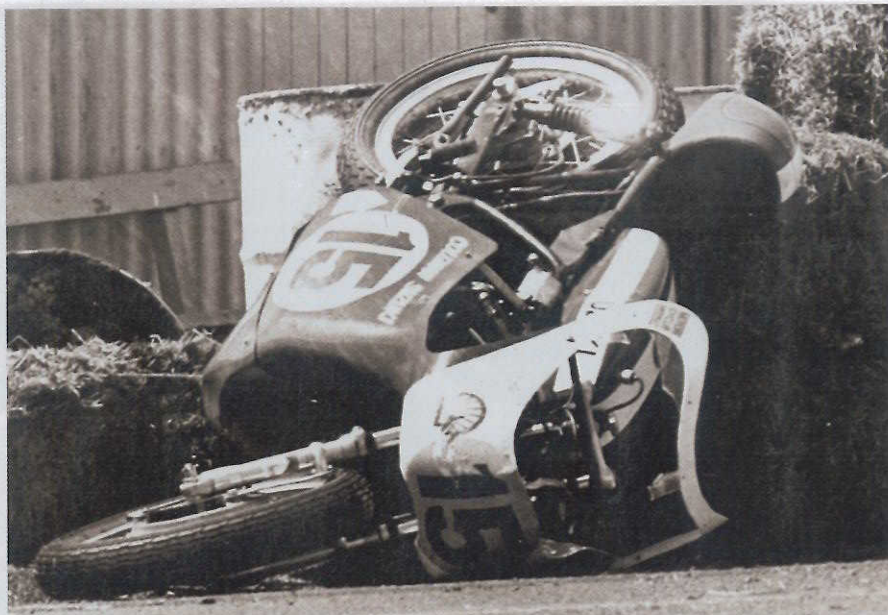


PHOTO: Joe Lett Archive

Cal Rayborn's borrowed Suzuki TR500 after the fateful crash (top), and later, after regular rider Joe Lett returned it to the racetrack. The whereabouts of this machine are today unknown.

death as a needless racing accident. "Cal was a great rider, but before he even started that fateful weekend, the odds were well and truly stacked against him," he says. "Practice and racing were all held on the same day, so there was an element of rush, rush, rush—and one small problem would put you behind the 8-ball. A bunch of well-meaning guys tried to get the Suzuki competitive, but in reality it was probably never going to be, even if they had been able to get it to run successfully on dope. Cal probably succumbed to the propaganda, and against his own better judgement got carried

away with the occasion and the hype that sometimes goes with an important race even here in little old New Zealand."

For all of us who admired Cal Rayborn, there is at least some reason for solace. He was embarking upon an exciting new chapter in his life, had come to New Zealand with great purpose and excitement, and grabbed vigorously at the opportunity to do a glorious bike/car double that few—if any—racers could ever hope to emulate. Although we all wish it had worked out differently, who among us could blame him for trying? And he gave it one hell of a try.