

# 2004 – My previous visits had barely scratched the surface

## Questions in parliament

It was when questions were asked about me in the Isle of Man parliament that I realised the job of presenting Manx Radio's coverage of the world-famous TT races would be different from any broadcasting challenge I had ever faced.

I reckoned myself an experienced operator in the field of sports broadcasting before I arrived on the island for my debut in May 2004. I'd commentated on everything from football's World Club Championship in Tokyo to the Open Golf Championship at Royal Birkdale. I'd reported live on TV from Canada to Malaysia, and had operated with facilities ranging from a full BBC outside broadcast unit to a mobile phone.

None of this mattered to Phil Gawne, a member of the House of Keys, the island's parliament. On the Wednesday of Practice Week he tabled a question to the Tourism and Leisure Minister, David Cretney, asking him to monitor my commentary and raise the matter with Manx Radio with a view to having my predecessor, Geoff Cannell, reinstated; and, by implication, having me fired. "Patch it up and bring him back," was the headline in the *Isle of Man Examiner*.

Geoff, a huge personality at the TT, was openly bitter at being replaced. He ensured everyone was aware of the questions asked in the House of Keys by issuing a press release about it, in his capacity as TT press officer. I had no quibble with an MHK discussing the matter if he thought it was appropriate, but I didn't think it was right for the press officer to be adding to the controversy. My role, after all, was as official announcer at the TT as well as radio presenter, and the press officer had a duty to look after my interests.

Come the Friday of Practice Week the pressure was still on. The minister had dealt with Phil Gawne's question by revealing that he

# 2005 – The chain's off the sprocket

## **Bloody-minded and unpredictable**

Dave Molyneux provided the big success story of 2005. He also provided me with one of the most memorable moments of my commentating career – and not for the usual reasons!

Moly was the talk of the island right from the start. Even earlier than that, in fact, because he predicted that he would break the 20-minute barrier for a lap before Practice Week even began. I arrived on the island in the early hours of Sunday May 29th, after a choppy crossing on the Seacat, to find that the same winds which had caused several of my shipmates to re-examine the contents of their stomachs had also caused Saturday's opening practice session to be untimed. It was wild and woolly over Snaefell, but that didn't stop Molyneux and passenger Dan Sayle from easily breaching the 20-minute mark, even if the official watches didn't record the achievement.

It looked like TT 2005 would be a breeze for Moly in every sense of the word. But the remaining practice sessions didn't work out like that. Bad weather and problems with the bike meant that we arrived at the final pre-race practice with the sidecar favourite yet to post a single officially timed lap. The prospect of the 10-times TT champ being barred from competing was looming large. Would the organisers enforce Regulation 13, paragraph four, which stated unequivocally: "A minimum of two laps must be completed on each machine entered, one of which must be within the qualifying time?" And if they did, what would be Moly's reaction? Barely printable, if his response to the mere possibility was anything to go by.

In the end, Moly despatched all doubts in his usual straightforward fashion – by going out on Friday evening practice and blitzing the lap record; under timed conditions this time. Twice Molyneux and Sayle

# 2008 – Manna from heaven for a live broadcaster

## **Too much bad news**

The build-up to the first TT of the second centenary was awful. In March the coroner's report into the deaths at the 26th Milestone was released, containing strong criticism of many of those involved in running the event. By this time the Manx Motorcycle Club had already resigned as organiser of the TT. Whether this was because it foresaw the likely outcome of the inquest was unclear, but it would have been difficult for individuals like Neil Hanson to carry on after the coroner, Michael Moyle, had his say. I felt very sorry for Neil, a courteous and decent man who would never do anything which was likely to increase the inevitable risks to riders. The fact remained, though, that Moyle uncovered evidence of confusion regarding the designation, marking and supervising of prohibited areas, and this had been a major factor in the deaths of the two unfortunate spectators. For 2008, a number of familiar faces would be absent from the administration. Roger Hurst, the chief marshal, was another casualty as a wind of change swept through the corridors of power. And the running of the TT was now in the hands of the Auto Cycle Union's subsidiary, ACU Events Ltd.

At the start of May came the terrible news that Martin Finnegan had been killed in a racing accident at Tandragee in Northern Ireland. It was devastating. Martin was such a talented rider as well as being a charismatic individual who had brought so much pleasure to the TT. Whether playing Jenga in the pub or sliding round Ramsey Hairpin like a kid on a tea-tray he did everything to the maximum and carried everyone else along with him. I remembered his aerobatics over the bridge at Ballaugh, and a sensational still photograph of Martin at the bottom of Barregarrow, bike bottoming out, face a mask of concentration. It was hard to accept that he wouldn't have the chance to build on his



*John McGuinness, the  
TT's Top Gun.  
(Courtesy Alan Knight)*

*In the commentary box  
with time-keeper Norman  
Quayle.  
(Courtesy  
Dorothy Lambert)*



*Enter at your peril!  
(Courtesy Dorothy Lambert)*



*Interviewing one of Yamaha’s best-ever racers, and my Radio TT colleague Charlie Williams. (Courtesy Dorothy Lambert)*

*The starting grid at Billown seen from ‘The Best Commentary Position In The World.’ (Courtesy Dorothy Lambert)*



*Finding out how it’s done from Murray Walker. (Courtesy Dorothy Lambert)*

# 2010 – The Honda coasted across the line and into Ian's own chapter of TT history

## Old combatants

A couple of weeks before TT 2010 Dorothy and I attended a christening at HMS Eaglet, the shore base of the Royal Navy in Liverpool. The baby's dad was a part-time reservist. The old couple serving behind the bar looked fed up. The main focus after the christening ceremony was a party for the youngsters and no-one was buying booze. We got chatting to them and happened to mention what I'd be doing in a fortnight's time. The effect was dramatic and instantaneous, like a massive power surge.

Simply mentioning the TT brought the old fellow to life. His eyes began to sparkle, his face became animated and in no time an idle chat became animated conversation. Eric Wolfenden MBE was 83 and had been going to the TT since 1948. The shortage of customers at the bar was forgotten as he told me about his favourite spots from which to spectate, places he'd stayed, and his plans for this year. He and Stella were going over for the Senior, later than usual because of another engagement at HMS Eaglet. If ever there was a man in love with a sport, this was the guy. Equally important was what the sport was doing for Eric – and Stella. The TT was the highlight of the year – had been for 62 years, and was still working its magic.

There were changes in the Manx Radio set-up. The most significant one was that, for the first time in years, we knew – or rather, we thought – we would be providing radio coverage of the event for the foreseeable future. Over the winter the radio station had concluded negotiations with the IOM Government for a three-year contract, with a further three-year option, a satisfactory outcome to a challenge launched by my old mate Andy Wint on behalf of Energy FM, for whom Andy was now working. As it worked out, only the initial three years of the deal were