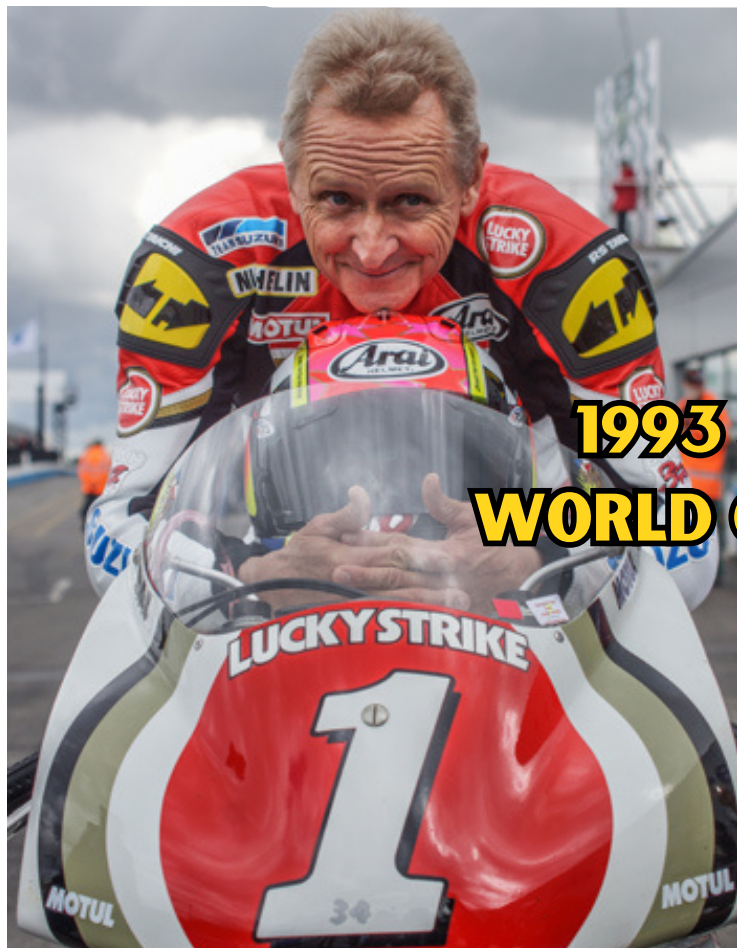


KEVIN SCHWANTZ



**1993 500CC
WORLD CHAMPION**



KEVIN SCHWANTZ QUICKLY ROCKETED TO PROMINENCE AS ONE OF AMERICA'S BEST ROAD RACERS DURING THE MID-1980S. BY THE LATE 1980S, SCHWANTZ MOVED TO INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION IN THE 500CC GRAND PRIX WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS. HE WAS A PERENNIAL TOP RIDER IN THAT SERIES AND WON THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP IN 1993. DURING HIS GRAND PRIX RACING CAREER, SCHWANTZ RACKED UP 25 CAREER 500CC GP VICTORIES.

SCHWANTZ WAS BORN ON JUNE 19, 1964, IN HOUSTON, TX. HIS PARENTS OWNED A MOTORCYCLE DEALERSHIP IN HOUSTON AND SCHWANTZ LEARNED TO RIDE MOTORCYCLES AT THE AGE OF 3. HIS FIRST MACHINE WAS A BONANZA MINI-BIKE POWERED BY A BRIGGS & STRATTON LAWNMOWER ENGINE. SCHWANTZ' FATHER COMPETED IN OBSERVED TRIALS AND THE YOUNG SCHWANTZ JOINED HIS DAD IN THAT SPORT.

MY FIRST RACING HERO WAS MICK ANDREWS (BRITISH OBSERVED TRIALS LEGEND)," SCHWANTZ RECALLS. "HE WOULD COME TO OUR DEALERSHIP ONCE A YEAR TO PUT ON CLINICS.

MY PARENTS HAVE OLD PHOTOS OF ME RIDING AND WEARING A BELL STROKER CAP, WHICH WAS THE COOL TRIALS HEADGEAR OF THE TIME.

HE WOULD TEACH ME TRIALS AND I WOULD TEACH HIM BILLIARDS. I WAS A LITTLE BILLIARDS ACE BACK THEN. MY CLAIM TO FAME AS A KID WAS BEATING ANDREWS AND GARY NIXON AT BILLIARDS IN THE SAME YEAR."

SCHWANTZ MOVED FROM TRIALS TO MOTOCROSS IN HIS MID-TEENS AND BECAME A TOP REGIONAL MX RACER. HE ALSO RACED A FEW AMATEUR DIRT TRACK RACES USING MOTORCYCLES BORROWED FROM HIS UNCLE, AMA GRAND NATIONAL RACER DARRYL HURST. SCHWANTZ GOT HIS FIRST TASTE OF ROAD RACING AT AN EVENT THROUGH THE STREETS OF AUSTIN, TEXAS. SCHWANTZ WON THE RACE OVER A SLEW OF THE BEST ROAD RACERS IN TEXAS RIDING HIS UNCLE'S YAMAHA SHORT-TRACK RACER.

AFTER SUFFERING A BRUISING HEAT RACE CRASH IN QUALIFYING FOR THE HOUSTON SUPERCROSS IN 1983, SCHWANTZ DECIDED TO QUIT MOTOCROSS. A FEW MONTHS LATER, A FRIEND WALKED INTO THE SHOP AND ASKED HIM RACE AN ENDURANCE ROAD RACE WITH HIM. SCHWANTZ DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WHAT IT WAS, BUT HE AGREED AND FOUND HIMSELF ROAD RACING A SHAFT-DRIVE YAMAHA XJ750.

"I HAD FUN AND DID WELL ENOUGH IN THAT ENDURANCE RACE THAT I WENT BACK TO MY PARENTS' SHOP AND GOT A YAMAHA XV550 VISION AND TAPED UP THE BLINKERS AND HEADLIGHTS AND WENT AND SPRINT RACED IT. THE NEXT YEAR (1984) I GOT AN FJ600 AND DID WELL ENOUGH THAT I DECIDED I NEEDED A RZ350 AS WELL - SO I JUST BOUGHT ONE OF THOSE, PUT IT ON TERMS WITH FORD CREDIT AND WORKED AND PAID IT OFF.

WHEN I STARTED ROAD RACING, I JUST USED TO RIDE LIKE I WAS ON THE DIRT. IT WASN'T PRETTY. I JUST USED TO LOCK UP THE REAR BRAKE GOING INTO THE CORNER TRYING TO GET IT STOPPED WITH THE BIKE HOPPING AND SKITTERING ALL OVER THE PLACE. THAT WAS THE WAY I THOUGHT YOU DID IT."

DURING HIS FIRST YEAR OF ENDURANCE RACING, SCHWANTZ IMPRESSED JOURNALIST AND RACER JOHN ULRICH. ULRICH ARRANGED A TRY-OUT FOR SCHWANTZ WITH THE YOSHIMURA SUZUKI SUPERBIKE TEAM AT THE END OF THE 1984 SEASON. THE DAY BEFORE THE TRY-OUT AT WILLOW SPRINGS, ULRICH TOOK HIS ENDURANCE BIKE OUT TO THE TRACK AND HAD SCHWANTZ MAKE LAPS ALL DAY. THE NEXT MORNING THE YOSHIMURA TEAM SHOWED UP WITH A SUPERBIKE, AND BY THE AFTERNOON SCHWANTZ HAD RUN CLOSE TO THE LAP RECORD. YOSHIMURA MANAGER SUEHIRO WATANABE WAS SO EXCITED THAT HE WANTED SCHWANTZ TO SIGN A CONTRACT THEN AND THERE.

"MY DAD WAS WITH ME AND HE SAID, 'WE'LL GO TO DINNER TO TALK ABOUT IT.' THE BIGGEST DECISION WE HAD TO MAKE WAS WHO WAS GOING TO CALL MY MOM AND BREAK THE NEWS TO HER. SHE STILL WASN'T REALLY ENTHUSED ABOUT ME RACING AT THAT POINT."

YOSHIMURA SUZUKI ONLY CONTESTED DAYTONA AND THE WEST COAST SUPERBIKE RACES IN 1985. AT DAYTONA, SCHWANTZ QUALIFIED THIRD, BUT THE CLUTCH FAILED ON HIS BIKE AND HE DIDN'T EVEN COMPLETE A LAP. AT THE NEXT ROUND, AT WILLOW SPRINGS RACEWAY IN ROSAMOND, CALIFORNIA, ON APRIL 28, SCHWANTZ WON BOTH LEGS OF THE SUPERBIKE FINAL TO EARN HIS FIRST AMA NATIONAL VICTORY. HE WENT ON TO WIN TWO OTHER SUPERBIKE RACES THAT SEASON AND WAS RANKED SEVENTH IN THE SERIES AFTER RACING IN ONLY HALF OF THE EVENTS.

YOSHIMURA SUZUKI HAD THE NEW GSXR750 IN 1986, AND WHILE THE BIKE HAD A TON OF POTENTIAL, IT SUFFERED NUMEROUS DEVELOPMENT PROBLEMS. SCHWANTZ STARTED 1986 FINISHING SECOND TO EDDIE LAWSON IN THE DAYTONA 200, BUT THEN A STRING OF BAD LUCK PLAGUED HIM THE REST OF THE SEASON. HE MISSED THREE OF THE EIGHT ROUNDS AFTER BREAKING HIS COLLARBONE IN PRACTICE AT BRAINERD, MINNESOTA, AND FINISHED THE YEAR RANKED SEVENTH ONCE AGAIN.

THE 1987 SEASON WILL GO DOWN AS ONE OF THE MOST MEMORABLE IN THE HISTORY OF AMA SUPERBIKE RACING THANKS TO SCHWANTZ AND WAYNE RAINEY. THE DUO'S BATTLE WAS FIERCER THAN ANYTHING EVER SEEN BEFORE IN SUPERBIKE RACING. IT WAS NOT UNCOMMON FOR SCHWANTZ AND RAINEY TO BANG INTO ONE ANOTHER AT TRIPLE-DIGIT SPEEDS. THEIR FIGHT EVEN CARRIED OVER TO ENGLAND AND THE TRANS-ATLANTIC MATCH RACES, GIVING EUROPEAN FANS A PREVIEW OF SCHWANTZ AND RAINEY'S GP BATTLES OF YEARS TO COME. RAINEY WON THE CHAMPIONSHIP, BUT SCHWANTZ CLOSED OUT THE SECOND HALF OF THE SEASON WINNING FIVE OF SIX SUPERBIKE ROUNDS.

DURING THIS SAME PERIOD, SCHWANTZ WAS GETTING A TASTE OF GP RACING. IN 1986 AND 1987, HE COMPETED IN THREE GRANDS PRIX. HE EARNED SOME IMPRESSIVE FINISHES IN HIS EARLY OUTINGS INCLUDING A FIFTH IN THE 1987 SPANISH GRAND PRIX.

SUZUKI SIGNED SCHWANTZ TO RACE GRAND PRIX FULL TIME IN 1988, BUT BEFORE HE LEFT HE WON THE DAYTONA 200, DESPITE FRACTURING HIS LEFT FOREARM IN A PRACTICE CRASH. HE WAS WORRIED THAT HE MIGHT NOT BE FIT FOR THE FIRST GP AT SUZUKA, JAPAN, BUT JUST TWO WEEKS AFTER WINNING AT DAYTONA, SCHWANTZ BURST ONTO THE GP SCENE WITH A VICTORY AT SUZUKA. SCHWANTZ REMEMBERS THOSE TWO WEEKS AS A TREMENDOUS WHIRLWIND THAT LAUNCHED HIM TO STARDOM

SCHWANTZ WENT ON TO BECOME ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL GRAND PRIX RIDERS OF HIS ERA. HIS ARCHRIVAL THROUGHOUT, AS IT HAD BEEN AT HOME IN THE UNITED STATES, WAS WAYNE RAINEY. SCHWANTZ WON 25 GPS, PLACING HIM SECOND TO EDDIE LAWSON AMONG AMERICAN 500CC GP WINNERS. THE CULMINATION OF SCHWANTZ' CAREER CAME IN 1993 WHEN HE WON THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP. HE WAS THE LAST IN THE LONG LINE OF U.S. RIDERS WHO DOMINATED 500CC GRAND PRIX FROM THE LATE 1970S TO THE EARLY 1990S, FOLLOWING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF KENNY ROBERTS, FREDDIE SPENCER, EDDIE LAWSON, AND RAINEY. SCHWANTZ WON HIS LAST GRAND PRIX IN GREAT BRITAIN IN 1994.

SCHWANTZ UNEXPECTEDLY RETIRED EARLY IN THE 1995 SEASON. HE HAD SUFFERED A SLEW OF CRASHES AND INJURIES IN 1994 AND EARLY IN 1995. A TALK WITH HIS OLD RIVAL RAINEY (WHO HAD BEEN PARALYZED IN A RACING ACCIDENT TWO YEARS BEFORE, WHILE BATTLING SCHWANTZ FOR THE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP) MADE SCHWANTZ REALIZE THAT HE NO LONGER ENJOYED RACING LIKE HE ONCE HAD.

AFTER RETIRING FROM MOTORCYCLE RACING, SCHWANTZ SPENT SOME TIME COMPETING IN NASCAR AND TOURING CAR RACES. HE ALSO SERVED AS A CONSULTANT FOR TEAM SUZUKI AND CONTINUED TO MAKE APPEARANCES AND RACE IN SPECIAL EVENTS ON BEHALF OF SUZUKI. SCHWANTZ WAS INDUCTED INTO THE AMA MOTORCYCLE HALL OF FAME IN 1999.

