

Arizona at the Isle of Man TT

Ready to roll, delayed by coronavirus.

By Kelly Sallaway

Photos by Martynsfotos, Cole Horchler, Paul Phillips and James Qualtrough



In February, Team Arizona had big plans for an event after Arizona Bike Week, to mark 20 years at their Gilbert training center and celebrate sport bike fans and riders. They had a celebrity appearance up their sleeve—Pete Murray, a Phoenix local who had competed in five events on the historic Isle of Man track and as one of the sole Americans at the storied TT (Tourist Trophy) event, was scheduled to be the guest of honor.

The celebration had been planned for late April at the TEAM Arizona facility, a five-acre lighted outdoor site dedicated to rider safety. There would be a motorcycle ride-in, an Isle of Man TT scooter track, a motorcycle dealership midway, food trucks and special guests, all in a family-friendly atmosphere.

We all know the rest. As the coronavirus epidemic and lockdown grew more serious through March and April, both the celebratory event here and the race itself on Isle of Man were cancelled.

Roadracing is its own kind of controlled craziness, with racers nearly horizontal coming into turns and hitting straightaways at 200 mph. But in this risk versus reward context, no venue is as

famous or as dangerous as the Isle of Man. This legendary race has been scaring the bejeezus out of riders and spectators since 1907. It holds a special history and mystery for anyone who has ever ridden a bike, and it's been a dream come to life for Murray.

The Isle of Man TT is the most dangerous race in the world and the most fatal. Although the risk is off-scale (275 people have died, versus 22 for the Indy 500 over the same time period), it still lures riders as the ultimate test of skill and survival. According to Pete Murray, "There is nothing like it," and as for why? Pete and other racers who have bested the 37.73-mile circuit say, "We live in a time when anyone came climb Everest. The TT is the last real challenge. Not anyone can do it. Some won't even try, and once you have done it you will never find anything else like it... nothing. The exhilaration of pushing a bike to the limits (my limits, anyway) around the most challenging course on the planet. It's the most difficult and most fun thing I've ever done."

As one of the handful of brave humans to ever qualify and race the Isle of Man TT, a conversation

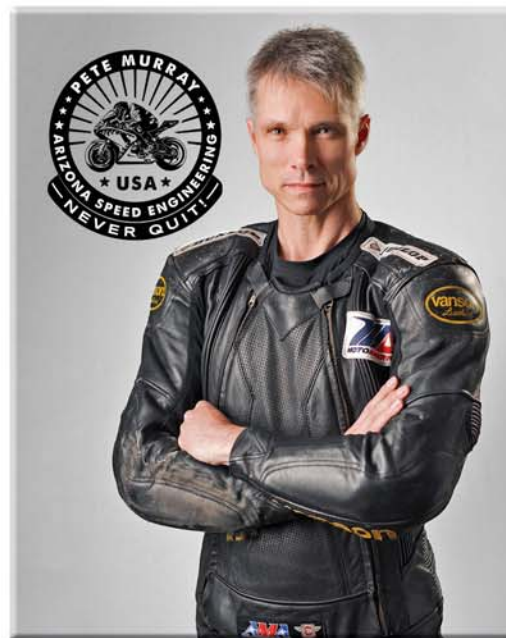
with Pete may strike you as like finding out your neighbor walks a tightrope without a net over a pool of Great White sharks.

It's rare for any American to make the field, and, in fact, Pete was the only US racer in 2017, 2018 and 2019. Murray is humble about being the lone Yank in the international field, saying, "I was just glad to know the American flag would be flying over the grandstand."

Murray came into racing later in life. After college with a degree in Aeronautical Science, he now balances roadracing in MotoAmerica, his career as a pilot for American Airlines, and his obsession for training and qualifying for the Isle of Man. At 49, one of the oldest TT competitors, at an age when most racers are considering their exit from the sport, Murray made a decision: "It was just a matter of fact: that's the most challenging motorcycle race on the planet, so that's the motorcycle race I am going to go do."

Pete's a hands-on motorcycle guy, building his own bikes and hauling them to domestic races, but logistics for the TT forced him to seek out a different solution. Finding a race team in the UK was

Left page: Martynsfotos / At right, upper: Cole Horchler; Martynsfotos / lower: Paul Phillips; Martynsfotos; James Qualtrough



the answer—Robbie Sylvester's VRS Racing.

"VRS is a small affair that Robbie runs on the side out of the shop in his back yard," says Murray, "but he has had some great riders on his bikes over the years, and his team is one of the most professional operations in the paddock. Renting a bike from him made perfect logistical sense. He shows up with well prepared bikes, under a professional awning, with a support team that takes care of everything. All I have to do is show up... it's like I'm a superstar!"

Before ever attempting the TT, normally held annually the first week in June, Pete followed a plan designed for newcomers, racing in the Manx Grand Prix, an amateur event held on the Island in August. The ManxGP and a Classic TT, where past Champions return for laps in front of adoring fans, are combined events with all the TT pageantry, but without the pressure or huge crowds. Murray suggests that trip as an alternative to the TT. "I would recommend that anyone wanting to watch racing on the IOM go to the ManxGP. You'll still see fast bikes, but also more of this beautiful island."

Murray takes his place as a role model serious-

ly. He is an advocate for any American who wants to attend or race in the IOMTT, and will continue to race and mentor other riders. "I would love to see an All-American team at the TT. If I have to start that team myself, I will."

Pete Murray will be up to the challenge. "It's what Americans do, it's who we are. We seek out challenges and crush them."

Murray will be competing anywhere that is open and running in 2020. He's entered into both the Classic TT and ManxGP on the Isle of Man in August. If those races go ahead, he will be back on the Isle of Man, but still waiting for another shot at the TT next year. ■

TEAM Arizona is the premier motorcycle rider training organization in Arizona. Operating for more than 30 years in Arizona, TEAM Arizona has motorcycle safety courses to obtain a motorcycle license (endorsement) or enhance rider skills. Motorcycle riders have been coming to TEAM Arizona since 1989, where their experienced instructors have trained more than 135,000 motorcycle, scooter and three-wheel motorcycle riders. TEAM Arizona has fourteen locations throughout the state and can be contacted at 480-998-9888. ●

The Isle of Man—a self-governing British Crown dependency in the Irish Sea between England and Ireland—is a study in contrast. Picture the world's fastest sport bikes careening through bucolic English villages. The Isle of Man TT is famous for being extremely hard to get to. Over 60,000 fans make the journey, none without a lot of planning. Pete Murray's first impression was that it "felt like home ... I grew up on a farm in a small town in western New York, and the feel of the island is very similar." The worst aspect? "The weather." Gorgeous green hills are the result of a lot of rain, one reason veteran visitors suggest making flexible plans for your trip—expect inevitable delays. The locals either love the race and welcome foreigners with open arms or they hate it, leave and rent out their homes. The 5,000-mile trip is best done by flying to Ireland and taking a ferry from Dublin or Belfast to the Isle of Man. Accommodations, from castles to BNBs to a tent camping spot, book out a year in advance. The well-organized race website directs travelers to every service: www.iomtraces.com. ■