

By David Boyce

An inquisitive Englishman took a careful step inside the open garage, away from the steady drizzle outside, and eyed a low, black, nasty-looking Harley-Davidson being tended by two guys who were working like madmen. They had just finished a frame modification to accommodate new motor mounts. In the far corner, a similar Harley rested on a side-stand, apparently not in need of attention

and looking out of place in an environment in which everything else appeared to be broken. The inside of the garage looked like a junkyard recently rearranged by a heavy-duty bomb. The floor was covered with motor parts; random piles of unidentifiable metal things glinted in the semi-darkness. In one of the few clear spaces, away from the work area, was a streamlined orange-and-black racing fairing.



HARLEYS AT THE ISLE

The Englishman spoke after seeing one of the men look up momentarily, "Say, I haven't ever heard of a Harley running at the Isle. You chaps from America?"

"Yup," said the dark-haired, bearded American, rapidly sorting through a box of bolts. "We're here from California for the Classic."

"Good show!" said the Englishman. "Must be at least a 1000cc machine you're building?"

"Yup," said the American, as he placed several bolts on a shop rag and stood up, "but this is just my cowtrailer. I broke my big motor. That one was 78 cubic inches, about 1298cc. We've had a lot of problems."

"I should say!" exclaimed the Englishman, looking around again.

"We've had to make do ever since we got here," said the American,

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Photo by Dennis Fagotow

Harleys at the Isle

Continued from page 33

"but we'll be ready."

"I hope you finish in time. You'll need a sturdy cycle to complete a TT race," the Englishman replied.

"That's for sure," said the American. "I don't think a Harley has ever finished a TT race before."

"I believe you're right," the Englishman said. "I'd be glad to assist you. If you need anything, I live four houses down the way."

"Thanks."

"Well, perhaps I'll see you again then. If not, good luck," said the Englishman. "By the way," he added, introducing himself, "may I know your names?"

"Sure. I'm Vance Breese," said the American, shaking hands. "The other rider is Mike Ross, and the guy in the welding helmet is Tony Williams, our mechanic."

"My pleasure," said the Englishman. "Take good care of yourselves, mates, and best of luck tomorrow."

"Thanks," said Vance. "We need all we can get."

Vance, Mike, and Tony were working non-stop to get their Harleys race-worthy for the 75th Isle of Man Tourist Trophy (TT) Classic, a six-lap road race around a 37 3/4-mile circuit of twisting mountain roads on a rain-soaked island in the Irish Sea. The fastest bikes and some of the best riders in the world come to the Isle each June, along with 250,000 super-enthusiastic motorcyclists, for what has always been one of the ultimate tests of a road racer's skill. This 226-mile race on public roads is unlike any other, with its San Francisco-type hills taken flat out at 160-plus mph, first gear hairpins that go off-camber if the rider goes wide, stone fences minus the hay bales, and a mix of turns and surface variations that tends to turn 100-percent riders into 80-percent riders in about five minutes or less.

* * *

Going to the Isle of Man was Mike's idea. Vance leaped at the opportunity to match his modified but basically genuine Harley-Davidson against a whole boatload of Japanese multis and a host of German, English, and Italian bikes.

An experienced but not-too-wealthy road racer, Vance is 32 and has been building, racing, and repairing motorcycles in his spare time for the past fifteen years. His

working hours are taken up with a carpet cleaning business and a telephone answering service. He had ridden and raced Triumphs, Nortons, a BSA, and a couple of Moto-Guzzis before he settled on Harleys, which he has road-raced for the last four years. The Isle of Man had been sort of a distant dream.

Team mechanic Tony Williams has been involved in motorcycle racing for the past ten years, as a flat-track racer, fabricator, and occasional motorman. One of his motors held a three-year novice record for the 250cc class at Ascot. At present, he designs competition and show-bike pipes at Williams Pipes, Inc., in San Carlos, California.

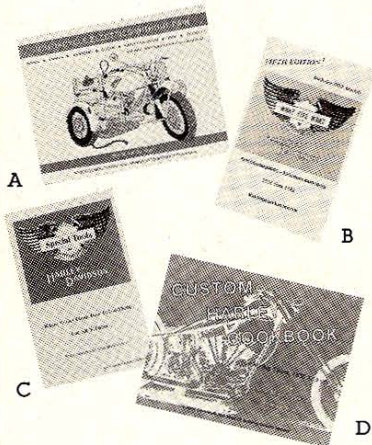
The third man on the team, Mike Ross, is a ten-year veteran Yamaha road racer (250-350cc) who has moved up to a Harley. When he is not racing or getting ready for a race, he works as a labor negotiator in California.

The British Auto Cycle Union (ACU) provided start money that would cover about half the expenses; the other half was a problem until Dennis Manning of BUB Enterprises learned of their predicament and said they *had* to go. He backed his words with a generous sponsorship. Two more sponsors, S&S Cycle and Custom Chrome, Inc., later came on board and the cash crunch was eased.

With the money problems more or less solved, they began to get the bikes ready. Jim Belland built the motors, pronouncing them good for 500 racing miles each. Mike's bike, his first Harley, was totally untried and not quite finished, but Belland was going along as mechanic, so no problem — until he had to cancel out because of business commitments. Still no problem, though: Tony Williams volunteered. Tony can make anything out of almost anything, he has a tremendous capacity for work, and he had worked with Vance on several projects already. With Tony signed on, they had met all three requirements: a good team, friendly and helpful sponsors, and two very nasty Harley-Davidsons.

After two months of preparation, interrupted only by sleeping (a little), eating, and earning a living, it was time to go, ready or not. The night before departure they packed the bikes and spare parts into the shipping crates. The sun came up as they finished and shone on two 1200-pound heavy-duty crates sitting in the parking lot. One last problem: With only three hours before departure time, the crates

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were on the ground with no way to get them into the trucks and out to the airport. Down the street, a large machine shop had a fork lift. Vance said, "Gee, Mister, can I borrow your \$5000 fork lift? No, I've never driven one before, but we want to go 9000 miles to race a bunch of Jap bikes with our Harleys." The foreman replied, "Sure, no problem." There was a familiar feeling coming on: the magic of a special adventure.

* * *

The day after arriving in London, Vance and Mike flew to the island while Tony waited in London to collect the motorcycles. They arrived on a Sunday, with the race less than three weeks away. Sixteen days to learn the course, get the bugs out of the bikes, and meet some of the enthusiastic women who were there to watch the races. It being Sunday, nearly everything was closed, so they rented a couple of bicycles to ride around the circuit, hoping to learn the course and get in condition at the same time.

Tuesday was rainy and gray. Things got really gloomy when they found out that the bikes were still in San Francisco because some bureaucrat had reweighed the crates. That evening Manx Grand Prix winner Graham Cannall spent a couple of hours showing them around the track and giving them his thoughts about where to take it easy and where to pour it on. He kept saying "Flat-out through here" in places where going 160mph would not have been Vance's choice.

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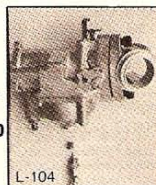
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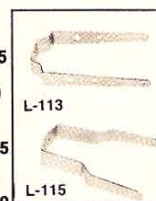
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but that kind of information was just what he needed.

On Wednesday, there were assurances from the airline that the bikes were on their way, so it was back to the practice runs — this time on a small Honda bike and a mini-car. Mist on the mountain had reduced visibility to about twenty feet, making a rear-end collision with a local truck a possibility, but the Honda broke a piston before this happened. The shop said they'd fix it as soon as possible, so Vance rented a mini-car for practice while the Honda was down.

Thursday: Two weeks left and the bikes were still in San Francisco. In the meantime, round and round the course in the mini, trying to attach places to names: Ballacrairie, Cronk-Y-Voddy, Sulby Straight, Ramsey Hairpin, Guthrie Memorial, Kate's Cottage, Creg-Ny-Baa; some sixty specific place names and more than 200 corners in all, each requiring a different line, different gear, and different speed.

The first tight corner on the race circuit is a right turn at Quarter Bridge, an intersection with a traffic circle. Normally, traffic enters the intersection in the left lane, and after turning left into the circle, moves sedately to the right, going around the circle and away. During the race, riders approach this corner at 135mph and white-knuckle it down to 35mph in a concentrated use of brakes and downshifting. They take the corner in the right lane, hugging the right-hand curb, bypassing the circle, and slingshot themselves down the straightaway toward the next corner. It is essential for the racers to know this corner because the road humps along the dotted line, and the left lane slopes off-camber down toward a stone fence.

Vance was trying to learn this and other rather demanding corners late Saturday night after a charming Manxwoman had kicked him out of her house at 12:30. He was in the mini and using the racing lines, which meant using both lanes. His lights were off, but moonlight provided enough light for him to see the road; he could see oncoming headlights in time to get back into the left lane. Using these techniques, with a top speed of 75, he managed to average 60mph for an entire lap. The next time around, he came sliding through Quarter Bridge in a four-wheel drift, cleared the corner on the racing line, and was gone down the straightaway at

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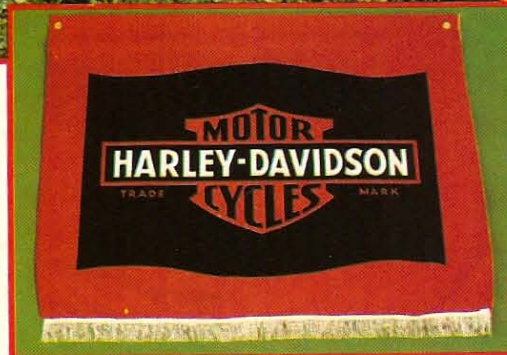
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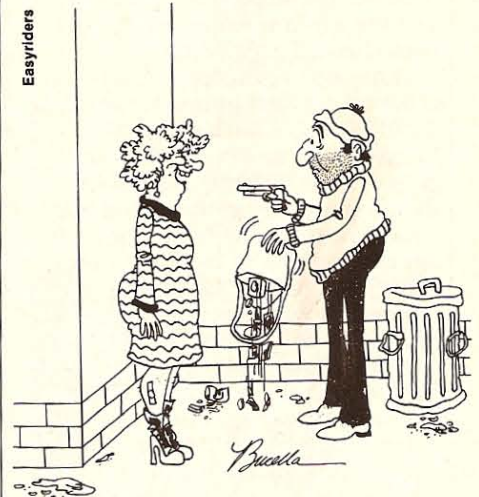
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about 75mph. Suddenly, there were headlights behind him. Two bobbies in a mini-van had been sitting near the corner when Vance had motored through. When Vance finally stopped, a large bobby got out, walked up to the car and said, "Excuse me, but the reason we stopped you is because you went the wrong way through the roundabout." In his best California drawl, Vance replied, "Gee, I'm sorry. We don't have those in California." He went on to explain that he was just trying to learn the course so he could race safely. The bobby asked him for his number and race and when Vance told him he was racing the H-D in the Classic, the bobby grinned and said, "Okay, mate. Keep to the limit (35mph), now." Imagine, the same situation in America!

Official race practice began on Monday and there were still no motorcycles. To qualify for the Classic, riders must complete six practice laps, with one lap run at an average speed of 90mph or better. No way on that little Honda. Fortunately, Graham Cannal had introduced Mike to a Manxman, Richard Bairstow, who volunteered to help with the mechanical chores. Richard works and lives in an institution for the elderly, where he makes 50 pounds (\$85) a week. His only valuable possession is a Honda CB 900F that isn't paid for, and Richard let Vance use it for the practice laps — incredible, but true. Bill Smith, a legendary TT racer, lent Mike one of his racing bikes, a Honda CB 1100R, with advice to take it easy breaking it in. You bet, Bill. No problem.

Easyriders



"There's a twenty-dollar bill pinned to my panties!"

Vance's first lap was an experiment in terror. At Braddan Bridge, he almost lost it. The problem wasn't a lack of skill. According to Vance, it happened because four-cylinder bikes are a bitch to handle. He went into the corner a little too fast and the front end started to wash out. He rolled off the throttle and the bike snapped back to vertical, almost threw him off, and headed straight for the wall. Spectators dove for cover and the turn workers came running, but somehow the bike made it through the turn with Vance still on the seat.

The next incident happened at a jump a few miles down the road. Vance took the jump at the recommended speed of 120mph and, as he touched down, the wind caught the front end while it was still off the ground and held the bike in an involuntary wheelie for several hundred feet. It was enough to set his heart to pounding. The road is straight there, which was lucky; the next time it happened, at Ballaugh Bridge, Vance needed more than luck on his side.

Ballaugh Bridge has a reputation that instills caution. The rider brakes hard coming up to it, makes

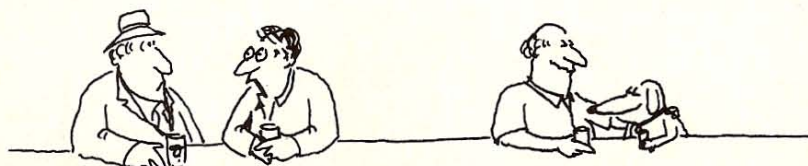
a hard left over the bridge, and then a hard right through a little town. The bridge is exceptional because it has a steep hump in the middle, which causes all traffic moving over 30mph to leave the ground.

Vance was ready, he'd been over the hump at 35mph in the mini. All four wheels had left the ground but he'd cornered safely. Using the standard calculation, 70mph seemed a safe speed on a bike. As he left the ground, however, he began to suspect that maybe 70 was a little too fast for the Honda. The bike sailed over the hump and stayed airborne long enough for a very good look around. The road was far

below and not getting any closer; the wall ahead was a solid mass of fieldstone and was getting closer; and the road beyond turned into the sharp right-hander. *Shit!* Get down, bike! Get down! When it finally did come down, it went right up into another wheelie. Vance's fault this time: he'd forgotten to roll off the throttle. Somehow, he made it through the corner. Lap one was a memorable experience.

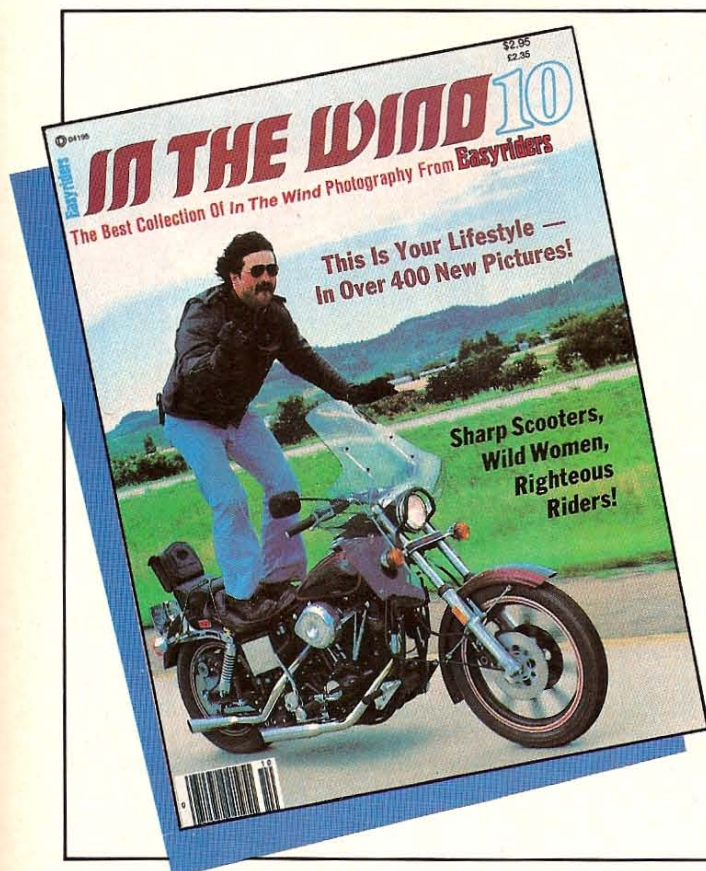
The second lap was more of the same, but with a lot less drama. On the third lap, he ran out of gas and stopped at a station on the course. The station owner, another typical Manxman, filled Vance's tank even

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"When he told me his wife was a regular bitch, naturally I had something entirely different in mind."



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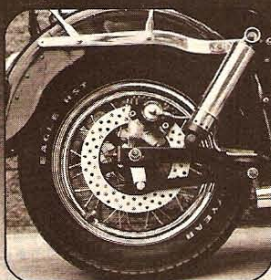
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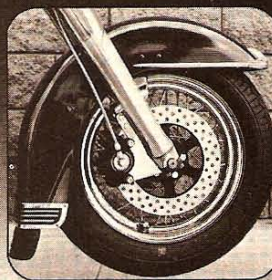
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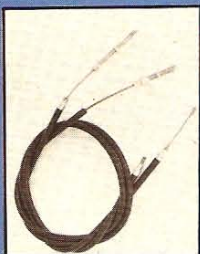
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though he'd forgotten his wallet.

At Sarah's Cottage, a little farther along, the front fender came loose and locked up the front wheel. He hit the curb but kept the bike upright and brought it to a stop, ripped off the fender and kept going. On his next lap, he averaged 83mph. He was beginning to think that this race might be a lot of fun if the motorcycles ever arrived.

On Tuesday, Vance was too sick to get out of bed. Later that day, he heard that the motorcycles had arrived in London and that Tony would bring them over the next day — in time for afternoon practice, they hoped. There were only two days left to qualify and a little over a week before the race.

The bikes arrived in time for afternoon practice. Wasting no time, Vance unpacked his bike, gave it a once-over, and wheeled it over to Scrutineering (safety inspector). The bike was not quite by their book, but the inspectors liked it so much that they bent a few of the rules and gave him a sticker. The motor rumbled into life on the first push: 78 cubic inches of thundering V-twin power. The bike pulled some really tall gearing and ran a little over 160mph past the Highlander Inn. This Harley was going to perform! At Ballaugh Bridge, Vance swept in, went over the jump, and roared away.

Coming out of Ramsey, still on the first lap, Vance heard faint sounds of detonation. About three miles down the road he had to stop. The right side of the rear barrel was cracked from top to bottom and there was a hole in the left side.

Meanwhile, Mike had missed practice, which was understandable since his front tire hit the lower fork clamp and his rear tire hit the seat. While Vance tore down his race motor, Mike and Tony fixed the clearance problems and drove out to an abandoned airstrip to test the bike. A fine idea, but the bike wouldn't start. They spent Thursday getting the bugs out and that evening took it out for another test. It started this time and seemed to run okay, except for a little problem with sticking throttle slides.

Vance's motor, however, was not okay. It had turned itself into non-repairable junk. All was not lost, though, because Tony had talked Vance into bringing along another motor (also built by Jim Belland), meant for Vance's new cowtrailer. This was a fairly standard Sportster motor with Thunder Heads and some cast-off racing parts. While it was no Grand Prix monster, it was a quality motor and, with a lot of work

to fit it in the frame, it would go fast enough to make a good showing and qualify Vance for start money, assuming that the officials would let him race at all.

Friday, last day of official practice, Mike headed out to make his qualification run: six laps, with one over 90mph. On his first lap, he broke a throttle cable at Quarter Bridge and had to stop.

With practice over, Vance's qualifying effort on the Honda was two laps short and a little slow; Mike had done no better. After two months of planning and late nights in garages, a 9000-mile trip, and all the ups and downs of the whole adventure, it looked as if bad luck was about to finish them off. Fortunately, the ACU officials were aware of all that effort. To show appreciation of their never-say-die attitude, the ACU qualified both Vance and Mike. With the race only a week away, they had just enough time for a sigh of relief.

Vance and Tony spent the next three days scrounging parts, cannibalizing the crapped-out motor, and redoing the frame in a borderline-frantic effort to create a motorcycle that would stand up to the punish-

ment of a road race in which up to two-thirds of the competing field does not finish.

By Tuesday, the motor was in the bike. By Wednesday evening, after some frantic fabricating on the intake and exhaust systems, they were ready for a test ride. Out at the airstrip, the motor coughed once and started. The bike ran great and turned about 140 without the fairing! It looked homemade in places, but in a practical sense it was fine.

Thursday afternoon they went back to the airstrip to get the gearing and jetting dialed in. On previous visits, the airstrip had been deserted. This time, there were hundreds of people watching the factory teams do their final tuning. When Vance and Tony unloaded the Harley, the whole crowd circled around them, taking pictures and asking questions. They pushed it off, and as soon as it started they knew they were in trouble. It missed, stumbled, backfired, and blew flames out both pipes and the carburetor — fulfilling the expectations of many Harley critics in the area. Vance and Tony frantically changed everything in the ignition system, but it did no good. Totally

frustrated, they took the beast back to the garage.

They worked into the night, changing parts, starting the bike and making lots of noise, but nothing seemed to work. The race was less than twelve hours away.

Around 8:00 a.m., they had it to the point where it would pull about 5500 rpm before starting to miss. If they were going to race, it was time to get it on. Scrutineering was supposed to close at 11:00 a.m. Vance hurried over, checked in at 11:10, and was cleared to race. It had rained hard all night and was just



"Well, at least he cured my hiccups."

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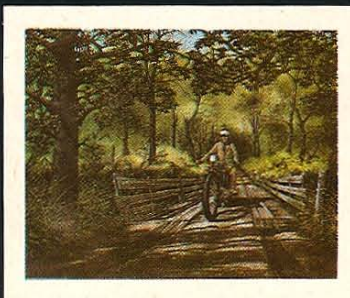
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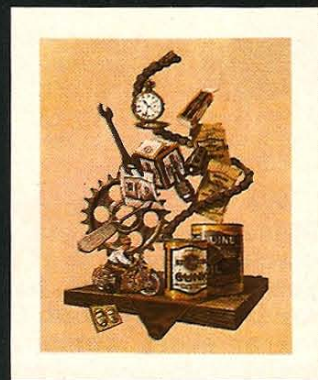
Dave Mann Prints



A. 29" x 24 3/4"



C. 29" x 24 3/4"



B. 30" x 23 3/4"

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starting to clear. While the weather now looked promising, he wasn't so sure about the bike.

Compared with the problems of the preparations, the race seemed almost easy. In the Classic, racers depart in pairs, each pair leaving 10 seconds apart. Vance pulled up next to his starting partner, and at the starter's signal, they roared off in the direction of Quarter Bridge. His bike was making just over 133mph before it would start to miss, not quite fast enough to compete with the 180mph factory bikes on the long straights, but certainly better than nothing.

Mike started right after Vance and made it as far as the Ramsey Hairpin (about two-thirds of a lap) before his motor stopped. Meanwhile, Vance motored around as quickly as possible. By the fifth lap (185 miles), his legs began to give out from standing on the pegs as he went over the bumps. He was taking quite a beating, but wasn't about to give up after all that work.

At the beginning of the sixth lap the bike began to miss at anything over 90mph, and Vance was sure he'd never finish the race. By this time, word had spread about his difficulties and people were cheering for him in the corners.

Somehow, the bike managed to run the distance and the scene at the finish was like something out of *Rocky*. The privateer Americans with their Harley-Davidson had placed 38th in a field of 104 of the best bikes and some of the most skilled road racers in the world. Vance was the seventh American to finish the race and possibly the first to do it on a Harley. He had also finished dead last, just two minutes before the track was re-opened to public traffic, but Vance seemed to be the only person who was bothered. After all, they had beaten all the factory teams, since none of them had finished. Back at the hotel, everyone cheered when the American team showed up for dinner. It seemed they had done the classic British thing: press on, regardless.

At the awards ceremony that evening, the MC made a very nice speech about how Vance and his team had overcome adversity and captured the spirit of the TT. The applause was long and loud.

Are they going back? Not without being better prepared and better financed. Was it fun? Hard to tell. Maybe it will seem so in about six months. Was it worth it? You bet. ■








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