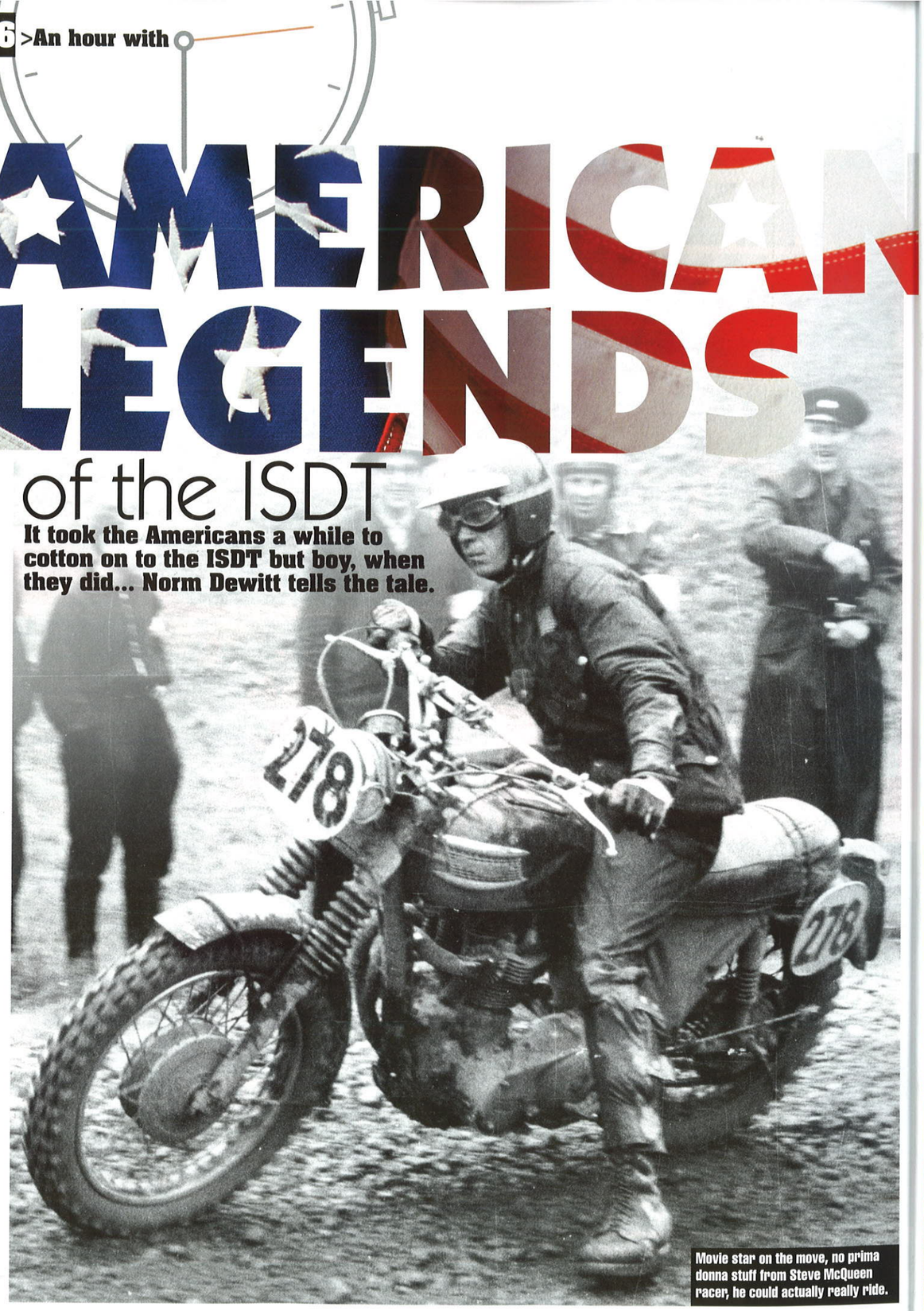
AMERICAN LEGENDS of the ISDT

It took the Americans a while to cotton on to the ISDT but boy, when they did... Norm Dewitt tells the tale.



Movie star on the move, no prima donna stuff from Steve McQueen racer, he could actually really ride.

WORDS: Norm Dewitt
PICS: Mortons Archive and Nick Nicholls collection

More than 100 years ago, T K Hastings had brought his chain drive Indian to England to compete in and win the Thousand Mile Reliability Trials of 1907, finishing in London. It is now considered the predecessor of the ISDT. Performance wasn't lacking either, as the Indian V-twins competed at the Isle of Man TT in 1911, sweeping the top three positions of the 500cc Senior TT after Collier's Matchless was disqualified.

So, it was no surprise to anyone, that Indian would be represented in the first ISDT. Dave Ekins says: "The first was in 1913, and it was the first Six Days Reliability Trial. The first American was T K Hastings from Springfield, Massachusetts and he was riding an Indian..."

That first ISDT consisted of different roads that each started and finished in Carlisle. Sadly with the coming horror of the First World War, the second ISDT wasn't held until 1920.

Tommy McDermott competed on a BSA in 1949. Success for the Americans came 12 years later. Dave Ekins says: "Bud (Ekins) had his first Six Day Trials in 1961, on a Triumph the factory prepared for him. The gearbox got stuck on the last day, he had to stop and repair it on the trail." As a result, Bud got silver instead of gold.

The West German ISDT of 1962 brought Bud his first gold medal, again on a 650 Triumph. Silver was John Penton, on a BMW. Dave says: "It was an R27, 250 BMW. They had put a BSA front end on it, because the small BMWs had an Earles front end. John won a lot of enduros with that bike because it was so damn reliable. He didn't have to worry about where to put the air filter, as it was already in the proper place.

"The situation with 1962 was, that was when they shot The Great Escape. The shooting had been held over, as they'd shot the first month in black and white, and then the studio decided to make it in colour. In the original script, there were no Americans, and then they rewrote the script because Steve McQueen said 'that's pretty good fellas but I don't see why I should get involved with this unless I'm a hero'. That movie was shot in the woods not far from where the Six Days was. The movie company had given Bud permission to go ride the Six Days, and then shut down the filming for the last couple of days of it."

The Isle of Man could be more muddy than the American contingent were used to, they coped though.

Also, in perhaps the movie's most famous scene, Bud Ekins had been the stunt man who stood in for McQueen in jumping a motorcycle over the barbed wire fencing. The end result of all this, was getting Steve McQueen all fired up over being a participant in the Six Day Trials. Dave says: "That's exactly right. He wanted to learn enough about riding to be able to do that. The real story is that Stephen had to do Cincinnati Kid, and then he cut off everything until after the 1964 Six Days was over. I think he had started too late. In 1964 he was 34 years old. Steve didn't have problems with money, as he was already the highest paid actor in Hollywood. So, he worked in Bud's shop and he had to learn to do things like change motorcycle tyres."

In the meantime the 1963 event in Czechoslovakia had brought a second gold to Bud Ekins. By this point, his brother Dave was chomping at the bit, wishing to ride the ISDT. All this combined into the first American Silver Vase 'A' team, entered for 1964 in East Germany. The team consisted of Dave Ekins and Bud Ekins on 500 Triumphs, with Steve McQueen and Cliff Coleman on 650s (John Steen was the alternate). Dave says: "It was two TR6s and two TR5s. We picked them up when we got into Great Britain."

It all clearly did not go according to the script. Dave: "Bud broke his leg, and Steve broke the motorcycle." The upside was that Dave Ekins and Cliff Coleman both received gold medals. Dave says:."It was more a reflection of how easy the Six Days was. I rode five of them and that was the easiest one of them all. The bike was a piece of crap, in fact all of them were. The bikes that Triumph had prepared for us were not all that good."

Dave: "We rode the same bikes on the Isle of Man (ISDT) in 1965. The bikes had stayed in Europe." It was a very different situation in 1965, as the course conditions and weather proved a great challenge and all the Americans on the Vase team were out by half distance.

For 1966, a new name was to appear on the scene, one whose achievements in a variety of ways helped to put Husqvarna on the map in America. Malcolm Smith says: "I had started racing Greeves for Nick Nicholson, who was the importer. He was my sponsor, which in those days meant that I got to buy the bike at a discount and if you won the race, he would pay your entry fee. Well, I had bought the repair shop portion of K&N motorcycles and I had seven guys working for me. I was the welder, machinist, and service manager.

"One day, this funny little guy with a French beret had stuck his head around the doorway and said 'who is Malcolm Smith?' When I told him that I am, he said 'I've

heard you are one of the fastest guys in California. I'm importing Husqvarna motorcycles to the US." It was Edison Dye.

Initially Malcolm wasn't quite sure what to make of the 1966 Husqvarna 250. "The frame was real small diameter tubing. We had a Greeves there at the store, and we compared notes. I said, 'look at the Greeves with the big aluminium frame compared to the spindly little Husky.' Well, he said, 'if you race Huskies, I'll send you to the International Six Day Trials and pay all your expenses. There will be a bike over there for you, and Husky will take care of you.' Boy, that got my attention.

"I was making maybe 100 dollars a week, so my chances of going were nil. But I didn't want to do it if the bike wasn't good. So, about five minutes away there were a bunch of hills where we'd built a track. I did one lap around the course, pulled in, and said 'you've hired yourself a rider.' It was so good compared to that Greeves. That Sunday I was in a desert race with at least 1000 entrants, and got second overall. The bike didn't go fast like the Triumphs, but it accelerated and slowed quickly. Then, the next weekend, I won overall. Just when I'd started racing the Husky, Bud Ekins was making a comeback on the big Triumphs, and this kid on a 250 Husky would beat him all the time. I became the first Husqvarna dealer too, as Norm McDonald didn't want to affect his relationship with Yamaha and so I would buy the bikes from Edison and put them on K&N's floor.

"Edison kept procrastinating about getting me the ticket to Sweden. So, I finally get to the airport and meet Edison who says, 'you're not going to Sweden, you are going to Norway. I run BMW tours in Europe and you are going to pick up a VW van at Oslo airport and drive it to Sweden. We've got a blue one, a red one, and a green one, here are keys, try them until you find the right one.' I got there at 2am... do you know how many VW vans there were in Europe at that time?"

Eventually Malcolm arrived at the Husqvarna factory, which looked like something out of a time capsule. "There was a waterfall there, and it ran this waterwheel. There were belts and shafts that went through all the buildings, and some of that was still in use. I knew what would go wrong with these bikes, the little solder joints in the magneto would fail. So, they showed me mine and I took it all apart right there at the factory.

"I'm a dirt road, desert, and flat track racer. When I got to Sweden, I'd never experienced mud like that before. Stones that were moss covered in the forest, and you'd just ping-pong off everything. I was under this theory that you go wide open, and it didn't work in those conditions. I hit the ground so hard, so many times the first day. I had damaged the throttle cable so that by the third or fourth day, it broke.

"In those days you carried a spare, so I put it on, but I'd lost my gold medal. But, the Husqvarna factory was wonderful to me. When I'd pull into the pits, they would come with hot raspberry soup, I just loved Sweden."

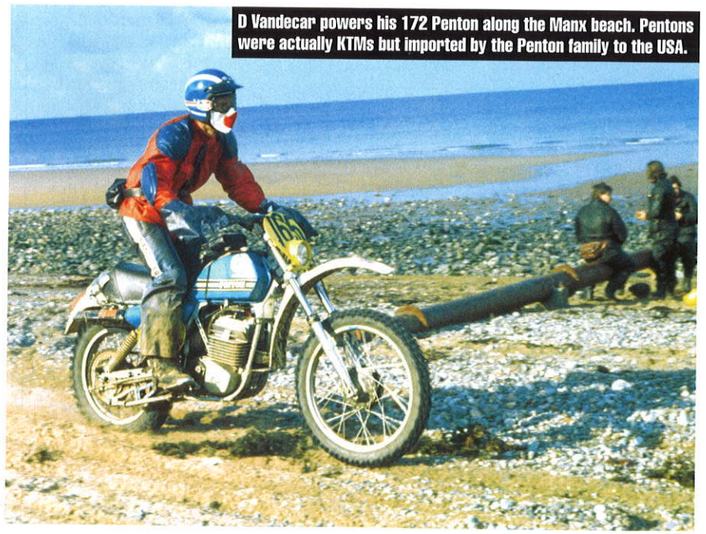
By the end, Malcolm found himself in his element: "The last day was a road race on a sports car racing track. They lined everybody up, about 50 at a time, and you road raced for about an hour. Well, my bike wouldn't start so everybody was about two blocks ahead. So, I just flat tracked on the pavement, foot down, passing three guys in one corner... two on the outside of the next corner. Everybody up in the stands started yelling and screaming, they had never seen broadslides on pavement before. By the end, I had passed all 50 of them and won the road race. That night at the awards banquet they gave me a huge crystal vase." Malcolm had finished his first Six Days with silver.

Dave Ekins had an entirely different experience at the 1966 ISDT. "We Americans got screwed over real bad, no motorcycles... so everybody jumped in," he says. "My brother was given a Husky by Rolf Tibblin. It's pretty bad when you don't know what you are going to get... when you've sold everything you have to pay for the airline ticket to get there. Edison Dye didn't get the Zundapp deal for the entire United States, so he put Leroy Winters on a Husky. So, there was this Zundapp sitting there that had been prepared for Leroy, and I fell into it... the last one to get a motorcycle.

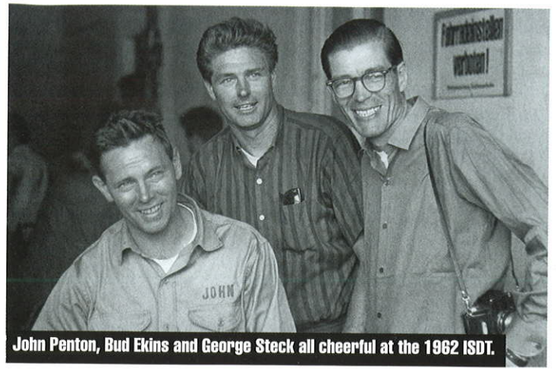
"The day before, the team manager of the Zundapp group, had one of their star riders take me out on the trail. I rode it maybe 20 miles, and they showed me how to start the motorcycle... how to shut the fuel off and run the motor until the carburettor was empty, and then you'd walk it in. Otherwise there was a chance it could fall over in the night and flood the whole engine." A week later, the Ekins brothers had each added an extra gold to their personal tally.

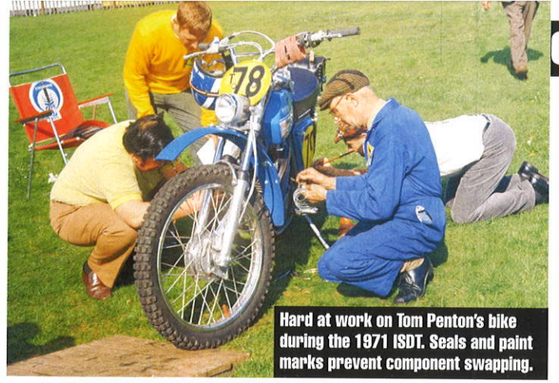
The 1967 event was in Poland, and the US Silver Vase team was comprised of Bud Ekins, Malcolm Smith, John Penton, and Leroy Winters, all riding Husqvarna. Malcolm: "It was the hardest one I'd ridden, there were a lot of tree roots. I was down on the ground all the time, getting up, getting started. I was roomed with Bud Ekins... what a character. He would party until 2am and by the time he got back they would have locked all the doors, so he would knock on the window. I'd open the window and he'd crawl into bed, then get up at 6am and ride... and he still got a gold." Malcolm had also received a gold medal, his first.

For 1968, there were no gold medals for the American riders and in 1969 in West Germany, there were two... for Malcolm Smith and Billy Uhl. Malcolm: "The factory had brought a 400 for me but I had entered with a 250. They wouldn't let me change. The guy who would pre-run the day before was Lars-Erik Johansson and he had a 250 eight speed with three Six Days already on it. It handled so bad that we had to put that motor in my bike, and I gave him the 400 motor to pre-run with. The 250s always worked better in the Six Days, better than the 360s too."


D Vandecar powers his 172 Penton along the Manx beach. Pentons were actually KTMs but imported by the Penton family to the USA.

Leroy Winters rode a fairly standard looking Honda in 1971.


John Penton, Bud Ekins and George Steck all cheerful at the 1962 ISDT.


Hard at work on Tom Penton's bike during the 1971 ISDT. Seals and paint marks prevent component swapping.

The same logic applied to the large number of riders on 125/175 Pentons during the early 1970s, as by the end of Six Days, light and nimble rules the day. Dave Ekins had again ridden the factory 125 Zundapp, this time receiving a bronze. Dave was also a believer in 'less is more.' "The Zundapp 125... we got along very well, the smaller displacement takes less energy."

At this point, Preston Petty had arrived on the scene, as he competed in the ISDT from 1969 through 1971. "Well, I had a chance to compete on a DKW in Southern Germany that time, in the Bavarian Alps. It was an opportunity to ride that country and go through the little villages, all Hans Christian Andersen type of stuff with the people and the flowers hanging out the windows. It was just wonderful and was spectacular looking from the top of some of those peaks. Sometimes when looking at the countryside, you just had to stop. Some of the riders said that it was the best Six Days that they had ridden. It was pretty dry, with just a little bit of rain. I got a silver medal."

Perhaps the most famous of ISDTs was 1970, this being the year Malcolm Smith rode to achieve a gold medal in Spain, as filmed in the movie On Any Sunday. Preston says: "I really regret that year, as I was nominated to be on the American Trophy Team. First they selected the team members, but the problem was that they then decided what motorcycle they were going to ride. At that time Ted Lapadakis was the guy with the DKWs, and he was in Germany talking about getting bikes for the Trophy team. But it was not to be and when the team was deciding what motor bikes to ride, it ended up a Husqvarna deal.

"So, I had to decline, as I'd told Ted I would decline if they did not run DKWs. I felt an obligation to Ted and the DKW thing, which I regret because once I'd gotten over there to Spain. Instead of DKWs, Ted put us on Puchs. It didn't even last a day. At the finish line for one of the special tests it broke the gearbox."

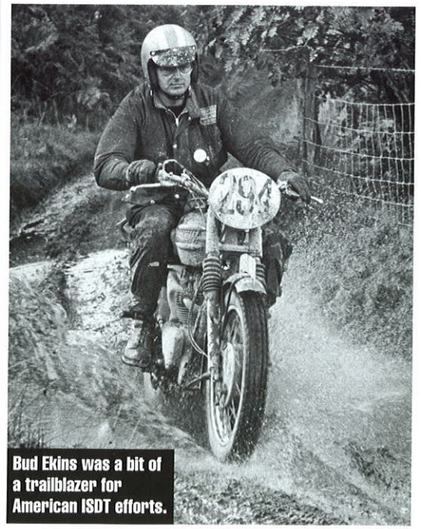
Dave Ekins was similarly riding the Puch. He says: "What Ted did, I never forgave him for it, even now. Those bikes... Preston lost his gearbox on the first day. Al Baker lost his gearbox on the second day. I lost my gearbox on the third day. Herr Puch had put special shifting keys in the Silver Vase bikes... and they all broke except for Billy Uhl's, who weighed about 100lb soaking wet."

Things worked out somewhat better in the Husqvarna camp. American rider Bob Rogsdad recalls: "There was a compound with all the Husqvarnas there. I rode the 400, with the eight speed transmission. The Swedes were all riding them, there must have been 25 or 30 motorcycles there. And there was Malcolm, he'd be taking his all apart, redoing the crankcase seals... he had the flywheel off, he did all that stuff, and it was a brand new motorcycle. The sign of a professional, being double extra careful... I sure didn't take mine apart."

Malcolm says: "I did that every year. Finally the Husky mechanics figured out that this guy sells a lot of these and he knows what breaks. The US Trophy Team had Malcolm Smith and Ron Bohn with gold, John Penton and Mike Patrick finishing with silver. The Penton mounted Vase 'A' Team took fifth overall, with gold medal performances for Jeff and Tom Penton, with bronze for Jack Penton and Doug Wilford.

The 1971 event was on the Isle of Man, and for Preston Petty it was more of the same: "I was running Puch again, one day I think the crankshaft broke. None of them finished that year, they all broke." The entire USA Vase 'B' team had again retired their Puchs. However 1971 was a strong performance for the USA Trophy Team, which took fourth place, with Jack Penton, Tom Penton, Lars Larsson, Gene Cannady, and Dane Leimbach all earning gold medals, while only Dick Burleson had retired. Malcolm had got better at slipping around on mossy rocks since 1966, being the only member of the Vase 'A' team to receive gold. He says: "I'd gotten better at it. I had a very enjoyable ride, it was fun!"

For 1972 in Czechoslovakia, the US Trophy team was to take four golds, one


Bud Ekins was a bit of a trailblazer for American ISDT efforts.

Malcolm Smith must be the USA's most successful classic era ISDT rider.

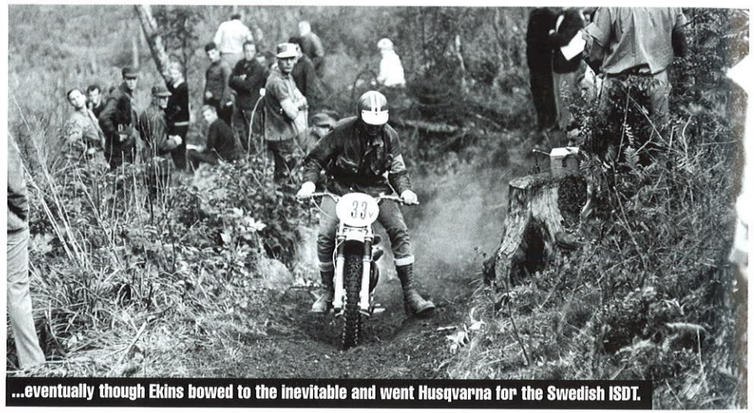
silver and one bronze on Pentons. But the following year, the magic finally all came together for the Americans at their home ISDT of 1973. Malcolm says: "Taking a gold and winning the Silver Vase… the American team had never won before." Looking back across the long ISDT career, was that your proudest moment? Malcolm: "I think so. I rode a Husky 250 the whole time (or an overbored 250 in the 350 class), and finished all 54 days with no breakdowns. I never trained, I just rode a lot." How did an American race for Husqvarna without having Rolf Tibblin put them on a treadmill? Malcolm: "He tried to get me on one…"

Chuck Miller was a desert racer in Southern California during the late 1970s and was to win the Baja 1000 in 1984. He first raced the ISDT in 1978, and also returning for 1980, 82, and 86 (gold medal). Chuck says: "The Six Days is a lot of fun, but just as much fun was the qualifiers. I rode six or seven events, and you had to run a minimum of four events a year just to qualify. Fort Hood, Texas, was just incredibly difficult… the very first qualifier that I ever did and it was quite a feat to come from the desert. Bill Bell from Yamaha was our team manager and I'll never forget him telling me 'you'll never qualify for the Six Days'. Bruce Ogilvie and I put our noses to the grindstone, and Larry Roeseler and Jack Johnson also qualified (Roeseler-Johnson were to win the Baja 1000 from 78-80). It was a feat for all of us desert guys to qualify for the Six Days."

Did course conditions favour riders such as the Penton brothers, who grew up riding in forests? Chuck: "For sure it did. The old superheroes of Malcolm and McQueen, those guys had been the generation before us… they were the phenomenal patriarchs of our racing careers. We started in 1980 with the new IT series for Yamaha… 250s and 465s. We had early production units, and we had transmission issues with them. My 250 broke the tranny on day two and ended up using it as a parts bike throughout the event. It was in France, and we were hiding in the woods and fixing bikes… doing the stuff all the Europeans taught us how to do."

This was nothing new. Dave Ekins said: "Oh yeah, that happened all the time. But just remember, there is something that needs to be brought out. The Six Days medal ain't no Olympic medal. If everybody is perfect, then everybody gets a gold."

James 'Bud' Ekins was a top USA off-roader and Triumph dealer. Hence his allegiance to the Meriden marque for quite some time…


…eventually though Ekins bowed to the inevitable and went Husqvarna for the Swedish ISDT.

1964 ISDT US squad (from left) John Steen, Cliff Coleman, Steve McQueen, Dave and Bud Ekins.

Jack Penton showing that road racers aren't the only ones who can lean over when on the Isle of Man.