

# SAN DIEGO CHARGER

Joe Leonard is the only American to have ever won national titles on two and four wheels

WORDS BY NORM DEWITT. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN MOTORCYCLIST ASSOCIATION AND JOE LEONARD'S COLLECTION

**J**ohn Surtees is revered on this side of the Atlantic as the only man to have won world championships on both two wheels and four. But over in the States there's a guy called Joe Leonard who is celebrated for a similar reason – as a racer who won major national titles on motorcycles as well as in cars.

Riding for Harley-Davidson, Leonard won the American Motorcyclist Association (AMA) Grand National title three times before switching to Indycar racing and winning the four-wheel title twice. More than that, both bike and car championships required the racers to run on dirt ovals as well as tarmac ovals and road courses, making Leonard's success even more noteworthy and underlining his all-round ability – and adaptability.

And as with so many American racing legends of the 1950s and '60s, there was a San Diego connection. As 1972 Daytona 200 winner Don Emde says: "That's what San Diego was all about. My dad had won Daytona, some of his best friends had also won the 200. Brad Andres (two wins) had a shop one block up the street. My dad was a sponsor of Ralph White (winner) when he got started. Joe (two wins) grew up there when he started riding bikes. Then there was Cal Rayborn (two wins)... If you were going to be anybody in San Diego you had pretty much better have won Daytona."

Joe Leonard reflects upon those San Diego roots: "I rode for Guy Urquhart, who had won Daytona with Floyd Emde on the Indian in 1948. Floyd must have known something we didn't know, or he got lucky, because it turned out to be the right move as Indian was going out of business soon after that."

In 1951 Joe was an amateur, racing his Triumph at the Belmont quarter-mile dirt oval, when Harley-Davidson number one Larry Headrick broke his leg badly in a crash. Soon after, teamed with San Francisco Bay Area tuning legend Tom Sifton, Joe got the Headrick machine, with half his winnings going to the Headrick family. That twist of fate launched Joe's career and he spent much of 1952 avoiding the unloved new KR Harley. Everett Brashear made extensive modifications, getting the model's first win in Sturgis.

Joe turned Expert for 1953, winning four Nationals, and was on his way. In 1954 he won the Laconia and Wilmot road races, the Springfield Mile, the Indy Mile and Peoria TT (a dirt oval with an infield motocross-style jump), in total eight of 18 races that formed the gruelling AMA Grand National series. Joe was the Grand National Champion in the first year it was a year-long point-paying championship, after the title had previously been decided in one-off races at the Springfield Mile.

He also raced in the famous Catalina Road Races – an arduous ten-lap race over a ten-mile course that mixed asphalt sections with dirt-covered mountain tracks on Catalina island, 22 miles off the Californian coast. ▶▶



■ Joe's 1951 switch to Harley factory rider came by accident, but ended up in glory



“In 1953, I led the thing for 90 miles until the last lap when I was getting tired,” explains Joe. “I took a little nose-dive down, only about half-a-mile from the finish of the race. I picked it up and finished third for Harley-Davidson.” The result was a big deal for Harley – an unlikely performance with the unwieldy V-twin on such a track, running against regulars like Bud Ekins on the Triumph. But then Joe always made his flathead KRrs work hard.

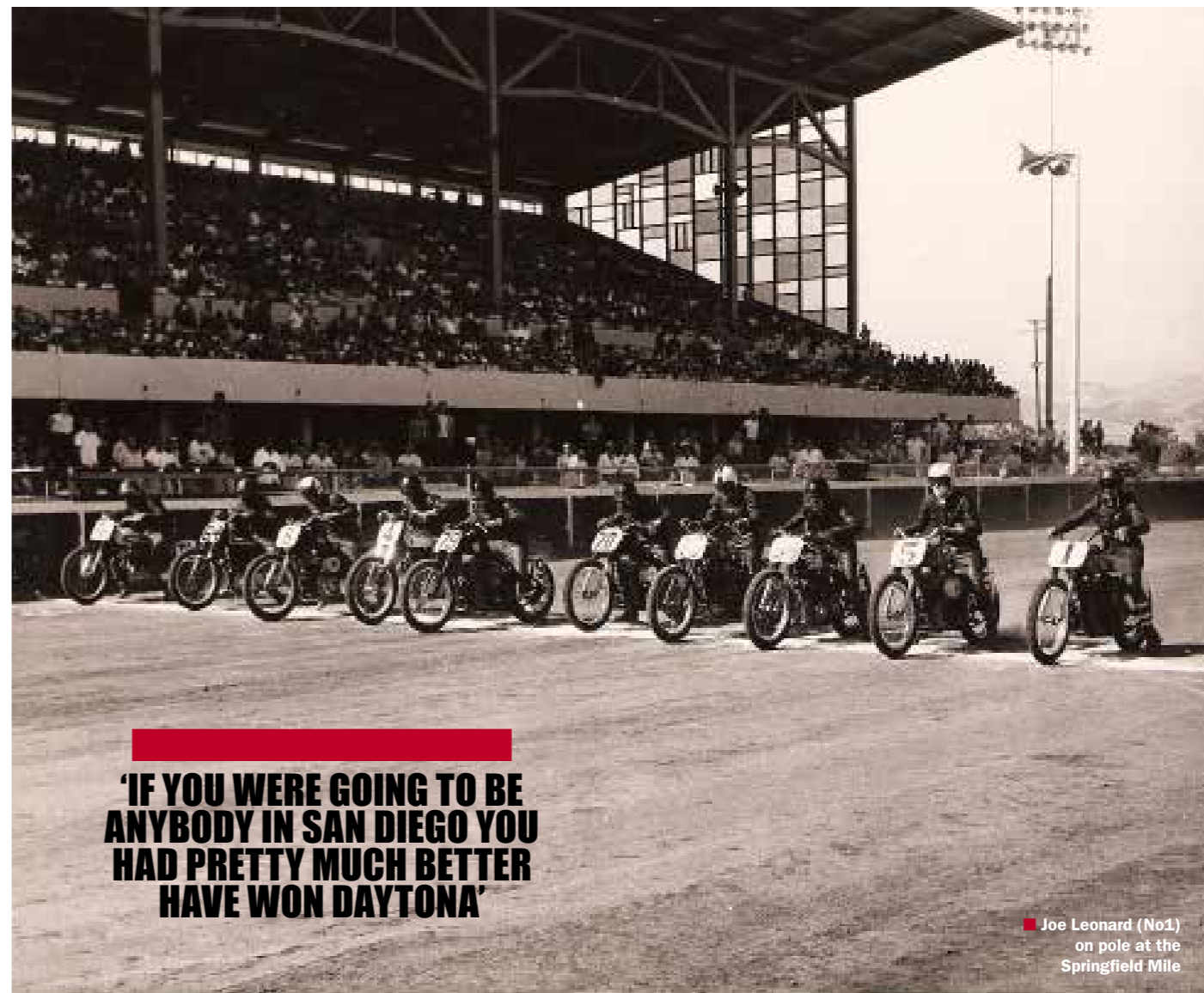
In the early days, the miles were long and the rewards were thin. Only Paul Goldsmith (winner of the 1953 Daytona 200) would get travel money from Harley-Davidson, which wasn't going down well with fellow Harley guys Everett Brashear and Leonard: “They were giving Goldie a credit card back in the '50s, and he was getting five cents a mile to get to the races. Brashear and I, they knew we'd be there whether we got anything or not. I started buying these old Nash Ambassadors (swoopy-styled saloon car), and they'd laugh at me. It cost me about 150 dollars, but it made into a bed. I'd get under it, put a straight pipe on it and it was like, 'here comes Leonard with his Number One Motorcycle!’

“The Harley people started getting upset and I said: ‘Listen, give me a panel truck and I'll turn it in at the end of the year'. There were Nationals at Daytona, Shreveport, New Hampshire, all over... there would be a Saturday race at Milwaukee, and then we'd have to be at DuQuoin, Illinois, the next day. And in every jerkwater town between, the only guy up would be a policeman. He would see the motorcycles and he'd follow you all the way through town. If you blinked your eye or did anything wrong, they'd kangaroo you for 20 bucks. Some of that was rough duty.”

Joe never got his panel truck. “With one [worn-out] Nash I just left it [at the Harley factory] and I told Walter Davidson: ‘call the junk man, he'll give you 25 or 30 bucks for it and you could send that to me'. He said: ‘God damnit Leonard, I had to pay 25 bucks



■ Joe was third choice to drive the Lotus Turbine car at Indy in 1968, but put it on pole and nearly won



**‘IF YOU WERE GOING TO BE ANYBODY IN SAN DIEGO YOU HAD PRETTY MUCH BETTER HAVE WON DAYTONA’**

■ Joe Leonard (No1) on pole at the Springfield Mile



■ Leonard (left) during the '70s with Harley works rider Bart Merkel (right) and Dick Mann (in BSA T-shirt)

to get it towed out of here.’ So, here I show up again in another big Ambassador. I'd crawled under there and cut the pipe off and put in a little flex extension pipe on it. It sounded like a big 'ol truck – it would go ‘vroom baa, baa, baa’. So I'd drive down 37th and Juneau (where the Harley factory was) on a Sunday right by William Davidson's office in second gear winding it wide open!”

In 1955 it was Brashear versus Brad Andres (another San Diegan), although Leonard won the Peoria TT, Milwaukee half-mile, and the Windber road race to finish third on points. He bounced back in 1956 and '57 with back-to-back championship titles – and won the Daytona 200 beach race twice, in 1957 and '58.

Leonard's larger-than-average physical size was a handicap on the fast oval tracks, especially when faced with Pedrosa-sized racers like The Flying Flea (Sammy Tanner), or ‘Mooch’ Carroll Resweber. While Resweber claimed four AMA National championships in a row from 1958-61, Joe remained his greatest challenger, finishing runner-up in 1958, '60 and '61.

In that final season racing bikes (1961), Joe was to win three Nationals, at Laconia (a road race), the Sacramento Mile, and the Peoria TT (one of seven wins there). He retired after a glittering career that included 27 National race wins.

In that era, the top motorcycle talent often switched to cars – it was the natural order of things. As with Nuvolari, Varzi, Ascari, Rosemeyer, and so many others in Europe the goal was GP racing.

In America there was similarly one primary goal – the Indianapolis 500. Fellow Harley racer Goldsmith had also switched, finishing third in the 1960 500, before being the first to put a 426 Hemi on the pole for the Daytona 500. “My grandpa would take me to the midget races at Balboa Stadium (in San Diego), and I'd see Bill Vukovich, Rodger Ward, Bobby Grim, and Johnny Parsons, the guys that ended up at Indy,” he says.

Leonard's racing career switched to running so-called Modifieds in the dirt ovals on some of the tracks he had run on

with motorcycles: “When I switched to stock cars, I was rookie of the year driving a Dodge for the Chrysler motor company – with a car that was producing 420hp on the dirt. We'd run Langhorne, Pennsylvania and at DuQuoin – two of the mile dirt tracks also used by the bikes. I was leading Springfield and ran out of gas with a lap and a half to go; they knew there was a new guy coming down the pike. The next week we went to DuQuoin and I won.

“AJ Foyt was my team-mate and he said: ‘Hey Joe, you run pretty good, why don't you come and drive a real race car... come on down to Indy and I'll get you a ride.’”

Racing at Indianapolis was a lethal proposition. Watching the 1964 race with famed NSACAR driver Bobby Isaacs, Joe saw exactly how bad it could be: “We stopped in Greenville, North Carolina, and they had that closed circuit coverage of the 500. We saw that hellacious wreck, Holy Christ. I said: ‘Bobby, I don't think that guy got out’. It was Eddie Sachs [who died in the accident]... I didn't know about Dave MacDonald, the flames were so high.” MacDonald also died.

“Dan Gurney was forming a team, and used to come and watch me race motorcycles at DeAnza Park out in Riverside with his buddies. Dan always liked motorcycles, he built the Alligator (a feet-forward motorcycle that Gurney had hopes of putting into production at one stage) and is another true champion who did much of his racing out of the country.”

Gurney won the 1967 Belgian GP driving an Eagle Weslake he designed and built – but also constructed cars for racing in the United States Auto Club (USAC) American National Championship, that included the famed Indianapolis 500 race.

Joe drove for Gurney's All American Racers for the 1965-66 seasons in the series, winning the 1965 Milwaukee 150. For 1967 he was teamed with AJ Foyt, finishing third in the Indy 500.

In 1968, Leonard was to drive the most famous race car of the 1960s, the Lotus Indy turbine car, backed by larger-than-life ▶▶





■ Legend though he is, even Leonard would have struggled on a Harley road bike against a lithe Triumph twin racer

team owner Andy Granatelli of STP. The innovative car was originally built for Jim Clark, but the Scot was killed in an F2 race at Hockenheim before the Indy trials started.

Clark's replacement (after Jackie Stewart injured his wrist in the Matra) was Mike Spence, BRM's number one Formula One driver, but he died after crashing into the turn one wall at Indianapolis during practice.

Perhaps the most difficult time in Colin Chapman's life at Team Lotus had opened the door for Joe Leonard. He didn't let him down, putting the car on pole – establishing a new track record at 171.559mph (averaged out of the four-lap qualifying run).

The Pratt & Whitney turbine car was a major challenge to drive as the brakes would fade away to almost nothing, due to the lack of engine braking. "With the turbine you had to anticipate," says Leonard. "I almost ran into the back of a couple of guys whose cars weren't handling real good. You had to make decisions really quick. If they didn't move, I'd have to get off the throttle and then after I hit the throttle again it would be one... two... three... before the turbine would start picking up again – the throttle lag was that noticeable."

Mert Lawwill, star of *On Any Sunday* and the 1969 Grand National Champion riding for Harley-Davidson, remains an admirer of how Leonard adapted: "Among other things, I always did admire Joe for his ability to drive the silent turbine car. Every racer uses sound as a major factor in racing and to have no sound to rely on must have been very difficult."

The turbine car's fuel pump had failed due to the team switching to a different fuel for race day. As it coasted to a stop, Joe's best chance of winning at Indianapolis evaporated...

Yet Joe still holds the lap record for bikes on the Daytona Beach course of 99.9mph, an incredible feat seeing how Joe 'Fireball' Roberts was the car record holder at only 101mph in Smokey Yunick's Pontiac convertible.

"When I drove Smokey's Eagle at Indianapolis in '69, something came up about that and he said: 'Hey Joe, hell, I knew you was a good racer because I remember you ran that little chicken shit bike... you had what, about 40 horsepower? And you run within about a mile per hour of Fireball in that Pontiac with 400-plus horsepower?' Smokey Yunick's shop was called 'The Best Damn

**'IT'S AMAZING THE THINGS THESE KIDS DO NOW. PASTRANA'S DOUBLE BACKFLIPS, HOLY TOLEDO!'**



■ Flat out in typical flat-track style in '61, Leonard's final season on bikes



■ Joe's title-winning VPI car from 1973



■ Leonard (left) in Ascot winners' circle (former Ascot promoter JC Agajanian in cowboy hat)

Garage in Town', in Daytona Beach, Florida, and his car won the Indy 500 in 1960 with Jim Rathmann. I wish I'd have driven for him more than just a few races."

Joe Leonard won the USAC National title back to back in 1971 and '72 – one year his Vel's Parnelli Jones team-mates were Mario Andretti and Al Unser, regarded as two of the best racers in the history of American auto racing. And thanks to his speed and consistency, Joe trounced the opposition. In '71 he amassed 3015 points, almost 700 points more than second-placed AJ Foyt. In 1972 he won it by 1260 points from Billy Vukovich Jr.

Ironically, it was a huge crash in 1974 in a Gurney-built Eagle at Ontario (an Indianapolis-style 2.5-mile banked oval track where he had won in 1971) that ended Joe Leonard's 20-year racing career. A front tyre blew, sending him to the wall at high speed. He suffered extensive damaged to his legs and feet.

These days, Leonard (84) takes an interest in motorcycle sport and is impressed with the abilities of the new generation of racers: "You know what's amazing? The things these kids do on motorcycles now. It gets me out of my chair! Pastrana doing double backflips, Holy Toledo! You've got to give them credit. Those guys are so talented and if they decided to run the Mile..."

Joe has remained in San Jose, California, through his retirement, suffering a disabling stroke a few years ago. He, along with Everett Brashear, Billy Tuman, Dick Mann, Paul Goldsmith and Dick Klamfoth are living legends from that era of beach course racing in Daytona – but Joe remains the only American to be a champion on two wheels and then an Indycar legend. ©