

A Half Century of Yamaha Motorcycle racing

Moto Column

1990-99 RR World Grand Prix

From the All Japan Championships to the World GP

The 1990s see the blossoming of great talents



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In the 1980s, Japan's motorcycle industry was swept by a boom in what came to be called "racer replicas." This trend had been sparked by the popularity of Japan's big races like the Suzuka 8 hours Endurance Road Race, Suzuka 4 hours and the TT Formula race series, and also the opportunity races like the Suzuka 8 hours and TBC Big Road Race gave Japanese race fans to see the performances of the world's top GP riders, such as Kenny Roberts, Eddie

Lawson, Freddie Spencer and Wayne Gardner.

World-class performances by Japanese riders were another factor. In 1986, Tadahiko Taira entered the full World GP250 series and won a round at the San Marino GP. Then in 1987 a round of the World GP was held in Japan for the first time in 20 years (first time ever for the GP500 class). In it, Masaru Kobayashi (Honda) won the GP250 class race and in the GP500 class Takumi Ito finished 3rd. These performances brought new motivation to the Japanese race scene to achieve world-level competitiveness.

With this lead-up, the 1990s saw All Japan Road Race Championship soar to new heights of popularity, delighting its avid fans with hot racing and producing a slate of top riders who were now ready to compete at the world level.



Riding the agile-handling TZ250M with outstanding skill and with a coolness in race strategy that belied his young age, Tetsuya Harada surprised and delighted fans in Europe as well as Japan



Competing full-time in the 1999 World GP250, Shinya Nakano (right) led from the start at the season opener in Malaysia. In the closing stages he was passed by Capriossi and Ukawa but finished 3rd by a mere 0.7 sec. and mounted the podium

Among the Yamaha riders of this new generation was Tetsuya Harada, who began competing full-time in the World GP250 class from 1993 at the age of 23. In the opening round of that season, the Australian GP, Harada went out and rode to victory, handling his agile TZ250M with consummate skill against a roster of top riders including John Kocinski, who had moved to Suzuki, the Honda riders Max Biaggi, Loris Capirossi and Dorian Romboni and the Aprilia riders Loris Reggiani and Jean-Philippe Ruggia. He went on to win three more rounds that season at the Japan GP, the Spain GP and the FIM GP to become the second Japanese World GP champion in history, after Takazumi Katayama (1977/350cc class). After that, the 1998 and 1999 All

Japan Road Race 250cc class championship winning Yamaha riders Shinya Nakano and Naoki Matsudo also went onto compete with great success in the World GP along with Honda riders Tohru Ukawa and Daijiro Kato.

Yamaha also returned to GP125 class competition in 1994 with the release of the production racer TZ125. That year, Yamaha provided the team of Jorge Martínez with a factory spec TZ125 and sent the 1993 All Japan Championship 125cc class champion Yoshiaki Kato to race as well on a development prototype machine. From 1996, Yoichi Ui also competed from a German team. For three seasons he competed in the World GP on the TZ125 (moving after that to Derbi).



With his lean body, shoulder-length hair and signature floppy jeans, Norifumi (Norick) Abe was distinctive for his fashion sense as well as his aggressive, full-throttle riding style. These traits made him a standout on the GP paddock



Probably the most sensational World GP performances of all, however, came from Norifumi (Norick) Abe. When his talent caught the eyes of both Wayne Rainey and Kenny Roberts, Abe was signed to the Yamaha Factory Team in 1994 at the young age of 19. From the following season he competed full-time in the GP500 class, and in 1996 he took his first GP win at the Japan GP. Norick continued

to ride the YZR500 until the GP500 was reorganized as the MotoGP and the 2-stroke machines were used for the last time in the 2002 season. During that time he won a total of three GPs. In 2007, Abe died in an unforeseen traffic accident. He is much missed in the racing world and his racing prowess has become legend among many fans.

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A diamond in the rough catches the eyes of Rainey and Roberts

