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WORDS: Aaron Frank PHOTO: FoTfinder

# INDIAN ON THE ISLAND

## The first American motorcycle to win the Isle of Man TT

**B**efore the ink dried on the first issue of *Pacific Motocycling* in 1912, the Isle of Man TT was already the world's most prestigious motorcycle race. The inaugural Tourist Trophy was held in 1907. The event originally welcomed cars and motorcycles, but for the first four years bikes competed on an abbreviated circuit because they weren't able to climb Snaefell Mountain. Motorcycles didn't race the full, 37.5-mile Mountain Course until 1911, when event organizers, in an attempt to force motorcycle manufacturers to develop new technology, mandated that all race entrants must tackle the mountain.

Indians, built by the Hendee Manufacturing Company in Springfield, Massachusetts, were

the most technologically advanced motorcycles of the day. At a time when most bikes still used direct-drive leather belts, with variable pulleys or planetary-gear hubs if they were really fancy, Indian's two-speed transmission and chain final drive were cutting-edge—and a huge advantage for racing.

Racing was an important element of the company's early history. Indian was the first American factory to field a racing team, predating Harley-Davidson's famous "Wrecking Crew" by at least five years. It was also the first U.S. brand to compete internationally, visiting the Isle of Man first in 1909. Indian rider Lee Evans finished second that year, but the 1910 TT was a mess of crashes and mechanical mishaps, and Jake Alexander's 14<sup>th</sup> place



The displacement limit for twin-cylinder bikes competing in the 1911 Senior TT was 580cc. Indian had to sleeve down its 750cc "Little Twin" to qualify for the event.

was the brand's best result.

To increase the odds of success, Indian boss Oscar Hedstrom entered five bikes in the 1911 TT—the first time motorcycles raced over Snaefell Mountain. Canadian/American superstar Jake de Rosier—the world's first professional motorcycle racer—was the favorite, followed by fellow Indian factory riders Arthur Moorhouse and Charles Franklin. Indian also supported two privateers: Alexander and a little-known British rider named Oliver Cyril Godfrey (sporting number 112, above and left).

"O.C." was a 23-year-old machinist from London who had competed in the TT every year since it began. Indian press materials described him as "small in size, but a bunch of

muscles and nerves and a magnificent rider." It wasn't muscle or nerve, but local knowledge that benefitted Godfrey that day. A board-track background did little good for de Rosier, who crashed repeatedly on a race circuit that was little more than a horse path in places. Alexander also crashed out, but Godfrey rode smooth and steady to win the five-lap, 189-mile Senior TT race in 3 hours, 56 minutes and 10 seconds, setting a new average speed record of 47.63 mph. After initial second-place finisher Charles Collier of Matchless was disqualified for illegal refueling, Franklin and Moorhouse advanced to second and third. It was a top-three sweep for Indian, the first foreign manufacturer to win the TT.

Indian never won the TT again. Godfrey

returned three more times, finishing second in 1914. Later that year, with World War I fermenting, Godfrey enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps. There he was assigned to the 27<sup>th</sup> Squadron RFC bombing division, and trained to fly the cumbersome Martinsyde G100 "Elephants." He was killed on September 23, 1916, when Germany's infamous Jagdstaffel 2—which included Manfred "The Red Baron" von Richthofen—shot down his plane during the Battle of the Somme, in the skies above Cambrai, France.

An American motorcycle didn't win again on the Island until 99 years later, when Californian Mark Miller rode the MotoCzysz E1pc to victory in the 2010 TT Zero race for electric bikes. **MC**