



JOHN SURTEES OBE

John Surtees was born in Tatsfield, Surrey in February 1934. The eldest of three children, he and his brother Norman and sister Dorothy lived with their parents John senior (known as Jack) and mother Dorothy (also a keen motorcyclist) in Shirley, near Croydon. This gave easy access to Jack's motorcycle shop in Tamworth Road, West Croydon.

Close to their new home was Monks Orchard primary school, which John attended before progressing to Ashburton Senior School in Long Lane, Addiscombe. John was a talented and keen competitor in whichever sport he was participating. He was captain of the Ashburton school football team, a competent cross-country runner and no easy pushover in the boxing ring.

With his father in the motorcycle business there was obviously no shortage of encouragement for John to pursue a career connected in some way with the industry. John's first ride on a motorcycle was in 1947, aged 13. This was a Wallace-Blackburne speedway bike which he rode on a cinder footpath on the outside of the Brands Hatch circuit and, according to his father Jack, he went round and round until he ran out of petrol.

His parents were both involved in motorcycle sport throughout the year. During the winter months his mother would be the passenger in Jack's trials outfit, while in the summer Jack would be at grass track or road race meetings with a variety of 'ballast' in the sidecar, including son John.

John's first solo meeting was in 1949; a grass-track meeting at Eaton Bray in Bedfordshire. He wore a pair of his father Jack's leathers, which were enormous on the fifteen-year old. The bike too was big and heavy – a B14 Excelsior JAP which was from his father's shop, now in Forest Hill. It proved to be difficult for the young novice to handle and he fell off on more than one occasion, but did have the satisfaction of finishing his first race.

John's road racing debut was at Brands Hatch on Easter Sunday in 1950, with a Triumph Tiger 70. He came third in the heat but in the final fell off whilst in second place on the last lap.

His apprenticeship at the Vincent motorcycle factory in Stevenage began on his seventeenth birthday in 1951, but he had already acquired a Vincent Grey Flash which his father had bought from the company the previous year. The first road race victory

was gained on this completely re-built machine which, prior to the Surtees purchase was little more than a 'box of bits'. This win came on Sunday June 3rd 1951 at Brands Hatch with John winning all three races in which he entered. The second race resulted in him beating his old rival Harry Pearce who had so narrowly beaten John on his debut race the year before.

And so at the end of 1951 John had entered sixteen races, won five, come second in five and third place in two.

With the 1952 season in full swing, it became clear that the Grey Flash was having an increasingly hard time against the newer Featherbed Manx Nortons and John decided to purchase one himself. Norton would only sell him one of their machines on the condition that he would enter a World Championship event and this he did in the 500cc Ulster Grand Prix of 1952, finishing sixth and in effect gaining his first ever World Championship points. By the start of the 1953 season he had begun to attract interest from several works teams, including Norton themselves

The next three years to 1955 saw John Surtees ride not only his own Norton but machines ranging from a works 7R AJS, an REG built by Bob Geeson in his workshop in Coombe Road, South Croydon and a 250cc NSU. 1955 was the year Joe Craig, the Norton team manager and development engineer asked John to become a member of their works team.

During the years 1953 – 1955 John entered 192 races; he won 147; came second place in 13 and third place in 7.

In the September of 1955 while John and his father were at Monza, Italy, their friend Bill Webster arranged a meeting with Count Domenico Agusta at the MV factory in Gallarate. John tested the range of machines on offer and decided subsequently to join the MV Agusta team for the 1956 season. His first race on an MV was at Crystal Palace in April 1956 where he won the 250cc race on a 203cc model. His second race was on the more familiar 500cc four-cylinder with which he was to win his first World Championship for 500cc in that year.

In 1956 on the 16 races entered John won 13 and came second in 1.

From 1957 through to the end of 1960 and the final race of John's motor cycle Grand Prix career, out of 101 races he finished first on no fewer than 70 occasions and second on 10 occasions. This resulted in a further six World Championships, three on 350cc and three on 500cc.

1959 was a memorable year with John not only winning two World Championships but also winning the Sportsman of the Year award from the Sports Writers Association, the Daily Express sponsored ballot, and perhaps most famously, the BBC Sportsview Personality of the Year.

After some persuasion from the car racing fraternity and the reluctance of Count Agusta to allow John to race anything but the MVs, he eventually turned his full attention to cars.

His first car, a Jowett Jupiter, was bought back in the days of his apprenticeship at Vincent and he progressed to a Porsche, Aston Martin and a BMW 507, which he still has to this day.

The debut race came at Goodwood in March 1960 in a Formula Junior race in a Ken Tyrrell Cooper-Austin in which he finished second behind Jim Clark in a works Lotus-Ford. Earlier in 1960 he had got himself a Formula 2 Cooper Climax and through his successes with these cars was offered a drive in a Formula 1 from the Lotus team boss, Colin Chapman.

The first Formula 1 World Championship drive was at Monaco in May 1960 in the Lotus, but he had to retire with transmission problems. Four subsequent starts in the Lotus resulted in one second place in the British Grand Prix at Silverstone in July 1960.

John drove for Cooper Climax for the 1961 season, finishing no higher than fifth out of eight starts. 1962 saw him team up with Lola Climax and this brought him two second places at the British and German Grand Prix, but that was out of a total of nine outings. An approach was made by Ferrari in that year but after initial reluctance he did eventually meet with Enzo Ferrari and found a similar sort of homely atmosphere encountered in his first meetings with Count Agusta.

After joining the Ferrari team, the 1963 season was under way with a fourth place at Monaco in May followed in July by his first Formula One victory in the German Grand Prix at the Nurburgring.

1964 began in fairly unspectacular fashion with a retirement at Monaco, but culminated five months later after ten races in John becoming Formula One World Champion. This was an achievement he had nurtured for some while – to add a motor racing world championship to the seven that had been won on two wheels.

Second place in the final race of the Formula One season in Mexico was enough to give John Surtees the distinction of the only man in history to win World Championship titles on both two and four wheels. A title which still holds to this day and seems unlikely ever to be broken.

For the 1967 World Championship he was now driving for the Honda team and it was in one of these cars that he gained his last win, the Italian Grand Prix at Monza in the September of that year.

He continued racing in several classes including Sports Cars Formula two, the Indianapolis of 1967 and Touring Cars. Leaving the Honda Team in 1969 he joined BRM but by the beginning of 1970 he was with the McLaren Team for just three races until turning out in his own Surtees Cosworth at the British Grand Prix at Brands Hatch in July. He remained driving variants of the Surtees Cosworth until his retirement from Formula One and motor racing at the US Grand Prix in October 1972.

John Surtees OBE lives at Haxted on the Surrey/Kent border between Lingfield and Edenbridge and now runs a property management company from offices in Edenbridge.

He is still very much involved in motorsport, especially with his son Henry who, following in his father's tyre tracks, races cars.¹ John is regularly invited to be a guest at historic motor racing events for both cars and bikes here and abroad. At these meetings he is often riding or driving one of his own fully restored machines which had featured strongly and played such a prominent part in his long career, although maybe these days driven at a more leisurely pace than they were a few years ago... or are they?

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Sources:
John Surtees
John Surtees World Champion autobiography
John Surtees Motorcycle Maestro by Mick Walker

¹ Henry Surtees, 18 year old son of John Surtees, died from injuries received during a Formula Two race at Brands Hatch on 19th July 2009.