

BY JEAN TURNER

## A LADY'S CLASS

The recent 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Women's Motocross celebration at Glen Helen brought together a number of former racers and champions – Sue Fish, Dee Wood, Tania Satchwell and even World Champion Steffi Laier came all the way from Germany. But what gathering of women racers (two wheels, or four) would be complete without the original pioneer, Mary McGee?

I had heard the name, but never met Mary McGee... until she



came striding toward me alongside event promoter Miki Keller that day at Glen Helen.

Fragile in appearance alone, Mary reached out and greeted me with a firm handshake. I could see the muscle definition in her forearm – the telltale sign

The author (right) poses with one of her motocross heroes, Mary McGee (left).

of a true motorcyclist. We began to chat as we both looked out at the freshly prepped and watered Glen Helen course that awaited dozens of lady racers on a hot



Sunday morning.

“When was the last time you rode?” I asked her.

“It’s been about two years,” Mary said. “I have an ankle injury right now.”

“So... you still ride?” I said with obvious surprise.

She turned and looked at me.

“I’m only 77,” she said matter-of-factly. (I’m still not sure if she was being facetious.) The conversation carried on, and it didn’t take long before the subject of her most famous career highlights came up, such as iron-manning the Baja 500 in 1975.

“Sometimes I look back and wonder, ‘what the f\$&% was I thinking?’ she said with a laugh.

Her words stuck with me, not only because Mary McGee dropped the F-bomb, but because it occurred to me... that’s exactly what you *should* be thinking at 77 years young. This is especially true when you consider the opposite. Few things could be more tragic than spending your twilight years thinking, “Coulda, shoulda, woulda...” Wondering about the challenges you never met, that trip you never took, or that race you never entered. Mary McGee doesn’t have to wonder. In fact, she still races today.

Mary races vintage motocross, and it must have been tough for her to be at a vintage motocross event dedicated to women’s racing, and not able to

participate. I teasingly suggested she borrow my gear and throw a leg over my new RM-Z250. It was then Mary confessed she has never ridden a modern bike. “I wouldn’t know what to do with all that suspension travel,” she said.

It occurred to me that someone of her experience would probably feel obligated to use it all – simply because it’s there. As someone who once tuned my suspension told me, “If you’re not bottoming out, you’re not using all your suspension.” Anything not used is wasted – it’s the same rule I applied to money in my 20s, and nearly as reckless in hindsight. That line of thinking probably makes sense when you’re dealing with three inches of travel, but with nearly a foot on modern bikes – I’m pretty sure there’s no shame in leaving a little leftover. That’s my story anyway.

Perhaps if I had used more travel, I wouldn’t have been edged out on the last lap of my moto. If Mary was thinking it, at least she didn’t say it when she told me I did a good job in my race. This is, after all, the one who always says, “It doesn’t matter how fast you go; just get out and do it!”

Following the racing at Glen Helen, a reception and award ceremony took place, revisiting the careers and championships of the honored guests. And though McGee was obviously an esteemed guest of the event, she

didn’t have any championships to boast of like the rest of the girls. Why is that? What did the rest of these ladies have that Mary McGee did not? The answer: Competition. There simply weren’t any other ladies out there to race with. If there were, there certainly weren’t enough to form a class – let alone a series. McGee was a unicorn of her time. But not having a level playing field never stopped her from getting on the starting line, whether it was desert racing, road racing or cars. She even recalled some friendly taunting from her old buddy, Steve McQueen, who originally told her to “get off that road bike and get out to the desert.”

McGee’s pioneering efforts point out a valuable truth – one that every girl who ever raced can hang her helmet on – without a full class, there is no championship. That doesn’t only apply to the pros. We all start at the beginning, and the bigger the field, the deeper the competition. More competition means more prestige in the championship. So no matter what class you raced in, how much travel you used or where you finished, if you have ever signed up for the women’s class at a motocross race, you can give yourself a pat on the back. Our playing field is small, but you helped make it just a little bit bigger, and played a part in elevating women’s motocross to where it is today.