

J.N.

Out on the empty floor of the Mojave, at one of the desert gas dumps, crew members wait to receive their riders in the Barstow-to-Vegas. This particular dump is 100 miles from the race's start, at the edge of an expanse of barren mountains. And at last the leader -- a speck of fast-moving dust, followed by a famous bark of Husqvarna exhaust -- comes flying off and down the mountain.

"It's J.N.!" J.N. Roberts.

A diminutive figure wearing protective knee and shoulder pads, and a helmet with a football mask, Roberts abandons his Husqvarna to its pit crew almost before he stops. And while swarming men service and refuel it, he sits on the tailgate of a truck, taking sips of water. Although he has just raced across 100 miles of rolling sand washes, rock canyons, and dry lake beds, Roberts doesn't appear tired. And, he is in no hurry whatsoever.

His Husqvarna is refurbished, his gang of mechanics is hollering for him to rejoin the race, but Roberts still sits there. Minutes elapse.

The situation is exasperating. Is he ever going to leave?

Finally, one of us watching can stand it no longer

. "For God sakes, J.N., you're leading the race! Get going!"

Roberts looks up at the person admonishing him. He smiles, then points off in the direction of the mountains.

"When I see dust," he says, "I'll go."

Astonishingly, there is no dust. He has been loitering here for at least five minutes and still not a single rider in the race is close to him. And this in spite of the fact that the Barstow-to-Vegas is the biggest desert marathon of all -- dense with upwards of 3100 motorcycles. How can one man be so much better than so many?

Then Roberts looks again toward the mountain. Now there is dust -- second and third place motorcycles at last arriving.

He pulls on his helmet. He fires the Husqvarna and jumps aboard. He nods at his crew, as if saying, thanks, and see you in 80 miles at the finish line in Las Vegas (he has already won it three times, and will win again this year). And then he opens up to peak revs and is away, dreaming of cavalry charges and with a hymn to heroin echoing in his head.

Roberts, who 20 years ago was the icon of desert-derring-do, was the last and fastest of the great long-distance Mojave racers that the south of California used to routinely produce until the whole Mojave adventure collapsed. Though he won 23 consecutive races, still believed to be a record, and the name J.N. Roberts continued resonating longer than anybody else's. Even on September 13, 1972, when police arrived in the middle of the night and clubbed him senseless, and nearly dead, newspaper write-ups were calling Roberts "the King of the Desert."

For somebody born in a place where the closest desert was half a continent away, that was quite a title. Rural Indiana, Roberts' home, was where he pursued quirky athletic interests: he was a graceful and natural speed skater on ice, as well as a master with a bow-and-arrow. And these disparate abilities later fused into an uncanny aptitude for racing a motorcycle to beat hell across the open desert.

Roberts departed Indiana forever while in his teens. Courtesy of the Marine Corps he was sent to Okinawa, where, as he once recalled it, "They marched my ass off: 'Hup, one, two, three, four!' After that, I said to myself, 'No more walking, ever. I'm getting a motorcycle.'"

It wasn't that simple. Upon getting back into the country again, Roberts settled in Los Angeles, where his priority not only was to avoid walking, but to avoid starving; he peddled vacuum cleaners and the products of Fuller Brush door to door and was dreadful at both endeavors. The film studios of Hollywood saved his life. He got a job at Universal as a pseudo carpenter, hammering together film sets.

This was the '60s, and Mojave racing was in its glory. At his first hare 'n' hound race, Roberts experienced an epiphany. Watching the line of dirt bikes and riders, almost a quarter of a mile long, kick-start their silent engines and burst hell-bent over the trackless horizon, made him think of a cavalry charge; and he always remembered it that way. "When I was racing, I always felt like I was part of the cavalry. And I was being chased by hostile Indians. And that they'd get me if I ever stopped."

Roberts acquired his first motor, a ponderous Scrambler model Honda, then got in with some new friends who were also plugged into the Mojave mystique. It was a tightly-knit and accessible gang: just throw your motor into the bed of a pick-up and tool out to Red Rock, Phelan, Little Rock, or even Sand Canyon, just 20 minutes from Universal Studios.

Recalling his very first meeting there with Roberts, Bob Harris, stuntman, race driver and Mojave zealot, said, "Sand Canyon was a great gathering place for desert people, and one day J.N. was out there working on a Honda he had spread all over the ground on an army blanket. We went riding together, and afterward he said he hoped he'd get better at it, and someday he'd have a better bike. I told him that the way he was riding already, when he got something better, it would be curtains for the rest of us. 'Ah," he said, 'You really think so?' Not long afterward he got that Husky, and it was lights out."

"That Husky," soon to be a legend, was an outwardly innocuous Husqvarna. Although similar motocross importers had already been tried in the Mojave, it still is the bailiwick of the bulbous and heavy-gauge 40-inch Triumph and BSA and Matchless desert sleds. But despite all their horsepower and vast bulk, the time-honored and beloved desert sleds had little chance against Roberts' sophisticated little Husky which was agile, nimble, and weighed an abstemious 245 pounds. Roberts, furthermore, represented the first of a totally new type of desert racer with a completely fresh racing style -- looser, cooler, certainly hipper.

Roberts was utterly unique. He'd been among the first to wear football-type protective gear, and, with the Honda, had needed them. Now he fashioned a minimalist technique. The high-speed desert sledders tried flattening the Mojave; Roberts conversely, appeared to be dancing away from the very ground he was trampling. And he never sat down; for 100 blazing miles, he'd be standing upright on the foot pegs. And he always had the throttle turned wide-open or else backed completely off. Same with brakes; they were either locked up or not getting used at all.

His riding thrilled his growing clan of compatriots, and one of them, Hal Needham, explained how Roberts made the life of anybody trying to follow him a torment: "If you try and keep up with J.N. in a sand wash you'll bust your ass because you'll be crashing trying to follow the wash while J.N. is following things only his eyes can see."

Himself in the movies, Needham eventually became a director/mogul. Upon discovering that Roberts was a common carpenter at Universal, Needham decided he should become a stuntman and immediately got Roberts a job on the film Little Big Man. And Roberts, already familiar with cavalry charges, got to ride horses instead of motorcycles while dressed and painted up like the Sioux and Cheyenne who brought down General Custer. Over time, Roberts moved from a stunter specializing in horses to one equally adept at violent car chases and smashes.

Needham also inducted Roberts into the Viewfinders, and extremely exclusive club of fellow stunters and Hollywood luminaries who found Mojave racing irresistible. Other members included Pernell Roberts from Bonanza, Needham and Harris themselves, and most conspicuously Steve McQueen, who learned the art of desert sport from his own brilliant mentor, Bud Ekins, and spectacularly presented an Oscar at the 1964 Academy Awards with his arm still in plaster from a desert misadventure.

Racing, Roberts always had a starkly lonely time of it. Whether a race lasted one hour or several, he tended to speed so far into the lead that he might never see another motorcycle. So, there he'd be, all by himself flying between boulders, dancing across cactus-topped valleys, making heart-stopping leapfrogs over rock canyons. What, if anything, was he thinking about while doing so?

"There's this song I like called Horse With No Name," he once explained. "I think it's about dope, but I do like the words of that song. That's what I hear when I'm racing."

Roberts was a total recluse. Even among the Viewfinders, he had few close friends. He lived off on the northern rim of Los Angeles, out in an earthquake-ravaged community where he could stable his stunt horses. The day of his beating was a quiet one. Police encircled his house, and as the moon rose they moved in, touching off the chaotic chain of smashing and hitting later reported this way:

Jail Stunt Man Injured in Scuffle

Motion picture stuntman and motorcycle racer James Nelson Roberts, 31, was in serious condition today in Los Angeles County - USC Medical Center jail ward following a scuffle with two police officers, in which he suffered a fractured skull and broken collarbone, police said.

Officers James R. Haupp and Gary Payne responded to a family disturbance call at Roberts' home at 13459 Glad-

stone St., Sylmar, last night and say Roberts, known as "King of the Desert," fled on his motorcycle, carrying his young son on the back. After a brief chase, the officers stopped Roberts in front of his home. During the ensuing scuffle, Payne and Haupp suffered bruises and stomach injuries. They were treated at Pacoima Lutheran hospital.

Almost a year passed. And then, amid rumors that he was crippled and disfigured -- he was neither -- J.N. Roberts kissed off Los Angeles and desert racing completely by moving to an edge of California's High Sierra where he found truly overwhelming seclusion -- life in a small cabin on top of a 6000 foot mountain at the end of a narrow and switch backing road.

He continues living there today. Apparently fully satisfied with the companionship of a dog and two cats, he hardly ever leaves, except to fly to a stunt job in Toronto, Miami, Chicago, wherever.

He refuses to discuss details about what brought on his beating. And he dislikes reminiscing about racing.

His timing, always good, didn't fail Roberts. Even before he left it, Mojave desert racing as he knew it was vanishing into history. Three decades ago the Mojave was still wide open desert -- a treacherous and dangerous world. As such, it was a legitimate challenge to a brave and fragile man on the back of a speeding motorcycle -- a brave man like, for example, Roberts, who had to wear a helmet and football pads for protection.

Modern sensibilities -- and legislation -- changed everything. So in the '90s it is the Mojave itself which is judged fragile and in need of protection from man and his motorcycles.

But for the moment, out there in total vast rolling wilderness, scene of many a forgotten pass and duel, on occasion you can still hear and see the exhaust of a ghostly little Husqvarna and the enigmatic individual who raced like the Indians were after him. (1993)