

MATS NILSSON

TT DREAMS

Interview: PAUL LINDSAY

MATS Nilsson is a man who exudes supreme confidence. The strength of his personality not only lit up our meeting, but his common grasp of the English language, and the use of taboo words normally reserved for 'colourful conversations' after the watershed, also turned a few heads in the yuppie Hollywood pub I suggested for the interview. Needless to say, we've had to include a few asterisks in the body of the feature, but I think you'll understand where he's coming from!

The 32-year-old from Gothenburg in Sweden has become one of road racing's brightest new stars, but the self-confessed adrenalin junkie also loves his cars, bringing his 500hp AMG Mercedes Black Series to this year's TT. So if you were on the Mountain during TT week and thought you heard faint screams coming from a flying Mercedes – you were correct. Mats' friend Lars and Ivan Morrell [Ryan Farquhar's mechanic] were clinging on for dear life as Mats recorded 185mph along the Mountain Mile on four wheels!

"I normally don't drive fast when I have people in the car but I knew where I was going. I could have went faster, but I don't think the boys liked doing 185mph over the Mountain in my car. Lars was really screaming – it was pretty funny!"

Coming from a country where football and ice hockey dominate the sports pages, Mats opted for two wheels, inspired by his father who rode a Husqvarna Silver Bullet back in the day. ▶



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“I started riding motocross bikes from the time I was 6, but you’re not allowed to race until you are 12 years old in Sweden. I wasn’t that good until I was about 15 when I’d grown up and matured a little bit. Well, grown up... I still haven’t matured!

My father used to drive his bike very fast. He didn’t race but he got me into bikes at an early age. He could never afford it back in those days but he was one of the motivators for me.”

On two wheels, Sweden is better known for its Speedway ‘factory’, producing such names as Tony Rickardsson, 6 times world champion, from its elite league. Road racing, and more so, pure road racing, is virtually unheard of in Sweden, so I asked Mats where his enthusiasm and inspiration came from?

“Road racing [circuit] in Sweden is a small sport and they’ve recently hooked up the superbike series with the car racing. Now they do have 15,000 people on the grandstands and they are getting TV coverage but they only have 19 bikes on the grid [more than MotoGP – Ed!]. The top guy, Jima Lindstrom, is no slouch.

On Tony Rickardsson: I think he changed the face of the sport worldwide, not just in Sweden. He was such a character but in Sweden he took the sport three levels up when he won all those world titles. He’s now racing in the Porsche Carrera Cup and that is picking up also. He’s a good sales person so to speak.

My road racing and TT interest came when I saw a piece on David Jefferies from 2002 when he won on the TAS bike on Swedish TV Sport News. They did a feature about his superbike and how much is cost to build and how fast his superstock machine was. He is my idol, and when I saw that I thought, ‘f***** hell, if you’re riding a bike and you want to win then you’ve got to do that!’”

Not one to shrug off a challenge – although some of his friends thought he was mad – Mats took his friend Lars’ brand new ZX6R to a track day to get his licence. Lars had just arrived in Belfast for the Ulster Grand Prix and told me: “He brought it back with the fairings scraped and the exhaust... it was all grinded down!” Mats interjected: “Yes, but the guy that took me round had been racing for a couple of years; after a couple of hours I just blasted by him and though, ‘he’s f***** slow!

I then took my standard R1 out to Anderstorp, as my friend who is a regular top 10 rider was having a sponsors’ day. He said, ‘Mats, come along and bring your road bike and

do some laps’. So I went there, but after a while he called me over and said, ‘Mats, it doesn’t look good for my sponsors when you are going faster than me!’ I didn’t care if my bike was upside down, inside out... I just pulled the throttle, so I went and got myself the licence – that was 2003.”

After watching DJ in action, Mats decided that it was the TT or nothing for him, but what he did need was more time on a bike, as he was basically a novice. A trip to France was organised with a friend, who was then the Swedish Superstock champion, but yet again Mats found himself going faster than his tutor.

“I’d bought a standard R6 racing bike and took it to France. At the time my friend had just done a deal with Suzuki, but I was one second a lap faster than him in France and before the end of the week I was two seconds quicker. That was in 2004.

I then planned to race at the TT in 2005 but I’d just too much work on as I’d just started my company. Joachim [Karlsson] died there in 2005 and I couldn’t go to the TT in 2006, but I found out there was another race in August. I’d never even heard of the Manx Grand Prix.

Lars was one of the people who didn’t think I’d go. I had some other people who said they’d help me out but when it came time to book the tickets, they were walking their dogs, mowing the lawn or going on holiday! So I thought, screw you; I just loaded up my Mercedes van with my standard R6 and a small tent and away I went. I took the ferry over and thought, if I don’t like it I’ll just come home.”

There’s an unwritten rule among competitors, common sense I suppose, to go and learn the TT circuit well in advance, but Mats didn’t even know where it was on the Island, never mind which direction they raced, as he described to me in his own inimitable and demonstrative style.

“I’ll never forget when I arrived. I stopped at St Ninian’s crossroads and asked this old woman, ‘Where is this famous TT circuit?’ She told me I was standing on it! I just thought, this is f***** brilliant. I made my way up to the paddock and the first guy I met was Woody [Chris Bradshaw] who is now one of my best mates. He races the Manx as well. When I arrived and parked up he said, ‘where’s your team?’ I told him it was just me. ‘When are the other guys coming?’ They’re not... it’s just me! ‘Who’ll do your pit stops?’ ‘Do we do pit stops?’ I said. He went back into his friends and said, ‘there’s some f***** lunatic out there from Sweden!’

Then I had this local guy, Kevin ‘Ago’ Murphy, who was some character. He took me out and showed me round for the first time. When he showed me the braking points and the way he talked, I thought, f***, you should be doing 140mph laps at this rate!

Without him I honestly couldn’t have done it, and even though people came up and told me to steer clear of him, I said, ‘If you’ve got a problem with Kevin, tell him, not me. I can handle him.’

I just told him to cut the shit, but he was just excited about the TT circuit. He took my comments really well and I find him really helpful.”

Mats’ first lap was supposed to be uneventful in a controlled environment behind the travelling marshal, but apparently someone else hadn’t quite prepared correctly [by this stage Mats had been doing laps in his van to learn the place] which gave the platinum blonde Swede a bit of a fright.

“For my first lap I was pretty relaxed but it was probably the closest I came to crashing as I had a local Irish guy with me going out to Cronk Y Voddy [I’m not telling his name] and he decided to pull the brakes. We were told not to pass people unless they are really, really slow but that was a close one. I did two laps every morning in the van so I knew pretty much where I was going at that stage.

On my first lap after that I did Bray Hill flat out in sixth gear and I’ll never forget it – I had a huge smile on my face. I thought, ‘this is just f***** awesome’. Ryan Farquhar gave me a lot of help [at the 2008 TT] and when he told me to take places like the left hander before Ballacrye flat out I trusted him.”

For never having seen the TT circuit before he arrived, the Swedish rider didn’t disgrace himself, finishing second in the Newcomers’ A race on his standard R6 behind Irishman Shane Conor on a 750. Mats also dipped under 20 minutes for a lap [113mph] setting him up nicely for a crack at the Manx in 2007.

“In 2007 I came across waved yellow flags at Rhencullen after Shane Conor had crashed in the Junior and I slowed to about 30mph; I knew then that it had cost me the race. I was pretty much the first on the scene of the accident... the first rider. It’s a pity because I did have something in reserve but that’s racing.”

For 2008 Mats agreed terms with Clive Padgett to ride alongside TT legend John McGuinness, but he was less than impressed with the quality of his machinery. ●



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NO PARKING ON SLIPWAY

Image: MATT HACKETT

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“I think I could have been on the [TT] podium this year... I really do. I just don’t think the bike was good enough or maybe quick enough. Racing is all about enjoyment, but with the schedule I have I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think I couldn’t win the TT. I’ve had experienced people tell me that I can win a TT and I do believe it as well. What upset me this year was that I went all out to win at the TT and I didn’t have the machinery.”

As we go to press, Mats has nothing in place, as yet, for 2009, but after making his debut at this year’s Ulster Grand Prix riding for both Raymond Lilley and Tim Martin, the Swedish businessman has irons in quite a few well lit fires.

“Apart from the rain and crashing at Cochranstown the Ulster Grand Prix was f***** awesome. I only got to do one flying lap on the superbike but I was just under 126mph – that’s not too shabby at all is it? In the first race we had to use wet settings on the 600 and the forks were bottoming out – that pretty much caused me to crash.

Then in the second race I had to ride with a cracked rib and my knee was f***** so we had maximum bad luck.

I would like to do Macau this year, so if anyone out there has a bike for me please ring. I’ve also spoken to a few teams about 2009, some very good teams and Mar-Train and Lilley Racing were impressed with me at the Ulster so who knows.”

Do you not think you’re setting your goals too high so soon in your TT career?

“No. I know I’m quicker than most of them. I know the places where the top guys are quicker than me but they should be. If I could get the right package and race it to my limits then I’ll win. I don’t have time to do it on my own, that’s why I paid the money I did this year.”

What would you prefer to be recognised as: a highflying successful businessman who drives a Ferrari and a 500hp Mercedes or a top road racer?

“It doesn’t matter if you’re good at riding bikes or anything else like

business – if you’re an asshole you’re an asshole. If you’re a road sweeper you’re as important as anyone else. It’s lack of commitment I don’t like. I’m one of those people that are never satisfied with what I do; I always want to do better. A lot of people aren’t like that... that’s fine by me, but be committed to whatever you do. I’ll never be content and at times that can be difficult.”

Your main racing goal is to win a TT race. How does that sit with your racing peers in Sweden?

“There’s always this thing about road racing and how dangerous it is, but back home in Sweden someone was killed during practice on a track. So I said, ‘well, are you all going to quit now? Is it just me who is stupid going to do the TT?’ That’s how it goes. When you race motorcycles you have to realise it can be dangerous – you’d be a moron to think differently. My goal is to win the TT and if I decide to race next year and I’ve the correct package then why not.” ●

Above:
MATS NILSSON