

Legends of Motorcycling

"Il Maestro"

KEITH MCCARTY WILL readily admit that he is a terrible piano player. In fact, he couldn't play anything more complicated than Euphemia Allen's "Chopsticks" when he first went to work for one of Japan's oldest and most famous piano manufacturers, Yamaha.

But on the other side of Yamaha's empire, Yamaha Motor Corporation, the 57-year-old McCarty has displayed virtuoso skills that would place him among the best of the great composers. For over 30 years, McCarty has orchestrated motorcycle racing championships for Yamaha, and as its current Manager of Racing, he is the face and the voice of the company's American competition efforts.

As a motocross mechanic, McCarty had a championship pedigree even before joining Team Yamaha; his early years in the industry were spent with Team Suzuki, where he tuned the great Tony DiStefano to two AMA 250cc National MX Championships in 1975 and 1976 just as the sport was beginning to make huge strides in America.

"I was living the dream, but there were some disagreements between Tony and myself on how certain things could be done, and I was looking for some support from Suzuki internally, but I realized I wasn't going to get it," McCarty recalls. "In the meantime, I had received an opportunity to go to work for Yamaha, and I hadn't really even seriously considered it, but the way things were going, I knew that it was time to make the change."

McCarty remembers the exact day he came to Yamaha, January 3, 1977—and for good reason.

"There were a lot of really good guys that were up for the job, but in the end I was the one that Yamaha selected, and they assigned me to work with Bob 'Hurricane' Hannah," McCarty says.

Whereas DiStefano and Team Honda's Marty Smith had already emerged as American superheros, Hannah upped the ante considerably. A brash talker with a pin-it to win-it riding style, Hannah was John Wayne on two wheels, and from their first race together, McCarty and Hannah developed a synergy that fueled greatness.

"Our first races together were in the Florida Winter Series, and we had very little time to prepare—it was such a blur," McCarty remembers. "We used a production bike for Florida. Yamaha had works bikes that were light and fast, but they didn't handle all that well, and we had a production bike that wasn't as fast but handled really well. We won the Florida Series

on the production bike, but for the AMA Nationals the production bike was too heavy. The works bike wasn't what Bob wanted either, so we ended up cutting the two bikes in half and using the best of both worlds to make the bike that Bob used to win the AMA Supercross Championship."



Keith McCarty, Yamaha Manager of Racing.

That sounds easy enough, but it wasn't just a matter of changing a few parts.

"Mechanics in that era were 'jacks of all trades and masters of none,'" McCarty says. "We were suspension guys, we were engine guys, we were truck drivers, we were rider confidantes, we were trainers—everything to the riders. The sport was just getting off the ground, and we were all learning what it took to become champions."

The kind of dedication required meant spending months on the road and endless hours at waypoints in-between races to keep Hannah's equipment in tip-top shape.

"I had a friend in Atlanta that was quite a fabricator, and he would let me work in his shop and use his knowledge of things to help me accomplish what my vision of things dictated that we needed to do," McCarty says. There was a lot of that back in those days. A lot of the mechanics at that time saw things differently than the factories or the engineers did, and they went off and did creative things that ended up being the way that production bikes were built."

McCarty and Hannah enjoyed a great run together, including three consecutive AMA Supercross titles (1977, '78 and '79) and a pair of 250cc MX National Championships (1978 and '79), but all good things eventually come to an end. Injury plagued in the early 1980s and disillusioned with the direction of Yamaha racing management, Hannah moved on to

Team Honda in 1983, where he was never able to match his success at Yamaha. McCarty, meanwhile, elected to remain at Yamaha, where he eventually ascended from mechanic to an R&D position for the motocross team, but his role continued to expand throughout the years.

"I was moving through the ranks of organizing and strategizing, working on rider contracts and being more of a visionary for the team," McCarty says.

When prior Manager of Racing Larry Griffis stepped down to deal with an illness, McCarty was the natural replacement. Since then, McCarty has been the overseer and orchestrator of multiple AMA championships for Yamaha in road racing, motocross, off-road and supermoto racing. He has been there to foster Yamaha's revolution of the motocross world via racing success with its four-stroke YZF models, and in road racing with R1 and R6 machines. Despite serious cutbacks to Yamaha's racing program in the face of a weakened economy, McCarty makes sure that Yamaha continues to put its best foot forward in racing. It's a lot of responsibility and a lot of pressure, but he handles the administrative side of things with the same mindset that he did as a mechanic. The challenges are different, though.

"When I was a mechanic, the biggest challenge I had was just getting into the pits!" McCarty recalls. "I remember once in St. Louis, a race promoter was mad because we had gotten footprints all over his beautifully groomed track the day before a race. He was so proud of it, and we had walked it and put footprints on his virgin soil, and he came to the hotel, demanding to know who had walked on his track. Well, it was me and (Scott USA rep) Bevo Forte. So the next day he locked the gates at 6 a.m. and wouldn't let us into the pits. I was first in line, and I asked the guy with the walkie talkie what the hold-up was, and he said the promoter wasn't going to let us in until the hot dogs were done being cooked. I said, 'Who the hell is going to eat a hot dog at 6 a.m.?', and I just drove past the guy and went in. I figured, what were they going to do? Throw me out? I was just focused on what I needed to do, and I didn't care what it took to get it done."

That attitude has served McCarty well throughout his professional career.

"I just love what I do," McCarty says. "I think back, and I have a lot of memories with a lot of special people, and today it really isn't that much different."

That much is true, although McCarty's piano playing still needs work.

—Scott Rousseau