



'The Blade' returns once more to brave deadly duel between Man and machine

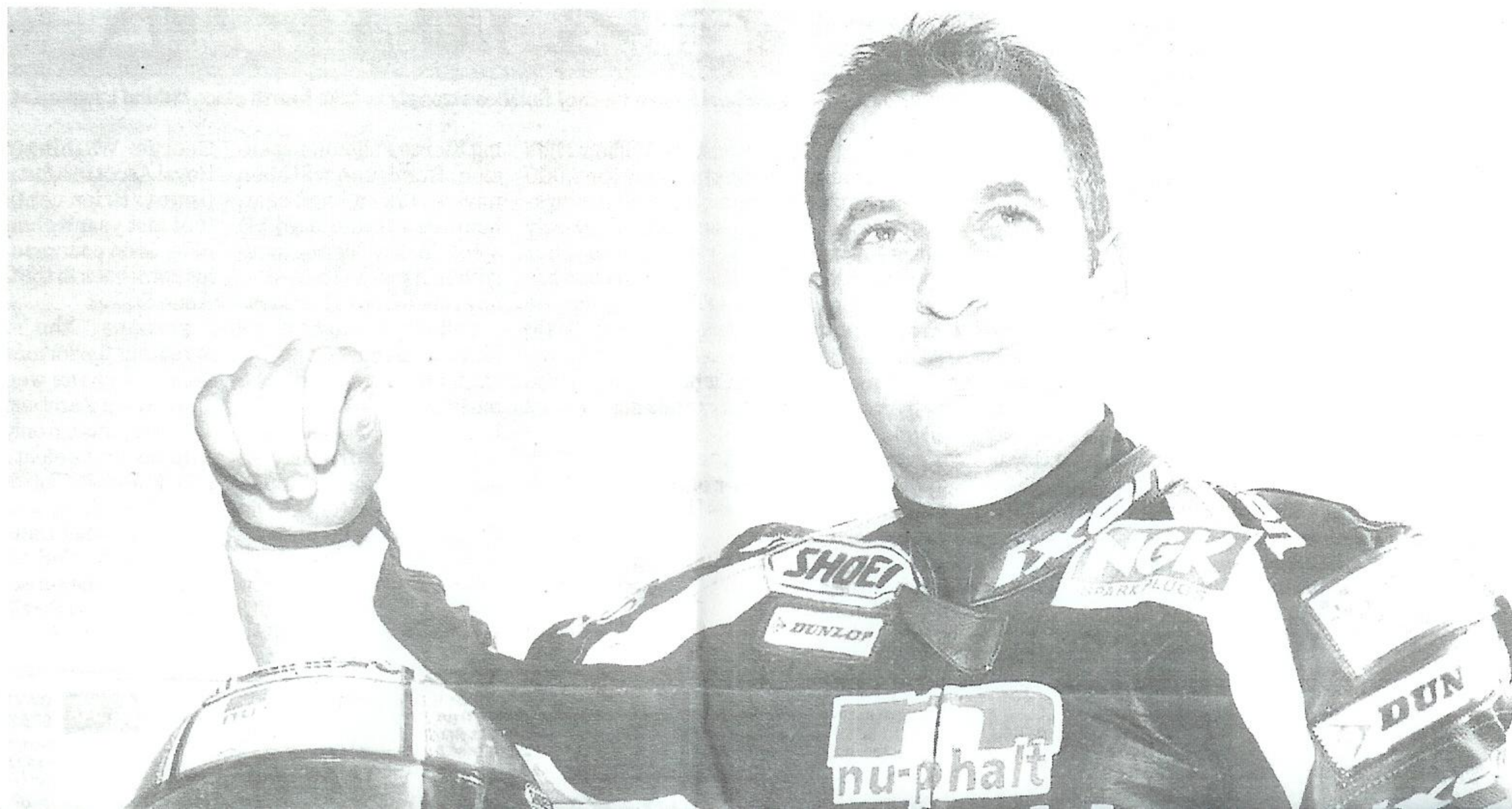
Michael Rutter, the father of two young daughters, is going back to an event that has claimed 220 lives. **Gary James** hears why

TT's heady
mix of speed
and danger

It is now seven years since Michael Rutter last competed in the Isle of Man TT races. So what makes a man, now 34 and with two delightful daughters, return to a circuit that has claimed the lives of more than 220 riders?

"Yes, you can run off a list of people who have died there," Rutter says. "But this sport that we're in, it happens. And you get such satisfaction from racing at the TT that you try not to think about it."

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Rutter is a major figure in the British Superbike Championship, where he has twice finished runner-up, but it is clear that skimming between the walls and trees of the 37-mile Mountain Circuit on the Isle of Man stirs something in his soul that Druids Hill Bend at Brands Hatch will never reach.

"You can't ever forget the TT - it's imprinted on your mind," he says. "I used to love doing it so much and I've missed it greatly. To sit on the grid again, just to be there and have a go - it'll be wonderful."

Rutter won the 1998 Junior TT, and has finished on the rostrum on eight other occasions on the island. So the return of the rider they call "The Blade" is a major coup for an event celebrating its centenary.

Rem Fowler, on a Norton, set the fastest lap of 42.91mph on a 16-mile course in the inaugural TT races in 1907. In 1911 the event moved to the formidable Mountain circuit, with its 200-plus corners and the 1,300-foot climb to the summit of Snaefell. Today the lap record stands at 129.45mph - far faster than on any MotoGP circuit - and fans are hoping to see the 130mph barrier shattered this week.

But over the race's century of action the culling of riders has continued remorselessly. Tap the numbers into a calculator and the average comes out at 2.23 per year. With around 250 competitors starting this year's six TT races, the term Russian roulette inevitably comes to mind.

So has being a parent - Rutter's eldest daughter Juliette, aged seven, was a newborn when he last raced in the Isle of Man - changed his attitude? "Yes, it definitely alters what you're



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thinking," Rutter says. "But racing motorcycles is my job. It might seem selfish, but I want to do it, I enjoy doing it, and I can make good money there." He admits, though, that his decision to return has disturbed his sleep.

"As soon as I knew I was going back, I started waking up in the middle of the night," he says. "You start thinking about it and going over each section in your head - which parts of the circuit you like and don't like. You think, God, I remember that bump, or that hedge or kerb."

Rutter raced a 1,000cc Kawasaki ZX-10R in the superbike race yesterday and will be aboard it again in the senior TT, switching to a 600cc Kawasaki ZX-6R in the supersport race, all for the MSS Discovery racing team. The big bike thumps out more than 200 horsepower - around four times the output of a Ford Fiesta - and will touch around 200mph along the Sulby Straight, although it failed to complete the first lap yesterday.

So what does it actually feel

like to muscle a superbike around the TT circuit at full throttle? "You start to smile when people ask about it," Rutter says. "It's got every kind of corner, really twisty bits, then it goes into villages, then you're doing over 170mph with the front wheel coming up. It sounds mad and while you're out there you think, 'Why am I doing this?' But when you finish an Isle of Man TT race you feel such satisfaction."

No wonder, because in an age when a passion for "extreme sports" has exploded, racing at the TT surely has to be the biggest test of courage of any sporting event anywhere. A rider's first

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mistake on the Mountain Circuit could well be their only one.

Riders take the plunge down Bray Hill, a normally quiet suburban street in Douglas with a 30mph limit, and a kink to the right at the bottom before the road starts climbing again. Participants approach the drop almost flat out after passing through the start and finish area. Then they ride off the side of the earth as the bike careers down the hill at 180mph before the suspension collapses as the road levels out, just at the point where the rider has to force the bike to the right.

"It's over that quick and you're travelling that fast that you're up the top of the next hill before you've almost got time to think about it," Rutter says. "You just have to shut it off at the bottom to get the bike turned."

Not even the steeliest of TT bravehearts can get through Bray without knocking off the throttle for a split second, it seems. If they attempted to go through flat out, and it went wrong, it could be fatal. High-speed accidents at

the TT can be gruesome when the human body slams into street furniture at the speeds achieved by modern superbikes.

"It does take courage," Rutter says. "Some parts of the track you have to be brave and try to calculate the risk. It's not as simple as just opening the throttle." In the move towards safer circuits, the TT was dropped from the grand prix calendar after 1976 because of its dangers. Now, the only riders who go there are the ones that want to. Even so, the relationship between team manager and rider changes when they get to the island.

"You have to have an affinity with your rider and try to take care of him," says Nick Morgan, head of the MSS Discovery team. "It isn't just, 'Get out there and get on with it.' At a British superbike meeting you sometimes give your rider a dig and a push. But I don't put Michael under any pressure at the TT."

Even the bikes get special treatment to withstand the Mountain circuit, where the

major races last 226 miles - three times the distance that Valentino Rossi covers in a typical MotoGP event. Morgan replaces the titanium bolts and the carbon-fibre seat frame on Rutter's Kawasakis with steel components. "Titanium can sheer, and steel is more versatile," he says.

The back wheel often bounces clear of the road, so Morgan's technicians soften the engine power and the suspension to enable the bike to last the race. An engine lasts only 600 miles because of the dust and grit sucked through the vents in the fairing.

Rutter will have covered about 1,250 miles in practice and racing by the time he has finished his three events. He managed only about 15 laps of practice before he started his first race yesterday, so did he ever consider driving around the circuit in a car to familiarise himself with it? "It isn't worth it," he laughs. "The only time you find out where the bumps are is when you're doing 190mph. You can't find that out in a Ford Fiesta."