Bob McMillan 1947 - 2026

Honda UK's longest-serving motorcycle general manager (1987-2006), Bob McMillan, died on 22 June following a long illness. He was 78. A bike cop before he joined Honda, he earned the respect and affection of Honda's mighty network of 800-plus dealers at the time for his dedication to their cause and the Honda marque.

Born in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, his father a coal miner, Bob McMillan was eight when the family relocated to coal pits in the Potteries near Stoke-on-Trent. From then on, he regarded himself as a son of Staffordshire.

Passing A-level woodwork, he secured his first main job with the police aged 19, going on to become a traffic cop on Triumph motorcycles and in cars. Later, his duties with Staffordshire County Police included M6 patrols. He became the county's youngest advanced level police motorcycle instructor and would always maintain deep interest in riding skill and road safety.

Bike cop Bob McMillan (far right) with Staffordshire police colleagues in the 1970s

He loved motorcycle racing both on and off-road, attending many events. These included European motocross GPs while still a policeman, following the career of Graham Noyce, who won the 500-world championship for Honda in 1979. Dave Thorpe (Honda) won the title in 1985, 1986 and 1989, the last with active support from McMillan, who by this time was Honda UK motorcycle general manager.

In 1979, McMillan secured a role with Honda as a northern area sales manager. The warmth of his personality and enthusiasm to fight the dealer corner saw him rise to national sales manager in 1983, followed by motorcycle general manager in 1987. He relished the main role and was especially keen on Honda scoring racing successes.

Bruno Tagliaferri, Honda marketing manager when McMillan joined, says: “He was Honda through and through. He loved the brand. He joined Honda when the motorcycle market was very good with more than 800 dealers and ten area managers. That tells you how big Honda was.

“Bob was an exceptional area manager, very supportive of dealers, and a great salesman. He gave the dealers a voice at Chiswick (Honda HQ, London) and went from strength to strength. He was very honest and upfront, and he could stand up to the Japanese, which wasn’t easy.”

Bob McMillan (left) and TT hero Joey Dunlop. A winning friendship forged at the 1984 MCN Man of the Year awards night

McMillan had tried his hand at riding trials, and amateur motocross with the AMCA (1972-1975) and again in 1980 on a 250 Honda. Pressure of work at Honda then claimed his time. He loved road racing and was in awe of the speed and skills of the top Isle of Man TT racers, especially his Honda aces including Joey Dunlop and John McGuinness.

Helping Joey Dunlop to achieve 26 TT wins, a record at the time, McMillan went to great lengths to get Dunlop the best bikes from Japan. “Bob went beyond the call of duty for Joey,” said mutual friend Leslie Moore.

McMillan presented Dunlop with the RC45 he had ridden to victory in the Superbike race at the 1999 Ulster GP. Some regard this as Dunlop’s greatest-ever victory, against more modern, higher-spec, higher-displacement machinery.

Seeing Dunlop on crutches at the 1989 TT following serious injuries at Brands Hatch, McMillan sought race control permission to take him as pillion for a lap following the Senior TT so that race fans could see their hero. He was overwhelmed by the fabulous reception all-round the Mountain course. “The lap was one of the most memorable biking moments of my life,” he said.

McMillan was devastated when Dunlop was killed racing in Estonia in July 2000. He flew to Estonia to assist in taking Dunlop back to Ireland and delivered a eulogy at the funeral attended by more than 50,000 mourners. That day he was interviewed by BBC Northern Ireland television. “He adored Joey,” says Bob’s daughter Suzanne Potts.

In 2004, McMillan wrote an Ode to the TT, which he made public on Facebook in 2021. He also rode TT parade laps, including the 1998 50th anniversary of Honda celebration at the TT.

Concerned about the safety of ‘born again’ riders returning to two wheels, he introduced free training through the Honda dealer network for buyers of new Hondas.

Retiring from Honda in 2006, aged 58, he continued to ride road Hondas on an almost daily basis.

In 2019 he suffered a serious motorcycle road accident. Injuries included a fractured skull, leg, arm, ribs and punctured lung. He said the quality of his riding kit saved his life. When he recovered, he resumed riding until kidney cancer cramped his style, though it didn't stop him riding when he felt up to it. His most recent trip was to Wales in March with riding pals.

Daughter Suzanne Potts said the family was moved by the outpouring of emotion and respect for Bob – "a man of immense warmth, loyalty, character, and professional acumen," typical of the tributes.

"Bob Mac was loved by many, feared by a few, but ultimately respected by all," said friend Martin Marshall, former dealer and chairman of the National Motorcycle Dealer Association.
Bob McMillan leaves wife Sandra; they were married in 1967 – son Steve, daughter Suzanne, two grandsons and a great-grandson.

His funeral, held on 23 July at St Giles Church in Haughton, near Stafford, was a fitting testament to the impact he made throughout his life and career. The service was very well attended by friends, family, and several generations of industry colleagues, with many dealers coming to pay their respects. In a moving tribute, Bob was escorted by four TT marshals on Honda Fireblades, while hundreds of mourners and motorcycles lined the route to his final resting place.

The attendance reflected the deep respect and affection felt for Bob across the motorcycle industry. His legacy endures not only in the memories of those who knew him but also in the countless lives he touched throughout his career. Bob's passion for motorcycling, his generosity, and his unwavering commitment to the industry will be fondly remembered by all who had the privilege of knowing him.