

By Roy Lang

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A quick look at the rundown of superstars in the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame shows the Pelican State has produced a wealth of "traditional" stars. Football, basketball, baseball, track, golf ... the lists are as impressive as they are deep.

Shreveport's Freddie Spencer and his dreams were far from traditional. But make no mistake: He's a superstar. And, now, as of June 27 in Natchitoches, he's a Hall of Famer. In fact, he is one of the biggest worldwide sensations this state will ever produce.

When a young Spencer eyed a motorcycle magazine back in the early 1970s, his dreams of tooling around the area's dirt tracks got a whole lot bigger.

Despite Louisiana's lack of a road racing facility, "Fast Freddie" emerged to become a world champion. He was popular in the States, but "across the pond" Spencer garnered Elvis-like attention and fame.

A meticulous attention to detail, a prideful work ethic and a feel for racing's intangibles led Spencer, now 47, to make history en route to 27 World Grand Prix victories. At 21-years old, Spencer became the youngest 500cc (the sport's top division) world champion in 1983 and the only rider in history to capture the 250cc-500cc double (1985).

His induction into the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame follows his AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame (1999) and Motorsports Hall of Fame of America (2001) honors.

"It's a humbling experience," Spencer said. "As much as anything, because it wasn't football or basketball – it was a sport that most residents in Shreveport aren't really familiar with. To be the first from motorsports to be recognized in the state is an honor."

Spencer began racing dirt bikes at the age of 4. He toiled around Boothill Speedway outside Shreveport and other dirt tracks around the Ark-La-Tex.

At age 11, when glancing at a racing magazine, Spencer took note of a world road champion Ken Anderson and thought, 'I can do that.' "

There was one problem: The closest road course was Green Valley

Raceway in Dallas – a three-hour trip.

“It was like there was no way,” Spencer said.

The Spencers did what they could to send Freddie to race. His first road event came at Green Valley on a bike modeled after Anderson’s. Coincidentally, it was the track his father, Fred Sr., held a go-cart course record.

“Everything just fell in place,” Spencer said. “Within three years I was doing more road racing than dirt racing.”

In 1978, Spencer captured a U.S. National Road Racing Championship. Two years later, Spencer emerged from obscurity in the U.S. vs. Britain Trans-Atlantic Match races (the sport’s version of the Ryder Cup).

“It was a track south of London called Brands Hatch,” Spencer said. “I’ll never forget walking out of the tunnel before the race. There was a wall of people as far as you could see. Just the murmuring and the flags – like they are in football (soccer) in Wembley Stadium.

“The feeling I had was: ‘This is where I was meant to be.’ ”

The last-minute addition to the competition scored stunning upsets of world champions Barry Sheene and Kenny Roberts (Spencer’s idol).

“After the races I could hardly get to the car,” Spencer said. “That one day was such a huge change. It gave me an idea of what motorsports and motorcycle racing meant outside of the United States.

“It just grew from there.”

Spencer made his full-time 500cc World Grand Prix debut for Honda in 1982. At 20, Spencer won two races and collected three other podium finishes en route to a third-place points finish.

The following year, he made history by capturing the world title, edging Roberts in a dramatic finish. He supplanted Mike Hailwood as the youngest champion of all time.

The racing world was shocked. Spencer wasn’t.

“I had these goals that I set years earlier,” he said. “I even knew Mr.

Honda's two dreams were to win the Isle of Man TT race and the 500cc world championship."

Spencer's plan was just going along.

When he returned to Shreveport, he was honored with a banquet, a "Freddie Spencer Day" and a letter from President Ronald Reagan.

Injuries shortened Spencer's campaign in 1984, but the world-class rider still won five times in seven starts. With the prospect of back-to-back titles dashed, Spencer had a diabolical suggestion.

"Everybody was working hard, so I said, 'If we don't win a championship this year, we'll just have to win two next year.'"

The year began in record-breaking fashion as Spencer became the first to win three divisions at one Daytona 200. His momentum carried over to the Grand Prix schedule.

Fourteen combined Grand Prix wins later, the 250cc and 500cc world championships were his.

"They said it couldn't be done," said Spencer, whose favorite track worldwide is Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps, the site of the Belgium Grand Prix. "Before the season started (Honda) didn't even have a 250 machine. They built one from the ground up. I had great people."

However, the historic '85 season did take its toll. Spencer never won another Grand Prix race and retired from competition – sans a couple brief comeback attempts -- in 1988.

Many believe the injuries caused by Spencer's grueling '85 schedule led to the premature end to his career. While the dream season proved rough, Spencer said more than 20 years of racing were to blame.

"I developed Carpal Tunnel in 1985, before anyone knew what it was, but I got through it," Spencer said. "Then I had problems in my neck and pinched nerves. It just didn't get any better.

"I'm not going to blame doing the two championships. It would have happened anyway. It was worth it to win the two championships."

Retirement hasn't left a void of adrenaline. In fact, Spencer says the "adrenaline junkie" tag for such athletes is a misnomer.

"It's really the opposite," Spencer said. "I've had my heart rate checked on the starting line at a Grand Prix. It was like 65 or 66. It's the same with Valentino Rossi, the top guy in MotoGP (former 500cc class) today.

"Racers, especially young kids bring in emotion, bring in adrenaline and get fired up. If you're an adrenaline junkie, you'll never make it to the very elite."

Now ask Spencer about his golf game and the blood starts to pump.

"I probably get more fired up about hitting a great (golf) shot," he said. "You just can't let the adrenaline come into the mix when you're performing."

When he's not playing golf near his current home in Las Vegas -- he's been there for 13 years -- Spencer still travels the world, often testing motorcycles. His favorite places to visit are Shreveport and Salzburg, Austria.

He is in the process of making another dream come true – getting to the grass roots of the sport that made him a legend.

"I've always wanted to really reach the beginner student – right off the floor, the first time they buy a sport bike" he said. "That where the problems are. That's where they scare themselves. Since I retired from racing, I just wanted to help people ride, enjoy it and be safe."