

TESTS: Yamaha XV920J Virago vs. XV920RJ,
Suzuki RM250Z, Yamaha 550 Seca, IT250



Exclusive Coverage

Kawasaki's KZ750 Turbo

\$1.75

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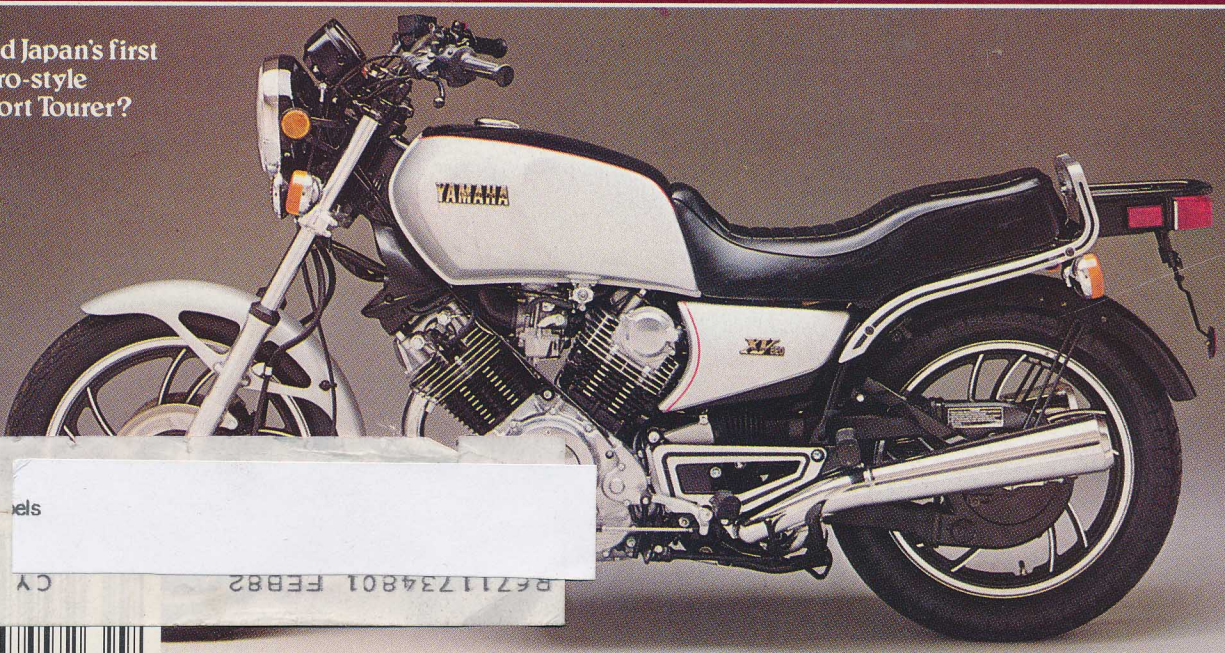
CYCLE GUIDE

STREET CRUISER VS. SPORTBIKE

Who really wins the confrontation between the ultimate American-style Boulevard Bomber



And Japan's first Euro-style Sport Tourer?



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Contents

VOL. 17 NO. 2 FEBRUARY 1982

SPECIAL EDITION: FAIRINGS FOR ALL REASONS

- 77 THE WHYS OF THE BUY *why you want one, what it does*
79 BOLT-ON MOTO-FASHION *windbreakers in every size, shape and color*

TESTS

- 37 YAMAHA 920 VIRAGO VS. YAMAHA 920RJ *fraternal vee-twins*
—by Paul Dean
44 CYCOM *taking LCD to the redline*—by Ron Lawson
58 MINITEST: YAMAHA 550 SECA *the two faces of Seca*
—by Tash Matsuoka
60 YAMAHA IT250 *do-everything's delight*—by Ron Lawson
62 SUZUKI RM250Z *the biggest 125 you'll ever ride*—by Ron Lawson

FULL-BLOWN FEATURES

- 48 THE SUPERBIKERS *the best of all worlds*—by David Dewhurst
50 RIDE THE WINNER *hot laps, dirt and pavement*—by Paul Dean
51 THE MAKING OF SUPERBIKERS *how do we do it? Ratings*
—by Jeff Burt
52 UP CLOSE AND TECHNICAL *what makes Stevie fast?*
—by David Dewhurst
71 KZ750 TURBO *tomorrow's promise of power*—by David Dewhurst

GUIDE LINES

- 25 COMING SOON *all the '82 Harleys, Husqvarnas, Maicos and Beemers*
29 BOOK REVIEW *WHEELYIN' WITH THE KING*
30 RIDING THE RADIO WAVES *late-night moto-talk*

SPORT LINES

- 89 SUPERBIKERS III *Wise wins—again*
96 YVON'S BACK *and winning*
98 PIT BITS *Honda's not just Kidding around*
101 WINNERS & LOSERS *life and times of the Trans-USA*

COLUMNS & DEPTS

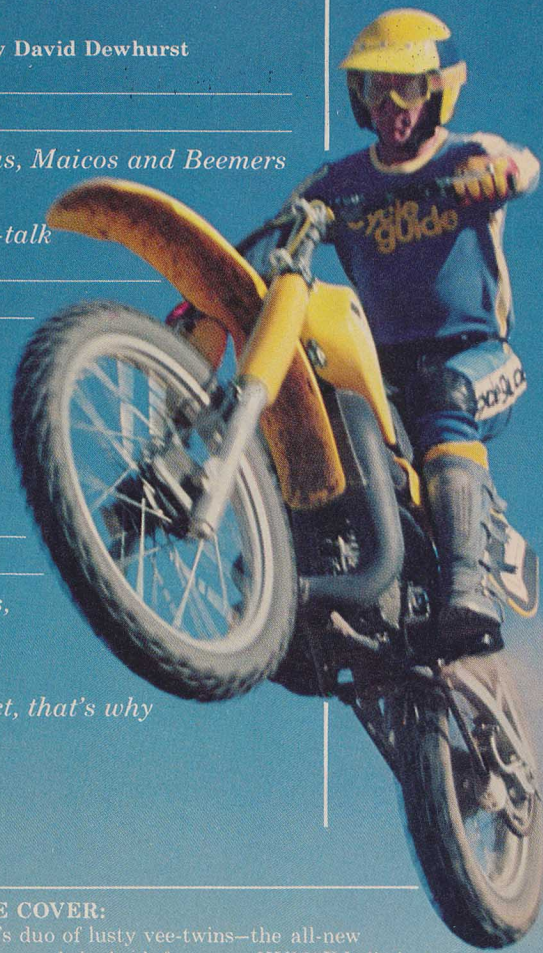
- 7 CYCLE GUIDE'S CYCLE GUIDE *facts, figures, times and dates*
8 EDITORIAL *getting set for the stretch*
10 THOMPSON AT LARGE *because they're extinct, that's why*
16 TECHSPEAK *life at the lash limit*
102 LETTERS *put it on paper first*

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ON THE COVER:

Yamaha's duo of lusty vee-twins—the all-new 920 Virago and the back-for-more XV920RJ—lie in repose before the magic picture box of Chris Eastman.

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BATTLE OF THE MOTO-STARS:



PHOTOGRAPHY © 1982 DAVID DEWHURST

The Superbikers

Finding the champion among champions.

BY DAVID DEWHURST

Winning is everything to a racer. Whether he's a world champion or a local novice, a real racer can't stop until he's beaten everyone. That's what keeps racers going. But it's never been possible, even for a world champion, to claim that he's beaten everyone, in every kind of two-wheeled racing. Not before The Superbikers.

The Superbiker event at Carlsbad doesn't unite every motorcycle champion,

of course, and the course doesn't present the *extremes* of roadracing, motocross and flattrack. But until The Superbikers, there was no way of proving which champ was the *real* champion, the best all-around racer.

Television played a large part in shaping the Superbiker course, because it was TV money that made the multi-national concept possible. The TV producers called for close racing and nothing longer than a two-

minute lap for the Saturday-afternoon armchair audience. To meet these demands, the Superbiker track was built so that, on a time basis at least, it's split neatly in half between dirt and asphalt.

In distance, the little-used Carlsbad roadrace track behind the more well known motocross course forms almost two-thirds of the two-mile lap. And with back-straight speeds topping 110 mph, the roadracers appear to have a definite advantage.

But three years of Superbiker racing have proven that a much-modified motocross bike is the best compromise for combination street-and-dirt racing. So, familiarity with the bike throws the advantage back into the motocrossers' court.

"It's a pretty good track to test everyone's riding," admits two-time Superbiker winner Steve Wise. "It's not much like regular motocross, and the roadracers say it's not really their kind of stuff either," he added as he looked down the dragstrip that forms the start-and-finish straight, toward a couple of hay bales around the tight righthand first turn. "The secret is to keep your speed up whenever you can; you can't square-off turns like you do in motocross," says Wise as he mimes a cross-up.

"For the second turn I just brake the bike into a two-wheeled slide. These Good-year flattrack tires are really easy to slide," says Wise as he points to the black rubber marks where he pitches his 498cc Honda into the turn.

He takes the Turn Two exit tight because, "You have to get a fast sweep at the uphill turn and keep the speed up." The apex for the corner is also the crest of the asphalt hill, and as each rider rounds the turn, flattrack-style with his boot down, the bike leaves the ground at about 80 mph. "The bike gets squirrely," concedes a smiling Wise, "but you've got to keep it wide-open to get a fast shot at the downhill."

Any horsepower edge shows up on the long, uphill righthand curve that passes for a back straight. "The first time I ever came over the rise here at more than 100 mph, the front wheel came way off the track. When



it came down again it shook so bad I almost got spat off," recalls Wise vividly. "That's why we tightened down the head bearings to act like a steering damper—you need it at these speeds."

And good brakes are needed for the tight hairpin that opens back onto the dragstrip. Everyone has similar disc brakes at both ends, so gaining any advantage here calls for a lot of nerve.

Most of the real position-changing happens out in the hard-baked dirt section of the track. "It's a bit like motocross" claims Wise, "but you're going so much faster. You can't just rush a guy in a turn and bump bars like you do in motocross. At these speeds it's too dangerous. It took a long time for me to get that motocross aggression out of my system when doing this kind of racing."

With speeds averaging more than 60 mph in the dirt, even the motocross section

resembles a roadrace. And as the hard-baked adobe gets covered with rubber, every turn becomes a wide-open sideways blast. "The track isn't very rough," says Wise, "but I think the better physical conditioning of motocross riders will always give them an advantage."

The racing machinery itself is more evenly matched. All but one rider in the 1981 event used a big-bore motocrosser fitted with disc brakes, flattrack tires, much taller gearing and short suspension to suit Carlsbad's relatively smooth surface.

It's a formula that's epitomized by Wise's factory Honda. But if you think the bikes sound little-changed and the multi-surface track appears not too demanding, you'd be wrong. No amount of TV watching and no other motorcycle-riding experience can ever prepare you for the unparalleled thrill of riding the ultimate Superbiker machine.

Continued

Riding The Winning Superbiker: Where The "E" Tickets Cost Forty Grand Apiece

• Listen, I'm not stupid. Dumb, at times. Maybe even gullible. But not stupid. So when Steve Wise handed me his Superbikers Honda racer and said, "Take it easy out there," adding that "You can get off really hard doing this stuff, and I don't want to see you get hurt," I sensed that he sincerely meant it. But I also sensed that much of *why* he meant it had something to do with not wanting his hand-built, tried-and-proven trusty race bike returned to him wadded up into a \$40,000 spitball. So "easy" became my operative word for the day.

But not *too* easy. After all, I thought as I climbed aboard, I've got flattrack and motocross experience totalling almost 16 years, and I've amassed a lot more miles on roadrace circuits than even Wise has. So I figured that there was nothing this triple-purpose, transmuted motocross bike—or Carlsbad's unique Superbiker racetrack—could throw at me in the way of surprises.

By the middle of the second lap, I knew for sure that I had figured wrong. Because there were three things I had *never* done: roadraced a motocrosser on a course comprised of a dragstrip and some pit-access roads; flattracked a 56-horsepower two-stroke on a decidedly unflat and unsmooth surface; and motocrossed an Open-class works bike while it was wearing a six-inch-wide dirttrack tire up front and an eight-inch-wide roadracing rain tire on the rear. But I quickly learned that Superbiking meant doing all of that on the same track, on the same bike and at the same *time*. Like I said: I had figured wrong. It was, to say the least, different.

I got my indoctrination into just *how* different the first time I pitched Wise's Honda into the track's loose and rutted "flattrack" lefthand sweeper. The fat front tire immediately started hydroplaning across the powdery dirt; and the only way the front would stop plowing so the rest of the bike could start turning was if I either slowed down or wicked the throttle open to break the rear tire loose—which, being wider and just as knob-free as the front, it was quite willing to do, even to the point of uncontrollability and terminal sidewaysness if I wasn't discreet with the throttle.

All that rubber was worth its weight in gold, though, once out on the pavement. Because for one thing, I found that I could lean that skinny little ex-motocross bike way, *way* over in the turns, so much so that it felt like my elbows would drag before any part of the drifting motorcycle would touch down. And I also needed the



Author exploring the strange new world of Superbiker racing

Just when you think you've done it all . . .

huge rear footprint to help get the Honda's immense power onto the ground, although the tire still would spin on the asphalt when I accelerated out of the slower turns.

If that wheelspin surprises you, remember that I'm talking about a 56-horsepower motorcycle that weighs just 230 pounds, meaning that it has a 15 percent better power-to-weight ratio than a Suzuki GS1100, the hottest hyperbike around. The Honda is, therefore, a viciously *fast* machine, one that will loop over backwards in the blink of an eye if you don't keep the top half of your body as far forward as is anatomically possible any time you're on the gas.

I was just learning how to cope with these and numerous other idiosyncrasies (like braking from 100 mph on a bike that has almost 10 inches of nosediv, or disciplining myself to take non-motocross lines around obvious motocross corners) when *blam!*—a loud clank, a screaming engine and a locked rear wheel, all in a split-sec-

ond. The transmission's countershaft had sheared right at the sprocket, jamming the chain between the rear tire and the swingarm and, sadly, sending the bike back into tuner Cliff White's box van for good.

Wise was cheerfully philosophical about the incident, reflecting on how much stress the roadracing must put on a gearbox meant for motocrossing, and on what would have happened if the shaft had DNF'ed in the race. That would have cost him a pretty penny. And who knows? Maybe I inadvertently saved him from a similar fate in next year's race.

One thing's for sure, though: I'll remember my brief stint in the saddle of that very specialized Honda long after I've forgotten about its broken countershaft. Not too many people can say that they've experienced this fast, thrilling and absolutely unique form of racing. Just a select handful of the world's best motorcycle racers. And me.

I told you I wasn't stupid.—Paul Dean

The Making of Superbikers: TV or not TV?

• “The biggest attraction of Superbikers is television,” says Gavin Trippe, the event’s promoter. “And I’m not just talking money. The reason the factories and riders are involved is because of TV. It’s called National Exposure.”

“One thing that bothers me is that we hear that Superbikers is made-for-TV,” says Bob Iger, Manager of Program Planning for ABC’s *Wide World of Sports*, who speaks with authority. “We’ve never looked at the race that way.”

Legitimate event, or trashsport? The six-year-old roots of Superbikers are entwined in each of the above; its beginnings and success are paradoxical.

It all started with: “Why doesn’t Brad Lackey ever race against Kenny Roberts?” The innocent—to some, naive—question was posed by an ABC producer who, along with his WWS crew, happened in June of 1976 to be at the Carlsbad Raceway to film the U.S. Grand Prix of Motocross, by that time a staple of his network’s winter sports line-up. The question was asked of two Englishmen, Gavin Trippe and Bruce Cox, promoters of the USGP and the men most responsible for bringing ABC to American moto-sport.

“That moment was the catalyst,” says Trippe. “Bruce and I had talked of designing the ‘ultimate’ race for years. Having riders from roadracing, motocross and dirttrack shoot it out among themselves was a very attractive idea. But without television, we were pretty sure we couldn’t sell it to the motorcycle industry. ABC has always been ahead of the game as far as new things are concerned, so we decided to take a flyer.”

Trippe and Cox knew, however, that network interest was only a start. The event that would become Superbikers was but a conversation piece in 1976. A firm format needed to be devised, a racetrack found, rules written, sanctions sought. The only other gadget-race, stadium motocross, was a variation on a proven theme. Superbikers would be breaking new, uncharted ground.

“Our first thought was to run it at Carlsbad in 1977,” says Trippe, “using the MX and roadrace courses and building a dirttrack.” Each rider would compete at his specialty on Saturday, trying to qualify for a winner-take-all race on a hybrid, half-asphalt-half-dirt circuit on Sunday. “The format was a bit unwieldy,” Trippe says. “We couldn’t get all the variables to come together, so we backed off. We knew if we blew it the first time around that Superbikers would never run again.”

The race was also postponed in 1978, this time a victim of sparring between the

sanctioning bodies (AMA and FIM) over divvying up the hefty network “rights fee.” After some lengthy negotiation and a change in command at AMA’s professional racing office, the financial problems were ironed out and “Superbikers I” was set for the fall of 1979.

“Mike DiPrete and Bill Boyce at the AMA were really helpful,” says Trippe.



Posing a question to Superbiker winner
Who’s ready with a Wise line.



“They realized it was our event as far as rules and track set-up were concerned, and saw that the TV exposure would be good for the sport as a whole. Once the money thing was out of the way, we were set to run it and see how it did.”

Evidently, it did fairly well, for “SB I” spawned “SB II” in 1980, and last fall before the start of “SB III,” the promoters were boasting that upwards of 30 million viewers tuned in annually to watch the action.

Bob Iger’s assessment is a bit more cautious. “The first quarter of the year is the highest rating period for *Wide World*,” the ABC executive says, “and that’s when we air Superbikers. It’s hard to tell exactly how it performs in the ratings because it’s only one element in a show of many elements, and we try not to attribute ratings to a specific element.”

Well, will it survive as an element? “We have an overall positive feeling about the race,” says Iger. “It’s still in its infancy, but we’d like to see it grow.” Will it grow with a too-pervasive influence from TV? “No,” says Iger. “Remember, the promoters came to us with the idea to establish the world’s best all-around motorcyclist. Our input has generally been of a technical nature, from our understanding of our medium.”

Gavin Trippe concurs. “ABC leaves me to do my job—get the riders and run the race—and I leave them to do theirs. The first time I see any film is when it airs on the tube. Our intention was to establish a good event that would become part of the regular racing schedule.”

To that end, the promoters have appeared to succeed. But it can be argued that without network money the riders might not race; without network cameras, the factories wouldn’t show.

“It’s a unique situation,” admits Trippe, “but Superbikers has a multi-year arrangement with ABC. This year’s program was the tightest and best so far, and we’re sure it will make for good television. We fully intend to run it again next year.”

For his part, Iger allows, “Competitively, Superbikers has been an unqualified success. We have an option clause to pick it up, and while I can’t say positively that it will be around in 1983, in all likelihood it will be a part of the *Wide World* schedule in the future.”

What is certain is that sometime in mid-March, 1982 “Superbikers III” will air as an element of a WWS telecast. On that day, whenever it is, the past and future of Superbikers will be meaningless to the viewer. Whether or not it entertains—that’s the question. —Jeff Burt

Superbiker Machinery: Ultimate Compromise

• Superbiker machinery has been developed with few rule-book restrictions, so it's surprising to find that almost every team has developed remarkably similar bikes. And the Cliff White-built factory Honda that took Steve Wise to victory is no exception.

Based entirely on a 1980 works motocrosser, the Honda's stock 300mm of fork travel is reduced by 50mm, while the rear end is reduced to 240mm of travel.

Other major changes include much taller gearing, along with a cutaway airbox and slightly lower compression that allows the stock-ported 498cc motor to rev more freely. A modified motocross pipe also gives more top end.

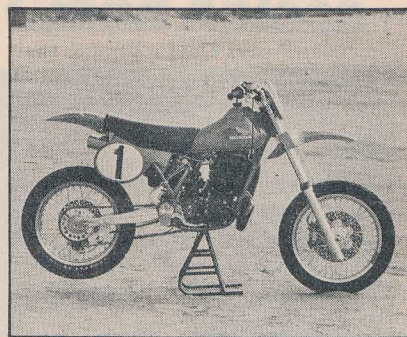
To cope with 110-mph speeds, the bike is shod with wide rims and Goodyear flat-track tires. A 12-inch Lockheed front disc and a 10-inch Grimeca rear disc slow things down.

—David Dewhurst



Familiar motocross line

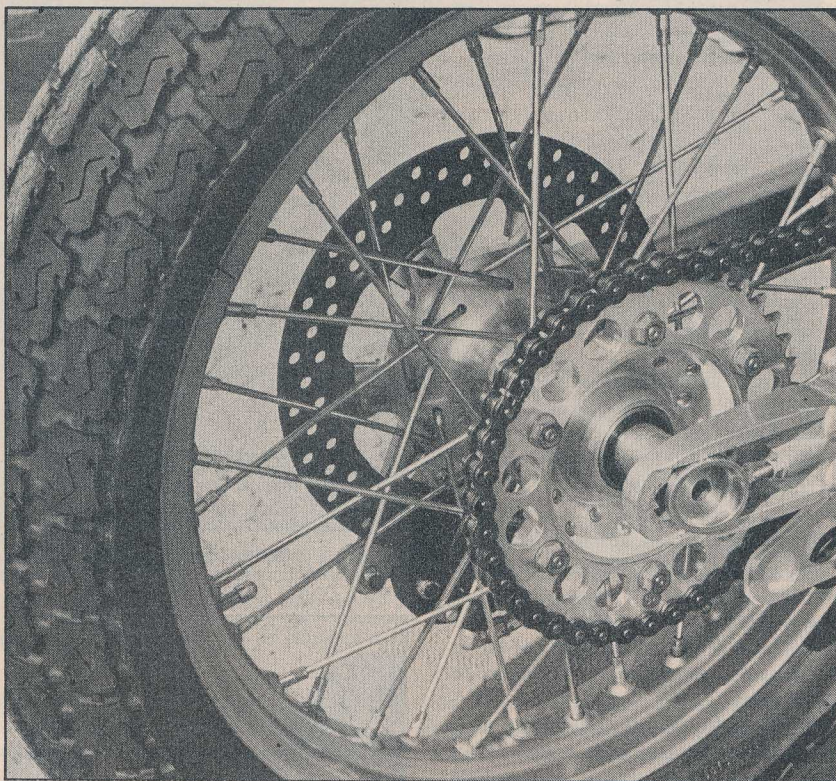
Hiding a very different personality.



HONDA SUPERBIKER

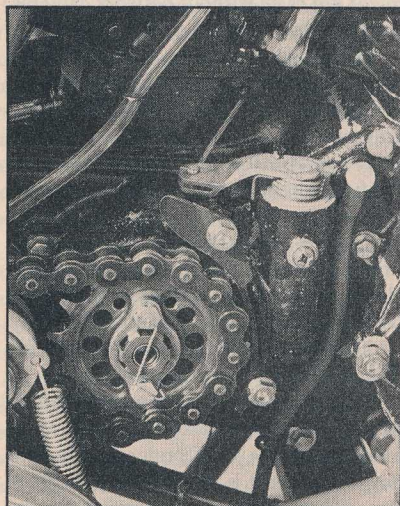
Manufacturer: Honda Motor Company, Limited
27-8, 6-chome Jingu-mae
Shibuya-Ku, 150 Japan

Category	Superbiker Racing
Suggested retail price	N.A.
Engine type	two-stroke vertical single
Port arrangement	one reed-valve-controlled intake, four transfers, one booster transfer, one exhaust
Displacement	498.0cc
Carburetion	one 38mm Mikuni slide/needle
Gearbox	4-speed
Front fork/wheel travel	air-spring/9.8 in. (250mm)
Rear shock/wheel travel	Pro-Link/9.4 in. (240mm)
Front tire	26 x 6 x 19 Goodyear DTII
Rear tire	25.5 x 8 x 18 Goodyear Road Racer
Wheelbase	57.1 to 58.9 in. (1451 to 1496mm)
Seat height	34.8 in. (885mm)
Handlebar width	32.0 in. (810mm)
Footpeg height	13.4 in. (343mm)
Weight	N.A.
Top speed (calculated)	110 mph (177 kph)



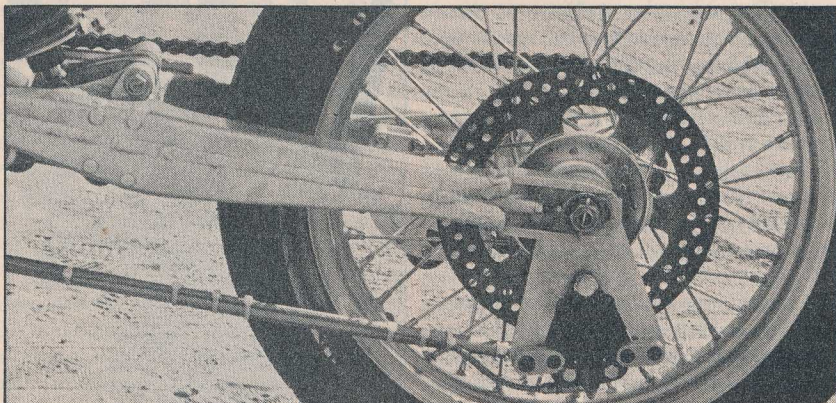
Honda goes one-off racing with a Class-C act

Tall gearing and flat-track tires are a common feature of a Superbiker racing.



Cliff White's perfect preparation

Safety wire won't stop a broken shaft.



Shortened Ohlins shock works a lowered motocross rear end

Grimeca rear disc is an essential part of high-speed racing.