

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



Exclusive Coverage

Kawasaki's KZ750 Turbo

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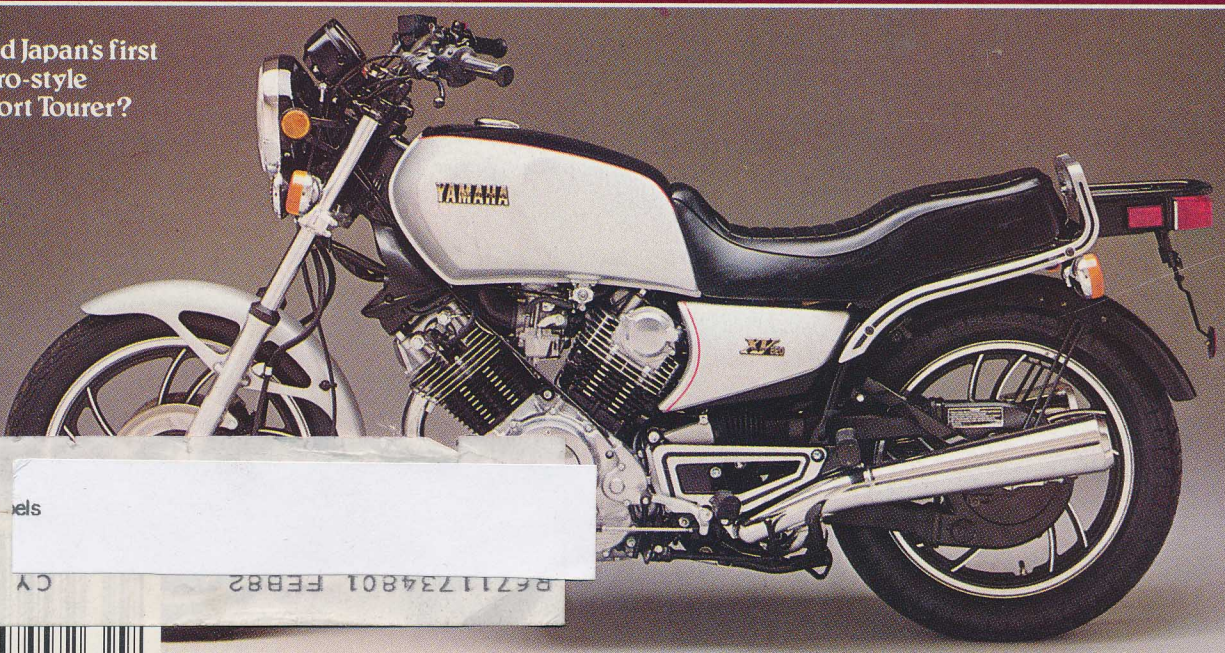
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Contents

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-everythinger'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*

Contributors

Patrick Behar, Chris Eastman, Don Fuller, Larry Gatz, Torrey Heeb, Vic Huber, Doug Jackson, George Larson, Tom Riles, Mark Wagner, George Wegner, Terry Whytal

CYCLE
GUIDE

Publisher
Peter S. Nicolaysen
Editorial Director
Paul Dean

Editor
Larry Works

Design Director
David Clark

Managing Editor
Merry MacTavish

Technical Editor
David Dewhurst

Feature Editor
Tash Matsuoka

Associate Editor
Ron Lawson

Art Director
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Editorial Assistant
Mark Diotte

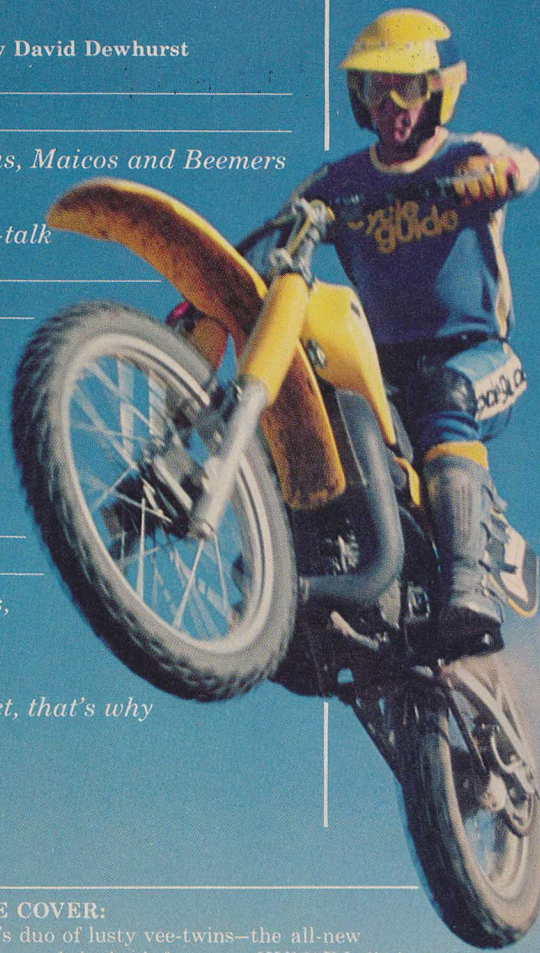
Editor Emeritus
Steve Thompson

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS:

London/L.J.K. Setright
Milan/D.O. Cozzi

Sport Editor
Dain Gingerelli

East Coast Editor
Ted West



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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SPORT LINES

Cycle Guide's True Tales of Race Courses, Dark Horses and Machines at Speed

EDITED BY DAIN GINGERELLI

Superbikers III

Wise gets the dough—Honda steals the show.



• As the Honda RC498 entered the front straightaway and clicked into fourth gear, it began to swallow yardage in huge—and for its pilot, motocrosser Steve Wise—unaccustomed gulps. Had there been a speedometer, Wise would have seen 100-plus mph on its face as a haybale-lined chicane rushed toward his bike's front tire. At the last possible instant, Wise grabbed all the brakes he could find, chattering the rear wheel violently, and flicked the bike left-and-right, through the chicane and down the hill.

"That road racing is really fun," he was to say later, after he had been crowned Superbikers champion for the second year in a row, "but braking, wow, it's really nerve-wracking. Getting all my braking-points down was the most important part of the race for me this year. I spent most of last week and the two days of practice here working on it," he said.

Wise was part of a massive Honda effort at Superbikers III, an annual event that purports to determine the "greatest all-around two-wheeled athlete in the world." Honda

was there in force, however, not so much because of pre-race hyperbole but for the post-race publicity attendant on the winner. With an ABC *Wide World of Sports* camera crew to capture the action and heavyweight ABC announcers Jim McKay and Sam Posey to call it, the Superbikers race has become an important vehicle that, some believe, can help develop and sustain company image. Whether or not Superbikers is a meaningful race in terms of athletic endeavor, or even a good one, is moot. The riders are there be-



PHOTOGRAPHY ©1982 DAVID DEWHURST

Eddie Lawson snakes his Kawasaki through the Carlsbad chicane

The Green Machine was out-horsepowered by Honda's red-hot 498s.

cause the event is unique and it pays good money. The factories that sponsor the riders are there for the national television exposure.

That's why Team Kawasaki was in the pits, right next to the Honda effort. Two works Open-Class motocrossers, disc-braked and shod with mile-oval tires, stood ready for roadrace champion Eddie Lawson and dirttracker Wayne Rainey. Ditto Team Husqvarna, with factory 430CR's and a three-man effort that included the World Speedway Champ, Bruce Penhall. Team Maico boasted a 490 Magnum-mounted Steve Eklund, the former Grand National Number One. There were two privateer teams, as well: Club Weekenders, from Europe, had '79 250cc MX World Champ Hakan Carlqvist; Dallas Baker Products featured the current Grand National titleholder, Mike Kidd. Besides Wise, Honda entered roadracers John Bettencourt and Mike Spencer, dirttracker Mickey Fay, and former World MX Champ Graham Noyce.

Two teams conspicuous in their absence were Suzuki and Yamaha. That those two racing giants were disinclined to compete was put down to no riders and no money, not necessarily in that order. Larry Griffis, Suzuki's team manager, attended Superbikers III as a spectator and allowed as how injuries were a factor: "Mark Barnett's been riding with a broken collarbone and Kent Howerton still has a cast on his wrist," he said, adding that Marco Lucchinelli, the World roadrace champion, who had been entered, was home in Italy recovering from injuries, too. He also stated that, "ultimately, the factory wasn't interested in spending money for these special, one-off Superbikers bikes for anything



Chris Haines doctors Noyce's bike

Waging war in the trenches.

less than a winning effort. Personally, I'd like to see a more production-oriented bike."

Some estimates for mounting a successful Superbikers challenge go as high as \$150,000—a strain for any racing budget at the end of the fiscal year. And even if the money were available, its expenditure alone couldn't guarantee a victory, making its allocation even tougher to justify. Although ABC is scru-

pulously impartial with the race—the announcers never, for example, mention any brand of bike—the camera captures the winner and his machine, *and* the losers and theirs. In the conservative quarters of the corporate boardroom, the flip-side to winning is sometimes not to compete. You can't look bad if you're not there.

That attitude exposes one of the flaws of Superbikers; namely, how can you crown the "world's best" if the competitors don't include, barring injury, *all* of the recognized stars of the sport? Superbikers promoter, Gavin Trippe, says, "Motorcycle racing is unique in motorsport in that the factories hold all the important contracts. If they don't want a rider to race, he won't race, and I can't make them compete. I'm very disappointed that some people decided not to come this year," he adds. "I sincerely hope they watch the show and decide to budget for the race next year."

But would the riders left out—names like Roberts, Hannah and Glover—have competed, if able? "I think so," Trippe says, "it's never been a problem to get the riders involved. You run a good race, pay a good purse and give them TV exposure in the bargain. There's a little ham in all of us. No, factory participation has always been the toughest to get. Industry support is sadly lacking for new ventures in the sport," he laments.

For the riders who were there—a gaggle of past and present titleholders—Superbikers III provided sometimes spirited and sometimes indifferent competition, the paradox inherent in the compromise of values the race represents. The asphalt section, though scary to the motocrossers, wasn't fast enough to separate the roadracers from the field. The dirt section, though tiring for the roadracers, wasn't tough enough to distinguish the MXers from the dirttrackers. It all came down to the fastest machines and, perhaps, the best all-around riders, as racing most certainly should; but the results could almost as easily have been foreordained by the size of each team's operation in the pits.

Eddie Lawson won the roadrace qualifier, leading it from wire to wire, and it was an unusual heat only in that Lawson was competing at all. Not only was he suffering from the flu, but—warming up his tires prior to the start—he had clotheslined himself on some string pennants and had to seek emergency medical attention. An entire tube of antiseptic ointment was applied to a rope burn on his neck, a roll of gauze was wrapped around the treated wound, then he rode, and won. Afterward, he said, "I had fun out there." He followed that surprising statement with "But after about five laps, I was ready to die! Those motocrossers are in such good shape, I can't believe I've gotta run 12 laps in the final." Asked about his injury, he shrugged and said, "It burns a little."

There were four passes of consequence in the dirttrack heat, and it was the best race of the day. Wayne Rainey moved from fifth to second in eight laps but couldn't catch Mike

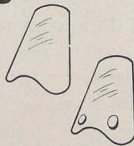
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VISA**Steve Wise sets sail for first place***No. 1 remains number one.*

Kidd, the winner. Kidd had been hounded by Ricky Graham's four-stroke Can-AM (one of three thumpers entered) until Graham slid out and stalled the motor, ending his chance for a transfer. Unfortunately, all of the drama occurred, as it did most of the day, in the dirt section, far from the eyes of the grandstand spectators. ABC's helicopter camera was there, though, so watch for Heat Two on TV.

The MX qualifier saw Wise and Noyce freight-train their Hondas in that order until an exhaust-pipe crack threatened to saw Wise's expansion chamber in half. He lost power and the lead, to Noyce on the last lap but still finished second. A long way from his native Sweden, Carlqvist rode his Grand Prix Yamaha MXer loaned to him by Yamaha of Europe with blessings from Japan—was third. Up the road a few miles, Yamaha of America stayed home. "My bike was good until the pipe broke," said Wise. "We'll have it ready for the Main."

Lawson holeshot the 12-lap feature race, towing Noyce, Wise, Rainey, Kidd and Carlqvist. Nine others trailed badly. Wise got by Noyce on the second lap, and both Honda riders ate Lawson up in the dirt on the third. Except for a last-lap swap between Carlqvist and Kidd, the positions were set. For the final nine laps, the 1500-or-so spectators watched the helicopter spin dizzily around the course, its cameraman taping the action, as Wise took the checkers with his fist in the air.

Afterwards, Gavin Trippe was heard to say, "All the bikes were purpose-built this year, built just for Superbikers, and that's not too bad. But I think next year we'll go to a more production-based motor." He was casting for a way to include more competition, certainly, because he cares about his race, and would like to see it grow. "Yes," he said, mulling it over, "stock engines are probably the key. We'll let everybody off the hook in 1982 and use production motors. Not factory racing engines—production, what you or I could buy."

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There is a good chance that ABC will market the TV tape of Superbikers III to England and the European continent this year, and it has already spawned a copy-cat race in France. In 1983, even, Trippe envisions a European event to qualify riders to come to the U.S. for the final. As a kind of pre-pubescent in the motorcycle racing world, Superbikers might suffer its growing pains, but it *is* growing.

All of which matters not a whit to Steve Wise, who, along with Kent Howerton, winner of Superbikers I, has upheld the superiority of motocross racers over their "lesser" brethren. Incidentally, for winning Superbikers III, Wise took home purse and contingency monies of \$13,000, plus a Hobie Cat sailboat worth another \$4,000. With a Honda bonus, it's conceivable he made close to \$30,000 for 20 laps—about one moto's time in his usual profession. "I don't think even Daytona pays that much," says Trippe.

He's right.

—Jeff Burt



Steve Wise after the show

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