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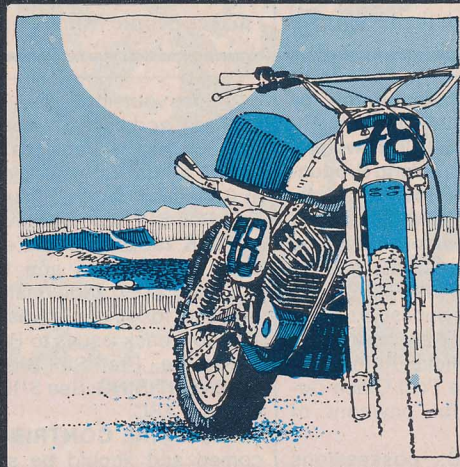
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**THE BMW R65, a portrait by Robert Monkton**





# Laguna Seca Formula 750 Road Race

King Kenny returns home in style and Baldwin wins  
the privateer competition

by John Ulrich

Steve Baker stood in the Laguna Seca pits after qualifying, gestured at his Yamaha Motor Canada-sponsored works OW31, and talked about his disappointing F750 season riding an Olio Fiat TZ750.

"These bikes weigh about 30 or 40 pounds less than the standard TZ750s," said Baker. "So you've got that much less weight to throw into a turn or stop. That meant I had to ride a lot harder than Kenny or Johnny to keep up."

All year long, Kenny Roberts and Johnny Cecotto dominated F750 on works bikes. Baker, who left behind the offer of a Yamaha Motor Canada OW31 ride for U.S. and Canadian races to instead defend his F750 title in Europe, struggled with his almost-standard TZ750 and the disorganized Olio Fiat team.

At Laguna Seca, Baker was back on the Yamaha Motor Canada machine, and had qualified fastest. Cecotto, who led the F750 standings, was fifth in qualifying, his bike over-rich, jetted-safe. Roberts, newly-crowned 500cc World Champion, had to win at both Laguna and at Mosport the following week—with Cecotto failing to finish one round and placing no better than sixth in the other—to add the F750 title to his belt. Roberts had qualified third, behind Don Vesco-backed Gene Romero.

Mike Baldwin had qualified back in ninth on the basis of his first—and only—timed lap. His bike's crankshaft broke, eliminating any chance of a better starting position.

The significance of Baker's comments comparing OW31s and TZ750s—and their application to Baldwin—would only become obvious during the second 100-kilometer leg of the Champion Spark Plug 200 (as Laguna Seca is commercially known).

Off the start of the first segment, Baker led Baldwin, Roberts, Romero and Randy Mamola—who had qualified fourth fastest and who had taken 2½-seconds off his lap times by following first Roberts, then Baker during time trials. It took Roberts less than two laps to secure second place; Baker and Roberts quickly cleared off from Baldwin and Romero. Cecotto pitted on the seventh of 32 laps, the victim of a broken shift shaft, out for the day. One more lap and Roberts irrevocably had the lead.

Romero and Baldwin cut and diced and knocked fairings, Baldwin twice running off the track and over berms in a drawn-out battle that would later have Romero shaking his head and saying "If Baldwin man-

ages to stay alive, he'll be all right." Skip Aksland, in his first race since re-dislocating his shoulder at Sears Point, worked his way past the pair and into third. Seven laps from the finish, Aksland pushed past Baker to take over second place.

At the end of the first leg, it was Roberts by eight seconds, Aksland, Baker, Romero, Baldwin, Mamola, David Aldana, Wes Cooley, Patrick Pons and Steve McLaughlin.

During the break before the second segment, Baker complained of too much rear wheel hop under braking, which made his bike hard to control. Tuner Bob Work installed a spare wheel fitted with the same type tire Roberts and Aksland had used in the first leg, a Goodyear D1997A. Baker had used a Goodyear D2447 with the same new, soft #825 compound as Roberts' D1997A, but the D2447 was taller with a different shape and profile. Like most of the faster riders, Baker had finished the first leg with his bike's rear tire pulling apart slightly at the tread joint. Several, including Baker and Baldwin, noted small chunks pulled out of the slick itself. A Goodyear representative said that the new compound was so sticky that it sometimes adhered better to the track than to itself, but claimed the condition wasn't dangerous.



King Kenny Roberts came home from Europe and won again.

"I have no complaints," said Roberts, who had turned consistent mid-1:08 lap times throughout the first heat. "But the racetrack's giving me trouble in turn nine. It's kicking the rear end out, which is a weird feeling going in."

Mike Baldwin worked to change gearing, bolting on a rear sprocket with one more tooth. "It was bogging out of all the turns," he said.

Like Baker, Roberts started the second heat with a new Goodyear D1997A. But while Baker had scuffed in his D1997A during qualifying, Roberts began with an unused tire, and was cautioned by crew chief Kel Carruthers to "take it easy on the first laps."

Baker again jumped out in front at the start of the second segment, chased by Baldwin, Roberts, Cooley, Romero, Aldana, McLaughlin and Mamola, whose bike had lost third gear during the first heat.

Roberts was again second by the second lap, but Aksland's race wasn't going as well. Aksland's bike had seemed to foul a plug on the start and Skip pitted on the fourth lap with what would later be diagnosed as a coil failure. Baldwin and Romero, meanwhile, were right behind Baker and Roberts, followed by Cooley alone, then Aldana, Mamola, and McLaughlin in a tussle.

McLaughlin and Aldana bumped together at the corkscrew entrance and Mamola shot by, setting off after Cooley. Eventually, Mamola would pass Cooley, lose all but three gears, and be repassed by Cooley and Aldana. McLaughlin would fade as his bike's aluminum front brake calipers spread, be challenged by John Long, and be passed by Ron Pierce.

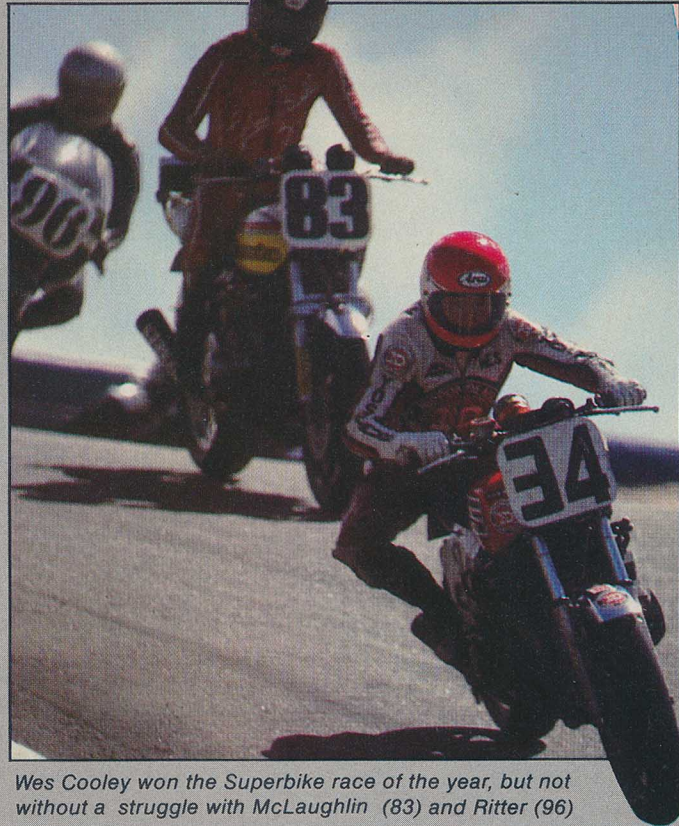
But for all the dicing going on for positions five through 10, attention focused on the front three. Baker still led, under pressure from Roberts, but close behind was Baldwin, broken away from Romero and keeping his TZ750 close to the two OW31s. You could see the difference in bikes just watching at turn nine, a tight, slow left hander. Baker and Roberts barreled in, both wheels on the ground to the apex. Then came Baldwin, less than 1½-seconds behind, rear wheel chattering under braking and showing daylight underneath, the motorcycle slightly out of shape.

By the 17th lap, Roberts had passed Baker for the lead, still turning steady 1:08s, just like he had during the first leg. Baldwin was just behind Baker, both backed off slightly.





In the second heat, it all came down to Baker (32) versus Roberts.



Wes Cooley won the Superbike race of the year, but not without a struggle with McLaughlin (83) and Ritter (96)

At 25 laps, Roberts had five seconds over Baker, who was giving a fraction of a second away every lap. Baldwin was just four seconds adrift of Baker, but 25 seconds ahead of Romero, who had 15 seconds on Cooley. By the finish at 32 laps, Roberts had six seconds over Baker, who held a three-second advantage on Baldwin.

Considering machinery, Baldwin's ride was remarkable indeed. Even he could scarcely believe he had kept so close for so long. "First leg it was geared too tall," said Baldwin as he bandaged and taped his shins and toes, bleeding from dragging on the rough asphalt. "Second leg I threw another tooth on the rear, got maybe a second, 3/4-second per lap, which gave me a chance to run with those guys. They've got a lot of horsepower on me. They'd pull me on the straights and I'd catch up like a bastard at the corkscrew. I was just riding the bike too hard. If I had kept riding it that hard, trying to pass one of those guys, I would have jumped off. But I was *catching* them! I was going into the corners harder than they were."

Or at least harder than Roberts and Baker had to ride.

Baker reported no troubles in the second leg. "Yeah, everything worked OK," Baker said. "Kenny just liked to drag everything more than I did."

"I had to work hard," said Roberts in what may have been the most meaningful measure of what had happened. "Steve was tough and I think Skip would have been tougher. Lucky for me Skip's coil went out. I had some reserve, but it's tough when you race those guys. One mistake and you've lost it."

## SUPERBIKE PRODUCTION

### The Surprise wasn't that Cooley won, but that the others kept up

"I thought it was Ritter behind me and I didn't turn around until he stuffed a wheel in on me. I saw it was McLaughlin, and there was no way I was going to let McLaughlin beat me," said Wes Cooley after winning the 20-lap Superbike Production race. "So I just gassed it up as hard as I could the whole way."

That Cooley and the Yoshimura Suzuki GS1000 beat Paul Ritter (Dale Newton 905cc Ducati) and Steve McLaughlin (Racecrafters KZ1000) wasn't as remarkable as the fact that Ritter and McLaughlin had been able to seriously challenge Cooley. At Sears Point, Cooley motored away from Ritter until the GS1000's sprocket bolts pulled out of the rear wheel. At Pocono, Cooley beat Mike Baldwin's highly-illegal, very fast Ducati. All year, none of the Kawasakis had been able to get close to the Yoshimura Suzuki GS1000.

Yet there was McLaughlin, picked as a last-minute replacement for Dale Singleton (who was hospitalized after a F750 practice crash), making up a 300-foot early-race deficit to catch Cooley, struggling with the gyrating Kawasaki, losing ground on the straights, making it up *somewhere*, closing the gap from five seconds to three seconds to less than one second, actually passing Cooley halfway into the race.

Ritter was right behind, slipping from fifth on the first lap to sixth on the fourth lap, then getting it all back and latching onto McLaughlin's tail about the same time McLaughlin drew up on Cooley. For

five full laps, the trio ran nose-to-tail, wheel-to-wheel, Ritter cutting and jabbing, probing for an opening; McLaughlin wrestling with his machine, seeming to use brute force to make up for being down on power and handling; Cooley blocking when he had to and leading across the finish line every single lap.

It wasn't as if Cooley had slowed down—he hadn't. Cooley turned eight of his first 10 laps within a .4-second spread, all in the low 1 minute 13 second range, with two laps in the low 1:14s. Caught by McLaughlin, Cooley's times dropped instantly to high 12s for six straight laps and then nicked into the 11s and low 12s for the final circuits. Cooley went faster at the end than he did at the start, but McLaughlin and Ritter were still there. On one lap, McLaughlin passed at turn eight, Cooley retook the lead on the straight, McLaughlin passed again at turn four, Cooley outdrove McLaughlin from the apex to lead once more. McLaughlin never got by again.

While the battle raged for first, Reg Pridmore (Vetter KZ1000) and John Long (GS Performance Group BMW R100S) squared off for the Superbike Production title a few places back. Pridmore was riding for the first time since breaking his shoulder in Japan, and it hurt. "I can't throw it around like I want to," Pridmore had said after Saturday practice. "My mind's telling me what to do but my body can't do it."

Pain or no pain, Pridmore held fifth



when Long was mired back in 10th. As Long moved through traffic and various competitors bounced out of contention (Hurley Wilvert crashed the Yoshimura KZ1000 while running third on the fifth lap; John Bettencourt's Yoshimura East GS750 got a flat tire while third; Chuck Parme fell off the Exhibition Engineering KZ1000 while sixth when another rider suddenly pulled off the racing line and into the pits right in front of Parme), a screw backed out of Pridmore's bike's dyno cover, and escaping oil lubricated Pridmore's left foot, which began slipping off the peg at inopportune moments. Pridmore would finish sixth, Long fourth to tie with 54 championship points each, but Pridmore would get the title (for the third straight year) on the basis of finishes, two seconds, a third and a sixth to Long's one second, one third and a fourth.

Ron Pierce (Yoshimura GS1000) had tangled with Steve Epstein (KZ1000) on the first lap, both bounding off the course into what Pierce would later describe as whoop-de-doos, bars and pegs interlocked. Epstein crashed, Pierce rejoined the fray in last, and began moving up in a charge that would yield eighth place by the finish.

The fight for first came down to the last lap, but none of the players knew it—no white flag was displayed. The lap before, Ritter had outraked McLaughlin at turn four, and made it stick.

"I was waiting for the white flag to make my move," said McLaughlin after the race, "and it never came."

"What a surprise," said Ritter. "No white flag. Maybe if McLaughlin knew it was the last lap he wouldn't have let me by."

"I kept waiting for the white flag," said Cooley. "I figured everybody would push really hard that last lap, but the last lap flag never came, so it worked out really good."

### F750 OVERALL RESULTS

Rider	Finishes	Bike
1. Kenny Roberts	1-1	Yam
2. Steve Baker	3-2	Yam
3. Mike Baldwin	5-3	Yam
4. Gene Romero	4-4	Yam
5. Wes Cooley	8-5	Yam
6. David Aldana	7-6	Yam
7. Randy Mamola	6-7	Yam
8. Steve McLaughlin	10-9	Yam
9. Ron Pierce	12-8	Yam
10. John Long	11-10	Yam

### SUPERBIKE PRODUCTION RESULTS

Rider	Bike
1. Wes Cooley	Suz
2. Paul Ritter	Duc
3. Steve McLaughlin	Kaw
4. John Long	BMW
5. Harry Klinzmann	BMW



Before the race, Steve Baker listed the advantages a works OW31 holds over a privateer TZ750. During the second heat, Baker had to use those advantages to fend off Baldwin.



Johnny Cecotto only wanted a secure, points-paying finish to buttress his F750 points lead. He didn't get it.



The Goodyear 1997A with newly-developed compound #825 was the preferred tire at Laguna, but the rubber seemed to stick to the asphalt better than it adhered to itself.

### 250 EXPERT

#### Baldwin's resurrected KR250 can't stop Randy Mamola

**R**andy Mamola won the 250 Expert Final at Laguna Seca, taking the lead away from Mike Baldwin on the ninth lap, and holding first place under pressure until the 18th lap, when Baldwin retired with an ignition failure. But the race itself told only half the story. The quarter-liter drama really started at Daytona when Ron Pierce and Australian Gregg Hansford battled, Hansford out-braking Pierce at infield turns and the chicane, Pierce flying past and pulling away on the banking and straightaways.

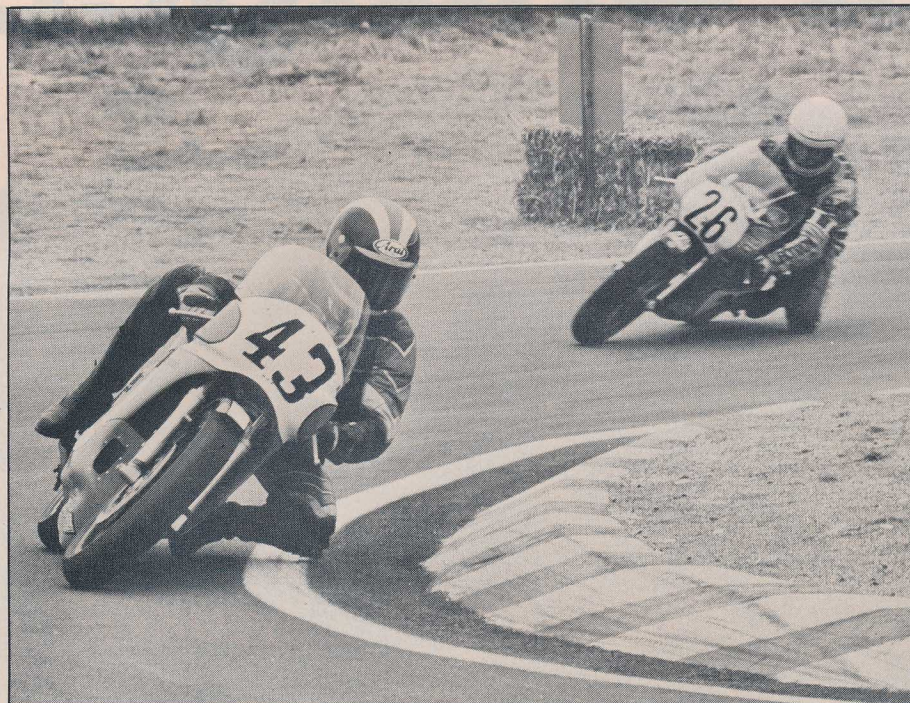
A double-disc KR750 front end grafted onto Hansford's works Kawasaki KR250 made it possible for him to stay with, and often pass, Pierce's faster Bob Work-tuned Yamaha Motor Canada TZ250 (the same lighter, lower, smaller Rob North-framed special ridden by Steve Baker in 1977). Pierce's ride ended when the bike's crankshaft broke (reporters were told the bike ran out of gas), and Hansford won. The value of two discs instead of one, even on a 250, wasn't lost on Pierce and Work.

But it wouldn't be until Laguna Seca that Work could again travel south to races in the U.S. In the meantime, Steve Johnson of Kawasaki Motors Corp., encouraged by what he saw at Daytona and by the performance of works KR250s in Europe, dragged Yvon DuHamel's 1976-vintage KR250 out of a corner in the Kawasaki race shop and went to work. He called Pierce, who had ridden a similar bike during early development testing, and asked him to pilot the machine at Laguna Seca. Pierce agreed. *continued on page 143*



# Laguna Seca Formula 750 Road Race

continued from page 109



Randy Mamola (26) won the 250 race, but Mike Baldwin proved a two-year-old KR250 could still be in the hunt.

The first thing Johnson did—at Pierce's suggestion—was install a KR750 front end. But in a test session at Ontario Motor Speedway during a club race several weeks before Laguna, Pierce decided that the bike was too slow to be competitive. With the prospect of also getting preparation help with his TZ750 if he rode Bob Work's TZ250, Pierce drove to Canada.

Confident that his mini-meanie could be competitive, Johnson signed up Mike Baldwin to ride the KR250 at Laguna Seca.

While this was going on, Randy Mamola and tuner George Vukmonovich installed a twin-disc front end on Mamola's Jim Doyle-sponsored, Kenny Roberts-framed TZ250 before Pocono, where Mamola won.

It came together at Laguna Seca—or fell apart, depending upon the rider's viewpoint. At the same time they installed a twin disc front end and moved the calipers behind the fork legs. Work and Pierce moved the seat back—Pierce is taller than Baker, for whom the bike was designed. During practice and in Pierce's heat, the bike's front wheel kept bouncing off the ground in fast sweepers, chattering, sliding, and actually showing daylight between tire and pavement. Pierce couldn't ride the bike fast as it was, and there wasn't time to fix the problem because he first rode the bike the morning of the race.

"I think it's something in the frame," said Work. "When Steve rode it he never was really happy with the front end, either.

When we moved the seat back, it made the front end even lighter."

Pierce was never in the hunt, but Baldwin and Mamola were. Baldwin led off the start, pursued by Mamola, and the pair quickly left the field behind. It was still anybody's race when Baldwin pitted, the bike firing on just one cylinder, two laps from the finish.

"I had more power than him," said Mamola after winning, "and he was out-braking me into the corkscrew."

"It slowed down on the third or fourth lap," said Baldwin. "I noticed it wasn't making as much power, then it quit altogether."

Behind Mamola finished John Long, riding his own TZ250, and Gennady Luibimsky, a club racer who bought his first TZ250—a clapped-out, trashed dual-shock model—two years ago and progressed to a trick 250 sponsored by Harry Hunt (former riders Pat Hennen and Gary Nixon). Glenn Shopher, who was still a novice as recently as Loudon, used his transfer points and two-year-novice status to become an expert just in time for Laguna Seca. For the first half of the race, Shopher led veteran Long, and Luibimsky

## RESULTS

1. Randy Mamola	Yam
2. John Long	Yam
3. Gennady Luibimsky	Yam
4. Glenn Shopher	Yam
5. Dave Garoutte	Yam

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