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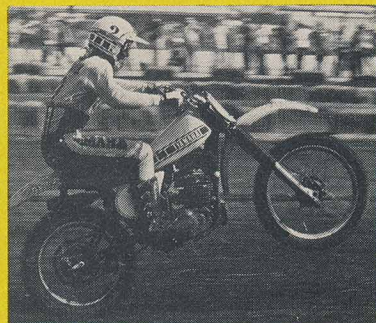
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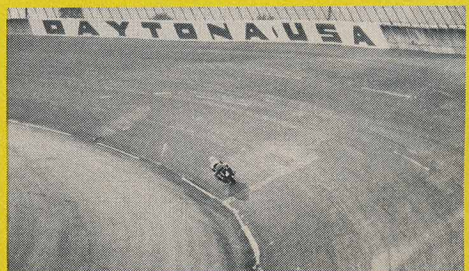
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COVER: The exciting, exotic Laverda Jota 1000, a \$4500 package of brute superbike performance, legendary Italian handling and suave Continental personality. Photo by Art Friedman.

Daytona 1977 was one of the wettest, most unorganized Daytonas ever, and certainly the shortest. None of that mattered to Steve Baker—he won everything in sight.

by Art Friedman

Big-time road racing has almost been taken out of the hands of the big-time roadracers. The final standings in most long-distance, super-speed road races are quite literally controlled by someone or something other than the combatants themselves. Take tires, for instance. They were the deciding factor in all but one major U.S. road race last year, and with no huge technological breakthroughs since then, tires also promised to determine the results of the Daytona 200, 1977's most important race.

Kenny Roberts was among those who thought tires would be a problem, and by the Tuesday afternoon before Sunday's race, his worries were confirmed. Practice scheduled for Monday was rained out, but on Tuesday, practice revealed that Goodyear's rear slicks, intended to be durable enough to withstand 230 miles of devastation, were going to be in trouble after 180 miles. Goodyear's people had



spent a great deal of time and money conducting tests at Daytona during the winter to be sure their tires would survive Daytona's 200 miles, but they couldn't foresee the late-winter freeze which changed the track surface completely and made it far more abrasive than anticipated.

The abrasiveness quickly ate away the tires on the handful of machines lapping near the two-minute mark. Goodyear is the only company with a tire that comes close to being safe for these machines for 200 miles, but even it couldn't come close enough. Slower riders with less powerful machines were delighted by this development because they assumed the fast riders would either have to slow down to save rubber or stop to change rear tires.

But Daytona officials and Goodyear's tire people weren't convinced that the

matter was as simple as that. What if a rider didn't slow down enough? Or what if somebody didn't stop for a fresh tire, thinking he could make it? What then? What real insurance was there against a 180-mph blowout if a rider wasn't cautious enough?

Some of the fast riders were asking different questions: Is this going to be a contest to see who can tiptoe the fine line between speed and catastrophe? Are long road races to become tire-changing contests? Do the spectators really come to see a 200-mile regularity run?

In the end, those concerned were divided into two camps. On one side were most of the racers—private and semi-sponsored riders short on speed but presumably long on endurance who saw this as their rightful opportunity to deal with the sheer power of the traditional winners. Their allies were the promoters, who held to the assumption that Daytona is successful because of its 200-mile, super-speedway format, and feared that any change in the program would bring a loss of revenue. This camp wanted a 200-mile race, as scheduled.

ABOVE: Baker cooled it for the first few laps and shadowed Roberts before going past and away. LEFT: Baker waits in the rain for word that the race is over.

WHEN YOU SAY STEVE BAKER, YOU'VE SAID IT ALL

On the other side was the handful of fast riders who wished for a contest of speed and riding skill, not of tire preservation. They were backed up by officials worried about safety who knew that at least one rider, gifted with more courage than common sense, would probably wear his tire to the limit, then gamble that it would last just a couple more laps. One 180-mph blowout was all it would take to give Daytona '77 a very sour taste. These people wanted the race shortened or divided into two parts because of the tire problem.

By Friday, it was obvious a tire change wouldn't drop the factory teams off the leaderboard and back into the pack. Steve Baker's pit crew, led by Bob Work, reported that its members could change a tire in 38 seconds. Anyone going slow enough to last 200 miles without changing a tire would have to be at least five seconds a lap slower than Baker, who was turning times of about two minutes flat.

An official decision was a long time coming and made the matter more confusing. Late Friday it was announced that the race would be black-flagged at 123 miles and stopped for an hour to check and change tires. The resulting uproar from privateers caused the officials to call a meeting to reconsider the decision. Late Saturday it was decided that the race would be run in two 100-mile segments using the Olympic-FIM scoring system. No one was really impressed, least of all the privateers and promoters, but at least the new format guaranteed safety.

The obvious domination of the factory Yamahas was behind the privateers' complaints. The company had produced new bikes for Kenny Roberts, Steve Baker and last year's winner, Venezuelan Johnny Cecotto. The new bikes had slightly different chassis, more power and improved streamlining. Roberts opted to stay with his 1976 chassis, which he had personalized and felt more comfortable with, although he used the new fairing and the tapered seatback.

Yamaha hadn't forgotten the privateers, though, and introduced a new



TOP: Mike Baldwin (186) and Reg Pridmore (163) lap Gary Tompkins (260) during their scrap for fourth place in the Superbike event.

ABOVE: This is how close the four-way 250cc battle was. Uncini (308) leads Roberts (on the yellow bike), Hansford (302) and Baker (whose tires are visible behind Hansford's).
LEFT: Eddie Lawson (74) took the Novice victory while Steve Biganski (40) dropped to 57th with problems.

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL DEAN, JIM ENYEART, ART FRIEDMAN, AND DOZIER MOBLEY



Gregg Hansford proved that the KR250 Kawasakis are still in the hunt, although they need bigger gas tanks for 100-mile races.

for-sale 750 racer. The new TZ750D, dubbed the "OW-31 Replica," had the same tiny profile and the same monoshock rear suspension as the OW-31 works bikes. It also incorporated a new exhaust system (which routed some pipes through the frame and sent others on convoluted journeys to keep them out of the way during cornering) as well as many other detail improvements.

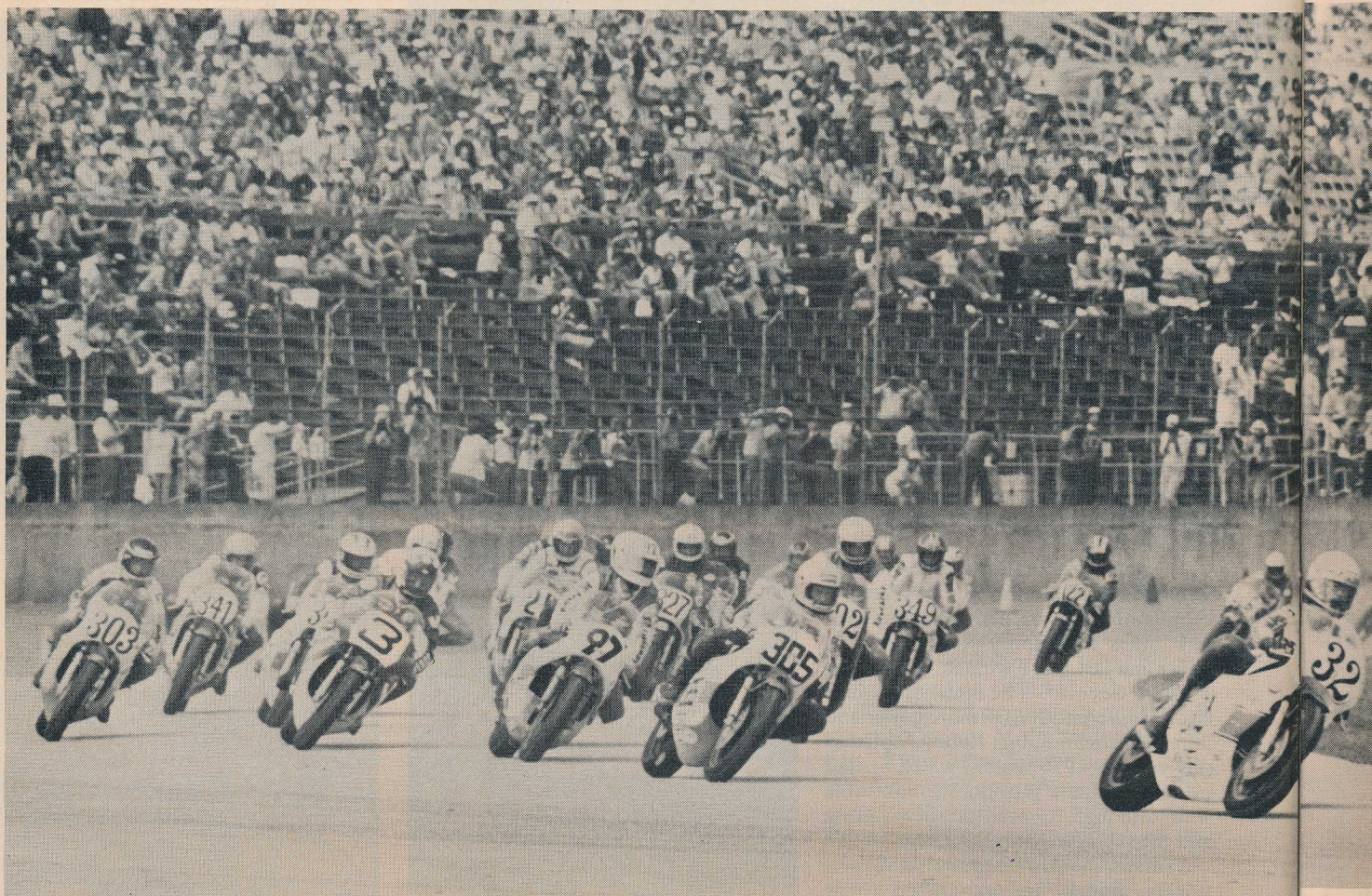
Privateers were also finding new ways to wring additional horsepower out of Yamaha's creations, and a number of new streamlining systems turned up on private equipment at Daytona. Steve McLaughlin used a wind tunnel to develop a very thorough streamlining system for his machine, and the fertile mind of Erv Kanemoto had developed a slick streamlining for Gary Nixon's new TZ750. But McLaughlin's fiberglass came to grief in a crash before the race, and Nixon cracked his wrist in a crash on Tuesday when his Harry-Hunt-prepared 250 seized, so Kanemoto's streamlining never had a rider to try it.

Qualifying runs, postponed until Friday because of rain, quickly confirmed the speed of the factory Yamahas. Baker and Roberts both turned average one-lap speeds in the 111-mph bracket, and Baker, with a speed less than one-tenth mph faster than Roberts, got the pole. Australia's Warren Willing (who was sharing a garage with Roberts) qualified third-fastest, with a speed three mph slower than the two Americans'. Cecotto and Frenchman Patrick Pons got the rest of the coveted front-row starting spots. Although there were only two Kawasaki KR750s in the field, Gregg Hansford

qualified his in sixth spot. Ron Pierce got the seventh starting position, the best qualifying performance by an "old" TZ750. Thirty-six foreigners and 76 Yamahas qualified for the 80-bike starting field.

Friday also saw the running of the 76-mile Novice 250 race, the first ten laps of which were a close-quarters duel between Eddie Lawson, Lance Jones, Scott Shinn and Steve Biganski. Shinn eventually stopped for two laps to fix his ailing motorcycle and Jones and Lawson crept away from Biganski, who was shuffled to fourth by Craig Morris before dropping out of the race. Lawson and Jones kept swapping the lead until Lawson began to apply his slight top-speed advantage to open up a nine-second lead at the checkers. Morris was third, followed by Chuck Killen and Bruce Sass.

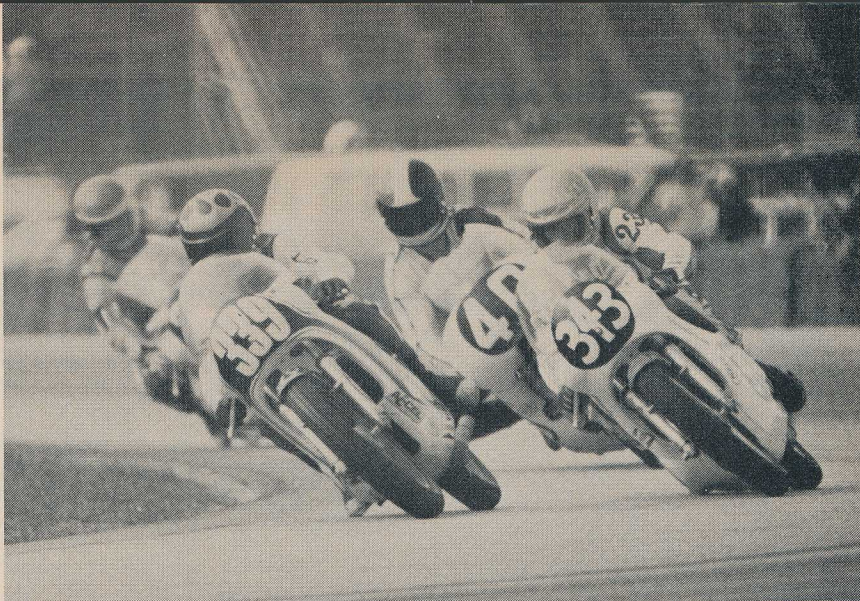
For Lawson it was a fine way to celebrate his 19th birthday, but Jones' story is even more interesting. It was his first roadrace, and he had purchased his TZ250 (from Lawson's sponsor) *the day before* the heat races. His total experience on a roadracer was five laps of practice before his heat race, where he finished third. He'd blown his engine before the final and also had to replace the igni-



tion—which was timed by ear as his pit crew installed the bike's gas tank on the starting grid. Jones celebrated that evening by winning the shorttrack races at Memorial Stadium.

Friday's final race was the 50-mile Superbike "Production" race, won with little apparent effort by Cook Neilson. Neilson put his overbored Ducati Super Sport into the lead for the final time on the second lap and then shot away from the rest of the field. Wes Cooley held a distant second on a Yoshimura Kawasaki 1000 until he was dropped to third behind the Mack-tuned Kawasaki ridden by David Emde. Moto-Guzzi-mounted Mike Baldwin caught and passed last year's Superbike champions, Reg Pridmore and his Butler and Smith BMW, but Pridmore eventually found a way to reverse the situation and re-claimed fourth at flag-fall.

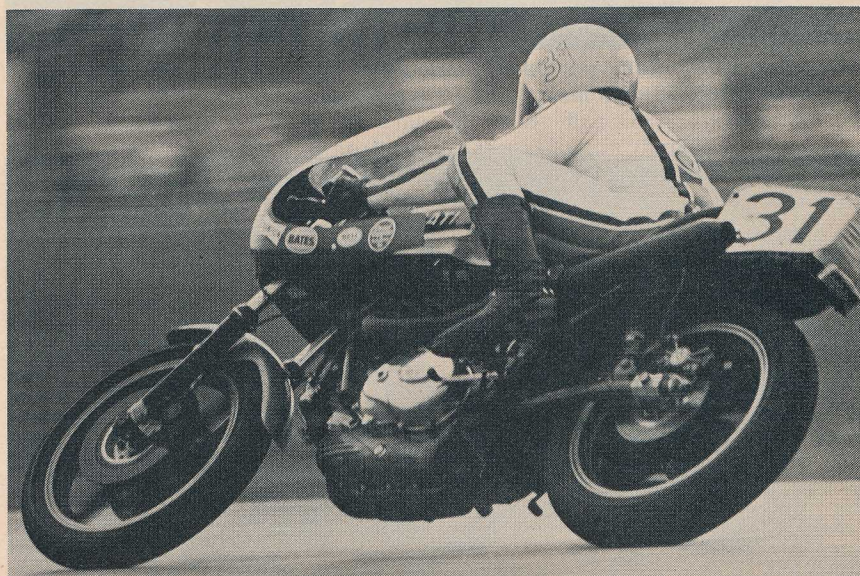
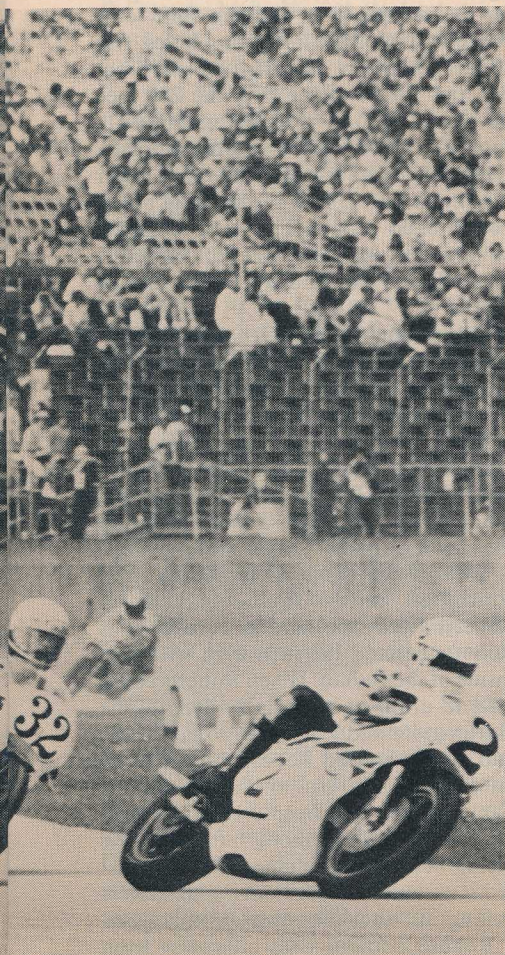
Saturday's 250 Expert event seemed like it might be the best race of the weekend. There were no gas stops or tire problems to interrupt the racing, and among the potential winners were a number of fast riders. Yamahas have won this race for the past 12 years, but this year brought a renewed threat from Harley-Davidson. That company im-



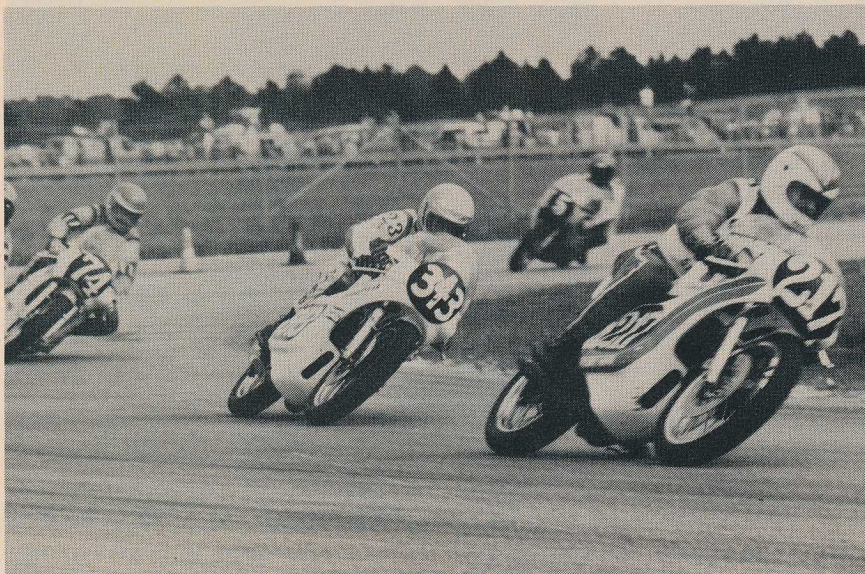
This is the way the Novice race went for the first ten laps, with none of the four able to get the upper hand. Scott Shinn (339) and Steve Biganski (40) eventually succumbed to mechanical difficulties. Fast qualifier Eddie Lawson (74; here running at the back of the clump) eventually won and Lance Jones (343) was second.



Double World Champion Walter Villa (left) and Kenny Roberts discuss the meaning of WFO prior to the 250 race.



Cook Neilson took his Ducati Super Sport to a runaway victory and a new race record in the Superbike race.



Dirtracker Lance Jones (343) was riding—and leading—his first roadrace, although Eddie Lawson (74) was the eventual winner.



For Mike Baeder (left) and David Emde (who was riding the No. 25 bike at the right), the 750 race lasted less than one lap.



Katayama racked up the weekend's second-best score with a second in the 250 race and a third in the 750 event.

ported Italian Walter Villa, its 250 and 350cc world roadracing champion, and his teammate Franco Uncini to join its Grand National Champion, Jay Springsteen. Although there is no longer a Kawasaki roadracing team based in America, Australians Gregg Hansford and Murray Sayle were on hand with Kaw KR250s, which have been lightened, quickened and cleansed of most of their teething demons. If development of the KR250 is allowed to go forward, the Kawasaki's design advantages (rotary valves, low frontal area and narrow width) seem certain to take it to the top of the heap.

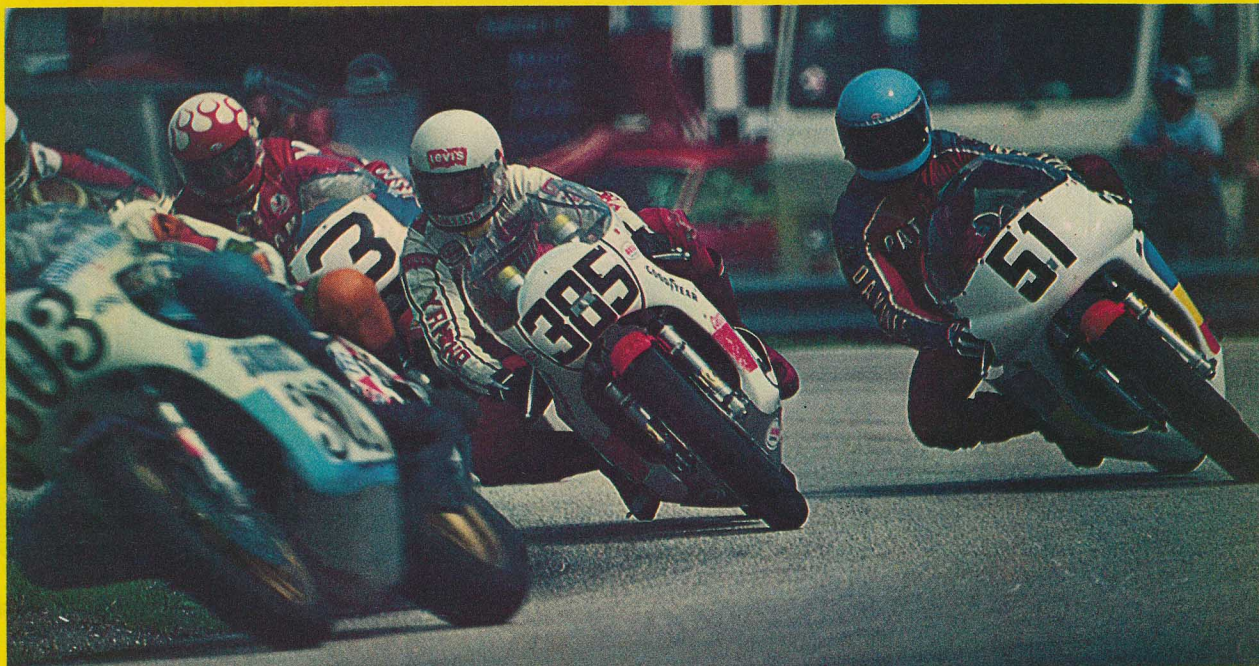
Despite Yamaha's long domination of the 250 class, the company hasn't paused in its development of 250cc mounts for its team riders. This year Kel Carruthers built a new monoshock frame for Kenny Roberts' TZ250 which was smaller and lighter than the standard frame. Coupled with newly-developed streamlining (fairing and seatback), the bike represents a big step forward. Roberts was very pleased with the new frame's handling, and when Steve Baker saw the bike, he ordered one as well.

The two tiny factory Yamahas were sitting on the pole for Saturday morning's 250 International Race. Villa had problems in his heat and had qualified 26th. Things went from bad to worse for Villa when he stepped on his drilled-for-lightness shift lever to put his bike in gear on the starting line and the shift lever broke at one of the lightening holes. But Villa's absence was hardly noticed. From the first twitch of the flag, the 250 race developed into a running, free-for-all, four-way brawl between Roberts, Baker, Uncini and Hansford, with each rider forging to the front of the swirling group about once a lap. The lead changed constantly and any one of the four seemed likely to end up either first or fourth.

Behind the fast four at the front, Japanese rock-and-roll singer Takazumi Katayama was holding fifth, followed by Springsteen and another constantly-shifting group consisting of Richard Schlachter, Harry Klinzmann, Pierre Soulas, Doug Teague and Charles Mortimer (until the latter crashed entering the chicane about 18 miles into the race).

The cut-and-thrust dicing at the front continued until Uncini leaned on Roberts a little too hard in Turn Two, as Roberts entered the turn even with and inside of the Italian. When Roberts eased off and dropped back half a length, the Harley rider suddenly dove to the inside and almost stuffed Roberts off the track onto the grass. Up to that point the Yamaha rider had been content to dawdle and put on a show, but when the dicing became too intense, Roberts gassed it up and just *split*, leaving the others behind at better than two seconds a lap.

Roberts continued to pull away from



Patrick Pons (303), Warren Willing (385), Pat Evans (51) and Gene Romero mix it up early in the race. Except for Pons, who dropped out just before the flag, they all finished in the top ten.

the other three for several laps until the damping on his monoshock began to rapidly disappear, slowing him—although the others still couldn't overtake him. Then a slower rider he was lapping came from behind and forced Roberts off the track, where he stalled the engine. By the time he had restarted, the leaders had gone past, so Roberts, who felt he couldn't catch the front-runners without rear-end damping, called it quits.

Roberts wasn't the only one to suffer from equipment shortcomings. Springer came up with a handful of nothing when his Harley's front brake failed entering Turn One. Springer ran off onto the grass and tumbled to a halt without serious injury. Uncini's race came to a similar end in the chicane. By this time, Baker had a firm lead and was steadily building it, and Hansford was slowing with rotary valve maladies. Eventually the Kawasaki rider backed into the sights of Katayama, who swooped around Hansford to take second. For Hansford, the worst was yet to come: He ran out of gas with two laps to go.

Baker won comfortably with a 25-second bulge, followed by Katayama, Schlachter, Klinzmann and Soulas. It was Baker's first win at Daytona and Yamaha's 13th consecutive victory in this race.

The tension in the pits on Sunday morning at Daytona is so intense you can taste it. Professional roadracers will tell you that they would rather win Daytona than all the other national roadraces put together. A win or a high finish at Daytona can vault an unknown rider to international stardom. The pressure is compounded by the difficulty of preparing a bike and rider to go 200 miles.

**DAYTONA MOTORCYCLE CLASSICS:
750cc EVENT
OFFICIAL RESULTS**

1. Steve Baker Yamaha Motor Co./
Yamaha
2. Ken Roberts Yamaha Motor Co.,
USA/Yamaha
3. Takazumi Katayama Sarome/
Yamaha
4. Gregg Hansford Doyle/Kawasaki
5. Gene Romero Vesco/Yamaha
6. Warren Willing Yamaha
7. Christian Sarron Gautoises/
Yamaha
8. Pat Evans Dahmen/Yamaha
9. Boet Van Dulmen Yamaha
10. Randy Cleek Bel-Ray/Yamaha
11. Harry Cone Cone's/Yamaha
12. Michel Rougerie Dada-Levior/
Yamaha
13. Ron Haslam Carter/Yamaha
14. Christian Estrosi TOTAL/Yamaha

Privateers faced the hassle of finding spare wheels at the last moment or making arrangements for a tire change at the halfway point. Even riders who knew they could go the distance on one tire appreciated the cornering advantage of a fresh one, although many riders never had a chance to break in a spare tire. As it turned out, the whole matter proved to be academic.

A more significant problem befell Kenny Roberts' machine. The seals on the primary drive side of TZ750 crankshafts are prone to problems, and those seals went belly-up on Roberts' bike in the Sunday morning practice. There wasn't time to fix the problem in that engine—the good one—so a new engine had to be installed, and it didn't have as much power as the good one.

Launch time was 1 p.m. and the five-minute countdown released some al-

most-visible butterflies in the stomachs of those on the starting grid. Roberts led the terrifying charge to the first turn with Baker, Cecotto, Pierce and Hansford close behind.

For some riders the race didn't even last one lap. Johnny Cecotto's Yamaha had a gearbox oil leak, and David Emde, trying hard to slip past Cecotto as he braked for the chicane on the back straight, suddenly found himself skidding in the spilled oil. Mike Baeder and Ron Mass got caught up in the oil and Emde's crashing machine, and the two joined Emde in demolishing the haybales. No one was critically injured, but there were quite a few broken bones. Cecotto eventually parked his leaking machine on the fourth lap. Skip Aksland, who had been among the first-lap leaders, also retired when he lost his clutch.

Baker took control of the race on the third lap, dropping Roberts to second place. By then, Gregg Hansford had the Kawasaki up in third. As Baker pulled away from Roberts and Roberts pulled away from Hansford, Takazumi Katayama (who had qualified 26th) moved up, passing Patrick Pons, Gene Romero and finally Hansford.

Romero and Pons raced together, taking turns occupying fourth spot. Behind them, Pat Evans applied pressure, passing Dutchman Boet Van Dulmen and then Ron Pierce to take possession of sixth. Steve McLaughlin ran out of sparks and retired, and Gary Scott saw his chances of picking up any Daytona points disappear when his engine fetched up.

Since the race distances were to be 100 miles at a time, the riders didn't have to

Continued on page 114

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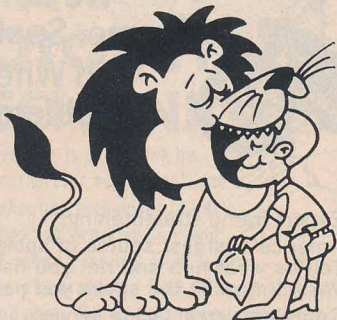
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WHEN YOU SAY STEVE BAKER, YOU'VE SAID IT ALL

Continued from page 47

take on as much gas at their pit stops as they would have to in a straight 200-mile run, and this shortened pit stops slightly. Baker called at his pits for just four seconds, but that was enough to give Roberts the lead. Roberts led for several laps until his pit stop dropped him back to second again.

After that Baker was home-free. The leaders didn't change positions for the rest of the leg. Baker continued to put about a second a lap on Roberts, who seemed content to ease up as long as Katayama didn't get too close. A distant second was as valuable to Roberts as a close one. Although Katayama gained on Roberts, he only closed to within seven seconds at the flag. Roberts' lack of horsepower hurt him and he said that he "didn't feel comfortable" on the 750, but he didn't have his traditional severe tire problems: His tires didn't "ball up" at Daytona.

Hansford was secure in fourth position and Romero became assured of fifth when Pons retired five laps from the flag with a dying clutch. Privateer Ron Pierce saw a good finish go bad when a main bearing went south with three laps to go. Pierce had expected the problem: The only exhaust pipes he could get for his bike—which he borrowed from Harry Klinzmann—were high-rpm pipes, designed to let the engine rev to 12,000 rpm. At those engine speeds Pierce anticipated bearing problems and stopped as soon as the engine began to sour.

Warren Willing and Frenchman Christian Sarron had sliced up into the top ten, passing Pat Evans' Paul-Dahmen-prepared machine to occupy sixth and seventh at the finish. Behind Evans and Van Dulmen, Randy Cleek finished the 100-mile leg in tenth.

About five minutes after the last bike rolled into the pits for a mid-race freshening up, the first drops of rain began to fall, and five minutes later the sprinkle had turned into a downpour. At first the riders and mechanics relaxed, assuming the rain would just extend the time between legs, but it soon became obvious—despite announced assurances of a quick end to the storm—that the track wasn't going to dry out that day. It was an anticlimactic end to America's most important race and the opening round of the World Formula 750 Championship. Daytona 1977 didn't end; it just sort of faded away.

Late in the afternoon, the officials and organizers finally acknowledged that the Daytona 200 had become the Daytona 100, and the appropriate riders, trophy-persons, officials, etc. were rounded up and trooped off to victory circle. There, in front of vacant grandstands and under stormy skies, a ceremony which was almost a parody of a trophy presentation was held, and speedy Steve Baker was officially pronounced The Winner. The weekend had made Baker \$20,000 richer.

There's no doubt that halving the race conflicted with many riders' race plans and changed the results. For example, had Ron Pierce known that there would be no second segment, he would have continued for the remaining three laps and probably would have earned a top-ten finish. And the riders who had prepared and ridden to finish 200 miles would have moved up as the second segment's distance wore down less cautious riders and more tautly-strung machines.

But a second leg would probably not have changed the name of the winner. "I couldn't have made up that 28 seconds that Baker had on me," conceded Roberts, "not with the motor I had. If we'd regared it for the second leg, we'd have had a hell of a race, but I couldn't make up 28 seconds on him... At least I got the points." Maybe Roberts was remembering 1974, when he also finished second at Daytona and went on to win the national championship. Second place at Daytona combined with victory the following week at the Charlotte roadrace to put Roberts on top of the 1977 Camel Pro Series standing with a 51-to-29-point cushion on Jay Springsteen, who isn't contesting any national roadraces.

Roberts' only hope for a Daytona victory would have been through bad luck for Baker. But Baker is as steady as he is fast, and Bob Work's engines rarely falter. Other finishes might have changed, but Baker's victory was as clean and unassailable as if he'd won after 200 miles.

For 24-year-old Baker it was the perfect start to a season which will see him pursuing the prestigious 500cc world championship abroad as a member of the factory Yamaha team. Despite his status as a newcomer on the world championship circuit, Baker has reached the point where he is *the* man to beat at any roadrace. 🏁