

Proving once again
that the shortest distance
between two points is a straight line—

Barstow

■ Despite what the BLM and the rest of the eco-freaks might try, nobody, but nobody is going to stop more than 4,000 desert racers as they get from point A to point B on motorcycles. Barstow-to-Vegas is history; it's tradition. The Indy 500 of desert racing. I hate to be the one to destroy the myth, but the race really doesn't start in Barstow, but rather in the Mojave Desert between two freeway off ramps—the Harvard and Field Road off ramps.

There, alongside the symbol of southern California—the freeway, never-ending and stretching across the desert like a ribbon—grows a small city of campers, vans and (for the more affluent) mobile homes. This city is short-lived; it grows in one day and is gone the next as the support crews for the racers trek into the neon canyons of Las Vegas.

No race faces here, not really. Even the factory riders are here to have a good time. The mood is festive, much like a gypsy camp; only an occasional pit race breaks the loud silence of the desert night. The full moon outlines the alien machines parked on the Mojave Desert. It's the calm before the storm. Soon two-strokes (and a few four-strokes here and there) will attack the terrain on the way to Vegas.

The desert chill had not yet been baked away by the sun when the first wave—including amateurs, experts, sidehacks, powder puffers and an occasional dune cycle—powered toward the smoke bomb only two and a half miles away at 8 a.m.

The worst part is having to eat the dust. Anything is better than the choking, eye-searing dust. For the first 20 miles it was 43-year-old Art Knapp leading a pack estimated to be nearly 3,000 strong. It was an awesome spectacle. The sound, the noise, the racers and the cheering crews added up to a real happening.

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The whoop-dee-dooos were great.

Just 20 more yards. Some of the bikes were literally carried down to the line.



to-Vegas

if the dust, rocks and ruts don't bother you, that is.

By Scott Harrison Photos: Dennis Greene



There's not much scenery in the Mojave Desert, but you can really gas it.

Even finishing makes you a hero. Barstow-to-Vegas is tough.



One hour later, with the butterflies in the stomach severely churned up along with breakfast, the novices were turned loose to chase the settling dust of the first wave.

Knapp led into the first check with Jack Johnson and A.C. Bakken close behind. Before the next check was reached, both Bakken (on the factory Husqvarna 400) and Johnson (also on a Husky) got by Knapp. Johnson was leading until the thin air at 4,000 feet (the California desert is deceptively tall) caused his machine to eat a serious hole in the piston and end his day of fun.

Charging hard, Bobby Balentine on a Husky took the lead through the second and third checks, looking like a winner until his tire became allergic to air and he limped along until the wheel finally knuckled under to the desert.

Meanwhile, Mitch Mayes, also on a 400 Husky, was having troubles: His front wheel had been a victim of the crowded and sometimes rude start, and he lost time at the first check replacing it with a round one.

In pursuit of his Baja teammate Bakken, Mayes said he was "motocrossing it," trying to make up the time he lost in the pits. He lost even more time at another check when he had to repair a flat rear tire. The tenacious Mr. Mayes kept pushing, and two and a half hours after the start he caught up with the leader Bakken.

While the rest of the pack was choking in their own dust, Mayes and Bakken were out in front, riding along and making it look like a Sunday pleasure ride. Hanging back was the desert veteran Knapp, riding his own race. Running on the freeway that parallels the course into Vegas, they were pulling away from the camera crews trying to beat them to the finish. Eventually our Highway Patrol escort got bored pacing us at 55 mph and we had to kick it up to catch the riders. They were MOVING.



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Coming into a check point.



Desert racing rule number one: Always land with the rear wheel first.

The Barstow-to-Vegas, put on by the San Gabriel Valley Motorcycle Club, is a classic, but the finish this year irked the old-time racers. Mayes and Bakken crossed the line in a photo finish, and the win was awarded to Bakken on the basis of a coin toss in the desert. "Besides," said Mayes, "I won it last year." The old-timers weren't pleased, but it does put the race-for-fun-and-cheap-trophies aspect back into the contest.

Many desert riders who don't really consider themselves desert racers entered the Barstow-to-Vegas caper fearing it might be the last running of this classic event. The AMA was flooded with new memberships (nearly 1,000) mostly from those fearing the worst. A semi-reliable motorcycle and \$12 got you entered in one of the largest motorsports events in the U.S.

If the dust-covered ruts didn't get you, the dust did. Those who survived were happy, those who finished at all were delighted, and those who placed in the top 100 were heroes.

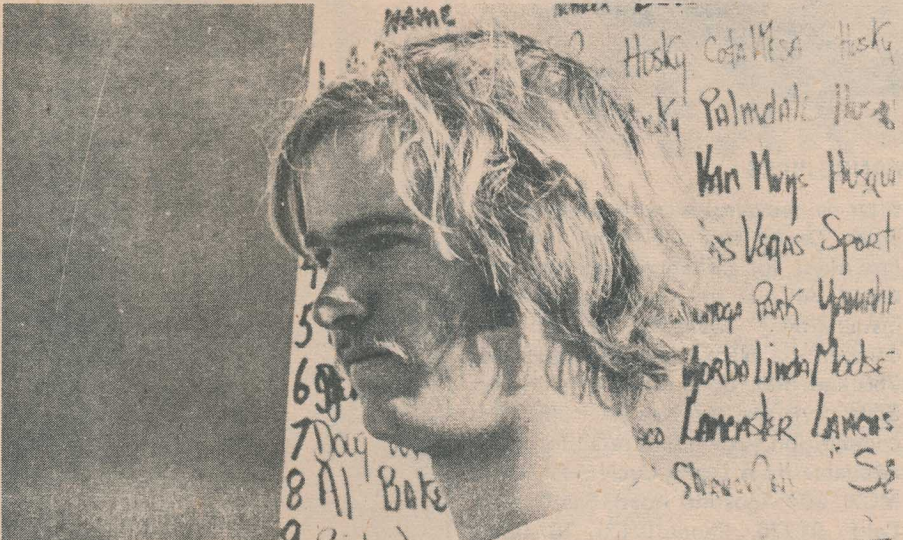
And so the eighth annual



Art ("Old Man") Knapp rode a wise race and finished a strong third.



Tenth-place finisher Ron Wright brings it home.



The co-winner, Mitch Mayes, lost it on a very unofficial coin toss in the desert.



"Look, I won". Winner A.C. Bakken pops the cork on the victory champagne.

Barstow-to-Vegas bash ended in the rocks and desert just outside of Glamor Gulch. Happy parents, wives and hangers-on greeted their dusty heroes and followed the bright lights into town for a night long to be remembered by harassed pit bosses, bar maids and other hotel and casino employees. One pit boss admitted that although the racers spent money, the hotel security people kept a wary eye on those who even looked like racers. So much for the friendly city in the desert.

Broken bodies, broken bikes and broke; but you can bet they will all be back next year. There is only one Barstow-to-Vegas. ●

BARSTOW-TO-VEGAS RESULTS
(unofficial)

- | | |
|------------------|---------------|
| 1) A.C. Bakken | Husqvarna 400 |
| 2) Mitch Mayes | Husqvarna 400 |
| 3) Art Knapp | Husqvarna 400 |
| 4) Scott Hardin | Husqvarna 250 |
| 5) Dave Labraik | Yamaha 250 |
| 6) Dean Modesett | Penton 175 |
| 7) Doug Winchell | Bultaco 250 |
| 8) Al Baker | Husqvarna 400 |
| 9) Rick Jones | Bultaco |
| 10) Ron Wright | Yamaha 250 |



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