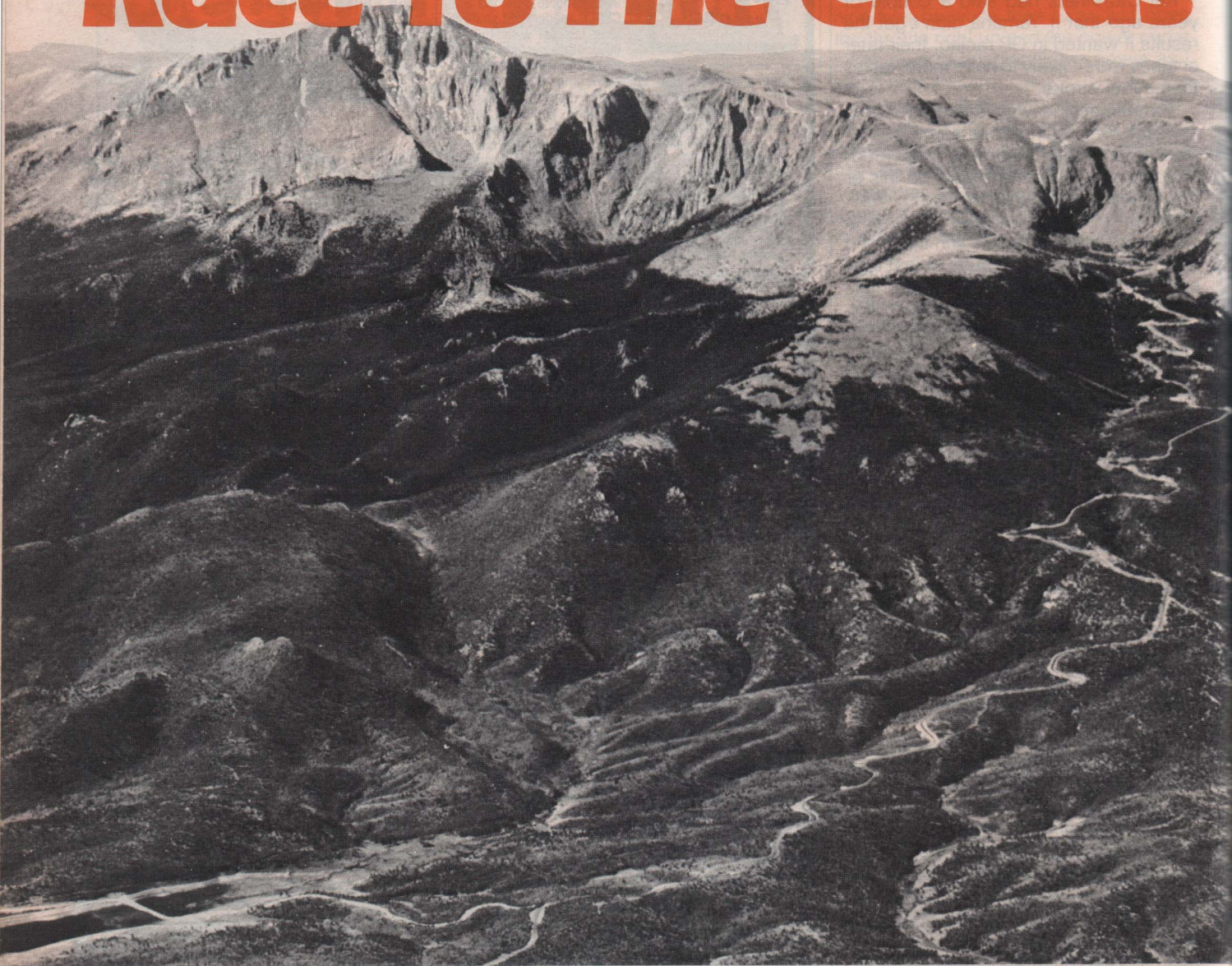


Race To The Clouds



● ASK ANY ICE-CHEST-TOTING SPECTATOR or any fiery-eyed competitor to name the ultimate bike race and he'll probably answer Daytona, Baja, Carlsbad, San Jose or the Isle of Man. But ask someone who's been to Colorado Springs on July Fourth, this past year or almost any of the last 60 years, and you'll get a different answer. He'll tell you Pikes Peak.

Pikes Peak is not a typical hill climb à la Widowmaker. The July Fourth classic is basically an uphill fireroad race, maybe more akin to a winding, climbing, jumpless TT. However you describe the course, the race itself is dramatic, challenging and spectacular. It is perhaps one of the most exciting races in the world for both spectator and participant.

Want convincing? Next time you swing a leg over your favorite gas tank, imagine this. Picture yourself moseying seven miles up the Pikes Peak Auto Highway until the pavement ends at the 9500-foot elevation mark. Now imagine yourself

Look ahead and you'll see a broad, twisting fireroad leading through pine forests, past lakes and finally above the timberline to the snow-capped summit of Pikes Peak. Don't look down or shut off the gas—you've just started the world's longest hillclimb.

By Joe Stephan

right there beneath a "Start" banner. Before you lies 12.42 miles of twisty, super-fast two-lane dirt road which leads inexorably to a rocky, snowcapped mountain summit in the distance—a summit where the snow never melts.

To get there, all you have to do is survive 156 curves and hairpin turns lined with trees, rocks, boulders and murderous drop-offs. Don't look over: off

some of those banks it's thousands of feet down. Are you in top physical condition? You'd better be, or you're going to be wheezing by the time you reach 14,110 feet. No doubt your wheezing will only match your bike's—unless, of course, your tuning skills are honed. Above all, don't think about getting snowed on or about the prospect of as many as 40 motorcycles wheel-to-wheel on a once-only shot to make the top. Now what do you think of the chances for some excitement running up the hill?

If you're captivated by the idea of making your way to the top, you're not alone. People have been dreaming about that mountain for nearly two centuries. American explorers first saw Pikes Peak in 1806. Exploring what is now the state of Colorado, a young Army Lieutenant named Zebulon Pike set a goal for himself: to reach the summit. He failed. Pike and his men were turned back in their

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efforts to climb the mountain, and in bitter defeat Pike declared, if somewhat ostentatiously, "No man will ever climb that mighty mountain."

One hundred ten years later, in 1916 to be exact, wealthy philanthropist Spencer Penrose completed an auto highway to the top to promote the tourism for which the Colorado Springs area has long been famous. Man and machine being what they are, barely months passed before the first race was on.

In fact, drivers of the first motorized vehicles had made it to the top while the road was still under construction. The

Having been run nearly continuously for well over 60 years, the Pikes Peak hillclimb ranks as one of the oldest motor races in the country. Fittingly, some of motorcycling's and auto racing's great competitors have boasted of climbing the mountain—men like Floyd Clymer, Barney Oldfield, Cannonball Baker and Joe and Jerry Unser.

first car made the top off-road style in 1901, not long before the first motorcycle. Joe and Jerry Unser took the first sidecar to the top in 1915, while brother Louis awaited their arrival at the end of the road, where they picked up the machine and carried it the last mile to the top. Deeds similar in spirit, if not in style, would later be accomplished by Jerry's sons, Bobby and Al Unser.

That inaugural race included all the frenzied excitement the times could muster. Promoters knew big names were necessary to capture the public's interest, so they arranged to have Barney Oldfield and Cannonball Baker race.

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Even Eddie Rickenbacker showed up, not famous yet but soon to gain a reputation as a World War I flying ace.

One entire day of the three-day meet was devoted to the motorcycles, which ran one at a time on a time interval the way the cars still do today. The big winner in that first day's activities was none other than the late great Floyd Clymer, who'd also had the distinction of riding the first cycle to the top a few years earlier. According to newspaper accounts of the day, Clymer's charge to the top in that 1916 race was simply another episode in a long-time rivalry with Frank Kuntz, who'd been an adversary since their childhood in Greeley, Colorado.

Clymer, though, was hardly out cherry-picking. Harley-Davidson, Excelsior, Indian and Thor all had their factory teams out in full force. Young Floyd came in first in the two professional events and finished second in the Colorado State Championship and sidecar races aboard a special home-built eight-valve racing Excelsior. Even though that machine wasn't as fast as the factory bikes, he preferred it since he believed it offered exceptional handling. There's no telling what Clymer could have done on a faster bike, but—speculation aside—his winning run was only one minute slower than the winning car time.

The only serious accident of the day occurred when Art Davidson crashed 10 feet from the finish. But it wasn't that crash that got him—it was what happened immediately after. Art got up in a daze and picked up his bike. He started back down the hill, evidently thoroughly confused, and made it about two miles before he went over the side and crashed into the boulders below. His teammates carted him down the mountain to the hospital in a sidecar.

Though auto racing up the peak has gone on essentially uninterrupted since 1916 (except for a break during World War II), bike racing has been spotty. From 1916, motorcycles competed into the '20s. There was a long break in organized runs—from the '20s until 1971—during which time only two cycle races

were AMA sanctioned, coming back-to-back in 1954 and '55.

In 1971 bikes were back en masse. Two-wheeled racing up the peak provided spectators with more excitement than auto runs did because the bikes battled much closer together. Into the mid-'70s the race grew in popularity despite—or maybe because of—certain obstacles. One year 70 mph winds whipped the competitors; another year fog hindered them. Through it all the excitement seemed only to intensify.

In 1976 the current record holder, Rick Deane, had a wheel-for-wheel battle going the entire way with David Korth through bitter cold and wind-whipped snow. Only the most experienced were ready for the unexpected Fourth of July snowstorm, and Deane and Korth were two who coped with the bizarre twist. Coming through the fast left-hand sweeper into the finish trailing Deane slightly, Korth got out into the loose stuff and took down the finish-banner pole. Korth was uninjured but his bike was badly bent. The finish line personnel and spectators quickly got the broken pole and wire into the air before the third-place runner crossed the line.

For mostly political reasons, bikes did not race from 1977–1979, but in 1980 the promoters reintroduced motorcycle racing, and it once again carried the AMA's stamp of approval.

In an effort to eliminate the massive pileup of the '76 start and reduce injuries all around, race organizers instituted a qualifying system. Seven bikes left the line on one minute intervals for the half-way run to Glen Cove; this is the same system the autos use. Qualifying also eliminated the need for the race referees' and flagman's facetious plans for the start. Terrified by the prospect of dropping a flag in front of a group of fanatical racers who obviously had no intention of shutting off the gas for anyone or anything, the starters jokingly proposed to drop the start banner from a helicopter.

Qualifying also produced better racing for the spectators. When seven riders lined up at the start, you knew they were there because they had very nearly the same ability and you could be assured of wheel-to-wheel action up the peak.

A record-breaking crowd of 25,000 spectators—most of them picnicking and enjoying the surroundings as well as the race—crowded onto the hill on race day 1980; that's a 40 percent increase, which many attribute to the return of the bikes. The spectators jumped and cheered and were glued to the radio broadcast as each class thundered up the hill.

Sparky Edmonston provided the thrills in the first half of the Open Pro Class, leading for the first five or six miles before dropping into third. Lonnie Houtchens was one of the racers who overtook Sparky, and Houtchens went on to win the Open Pro Class with a time of 13:44.73; that's 32 seconds off Rick Deane's 1976 winning and record-breaking time of 13:12.61.

Bob Conway came in second with a 13:45.027 after he crashed his Triumph 750 at Devil's Playground. He had a tremendous ride shaping up when he crashed. In fact, he picked his bike up and nearly reeled in Houtchens in the last four miles, finishing less than a bike length behind.

Race co-organizer Steve Scott captured his sixth straight 250 Pro Class win. He's made the class his personal property and this year posted a run of 13:56.81—breaking the old record by three seconds—on his Bultaco. He stretched his margin of victory to 35 seconds over Yamaha-mounted co-organizer Gary Palmgren (Chuck's brother).

"Donnie Danger"—Donald K. Seidel II—had his eye on the Open Sportsman Division and took top honors there. He set a new record for that class, making it to the top in 14:33.69. David Doyle bested the 250 Sportsmen with a time of 15:09.76—only 36 seconds off the big bike record.

There should be no problem running bikes up the hill in the future. The cars prefer to have other classes using the road ahead of them; the bikes do a good job of sweeping the road of the loose stuff. The new Pikes Peak Hill Climb Association President Charles Tutt IV (his great grandfather was partner to Spencer Penrose in building the Pikes Peak road) and the community-supported "300 Club" made 1980 one of the best Pikes Peak runs in years, so there's no hassle with city support. With a major sponsor well into the works for '81, this year's purse (along with contingencies from manufacturers) could be considerably more than the 1980 \$5000 payback.

Regardless of the payback, in just a few months, a bunch of enthusiasts will again line up with their eyes on a snowy summit ahead. They'll have a long tradition behind them too. Floyd Clymer and the Unser brothers along with explorers who never had a chance to know what two-wheeled excitement is all about have been dreaming about making it to the top of the peak for centuries. ●