

PROFILE: DON VESCO

One Land Speed Record Isn't Enough; Vesco Wants it All by Fred M. H. Gregory

Don Vesco is faced with the same problem as ex-Prez Gerry Ford—what do you do after you reach the top? But unlike Ford—who can't very well pack up and try to become the president of another country—Vesco can at least move to another mountain and try to scale new heights. At the moment, he has driven a two-wheeled vehicle faster than any other person in history. The next thing he wants to do is drive a wheel-driven vehicle faster than anyone else, period.

Vesco set his motorcycle record in 1975 by averaging better than 302 mph on a two-way blast at the Bonneville Salt Flats. This October he will begin construction of a new (once again, two-wheeled) vehicle to assault the record set many years ago by the Summers brothers. They used a streamliner powered by four Chrysler Hemis and bumped the mark to 407. In the intervening years, of course, any number of jet jockeys and rocket riders have gone a good deal faster than that, but purists and Land Speed Record buffs maintain that these people are merely demented passengers, simply riding in horizontal spaceships that are essentially out of their control. Still, the rockets have taken the luster off the wheel-driven record and Don Vesco is going to be the first man in quite a while to take a shot at it.

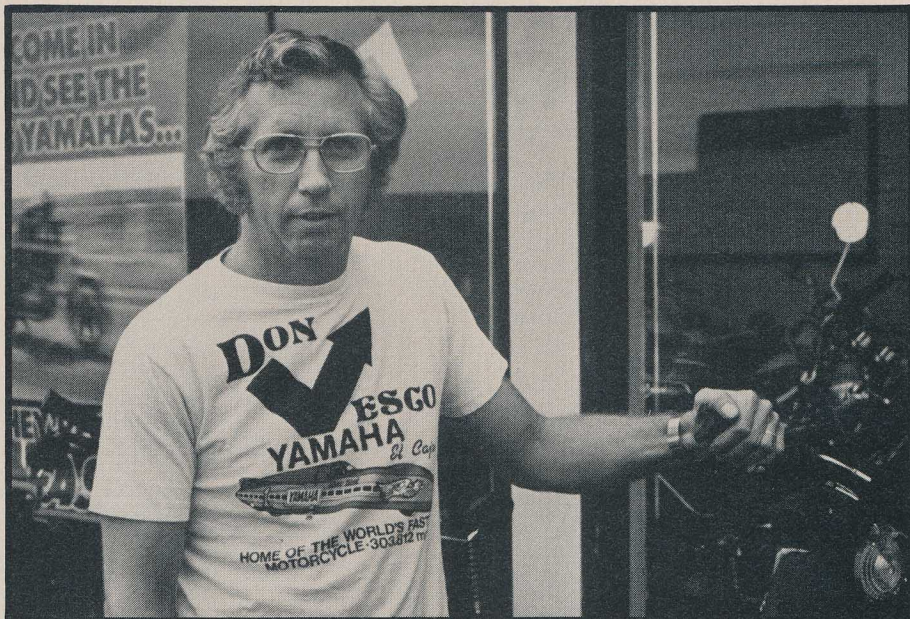
That alone says a lot about him. There's really little in the way of money or glory to be gained by breaking the Summers Brothers record. And, though he has the backing of Kawasaki and will be using KZ1000 motors (anywhere from one to three of them, both normally aspirated and turbocharged), sponsors are not exactly burying him with blank checks. He's not even sure if he can get tires for his new streamliner, since the major tire companies seem to have no interest in the project.

Why is Don Vesco doing it? Simple. He's a racer at heart and speed is in his blood.

He is a second generation hot rodder who became infected with the racing virus as a pre-teen in the early 1950s. His father was one of the original Southern California drag racers and also campaigned a streamliner at Bonneville for many years.

Though Vesco first got his hands dirty helping Dad with four-wheeled racers, it wasn't long before he was racing motorbikes and, by the time he got his driver's license, he'd moved up to motorcycles. Drag racing first attracted his attention, but by the late 1950s he'd turned to road racing, dirt tracks, half-miles and TTs.

Vesco's first racing bikes were Triumphs and BSAs. When the Japanese motorcycle invasion landed its first wave of machines in the early Sixties, he switched. There was a Honda factory ride for a couple of years and, in 1964, an offer to try a Yamaha. It



was a calculated risk. "They used to laugh at them at the races," he recalls. But when Vesco won at Daytona aboard a Yamaha a lot of people gagged on their giggles. "Yamaha was made by racing," he flatly states.

Even though he was a successful professional racer, Vesco could not make a living at it in those days and supported himself as a maintenance mechanic at an industrial plant near his home in El Cajon, California, a suburb of San Diego. In 1964, he was hurt in a spill and the word from his boss was: "Either quit racing or quit work."

It was like telling Bobby Riggs to quit tennis. Vesco took a hike and opened a small motorcycle repair shop and Yamaha dealership. Today, his thriving business handles several lines of bikes, does work for numerous racers and is the base of a solid mail order business in fairings, tanks and other special parts.

And, though his racing career tapered off around 1970—he hasn't ridden competitively in more than three years—Vesco continued to build fast bikes which were manned by some of the sport's biggest names. "I had Dick Mann ride for me," Vesco recalls, "I had Dave Smith ride for me for quite a while. Ronnie Pierce rode for me. Cal Rayborn and . . ." instead of going on he spins around in his chair and with a broad gesture lets a wall covered with pictures of racers do the talking. Gene Romero has been his rider for the past few seasons.

Though he retired from the track, Vesco didn't forsake the Salt Flats. He's been going there since 1951 when he was a child and has driven everything from streamlined cars to road racing bikes on the salt. In 1969, he built a streamlined bike which, compared to the competition, was under-

powered by a pair of 350cc Yamaha engines. At that time the motorcycle record was around 220 mph and Vesco, after a nasty incident, knew that it was his for the taking. "I was taching about 260 and I blew a tire about halfway through the mile and dropped it and slid through at 252. When I did that I *knew*—because that was the first bike that had ever been over 250 and it wasn't even on its *wheels*—I knew we had it then."

After a quick rebuild, he went out and set the record at over 250. It was only a month before it was broken and it wasn't until 1975 that Vesco got it back for good with his 300-mph passes.

Amazingly, he did it with a bike that was six years old and showing the scars of several tumbles. He thinks that it is capable of going 400 but is determined to build a new bike for safety's sake. "I want to be able to crash at 400 and get back up and dust it off and run again," he explains.

It won't look much different from his current record holder, the Silver Bird streamliner. "Most likely that same design will be utilized in the next one I make except it'll be bigger," he says. The difference will be under the skin. "It will be completely monocoque," Vesco says, adding that it will nevertheless employ a tube frame for added rigidity. He plans on whittling the shape of the bike out of a block of foam, hollowing it out where the engines, driver and wheels go, and then fiberglassing it. This will assure that the aerodynamic configuration keeps its integrity even after a spill and is not unlike building a giant crash helmet.

It's a formidable task that Don Vesco has set for himself. Nobody has done it before and Don Vesco wants to be the first.