

THREE IN A ROW

U.S. NATIONAL SPEEDWAY

Suddenly, it's gonna dawn on you . . . Bast is best
by Len Weed

Photography by Pat Brady

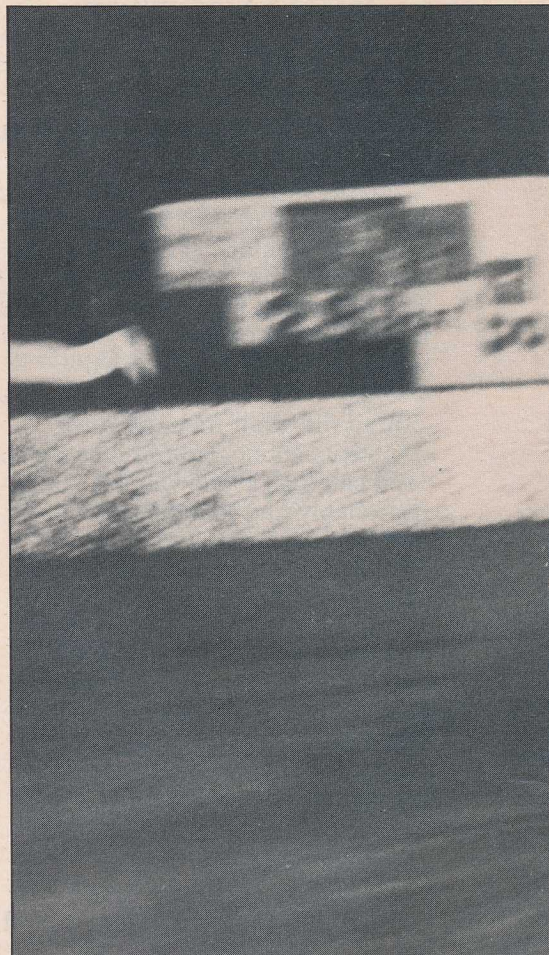
They cheer. They boo. One thing's certain. Nobody's neutral about Mike Bast, the champ. He dominates his sport in America.

Speedway championships are annual one-night affairs around the world. Get it up and go for it. Five heats and let's see who's best when it's all on the line.

Except for a one-year fling at the

Los Angeles Coliseum, Costa Mesa has been the site of the national final since the rebirth of the sport in California. Costa Mesa is also Penhall country. Bruce Penhall, the Fox, the 20-year-old challenger. Second in season scoring in 1976, first in '77. Many consider him the heir apparent.

It looked like the classic match-



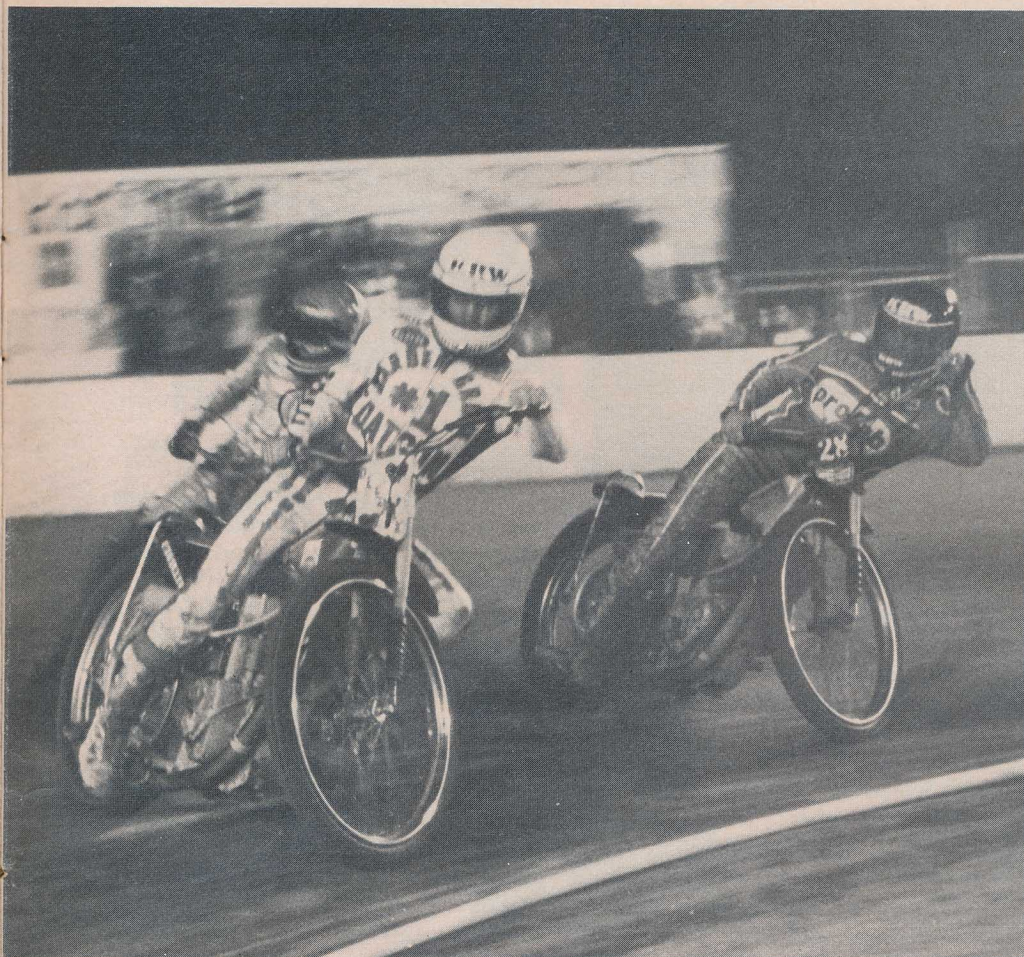
The thrill of victory . . .



Jubilation . . .



Hugging . . .



Number One again.



The runner-up. Steve Bast (left) and Bruce Penhall reflect on what might have been . . .



And the inevitable champagne dousing.



Continued hugging . . .

up. Adding to the drama — the luck of the draw. The pair would go head-to-head in the final heat of the evening. And when it was over it was Bast on top again. For the third straight year and the fifth time in the last seven tries.

For the second straight year "Crazy" Alan Christian (top scorer in the qualifiers) played a pivotal role in adding drama to the Datsun-Coors-KEZY-sponsored championship meet. Last year it was Christian who beat Bast in the opening heat. That set up the decider in a final confrontation between Bast and Penhall.

Again this year Mike failed to win his first ride as Northern California's top-ranked rider, Mike Faria, beat him in the opening heat.

Then Christian dealt Penhall the defeat Bast needed to keep his title hopes alive. It was the most frantic heat of the evening. Christian, who grabbed the lead from his pole position, held off Penhall's banzai charge, drifting him virtually into the boards and then shutting off the inside line around the pipe.

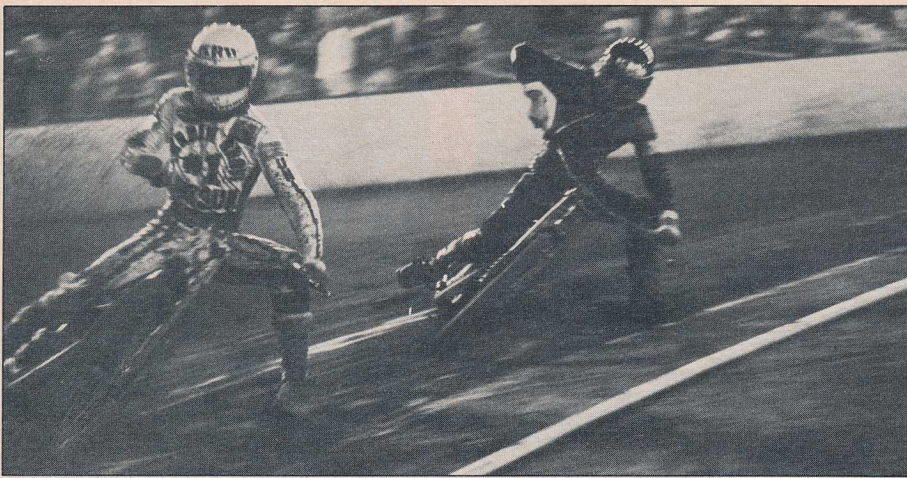
Steve Bast, like Penhall, won his first two heats. Steve, national

champion in 1969 and 1974, did not compete last year, but was back on the gas in '77, looking for his third title.

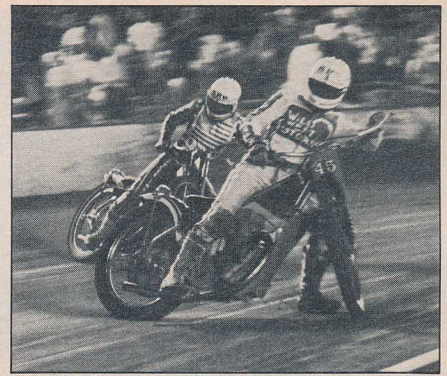
The brotherly confrontation was scheduled immediately after the Penhall-Christian duel as the final heat before intermission. If Steve had won it he would have taken a 9-8-7 lead. But Mike took it, creating a three-way tie for first at eight points apiece.

That logjam of front-runners was broken up immediately after the break. Bruce and Steve went head-to-head. Steve got the jump but Bruce went around to take the win. Now all Penhall had to do was wait for the final heat of the evening. But Mike still had to win one more heat to head into that final tussle tied at 11 points. And win it he did, but he had to pass Mark Cherry to do it.

Two heats later Steve won his final race, compounding the drama of the final heat confrontation. Whoever won the heat would win the championship. And whoever finished second faced a runoff for



Mike Bast leading Scott Sivadge.



Penhall (45) topped two-time champion Steve Bast for second place.

SIDEWAYS IN SEVENTY-SEVEN

Nothing like picking up after a 30-year layoff. Houston was the scene of the first AMA-sanctioned speedway final since 1947. The January 30th meet was resolved when Mike Curoso topped Scott Autrey in a runoff on the same track that had been used for the Class C TT and shorttrack openers the preceding two days.

Meanwhile, back in Southern California, home of the un-sanctioned but generally accepted "real" national final, all was not exactly hearts and flowers. The major promoter, Harry Oxley of International Speedway Inc., received demands from a number of riders seeking a 40-percent slice of the gate. Oxley claimed this would put him in the red and an impasse resulted. Oxley then pulled out of the riders' sanctioning body, the SRA, and announced he was going racing — anybody who wanted to come along at the usual 30 percent was invited.

The season openers were delayed three weeks and the early races were picketed by the striking riders, but eventually most returned to the flock.

The team racing reactivated in '76 was scrapped as a result of the hassles and it was open racing as usual in Costa Mesa, Irwindale, Ventura and San Bernardino. Racer and actor (*Father Knows Best*) Billy Gray turned promoter. He tried to revitalize racing interest in Bakersfield, but even Darth Vader and the power of the Force couldn't pump attendance.

Things settled down and second division (Novice) racing featured

three young ladies among the sideways lads.

Then, later in the year, some more controversy. Scott Autrey, who finished ninth in the world last year, had to come home from British Speedway League racing to qualify to ride the Inter-Continental world semifinal in England. Two other overseas Americans accompanied him, Steve Gresham and Mike Curoso.

While the AMA could have seeded Autrey or anyone else to the Inter-Continental, such practice is not the norm. New Zealand's Ivan Mauger, who won his fifth world title in September, had to plane home to qualify. Still, some questioned the decision.

Bast won the Costa Mesa qualifier for England and Penhall topped Autrey in a runoff for the second American slot.

Bast and Penhall flew to England three weeks early for the specific purpose of getting some experience on the much longer overseas tracks, as well as dialing in their bikes. For three weeks the door was slammed in their face, despite assurances from the AMA that they would be able to ride in England. Both received offers to race in the British Speedway League, but only after the Inter-Continental Final. Mike and Bruce wound up on strange bikes with virtually no practice and finished dismally.

But all the overseas unpleasantness became ancient history at Costa Mesa. The track may be small, but the show was grand indeed.

second spot against Steve Bast.

Finally, the showdown. Bast was the first out, riding immediately to his starting position on the outside, the same slot he had for his first heat loss. No one had won from the outside spot all evening. Penhall delayed, as he had before each previous heat, making the field wait for him. He lined up beside pole-sitter Jim Fishback. The tapes went up, Bast swooped outside while Bruce grabbed a little too much traction. Despite Bruce's desperate attempts, it was over.

The runoff for second saw Penhall grab the lead, then coast home when Steve slid into the wall.

The 16 finalists divided a purse of approximately \$16,000. Mike's win meant a purse, contingency and bonus payoff of over \$5000. Not bad for five minutes' work, but what an adrenalin-packed five minutes before 8127 screaming fanatics.

So, nine seasons after the Great SoCal Sideways Revival, the scorecard for national championships reads: Rick Woods — two, Steve Bast — two and Mike Bast — five. Is there any doubt?

RESULTS

October 15, 1977
Costa Mesa, California

	Finishes	Pts.
1. Mike Bast	(2-1-1-1-1)	14
2. Bruce Penhall	(1-1-2-1-2)	13*
3. Steve Bast	(1-1-2-2-1)	13
4. Alan Christian	(2-2-1-3-2)	10
5. Mike Faria	(1-2-4-3-1)	9
6. Kelly Moran	(2-1-3-2-4)	8
7. Larry Shaw	(1-2-4-2-4)	7
7. Dennis Sigalos	(3-3-1-3-3)	7
7. Ron Preston	(2-4-1-4-2)	7
10. Bob Schwartz	(3-2-2-4-3)	6
11. Scott Sivadge	(3-4-4-1-3)	5
11. Steve Columbo	(4-3-3-1-4)	5
11. Mike Muntean	(4-4-3-3-1)	5
14. Dave Sims	(3-3-2-4-4)	4
14. Mark Cherry	(4-4-4-2-2)	4
16. Jim Fishback	(4-3-3-4-3)	3

Scoring: 3 points for 1st, 2 points for 2nd, 1 point for 3rd.

*Won runoff for second with Steve Bast.