

SUZUKI'S RHINESTONE COWBOY ROPES...

The SUPERBIKERS

Where the World's Best went head to head

By Brian George

A few months ago, Team Suzuki had the hottest rider on the circuits, when Mark Barnett was winning everything he entered. Now, they've got another hot gun: the Rhinestone Cowboy, Kent Howerton. Recently Howerton grabbed the final race of

the 1979 Supercross Series with his Anaheim Motocross Finals victory, which gave him the Triple Crown title as well.

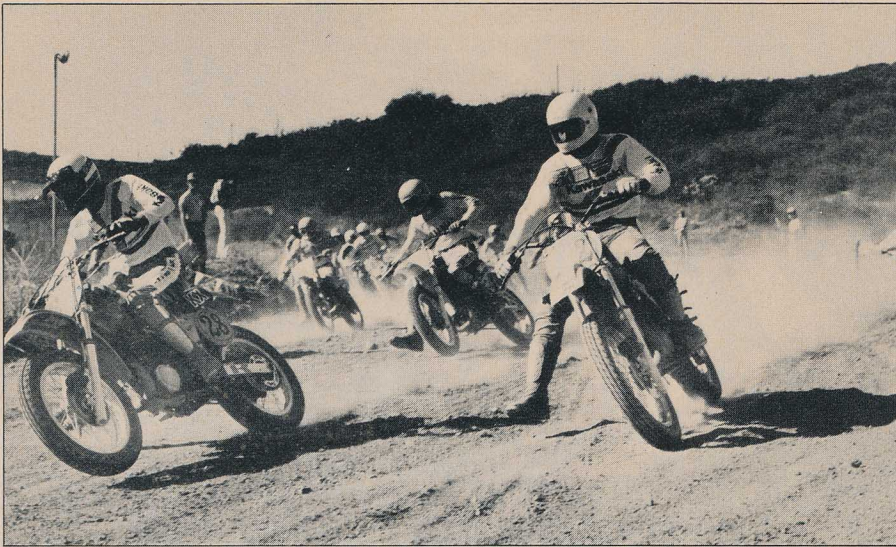
From there, Kent and Jill, his always-on-hand wife, headed down to Carlsbad Raceway for the first running



of The Superbikers. When they left Sunday evening, they were both a lot richer, and Howerton brought Suzuki home another title. This title was "The Best Motorcyclist in the World."

What is The Superbikers? And how would it prove who is the best motorcycle racer in the world?

To start with, The Superbikers was designed to replace the now-historical



Kawasaki's Warren Reid (28) and Bad Brad Lackey tow Mike Bell into the first turn of the motocross heat. Howerton is on the inside of Bell.

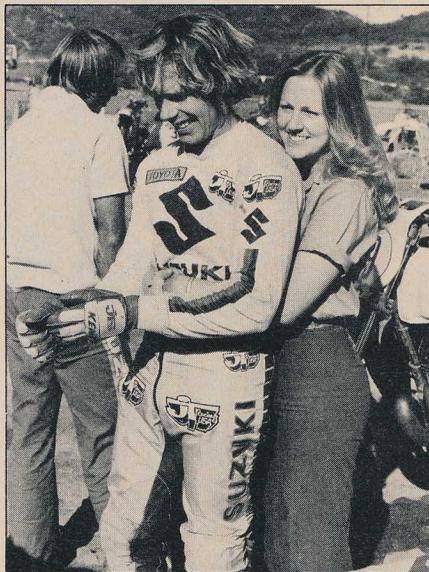
Motorcycle Olympiad. The Olympiad started out much the same way The Superbikers did, but instead of running all of the motorcyclists head to head to determine the best, a complicated and confusing scoring system was used. That ultimately killed the Olympiad.

In order to keep The Superbikers alive, a new system of racing was devised, one that ran all of the riders together, to truly tell who was the King of Motorcycling.

But, just matching riders in a race couldn't fairly decide who was the best. A track had to be designed with an equality of the three main facets of competition: pavement, slick Grand National-type TT, and rough motocross. So the promoters, Tripp/Cox, went into Carlsbad Raceway and laid out such a course.

When it was completed, there was one thing that they forgot. Motocross. The course they laid out contained over a mile of pavement, and a dirt section (just under a mile) that was totally smooth, precisely what the dirt trackers make their living on. It was no doubt a Grand National rider's course, and at the end of practice, the motocrossers knew it. Long-travel suspension didn't mean a thing, and knobbies were pure disaster on the circuit. Howerton finally opted for a set of Goodyear dirt track tires for the final, as did most of the other riders. If it wasn't a street tire on the rim at The Superbikers, it was Class C. Nobody touched a knobby.

As for the races, an AMA-type system of heat races, semis and consolations was run to narrow competitors down to a 25-rider main event. The first three heat races would separate the road racers, dirt trackers and motocrossers, then all three divisions would run together in two semis and a consolation before the main event.



No, Kent Howerton didn't ride the Buddy class, he just got a lot of congrats from wife Jill after his Superbikers victory.



Goodyear flattrack tires were the hot setup for Howerton's works Suzuki.

Twenty-two riders made the main by qualification, and three World Champions were put directly in the race via their titles.

The three stars of the main event were to be Road Race World Champion Kenny Roberts, Speedway World Champion Peter Collins and 250cc Motocross World Champion Hakan Carlqvist. In order to be recognized, their number plates were initialed instead of numbered: KR, PC and HC. But not one of those plates became a factor in the main event.

Roberts didn't even ride the final Sunday. His Shell Racing Specialties Yamaha threw a shock bolt as he was pitching it into a paved left-hander, and he high-sided into a wall of haybales. Carlqvist started out in the top three on the first lap of the main event, and Collins managed to get into the top 10, but both riders crashed several times, and put themselves out of the running.

As for the action in the front of the main, it was a total motocross show. Kawasaki's newest factory rider, Warren Reid, was out in front early, with Jimmy "The Jammer" Weinert second and the Teenie Meanie, Jeff Ward, third, which made up a lime-green freight train for Kent Howerton to try to overtake.

One by one the Cowboy did it, but Reid was by no means easy pickin's. Howerton had to fight for three laps before he could get around in the dirt section. On the next lap, Reid went right back by. This lead was short-lived, however, when Reid's front tire wore out, and he laid it over hard in a paved right-hander. Howerton then cruised in for the win as Weinert and Ward gave Kawasaki a two-three finish ahead of the top non-motocrosser, Grand National Champion Steve Eklund, while Reid got back up and scored fifth.

The entire event was filmed by ABC's Wide World of Sports for showing in April, and the promoters of The Superbikers have a three-year contract with the television station for the annual race. Hopefully, next year's event will include some motocross sections to make the track a bit more interesting for everybody, but by this year's standard, the motocrossers proved who the best in the world were.

And the Kent Howerton win streak continues to grow. □

RESULTS

1. Kent Howerton (Suz);
2. Jim Weinert (Kaw);
3. Jeff Ward (Kaw);
4. Steve Eklund (Yam);
5. Warren Reid (Kaw);
6. Rick Hocking (Hon);
7. Steve Wise (Hon);
8. Dave Aldana (Hon);
9. Alex Jorgensen (C-A);
10. Jeff Haney (Hon);
11. Danny Chandler;
12. Mike Bell (Yam);
13. John Hateley (Hon);
14. Larry Roeseler (Hus);
15. Tony DiStefano (Hus);
16. Dennis Briggs (Yam);
17. Hakan Carlqvist (Hus);
18. Jim Filice (Yam);
19. Mike Bast (Yam);
20. David Emde (Hon);
21. Rob Morrison (Nor);
22. Peter Collins (Yam).