

O'SHOW

Looking into O'Show's past & future

By the DIRT BIKE Staff

Johnny O'Mara is back. The kid who shocked the world by winning the 1980 125 USGP aboard a Mugen and rose to instant stardom and, as a factory rider, won the '83 125 National and '84 250 Supercross National championships, all but disappeared in 1987. O'Show was overshadowed at Honda by David Bailey and Rick Johnson and did not renew his Honda contract at the end of 1986. O'Mara instead signed with Suzuki for '87 and vanished temporarily from the motocross spotlight and the winner's circle as he wrestled with the complications of the brand switch and his personal life. Johnny O' has put problems behind him, he's pumped with the new Suzukis and he's back in top form. We caught up with O'Show at his Simi Valley, California, home to come to terms with his new outlook.

DB: Let's start with your last championship, the 1984 Supercross, riding for Honda; would you consider that the high point of your career?

John: Yes, the Supercross would always be the biggest, most prestigious win. I always wanted to be the 125 champ, which I did the year before, so those two and winning the MX des Nations five times have been the highlights. Winning the Mid-Ohio 125 GP was pretty big, too, because that's what opened everyone's eyes and got me a ride with Honda. That was a great race. Mid-Ohio and the Mugen sponsorship from Al Baker and the exposure I got had a lot to do with where I am today.

DB: After '85, what happened with Honda?

John: That was Rick Johnson's first year with Honda. That year I finished third behind Johnson and Bailey nearly every race. I injured my knee pretty badly so I never really had that edge to run with them, I was the third guy, on the bottom of the totem pole. Honda figured they had those two. It's not like they wanted to fire me—they wanted to get me in the next season for half the money I was worth, and, at that point, Suzuki learned of my contract's end. I had thought I would be riding for Honda until I quit racing—like part of the family—that's what hurt the most. I felt discarded; they were done with me despite my contributions to the

company. I tested so much for them and helped develop their bikes. I was there when Honda was not as competitive as they are now. I felt I had a lot to do with the new generation of Hondas, which dominated through '83, '84 and '85, even to the way they are now. Suzuki has caught up to them and is equal now, but back then, Honda was the superior bike.

DB: How did you feel about your career when you went over to Suzuki?

John: I was excited about signing a contract with Suzuki. Before that, the season of '86, when I got healthy and I won MX des Nations on the 125, I felt I was back 100 percent. I rode well in that race, and it was funny, because as soon as I won, beating Thorpe, that's when Honda really wanted to work out any problems and sign me back. I didn't like that, but that's the way the industry is.

DB: How was the transition from Honda to Suzuki for you?

John: I had no idea what the bikes would be like. I knew they would be a lot different from Honda. I was ready for a change, though. I brought my mechanic, Jim Felt, with me. I could never have made the transition without his help. If I have a problem with the bike I know he'll have the answer, so things went smoothly. I had trouble at the beginning, adapting to the bikes. Suzuki had a whole different concept from Honda as far as geometry and other features of the bikes. I had been riding Hondas for six or seven years. They listened to Hannah and me, and so in the last two years, we've gone almost to

Honda specs, not copying them, really; we have a different setup and the Full Floater system. I'm real happy with the bike, it's taken a couple of years to get to where I feel I can ride them 100 percent.

DB: What do you see as the biggest difference between Honda and Suzuki, as far as the race attitude and the teamwork?

John: Suzuki goes about things in a much more mellow way. Honda was always so aggressive. I had a lot more pressure at Honda. They wanted to win so bad, and they'd make you feel terrible if you got beat. Suzuki is more laid-back. Honda had us out testing all the time, and I was used to that constant development to improve the bikes. When I found myself not doing very much testing I told Suzuki we would have to work harder. I knew we weren't at their [Honda's] level yet and I knew Honda was busy testing, improving.

DB: Are you happy with your accomplishments so far, having a home and your own track; is this what you envisioned when you thought of being a factory rider?

John: I never thought it would be like this, as far as what I own, and it's sometimes hard for me to believe I've come this far in racing. I feel lucky and proud that I could make a living and become so successful. I had nothing at the beginning and all I wanted to do was to ride and do well. I poured all my energy into my career, though. I'd have to say that I worked harder than anyone I know to get where I am now.

DB: It's said that your moods affected your riding in the recent past. What are the moods of Johnny O'? How did your attitude affect your racing in '87?

John: As far as the moods, there's a wild side of me, but in the last year and a half I've calmed down a lot. I used to be pretty hard on myself, like if I didn't do well at a race or if something didn't go quite right, I'd let it ruin my whole week. Jim's really good at keeping me in a good mood because I have to be happy to ride well. If I get frustrated, I shouldn't even be out there. I've got to be out there having fun, whipping the bike side-

Spoils of war: Johnny has collected a few luxuries in his ten-year professional racing career. He'll be the first to tell you that his "toys," like his modified Porsche 911 Carrera, are earnings, not gifts.





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◀ J.O.'s home is luxurious but not outlandish. He's fond of beautifully restored antiques like his 1940-era Coca-Cola vending machine, but he'll offer you a cold glass of Exceed if you're thirsty.

ways, that's when I ride the best, when I'm relaxed. I've let some personal things detract from my racing, but that's over.

DB: You're a name in motocross, you have that to your credit. What does the immediate future look like?

John: The success I've had so far this year is a result of my really giving it 100 percent. That's possible now because of the bike and my healed injuries and my attitude. I'm not satisfied with what I've done in the last couple of years. I've really put a big emphasis on this year to make sure that I give it as much as I can, everything I have. I have no pressures in my life and nothing can hold me back.

DB: Do you think this is a peak period for you, will we see a better, faster Johnny?

John: I'm at the same confidence level I was when I won my championships and I'm riding better than ever. It will be a matter of avoiding injury and keeping my confidence level high. I have no obstacles at all and I have an open mind to racing.

DB: How many more years will you be racing and what do you plan on afterward?

John: I'd like to race for a couple of more years after the '89 season. After that, I'll still be competitive, a top racer but maybe a little burned-out on it. This is my tenth season. I'm not burned out at all now, I still love it, I just think that in a couple of more years I'll want to go do something else. I doubt it will involve racing. I am involved with mountain bikes, so maybe I could spend more time with that and race with my friends. I'll do a lot of things that I could never do while racing—water skiing, snow skiing, I'd like to try cross-country skiing and go 30 miles at 10,000 feet. I'll just enjoy life, do the things a normal person can do, which this sport does not allow if you are to give it 100 percent.

DB: Within the last ten years of your racing, do you think the sport has matured?

John: It's so much different now. The style of Supercross racing, they have us doing crazy stuff. I'm not against it, I do it every day of my life. There aren't as many factory riders—it's very difficult to get a sponsor now from a factory. It's not as easy to get started today. You don't see too many riders last very long, maybe five years, and not much after that. The racing is more dangerous and you see a lot of guys getting hurt

A 70-foot triple: Part of J.O.'s daily training regimen at his private track. Seeing what you have to be capable of to race at a factory rider's level is a sobering experience.

Mary Partelow



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◀ In the beginning: Johnny's Mugen Honda, his victories on it and the eye-catching white outfit made him a standout on the National motocross scene in '79 and '80.

The "O Show" (20) got record ratings from the fans during this thrilling but tragic episode in Anaheim when he led Guy Cooper (10) and Rick Johnson (1) until the works steering stem on his Suzuki snapped. ▶



right at the beginning of their careers. The salaries aren't that impressive anymore. No more multi-year contracts, mostly one-year. It's good to see the increased exposure motocross is getting. It would be great if things would improve for the riders, too. They're the ones who have to put it on the line.

DB: How did you get the Mugen sponsor?

John: That was due to Al Baker. He set it up in the beginning, and was taking care of me on a local level. When Mugen was looking for a rider, Al got me that lucky break.

DB: Would you say that Al Baker was your biggest influence and support?

John: My father got me into racing when I was ten, but at that point it was just a fun thing to do. But even from the start, I was racing every weekend and didn't have any other hobbies. At age 15, I started to take it seriously, becoming pro—that's when Al took over. From then on, he brought me up, from turning expert to where I am now.

DB: Does Johnny O' overtrain?

John: At times I have. This season I've tapered a bit. Bicycle riding isn't a priority right now. Motorcycle riding is at the top of my list. That's another reason for my success so far this year. Before, I'd try to fit in everything I could in one day, then I'd be so burnt-out the next day I could hardly ride my motorcycle. I don't want to be like that anymore. Now I spend more time on the bike, probably an hour and a half on a daily basis. One day a week I don't ride and I've got a running schedule, now that my knee is all healed up. Running doesn't take up too much time, I run five to six miles a day every other day with a mountain bike ride in between. It's based on how my body feels. This has worked so far this year, I'm strong enough.

DB: Is Roger DeCoster going to move to Suzuki? An old rumor, but it's still being circulated.

John: I wish it would happen, that would really help us out a lot, but I doubt it. Honda would be pretty careless to lose him.

DB: What advice can you offer someone getting started in racing, advice different than that most often heard?

John: Accept a life style different than that of your friends, dedicated entirely to racing. At a young age, I gave up doing a lot of things kids do when they grow up, like playing baseball, discovering girls. All I thought about was motorcycles. That's all I wanted to do. You have to dedicate your life to motorcycles to be successful these days. You have to start at a young age, you can't get into drugs or any of that stuff. There's no way you can be fast and do that. I've never gone out getting drunk, I've never done any drugs. While a lot of my friends were doing that, I was off riding my motorcycle. You just have to accept being different. □



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