

FOX hounds 'em

Brits Doug Fox and John Cooper takes up the world sidecar cross title chase with a vengeance this year.

Story: Alex Hodgkinson.



WITH the heartening feeling of their first world championship win under their belts, Britain's top sidecar crossers Doug Fox and John Cooper are set to launch an all-out offensive on the title when the series switches to Britain later this month.

Despite having to sit for so long in the shadow of Terry Good as the Reading racer has battled to three home series crowns, Fox and Cooper were the highest-placed Britons in last year's world chase and again held that honour after this year's opening three rounds.

Their international fortunes took an upward turn in Holland where Fox scored the first race victory of his international career in the second

race. And as his luck took a turn for the better Good slipped back down the table.

There's a change in the 25-year-old from Ramsgate this year. For the first time since he signalled his talent by winning the 1978 Swiss GP overall, he shows a degree of determination previously lacking as he and Cooper have struggled in vain to live up to that early promise.

"We are better prepared than ever before. The 950 Nourish Weslake is very reliable and I haven't had a single breakage since changing to EML when my sponsor Eddie Pinchbeck became the importer two years ago.

"Pete Lewis will be on hand to help us with the machine again and thanks to David Banks of Dirt Winner, we now also have a full-time mechanic, New Zealander Dick Law.

"David who has lined up help from companies like Dunlop and Shell believes that we can win the world title and the confidence shown by the sponsors has helped John and I feel the same way."

The son of Dave Fox, one of the country's best sidecar men in the 'sixties and early 'seventies, it was inevitable that Doug should take to

the three-wheeler game when he was old enough.

"I was never pushed into taking up the sport," said Doug, "and I started off when I was 17 with one of the original Wasps, the one Mike Guilford took to the British title in 1968 with Mark Chittenden in the chair."

By 1975 they were racing SPPs, the French sidecar which father Dave imported at the time, and won both the Eastern and South-Eastern Centre titles.

However, Mark decided to retire at the end of the year and Mick Ripper, swinging for Fox senior at the time, suggested Barry Williams as a replacement.

It is doubtful that Doug could have been given better advice for the new pairing won the British qualifying championship at the first attempt with a Weslake SPP before changing to a Norton Wasp supplied by Robin Rhind-Tutt in 1977.

He finished fifth in the main title chase at the first attempt after winning the first round of the series and also scoring five points at Halstead in their only GP of the year.

With only Nick Thompson and Terry Good of the first four electing to contest the series Doug and Baz were certain of entries at every GP but early in the series Gary Withers was injured and Barry was pressed into service with Thompson.

"My father and Mike Guilford have always had a great influence on my career and they agreed that the only passenger around who was good enough to step straight into the GPs was 'Coop'. John was keen to try and our first ride together was the Belgian Grand Prix.

"We didn't score that day but seven days later we beat both Nick and Terry in France and the partnership was sealed. That was the first time I had beaten Nick fair and square and I'm sure that had been a mental block.

"John and I scored in every GP to the end of the year, the highlight of the season being our win in the Swiss Grand Prix at Wohlen.

"The week after the European series finished I broke my leg in France. We were only one point behind Nick in the British championship and tried to keep it a secret - but the last race of the series came too quickly and we had to settle for second."

Despite winning more races than anyone else in the British championship and finishing a best yet seventh in Europe, 1979 was a disaster.

"We blew up five Nortons and broke three gearboxes. It definitely affected my form."

Many also feel that success had come too early and too quickly for Doug who was only 22 when he won in Switzerland.

When they changed to Weslake in 1980 Doug and John spent most of the

early months sorting out the motor, and then came the tragic incident in Belgium when the throttle stuck open in the muddy going and a woman spectator was killed. It was two months before Doug could shrug off the memory.

In an end-of-season boost they finished second to new champion Reinhard Boehler in his home GP at Holzgerlingen and the normally teetotal Cooper 'blew' his share of a substantial contingency payment on champagne, much to the amusement of the rest of the camp when they found him flat on his back at the end of the evening.

Last year was written off almost before it started when Doug broke his shoulder whilst racing to an overall win in the first round of the British championship. Not until six weeks later, when he crashed again did a doctor realise that the shoulder was broken and their next ride was not until July.

With so much of the season run, they immediately decided to look on the remaining months as a preparation for 1982 and that decision is now paying dividends.

Although seven years older than his driver, John only started to ride one year before even though he had been interested in the sport for some time through his friendship with John Davies.

"When John was injured, I went in the chair with Terry Salter for a few

meetings," explained Coop. "Then John decided to take up driving. We finished second in the 1975 AMCA championship, then in the ACU we were runners-up to Doug in the following year's qualifying series.

"After that I rode with John Turner and Paul Norris, and even a one-off ride in the 1976 GP at Halstead with Dave Mallows in which we finished fourth, before joining Doug."

A fit farmer's son from the West Midlands, a tongue-in-cheek John sees himself as a 'stabilising influence' on his younger partner and, despite being the oldest of the current crop of GP passengers, feels confident that he has at least three more years at the top. Doug confirmed: "John has never asked me to stop, or even slow down except once when he hurt his wire-rimmed spectacles. I didn't though."

Doug firmly believes that the new influx of lightweight two-strokes can only benefit the sport by encouraging youngsters to compete even if they are unlikely to ever be competitive in the main championships.

"I'd like to see British courses designed far better," he said. "If they were modelled on the French tracks with their long straights, flat-out jumps and tight corners, I'm sure we would get more spectators. The sport is just as big as the solos in Europe because it is so exciting to watch.

"Perhaps whis will happen one day: Soon I hope. Perhaps it will help when John and I win the world title!"

Doug Fox (left) and his 'stabilising influence' passenger John Cooper: Britain's top sidecar crossers are in confident mood.

