

O'SHOW *is go*



The O'Show style is fast and flashy. But behind this front is a serious motocrosser. JACK BURNICLE discovers the real Johnny O'Mara.

THE O'Show's back on the road! He's been recalled to the American Motocross and Trophee des Nations team after a year's absence. And with good reason.

Undoubtedly the most enigmatic of the United States' top-line motocrossers, Johnny "O'Show" O'Mara is enjoying his finest season, challenging strongly for his team-mate David Bailey's triple crown of National, Supercross and Grand National Championships.

This mild-mannered 22-year-old Californian has always commanded a unique niche in his country's

motocrossing folklore. Introspective and reserved, he hardly fits the usual bill for an American sporting hero. That boastful aggression, nationalist fervour and whooping Olympic swagger we came to know so painfully well during August are far more familiar aspects of the American competitive spirit.

And aggression, not entirely coincidentally, is what O'Mara feels he needs more of. "I spent last winter working on my weaker points," explained Johnny O at the American 500 GP in June. "I need to increase my aggression. A lot of times last year I'd slacken off and

settle for second or third. I've worked on accepting nothing less than first. It was time to do it."

Not that the "old" O'Mara had done so badly. Twice second in the 125 Nationals behind Suzuki's Mark "Bomber" Barnett, he finally lifted the crown in 1983 from Barnett and Jeff Ward (Kawasaki).

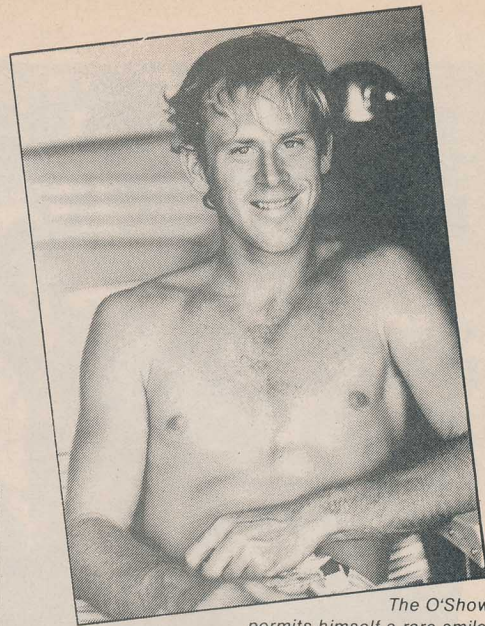
"I was pretty happy to have won," admits Johnny O. "I was more consistent than before. Afterwards I felt it was time to mature, to go on and win the Supercross title and become more dominant. So I worked really hard before the season, did a lot of riding and felt

really confident coming into this year."

That confidence has paid off. "I'm not concerned with the overall Grand National title. Just Supercross and that 125 championship." He is also emerging as a genuine open class operator. Only a second race, first turn crash destroyed his chances of victory at Carlsbad after he had won the first moto. O'Mara shrugs. "I find the 500 easier to ride. It's a lot mellower. I'm definitely not as aggressive on it. Working harder on a 125 makes me feel more aggressive. There's time to relax a little bit on the 500. But I'd like to ride 250s for a while before switching to 500s. That's where I'll probably go next..."

His rare rides on the open classer have been very impressive. As the mop-headed 19-year-old baby of that first all-conquering American squad in 1981 he contributed strongly to their startling success. "Our whole team in '81 was good in sand. Both me and Danny LaPorte are especially strong sand riders. And I like that type of racing. I adapt very easily to different tracks and different circumstances."

He certainly adapted well at Carlsbad this year when his competitive open class rides could still be counted on the fingers of one hand! "Carlsbad is hard-packed and real rough. You don't see too many tracks like it. Yamaha's Ricky



The O'Show permits himself a rare smile.



"Bye, bye y'all." Johnny O'Mara streaks downhill at Carlsbad during his loudly acclaimed second moto recovery. Those eyes mean business!

Johnson has it really well dialled. He's ridden it more than anybody and has all the lines worked out. Looking for lines is the key to this whole business."

Having a level, intelligent head on your shoulders is another. O'Mara's views on overseas participation at Carlsbad confirmed his good sense. "The Europeans look pretty good. If they get out front they'll be okay, but it will be tough if they come from the back. Really they're riding against each other. If there's no need to take a chance they won't. They'll look to better their championship positions, as they should." In the event only Andre Malherbe got a good European gate and hung on to O'Mara for most of the race before "doing as he should" and settling for second.

After his own second race setback, O'Mara stormed back through the pack to a deafening crescendo of support from the crowd, failing to snatch Johnson's second overall by one point. The enormous popularity of this brooding introvert goes back to the days when he first appeared as an electrifying 17-year-old on a Mugen Honda.

O'Mara was born on March 25, 1962, in Encino, California. Dad, John O'Mara senior, was a desert racer. His fair-haired son started riding at five, racing around 10 on a Honda 100. "I wasn't all that good but I had fun!" Fun enough to become No 1 local schoolboy. Then in 1980 Johnny went adult in the AMA, riding part of the 125 Nationals on a Mugen Honda. He scored a couple of fourth places - "good for a privateer against the factory bikes" - finished twelfth in the series - "despite missing three races out East because of a tight budget" - and won the Mid Ohio American 125 GP, beating reigning world champion Harry Everts. A legend was born.

"I got a lot of attention riding the Mugen bikes," recalls O'Mara. "No-one had heard of me then all of a sudden this kid appeared on a white bike in white gear. The O'Show caught a lot of people's imaginations, I guess. I had a pretty good style - kinda flashy - so they liked watching me too.

"I got first and third at the GP. Shitty conditions, real bad. I didn't really like it -



The O'Show Entertainment Express sweeps to victory. His style and commitment results in plenty of support from the fans.



"I want to dominate Supercross this season," says Johnny O.

I don't like riding mud – but that day everything went pretty well!" And at the end of the year Honda was talking. For 1981 O'Mara signed for the 125 Nationals. He was 18.

Second place in the 125s behind Barnett in both '81 and '82 – the latter "much more competitive, with several wins" – was highlighted by his further victorious European visits. Particularly satisfying was the 1982 Swiss 125 GP...

"It was my idea." Johnny O permits himself a rare smile. "The 125 Nationals got an eight week break and me and my mechanic thought it would be neat to nip over and ride at least one GP. The Swiss was just perfectly placed so we sent my own race bike over and Honda Belgium took care of the rest. We were only across for a week.

"I always knew I could win it. There are few people who can go faster than I do on a 125. I wasn't just going to smoke 'em. I was impressed by the top guys. I knew Erik Geboers would be the main threat and thought he rode well, but he never got close. It was warm and I was in better condition and much stronger towards the end."

A second Motocross and Trophee double followed in West Germany and back in Switzerland. "The Trophee was the first time in 1982 I'd ridden a 250 outdoors and my stomach started to hurt! Second moto I felt better and hung in a bit more. I could have gone faster but it was a team deal. I hadn't even been on an open classer since the previous year's Motocross des Nations. But I enjoy riding the 125s most."

O'Mara is "interested" in coming to Europe, "but not right now. It's up in the air. As long as racing stays competitive in the States I'll stay here. Maybe in two or three years I'll come over..."

In Europe we imagine waves of motocross talent pouring forth across the Atlantic. Surprisingly, the O'Show isn't so sure. "I don't see so many really hardworking youngsters around now. I'm always looking at other guys to learn. I've got a lot of respect for my team-mate David Bailey and Ron Lechien's a good rider. Ricky Johnson and George Holland are already there but nothing much beyond them unless there's something out East I don't know about."

Even for someone as precociously talented as the O'Show there's obviously no substitute for hard work. So how long does he intend going on?

"I don't wanna end my career not thinking I've given it 100 per cent. In the States a lot of people stop racing around 26 or 27. I'd like another 10 years. I don't know how long you can run over 30, but I haven't had any serious injuries and that's a big advantage.

"I'll probably be in my prime over the next couple of years. I'm on my own in my career. To be successful I must do the best I can for as long as I can. It's a job. I live comfortably now. I hope I can when I'm 40."

O'Mara excuses himself politely and gets absorbed immediately in a discussion with teenaged team-mate Lechien. It was inevitably about work. It usually is where this serious, dedicated professional is concerned.

