

ANATOMY OF A STUNT TEAM {or we told you so!}

FOR the Magnificent 7 stunt team the season started in anger at Radlett airfield in April . . . there is no doubt about it, by their own standards the show was a complete, unequivocal — disaster.

By the time Radlett had rolled around I had become so involved with the team that I wasn't just 'official' team photographer, I was also friend, nuisance, critic, promotion consultant and cigarette vending machine! Consequently, the lack of cohesion, continuity and 'match practice' was probably more apparent to myself and people like Bryan Wolf — Capital Radio's head of talks — who found himself in a similar position, than most of the spectators. To us, I suppose, the faults were obvious. The 'overlapping' between the 'skills' was inconsistent and not quite slick enough; the 'crossovers' and 'roulettes' lacked timing and the fire stunts were weak and badly judged. The latter routines were probably the one single factor that gave the team their only real problem throughout a highly successful season.

The weekly team talks, after performances, usually ironed out any minor faults or problems almost before they occurred. After Radlett, however, the air in Tony Baily's flat at Catford was ripe and blue and cigarettes weren't the only cause. The meeting went on until the small hours, but one major decision had been taken. The answer was simple and could be found in three words — practice, practice (and more) practice. Suffice to say those faults never occurred again.

As readers of the May '78 article will know, the Magnificent 7 had virtually gambled their entire future

on one big event at Elstree on May 14th. Right up until the 'big day' everything had gone well. Since Radlett, the routines, and especially the rides, had become slick, fast and exciting. The five stunts had improved out of all recognition and the entire presentation was, as George Bailey puts it — professional.

So the ground work had been done and the scene was set. Now the questions would be answered: would Robin Winter-Smith prove he was the world's best motor-cycle jumper by clearing 31 British Relay Escort Estates (and thereby beat Bob Gill's ratified world record of 176 feet)? Would George Bailey become the first man in the world to 'loop a Mini'? More important to the team than any of those events was, would they get the publicity they needed from TV, rational and motorcycle press?



Vic Barnes

The big day

When I set off on the BeeEmm for Elstree, it was a case of 'plastic bags' for the cameras and Derri-boots for the feet. The weather could not have been worse, not only was it raining stair rods but it was bitterly cold and worst of all, there was very little light.

In the team bus, in front of the club house the excitement was subdued by the climatic conditions. Tony Baily was checking and re-checking the bikes — they were as always, as near perfect as Tony could get them. Meanwhile George Bailey was going over the programme with Kelvin Nichols the team co-ordinator and Smudge (Robin Winter-Smith) was looking so ridiculously relaxed that at first I thought the jump had been cancelled. It hadn't. Oh yes, and Barry Gazaniga the team extrovert, impressed everyone with his impersonations of a man who'd forgotten his cigarettes. Except for me — I'd had many demonstrations of this unique talent before.

Time passed slower than a dole queue and the crowd at one o'clock was about the same size. The arena for the display was as bad as the boys could have wished for. The grass was too long and sodden and the surface beneath sticky and slimy and far from even. By now though, the torrential downpour had abated, giving way to a fine penetrating drizzle. The 4,000 hardy souls who had decided that the day had more going for it than the weather, seemed remarkably cheerful and enthusiastic. They were to be rewarded for their stubborn solidity by witnessing an afternoon of excitement and entertainment that has never been excelled, in my lifetime anyway.

Precisely on time, eight bikes roared into the display area in perfect formation. Aware of the sense of the occasion the Kett Leather Company had supplied each rider with immaculate Contour 5 suits in red and white. The colours lit up the gloom and warmed the muddy May day so that, as if on cue, the drizzle stopped.

The 'crossovers' were quite brilliant and very tight. There were inches between the bikes at collision speeds of around the 'ton'. On that surface the spectacle was hair-raising. There was absolutely no margin for error and nowhere to go if there was one. The applause wasn't just to warm the cold hands, it was far more than that. For one thing, it proved they had been removed from cozy pockets.

The 'roulette' started. I hate the 'roulette', the double 'cross-overs'



frighten me to death. I put my camera to my eye because it isolates me from the action. I cease to be personally involved and become cowardly professional. I take pictures, though I know I can't capture the excitement of the manoeuvre in one five-hundredth of a second; I wait for the routine to finish and it does.

Disaster

In an instant I know something is wrong. A cough from one of the

Colin and Smudge were thankfully O.K., but poor Dave was taken to hospital with a broken left femur.

The show continued with hardly a pause, the team dare not allow themselves to be disturbed by the injury to Dave. Dave would have hated them for it anyway. Ah well, there's no business like show business!

There seemed very little chance of George Bailey doing his party piece, the 'loop-a-Mini' attempt. The conditions were all wrong. The grass

perfect steering at 60 mph to hit the 45° ramp and that didn't seem possible. George couldn't be dissuaded.

He came barrelling down the runway, hurled the little beast on to the grass, aimed for the ramp and pulled the trigger. She shot up the rigid planks about 3 inches off line and took off like a bird.

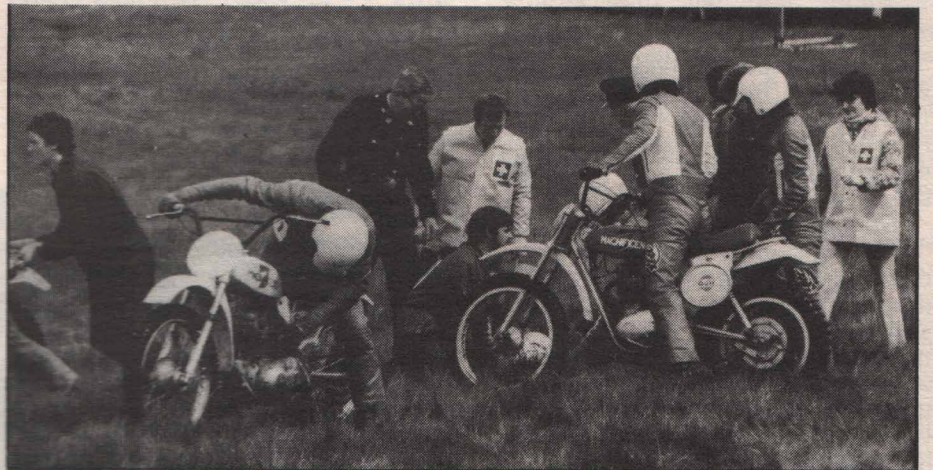
She didn't 'loop' but did the most graceful victory roll that even Elstree airfield had seen. The offside wing touched down first and then she



The disaster at Elstree: on the ground (above, left) is Smudger, while Colin Rance, still mounted, collides with Dave Clarke, who unfortunately broke a leg.

bikes and a change of revs and a crash; a sickening, frightening crash. I press the button on the camera, focusing and framing instinctively, but my mind is ahead of the camera. Three bikes are involved and one is Smudger's. How bad is it? Has all the hard work, dedication and second mortgages brought us to this — a big fat zer? The mêlée is quickly isolated and in an attempt to distract the crowd Tony Baily is going through his considerable routine of balancing skills.

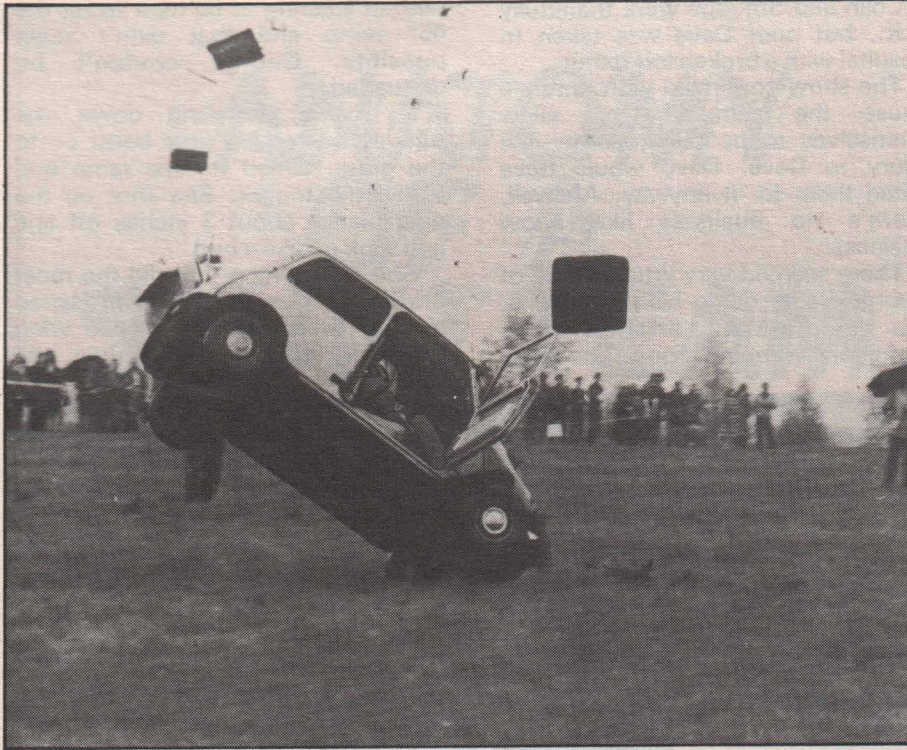
The cause of the accident was lack of money. More precisely, lack of new reliable machinery. Smudge's tired old British bike had mis-fired at the critical moment and Dave Clarke, unable to take evasive action because of the conditions and rigid formation, had torpedo'ed him. Colin Rance had run into the ensuing tangle of bodies and bikes.



was too wet and the surface beneath too muddy. The stunt required inch

cartwheeled — about three times! The bonnet crumpled like a pair of





demob suit trousers and doors came open like a flasher's raincoat. When all the jangling of tortured metal and tinkling of broken glass had subsided, there remained one question — was George alright? The one remaining door opened and there he was; the only case-hardened, galvanic stuntman in the business!

The Jump

By now the time had come and while British Relay were positioning their 31 cars I went in search of Smudge. He was in the club house sitting quietly with his girlfriend, sipping orange juice.

We talked for a while and I tried to "suss" him out. He's a pretty deep character, at times unpredictable, but always cool and very professional. He said jokingly that he couldn't watch the cars being positioned because it would scare him to death. Actually that was probably true, but somehow you knew it didn't really matter, because the tension was gone and this was the moment he had lived for. There was an air of controlled excitement around him almost as though he needed it. He was just waiting for that one moment and he knew inside him that there was no doubt, and he made you feel it with him.

Once outside, he warmed the PE 250 Suzuki up slowly and carefully.

Ouch! That hurt! Actually, George Bailey escaped with little more than a shaking.

He did two practice runs past the ramp and then turned away for the 3rd and final time. The tension was unbearable and for the first time that afternoon Elstree was silent except for one sound — the crack of the Suzuki's exhaust.

Smudge had disappeared over the slight hump in the runway half a mile away, leaving us aware of the cold

loneliness as we fidgetted together.

Once out of our sight he said that he rode around in a circle three times after missing a gear. He felt more alone at that time than at any other time in his life.

I heard the gears go in as swung wide to the edge of the runway and lined the screaming bike up for the ramp. I looked again at the 31 cars and began to doubt the possibility of it all. Unless you were there you can't imagine just how far those 31 cars seemed to stretch. When he hit the ramp flat-out, such was the distance away that for a moment I was convinced that he didn't have enough speed. But man and machine took off like an Apollo mission and from that instant there was never a doubt. The height he got was awe-inspiring and his technique was perfection. He cleared the last car perfectly and comfortably and touched down on the back wheel. The bike hit a bump on the uneven grass and the suspension bucked like a wild mustang; he held it for 15 or 20 yards then inertia took over and they parted company.

The bike cartwheeled for over a hundred yards and Smudge rolled a dozen times. Both were O.K.

Aftermath

The aftermath was unreal. Spectators swarmed around him, people cried with relief and happiness, photographers scorched their film in red-hot cameras and the panel of judges for the Guinness Book of Records ratified a jump of 189 feet.

After Elstree the euphoria didn't



Smudger after the 31 car jump — the Suzuki suffered only a loose tank and collapsed handlebars.

last long. The publicity in the Daily papers amounted to about 3 inches of column space. The ITN newsreel camera had jammed during the jump and they were too damn proud to use the Southern TV coverage. The motorcycle press, at least, did the team proud with very good coverage, as did local press.

Road Safety

Elstree was also beginning of what has now become an important part of most Magnificent 7 shows — the road safety section. In this part the team demonstrate up to six typical motor-cycle accident situations and show the consequences and remedies. Apart from showing to the general public that the motorcycle industry IS concerned about its responsibilities in this direction, the sequences have proved to be very good in terms of publicity. Most satisfying, though, is the knowledge that the team's demonstrations have saved at least two lives and for that reason alone it's been worthwhile.

Almost before the boys had had a chance to perfect their new routines, Bill Gamon of Southern Television had hired them to perform some of the selected accident sequences on the highly successful "Talking Bikes" programme. So impressive were the sequences that a star booking on the children's show "Saturday Banana" soon followed. Southern say that their performance proved to be some of the best television of the year. Perhaps they were thinking particularly of the unplanned and highly spectacular fire jump that the team put into the last sequence.

Barry Gazaniga was to have jumped through the usual wall of fire, closely followed by Viv Wright. Normally, this would have presented few problems but on this occasion, in front of about 12 million viewers, something just had to go wrong.

The stunt took place in Southern's



Road safety is given real impact (sorry!) with vivid demonstrations such as this.

car park and because of the lack of space Barry was accelerating hard up the ramp for his jump through the fire, when it happened! Unknown to the field crew who had positioned the ramp, it had been placed on some very fine gravel. When Barry accelerated up the ramp it had spun slightly to one side, catapulting him through the fire sideways.

The kids viewing at home probably thought it was all part of the act, but Barry didn't. He threw himself away from the bike out of Viv's way. Following up Viv had little chance to avoid the riderless bike and hit it square on. Almost before men and machinery had come to a halt, the field crew were on hand with the Merryweather fire extinguishers and the whole incident had occurred and been cleared-up in less than 30 seconds. As professional as ever George Bailey immediately pointed to the efficiency of the fire and accident drill. No one was hurt and the bikes suffered no damage.

To say that the "Saturday Banana" was a success is to understate the obvious. Southern T.V. claim that their switchboard was jammed after the show with questions and compliments. As a result — by the time you read this — George will have returned to do a car stunt and answer a "phone-in".

The Earls Court Show provided the team with their other T.V. appearances when the accident routines made five transmissions on both channel's newscasts.

George Bailey smashes his way through blazing straw bales — a regular feature of their action-packed stunt routine.

A lot has happened for the Magnificent 7 this season and what started out as a year of consolidation proved to be more successful than anyone had a right to expect.

The benefits have been many. This sponsorship by the Kett Leather Company has been nothing short of perfection. The team have wanted for nothing and Kett's computerised replacement service has been virtually instant. The team estimate that they have had about £5,000 worth of equipment and service.

On the technical side, both the Motor-Cycle Shop (Leytonstone) and N.G.K. (U.K.) Ltd., have provided spares and valuable technical assistance respectively. One amazing statistic to emerge here is that the total number of N.G.K. plugs used for something like 14 bikes (two of which are twins) throughout the season, has been a mere 22 plugs! Of the Regina Chains supplied none has had to be replaced.

All the lessons have been learned and the team are acutely aware that they now have a standard to maintain. They *must* continue to be innovative and progressive and continue to look ahead. New ideas and stunts must be explored and complacency ignored. The worst thing that could happen would be for the Magnificent 7 to sit back and gradually degenerate into just another motorcycle Display Team.

The biggest need for 1979 is a sponsor for the Road Safety demonstrations. Money is needed for 'old bangers' and 'clapped out' bikes and one safety conscious sponsor would make everyone happy.

Whatever happens in 1979 you can be assured that the Magnificent 7 will be there. They will be in your papers, your motorcycle press and on your TV screens. They won't rest until they are the best in the world at what they do — and at this moment they probably are.

