

MAY 1978

Motor cycling

MONTHLY

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**HONDA CB 750 F2
KAWASAKI Z200
KAWASAKI KL250**

**YAMAHA XS250
STRIPDOWN
HOW & WHY
FUELS**

FREE
**TYRE
DEPTH
GAUGE**

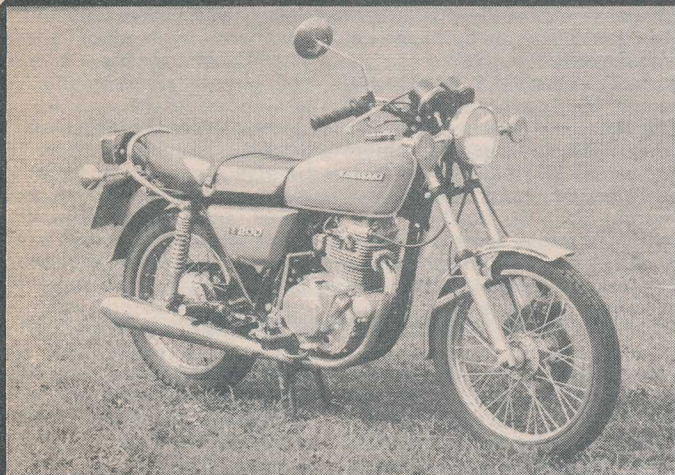


Westover House,
West Quay Road,
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MAY 1978 No. 31

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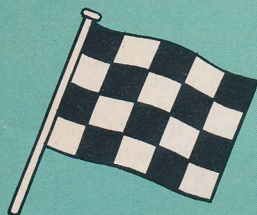
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Published approximately on the second Thursday of each month preceding cover date by IPC Magazines Limited, Westover House, West Quay Road, Poole, Dorset BH15 1JG. Litho colour origination by GM Litho Ltd, Format House, Longwick Road, Princes Risborough, Bucks.

Printed by Severn Valley Press Limited, Pontygwindy Industrial Estate, Caerphilly, Glamorgan, Wales.

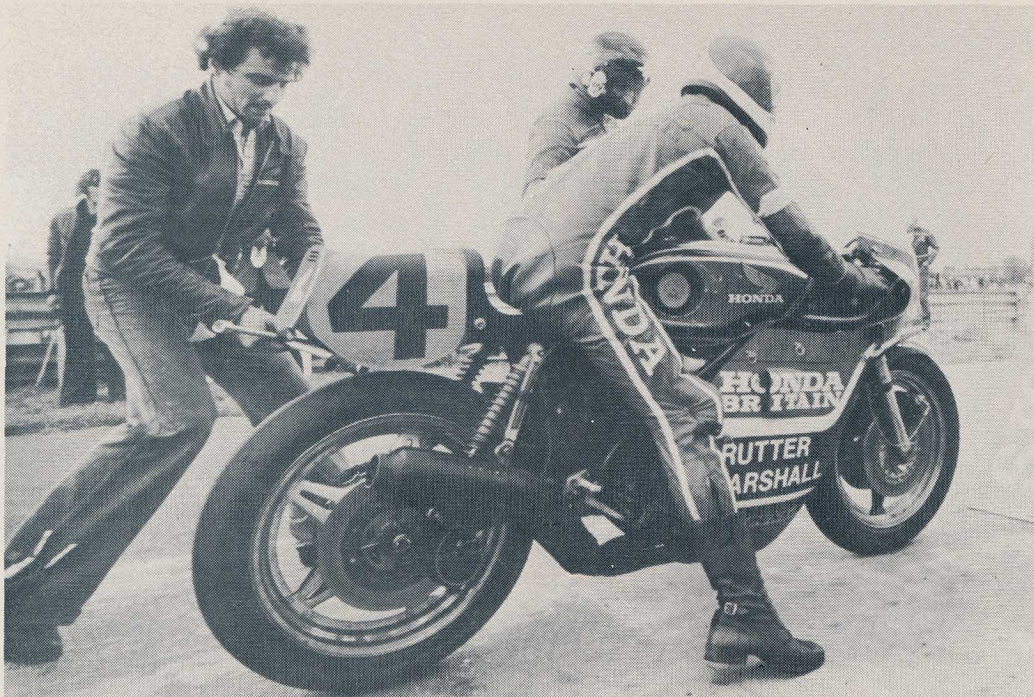
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RACING SPANNERMAN

Want to be a Race Mechanic? Norman White, Honda Britain's Chief Spannerman Tells How It Happened For Him . . .





Norman White wields the wheelbrace in the pits to get the works' Honda endurance racers back in the race in the shortest possible time. Speed and efficiency are what count . . .



DREAMS are a fulfilment of aspirations and when you live and breathe motorcycling from the day that you change into long trousers, then it seems as though you're striving for the impossible to become a Barry Sheene or Mick Grant of the road racing world.

When your piggy bank rattles with a depressing hollow sound and your prize Bantam racer has blown its gaskets, then where do you go to satisfy that inner urge to become part of the racing scene?

Norman White, five-foot-nothing in wet socks and 28-year-old chief race mechanic of the Honda Great Britain race team, took the bull by the horns and decided that he had the ability to live with the best and take on the rest.

Born in the Teignmouth/Torquay area of the West Country, Norman started swinging a leg over two-wheelers at the ripe old age of ten and by the time he was fourteen, he'd acquired an old A10 Beeza and was thrashing up and down the country lanes on petrol pilfered from motor mowers or paraffin from lamps refilled for the next power cut.

"Even when I was fourteen, I couldn't wait to go racing," said Norman during our chat in the Honda race workshop. "I had that old A10 Beeza and at 4 o'clock in the morning, I would be riding it around the country lanes down near Torquay hoping that there were no police about. I was so small, I'm not all that big now, that I'd have to

park it alongside a hedge to be able to climb on to it before I could ride it. Petrol, paraffin, any fuel was used as long as I could get it to run. It seems crazy now, but I was mad about motorbikes and I suppose I still am."

Norman was at engineering school at the time and his main ambition was to be an agricultural engineer. But the motorbike bug had bitten and any spare cash went on buying bikes in any condition.

"It didn't matter what state they were in," said Norman. "If they had an engine and two wheels, then somehow I'd get them going. Engineering school knowledge was useful, but I learnt a great deal more just stripping and rebuilding the old bikes to get them working."

Norman's passion for high-speed motorcycling finally took complete charge and the acquisition of an old DB32 Beeza Gold Star in 1968, gave him the chance he'd been waiting for — to go road racing.

"I remember I stripped the motor out of the frame, which I sprayed gold. Then I sold the DB32 motor to buy tuning bits and pieces for a Triumph splayed-head 650 twin," said Norman. "My first race was at Staverton towards the end of the 1968 season and I must admit that I was very nervous."

"Malcolm Uphill, Percy Tait, even Tony Rutter were there, I think. Anyway, I didn't expect to do all that well against some of the established road racers and you can imagine how amazed I was when I actually finished eighth overall. I couldn't believe it; I didn't even expect to finish let alone be placed that high in my first race."

The door to road racing had opened for Norman White and he felt confident that he would succeed. But the big problem to overcome on the way to stardom was lack of cash. A few more races on the Tribsa proved that he had the ability, but a cheeky scheme to obtain a possible works' ride with Norton-Villiers backfired and the door slammed shut on his ambition to become a full time road racer in 1969.

"It all ended rather suddenly," said Norman. "I joined the Norton racing and competition department at the end of 1969 thinking then that it would be the gateway to success. I'd spoken to Peter Williams at Mallory Park and was amazed to get a job as a development test rider at Thruxton after Peter had advised me to write direct to NVT at Andover. It all seemed too good to be true. I moved house from Devon up to Thruxton and began riding and

testing the Norton Commando around the circuit, believing that I would eventually get a chance to race.

"All I wanted to do was race. I knew I was good and somehow I hoped that Norton would give me a chance to prove it. Unfortunately, as a test rider I became more and more involved in the mechanical work in the competition shop.

"At the time, most of the work was concentrated on the motocross machine with Andy Robertson and Malcolm Davis. Then Vic Eastwood came on the scene, but I had very little to do with that and in 1970 it folded up and we all moved to Wolverhampton on the Commando development.

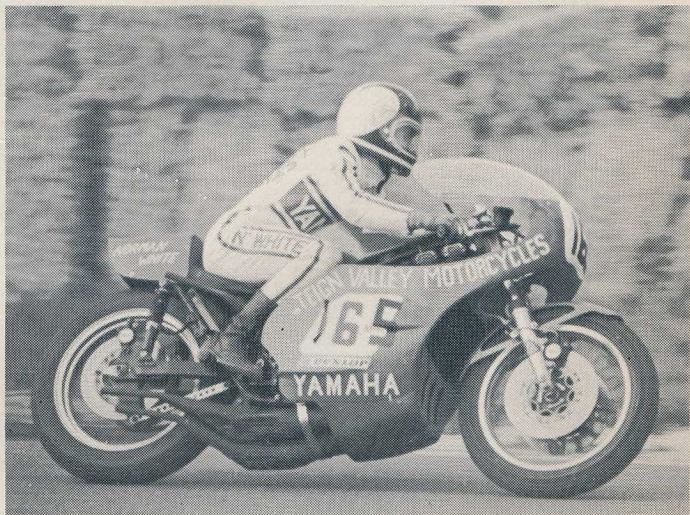
"I was still club riding and by this time I'd sold the Tribsa and bought a Norton/Metisse. I had some pretty good rides, but I hated it in Wolverhampton, I really did.

"Then while I was working on Norton development, Peter Inchley set up the Norvil performance shop building production racers. Anyway, I managed to get a transfer and finished up riding and testing the production racers out on the Thruxton track. That was when there were no noise control problems and I used to be out sometimes at seven o'clock in the morning riding the production racers.

"I had to do the running adjustments and was quite enjoying the work when, suddenly the big black clouds appeared over the horizon and we weren't quite sure whether we were all going to lose our jobs again. It was always a bit hairy in those days; Peter Inchley went and suddenly Frank Perris arrived.

"It all seemed pretty vague, but we soon learned that John Player had become involved and at the end of 1971 we had the John Player/Norton racing team.

Below: The spannerman who is also a very competent racer rides a Yamaha TZ750 sponsored by Teign Valley Motorcycles during the '76 season.



"Peter Williams, apart from being chief designer was also the number one rider and with my practical experience, I became his mechanic. We had to build the production and F750 racers."

What about the engines? Did you have to work on these at all?

"Well, I'd been working on the Norvil production racing engine with Dave Ludwell. Between us we built the motors and then I went out and did the testing. For the 1972 season we had to build new racing bikes and we had very little time to complete the machines, but we came up with what you probably remember as the blue John Player/Norton machine," said Norman. "It was a beautiful looking bike, but it was put together so quickly it was untrue. In fact, we were still painting it when it went to Daytona for its first race."

"Phil Read rode it and came fourth, which is more than one could expect really from the pushrod motor."

How much work went into those motors? Were there special pistons and camshafts?

"Well we started off with Norvil performance parts, the same as anybody could buy to tune their bike, but then we experimented with different pistons and camshafts to get extra performance."

"Trouble was that with increased engine performance we started to get transmission trouble. With Axtel camshafts and special pistons we were achieving almost 170-miles-an-hour with the 750 motor," said Norman.

So in 1972 you were busy working as a race mechanic rather than riding the machines?

"Unfortunately, yes. I still wanted to race, but I was too busy building and preparing Pete Williams' bikes. The only consolation was that I was still involved with racing and I hoped even then that I would still have the chance of a ride for Norton on the F750 or production racer."

I thought back and then put another question — your first chance to ride the Norton production racer came in 1973, didn't it?

"Yes, that was in the Thruxton 500-miler. Peter was away racing the F750 bike in the States and I rode with Rex Butcher. Surprisingly, we won and I think it was this that gave me the opportunity of riding the pukka F750 bike in the 1974 race at Thruxton. Unfortunately, although we were leading the race, we didn't finish."

What happened to the Norton race effort? They seemed to be doing so well in F750s and with the promise of a new motor from Cosworth, it looked as though they could be on to even greater things.

"Well, there's no doubt about it that when Peter Williams



Norman White busy at work in the Honda Great Britain workshop where he has to prepare and maintain four racing motorcycles for the 1978 racing season. Precision work is absolutely vital . . .

crashed at Oulton Park in 1974, it changed the whole scene for Norton. He was the designer and engineer behind things and after winning at Spa, Brands Hatch and other big F750 races, it all looked good until Peter's prang.

"The Cosworth was coming along and we expected great things of the motor, but with Peter no longer available to help develop the bike, we had problems. The power characteristics were all wrong and when the throttle was closed, it was almost like sticking the back brake on hard."

"I rode the bike during test sessions and it scared me the way the back wheel would hop and skip about on the approach to a bend. We had a new chassis and tried everything to get that bike to work properly, but when Dave Croxford rode it at Imola, he was almost three seconds slower than on the Norton-powered bike and didn't even qualify to start in the race."

Wasn't that the beginning of the end as far as the Norton-Cosworth project was concerned?

"I suppose so. We certainly didn't have the answers to the problems and when John Player withdrew their race support, we had an impossible task of finding money to keep the team going. Frank Perris tried to find the cash with funds from a public appeal, but it was no good. By the end of 1975, it was all over."

"I went back to Devon and started work for a company down there and with the sponsorship of Teign Valley Motorcycles, I began the 1976 season racing a Yamaha TZ750-four. But the out-of-pocket expenses were too much for me. I had to

sell my car and almost everything else just to go racing."

"I also had a go at endurance racing with the Mead-Thomkinson Laverda, but the bike wasn't very reliable and the best result we achieved was a tenth place in the Barcelona 24-hour race."

How did the Honda job come about? Were you still racing when they contacted you?

"No. Racing was just too expensive and, believe it or not I returned to Norton yet again. I met Frank Perris in the local pub and although things were on a shoe string, they were still playing with the Cosworth supplemented by building chassis for sidecar outfits, I thought that at least it was a job connected with motorcycling. But I think by this time everybody realised the Cosworth motor was unsuitable, and I rode it enough times to find out. I'm not saying Keith Duckworth can't build a race engine, he's proved in the car world that he can. But that twin just didn't suit a motorcycle . . . let's face it, you can build a 100 horsepower steam roller, but it won't lap Brands Hatch in 54 seconds!"

So it all came to an end as far as you were considered at the close of the 1976 season?

"That's right. I was still working at Thruxton when Gerald Davidson of Honda telephoned and suggested a meeting to put me in the picture as to what was happening on the racing scene with Honda Great Britain in 1977. It sounded great and obviously I wanted to be involved."

"For a minute I thought that he wanted to offer me a ride, but no such luck. Gerald told me that Japan was supplying two machines for endurance racing

and asked if I would prepare the machines and run the workshops and I said yes, you bet. I needed the money and they offered me a good salary, so I took the job."

But you're still only preparing the bikes as a mechanic and not really fulfilling your ambition to race motorcycles.

"Well, I suppose I've made a step forward in this direction in that I'm now considered as number one reserve rider should anything stop any of the team riders competing. I never dreamed that I would ever have a ride on a works' Honda, but it happened at Barcelona last year after Geoff Barry was unfortunately killed in the Ulster Grand Prix and Charlie Williams hurt himself at Donington."

"I was asked to team up with Neil Tuxworth on the number two bike and we finished in tenth place. However, I'm still considered as chief mechanic and in charge of the Honda Great Britain race workshops."

I suppose you could now be considered at the top of your profession as a works mechanic. So, what would you advise any young lad who wants to become a race mechanic?

"Well, for a start, he has to be totally dedicated to bikes. I really started when I was about ten years of age. Then, he will need a good practical engineering knowledge as well as the desire to spend almost every evening and weekend tinkering."

"You can't expect to earn any money out of the game at the beginning; in fact, you'll probably have to offer your services for free at first. In other words, start chatting to any of the lads in the paddock who race and ask if they need any help."

"I was lucky; I happened to ask Peter Williams who put me on the right track. But there are dozens of riders who can't afford to pay a mechanic but are looking for an extra pair of hands to help with preparing their bikes."

"I think if you talk to any of the well-known spannermen such as Nobby Clarke 'ex-Hailwood, Agostini and Hailwood '78' and Don Mackay, Barry Sheene's mechanic, they will tell you the same story. You have to be totally involved in racing, preferably as a competitor at some time or another, to understand the problems a rider has out on the track."

"I suppose in some ways I'm a frustrated racing man, but at least I have the opportunity of travelling the world with a race team and, if the chance occurs, of riding one of the best racing bikes in the world. I'm really looking forward to the coming race season and hope I have the chance of racing the bikes I prepare . . . after all, I'm still only 28 and I still think I can make it as a rider in my own right."

CHARLES E. DEANE