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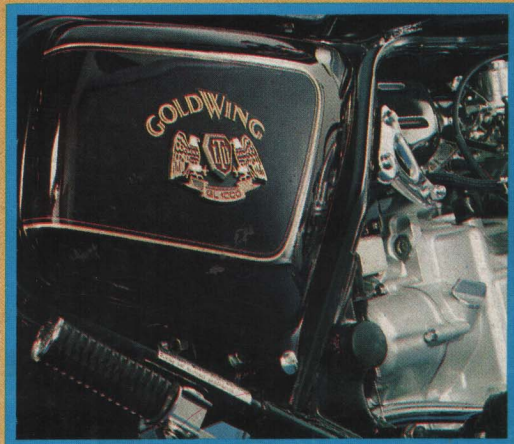
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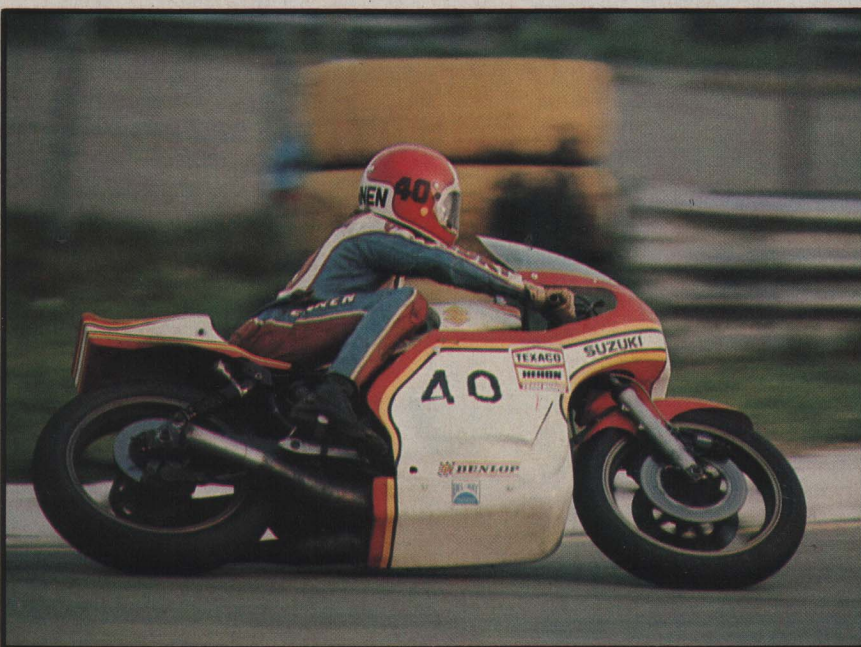
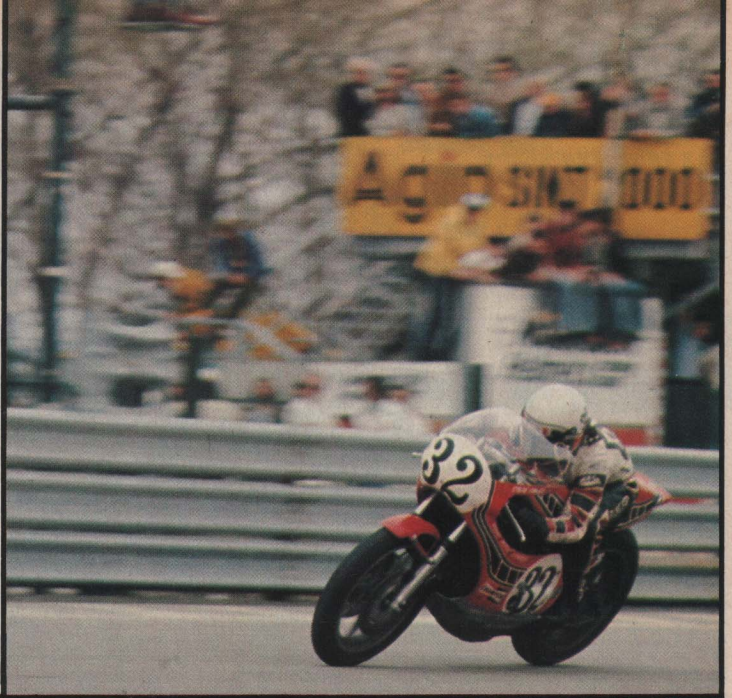
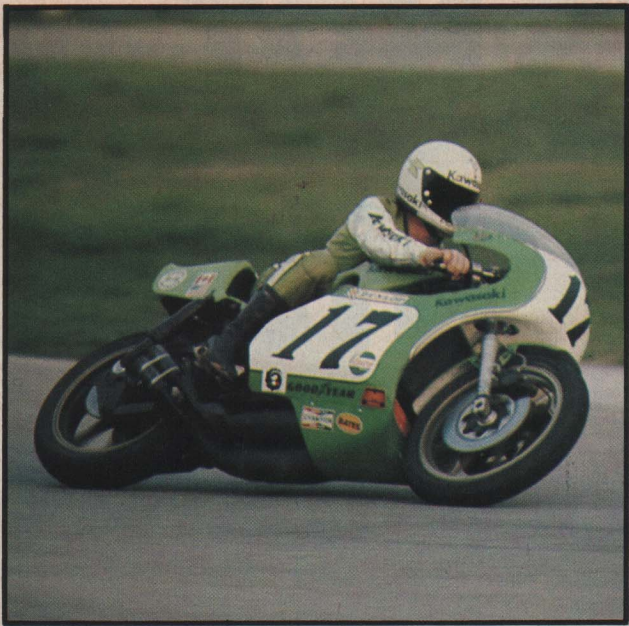
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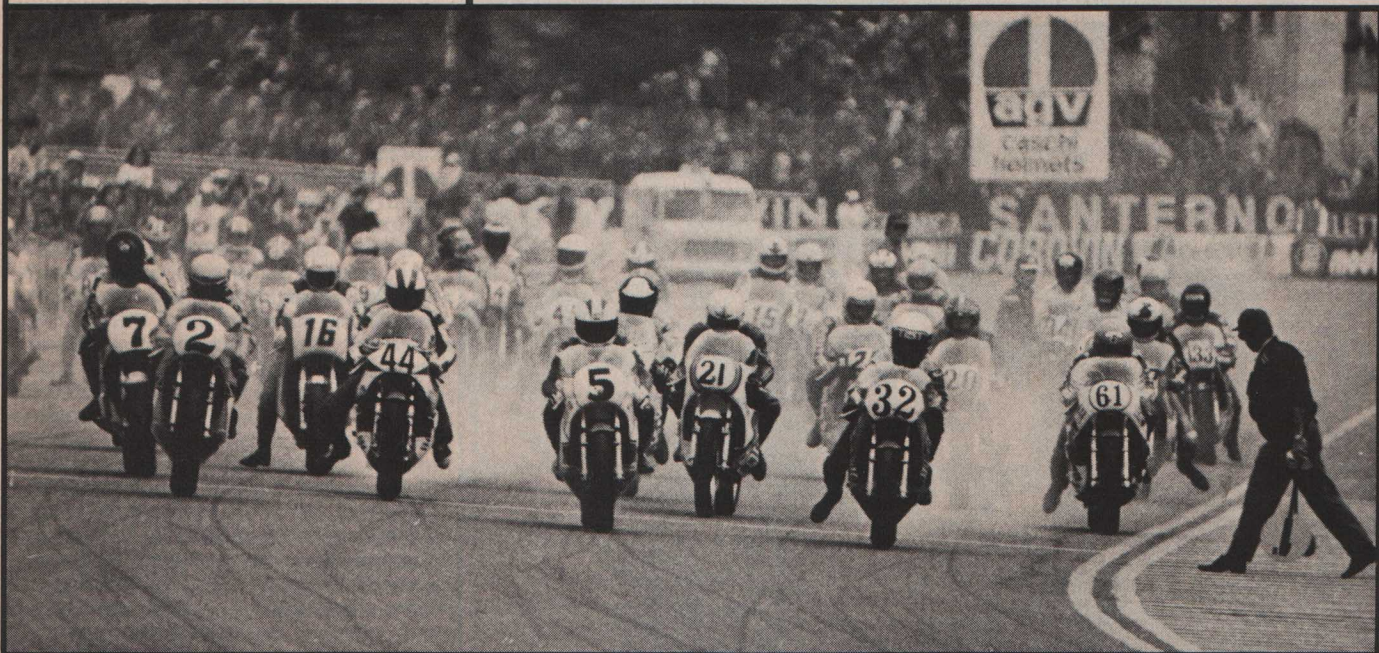


**K**enny Roberts must be the most frustrated ace in the history of road racing, and from the way things keep going for him he will stay that way until next year. Once again he missed the double appointment with the checkered flag in the two races he has never won—yet: Daytona 200 and Imola double 100. Ken's golden racing career might come to a natural decline while he is still attempting to nail down his first win at either Daytona or Imola.

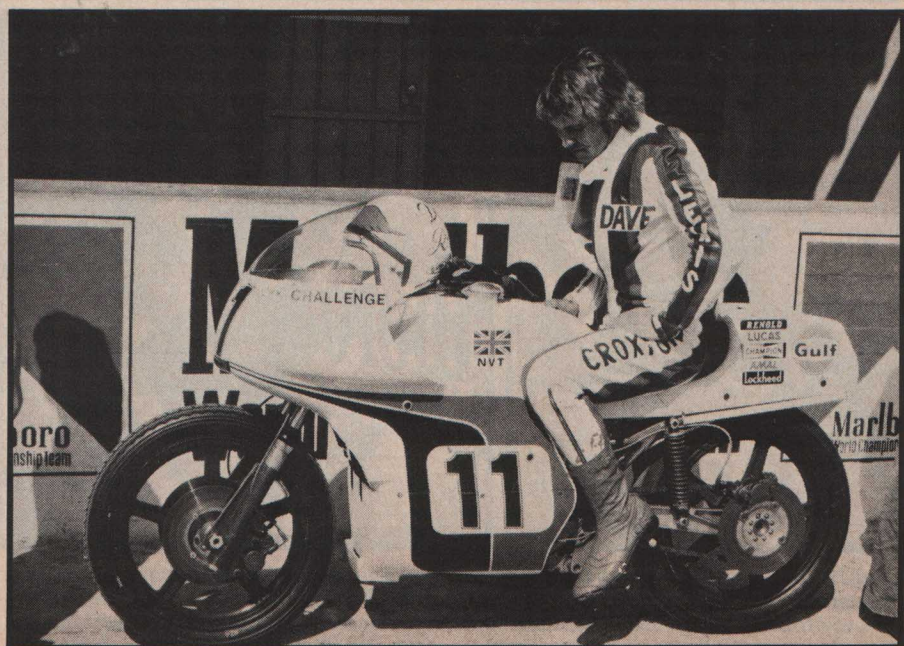
It would not be the first case in the sport; take Jay Sylvester, possibly the greatest discus thrower ever, world record setter dozens of times, but he never won the Olympics. Daytona and Imola are the Olympics of Formula 750 road racing and, even though we are ready to crown Ken Roberts the greatest road racer of our times, he might just have to do

# STEVE "IMOLA" BAKER Yankee Lion Eats Roman Gladiators, Twice On Sunday

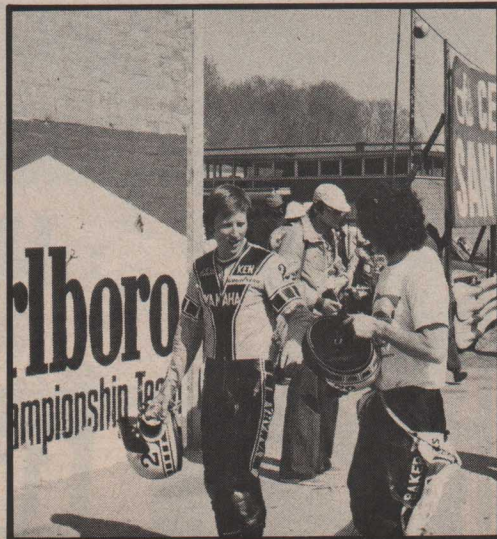
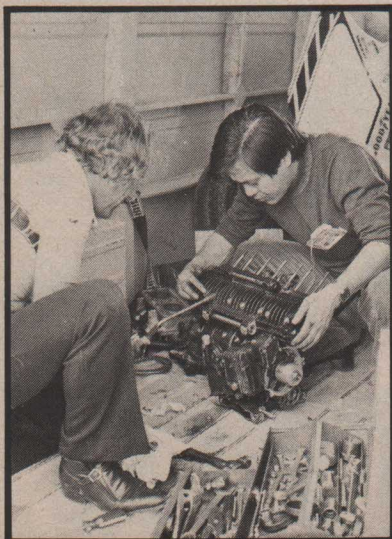
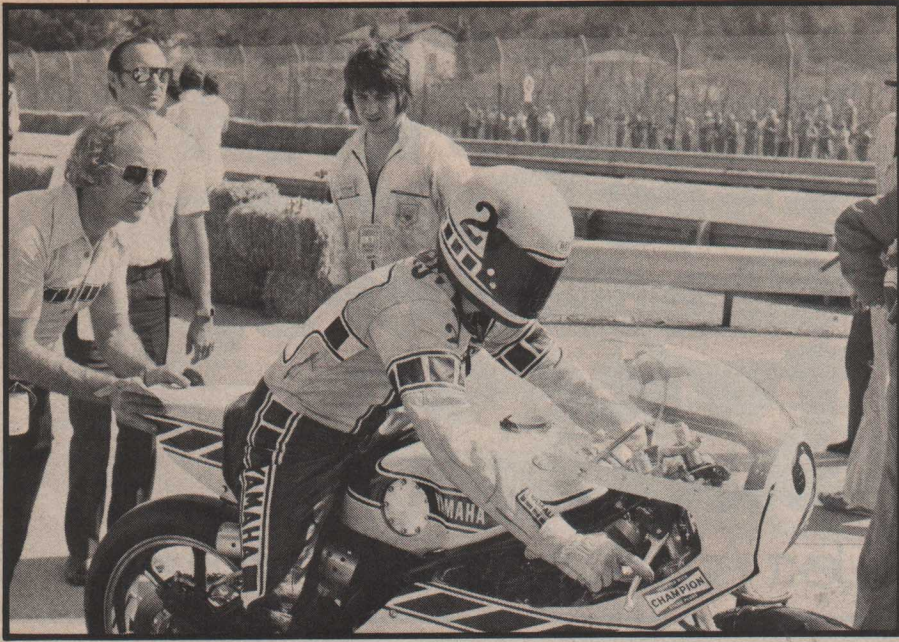
Text And Photos By Bruno de Prato



Opposite page, top left: duHamel, the limping old man from Canada, lapped his uncompetitive Kawasaki to a very smooth seventh overall placing. Top right: Four nations shared the first four places, Michel Rougerie, the French marathon champion, copped second at Imola. Middle: Barry Sheene, handicapped by a non-competitive Suzuki, chasing one of the hords of Yamahas that so decidedly dominate road racing. His kind of talent should not be wasted on poor machinery. Bottom left: Pat Hennen giving chase on a borrowed Suzuki courtesy of John Newbold and Suzuki G.B. Cross-over foot control levers and being new to the course were too much of a handicap for the American Ace. Bottom right: Gary Nixon wearing Motorcyclist Magazine's '74 All Star jacket walks away from it all. Above: Cecotto gets a hole shot in the first race, seized it before the lap was over. Right: A Norton, too old and too slow for the show.







Top: Kenny getting a push from Kel during pre-race practice. Bike had nothing but problems, making a lean year for Roberts. Middle left: Pat Hennen waiting it out. Middle right: Steve Baker and duHamel doing the same. Bottom left: Speed wrenchin' between races. Bottom right: Marlboros are big over there.

without those laurels. He'll remain great; after all, it has always been some side problem that has stopped him from winning—he has never been defeated in the real sense, not even in '74 when his choice of an inadequate tire put him in the second spot at his first Imola.

This year things went sour by the end of the third qualification run when a big-end bearing seized. Ken was just beginning to sort out his bike and had just set a very convincing lap time, the second best behind Cecotto's runs at 1.55.14, some three seconds faster than Agostini's previous record. At 1.56.40 Ken looked consistent and we all expected him to break in the low 1.54s during the fourth and last qualification run. But he did not appear at the paddock gate. With his leathers halfway down, he was helping Carruthers in removing the engine of his mighty Yamaha from the frame. With his lap time, there was no worry about a first row start, and Kel decided that if such a problem had to show, it certainly was better that it happen Saturday afternoon. That it would happen Sunday also, Kel had no way of knowing; otherwise he would have saved himself four hours of hard work and Ken a seizure and consequent crash, knocked head and injured foot.

While Kel was working on Roberts' bike, another American rider was circulating at an incredible pace around the 3.134 miles of very demanding track of Imola; it was Steve Baker, aboard the sound 750 Yamaha sponsored by Yamaha Motors of Canada. His lap times had steadily increased through the practice sessions, by the fourth he was just too fast for anyone and got the pole position with a superb 1.54.79. In 1974 Roberts had set the fastest lap time in the race at 2.00, the year before the late Saarinen had circulated at 1.48.9, but there were no chicanes yet to slow down the riders in the two fastest sections of the track. Now Steve Baker is within less than six seconds of the old record and that should mean something about his superb riding ability and hot Canadian machinery.

One rider who looked out of place, surprisingly, was Giacomo Agostini. On his home turf he has always been sensational, but now the young lions of new generation road racers are too fast even for him. He tried as hard as he could to get his lap times in the same league with the Americans, but all he could muster was 1.57.55, only fractionally faster than Frenchman Michel Rougerie on a private Yamaha 750 that was supposedly substantially slower than the factory fire engines ridden by Ago, Baker, Cecotto and Roberts.

The official machines are some 25-30 pounds lighter and 10 hp stronger than the over-the-counter versions. Their power-to-weight ratio, in terms of hp to kilo is 135:135, or better 1:1. No other bike in the 750 class can match them. Ask Pat Hennen or Barry Sheene, best of the Su-



zuki riders. Pat had his first experience at Imola, and in the qualification runs he was able to break in the 1.59+, the safe limit to make the first grid wave. Pat did it on a bike he had never ridden before, with the pedals switched and in only two runs. It all happened in Caracas, after the 200-mile race at San Carlos. The bikes of Hennen, Pat Evans, Randy Cleek and the one and only Gary Nixon were lost somewhere between Venezuela and Milan, but chances are they had been misrouted to Australia. Pat was the only one of the four to get a place in the starting grid. Young and possibly more flexible than Nixon, he adjusted to the bike he borrowed from Suzuki GB, the one that John Williams was supposed to ride.

But Williams is not the right man on a track like Imola, being a specialist of the British short circuits, so he was happy to hand his fresh Suzuki 750 to Pat. A good bike, Pat said the engine felt stronger than his, the problem being that the rear brake lever was on the side where he usually finds the shift lever, and the shift lever... "I have to think every time, and when you are in a hurry, you lose a lot of time." Pat confided this at the end of the qualification runs, while he cleaned the engine of his borrowed Suzuki. He, with brother Chip, reset the pedals, switching sides for the next day's race.

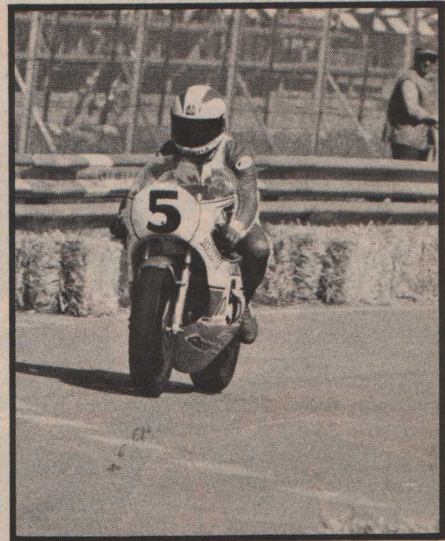
Gary Nixon, long expected at Imola and finally here, did not qualify. On Roberts' spare bike, with the same pedal problem Hennen was facing, he could not do better than 2.4+, not enough in this year's super-fast Imola 200. Gary was riding in his usual immaculate style, but it was not enough; Imola's blind corners take some time to learn where to put the wheels, it is too easy to settle for too-short gearing, trying to pick up acceleration out of corners. Nixon was just sorting out the bike when trials ended. Too slow.

Everybody felt sorry, and tried their best to get him on the grid. We all knew that Erv Kanemoto, almost in tears, would have set that uncustomary Yamaha to its best potential, and Gary would have done the rest. With that tough Nixon grimace, the superb rider from Maryland, the still-going-strong hero of pre-Roberts years just could not believe that he wouldn't be in the race. He and Erv went back to work to set the machine up for the race with a feeling that somehow he would be on the grid, even if in the back of the second wave. He would have worked his way up the pack; hell, there's only one Nixon in the racing business. They toiled in vain.

The surprise of the trials came from such as Rougerie, Katayama and Palomo, little known outside Europe and Japan, but very impressive and all able to break in 1.57+ on regular Yamahas. Right behind them was Barry Sheene on the less potent Suzuki.

Johnny Cecotto, fresh off his Day-

*continued on page 68*



Top: The winners' circle—Steve Baker waves the cup while Michel and Barry seem very bored about it all. Middle: Erv Kanemoto and Nixon couldn't get it together enough to make the program. Bottom left: Baker wheelies out of a turn. Bottom right: Luckless Johnny Cecotto coasts back to pits.



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## STEVE "IMOLA" BAKER

continued from page 47

tona 200 win, had lapped very fast on Friday, while he had gone steadily but without improvement the next day. Cecotto loves to surround himself in mystery. He never talks; if you want to know anything you must go to see Mr. Ippolito, his sponsor, the almighty Yamaha distributor for Venezuela. Johnny is the new hero of the local fans because of his Italian origin, and because during the world series he is stationed in Italy.

Ago is no longer first in the hearts of his countrymen; most of the Italian fans come to see him in the dust, but they go wild when he wins. After so many years, the love affair between Ago and his public has turned into a love-hate game. Cecotto is the new fiancée; and Ago is some sort of mistress they are getting fed up with, but who is still able to stir them when that special feeling strikes back.

Johnny is supposed to be getting the best stuff from the factory, and that is certainly true when it comes to the 350 and, obviously the 500, since he has the only two of the aborted '76 versions in existence. Ippolito expects his protegee to regain the 350 title and double it with the 500 crown, not bad for an early season preview. In Imola, Cecotto was expected to win, most of the Italian press were betting on him, probably to please their readers. With his curly hair and angel face, Johnny is the instant winner. But he didn't last more than one lap.

Despite his fantastic qualification time, Baker was still regarded as an incidental, an intruder among the gods of speed. The typical underdog, Steve certainly looks the part, always busy about his bike, soft spoken and superficially unglamorous. Easy and friendly after the race, Steve doesn't shuck 'n jive prior to it—he doesn't pose as a superstar; he is the anti-star, so natural in all expressions, and so great.

The race was no race at all. Steve just took off, Roberts trailing for a couple of laps, then dropping back with engine troubles that climaxed in an unglorious seizure. Unfortunately that happened right at the end of the long stretch from the grandstand chicanes around a very fast left sweeper and into another straight, the fastest section of the track, where the stronger machines reach 150 mph. Near the end of the stretch, there's a slight bend to the right, and at this point the riders start fan-shifting and braking to negotiate the slowest of Imola's corners, a sharp left.

Ken's bike seized right here, where the riders are super-busy and well cranked over. No time to pull the clutch. Bang! Ken's bike had been rebuilt after the third practice session, but the original piston had been retained since no time remained for proper running-in new pistons. Maybe the pistons were a little

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abused, since the engine has never run at full string on race day. Consequences for Ken were fairly marginal, a little head concussion and a foot injury that prevented him from taking the start one week later at the French Paul Ricard 200.

When the seizure occurred, Ken had already dropped to third place, surprisingly having been passed by Michel Rougerie. Cecotto had crashed during the first lap due to a clip-on that had snapped in his hands while braking hard. Some said that things went the other way around, with Cecotto grabbing a handful of brakes and flipping, the clip-on snapping in the crash.

Ago was never part of the show. Too slow, out of shape, he pulled into the pits when, after six laps, he had already been passed by a number of riders on supposedly less competitive machinery. He reported



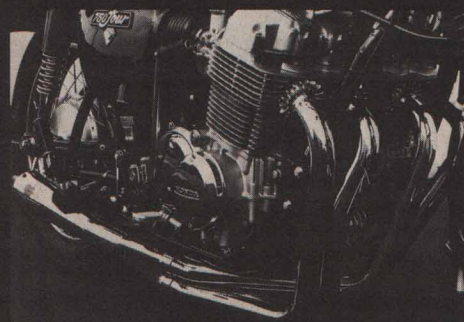
some mysterious misfiring, but it did not sound like that. Back in the race, he looked totally unconvinced and finally called it off with a reportedly broken big-end. Baker, totally unopposed, was sailing all alone up front, while the only real race was for second place, between Rougerie and Sheene, with Katayama, Palomo and Hennen right behind having their own fight. Rougerie had a faster machine, but Sheene was riding at his best and had a better pit crew. At the end of the first heat Steve was almost one minute ahead of the rest of the pack, led by Rougerie closely followed by Sheene, Swiss representative Kneubuhler being two seconds ahead of Pat Hennen, who was in turn two seconds in front of Katayama on a private but very fast Yamaha. Pat was making an exceptional showing in his first race at Imola, picking up confidence lap by lap.

The 45-minute intermission between 100-mile races allowed crews to change tires and patch engines. Roberts was, obviously, a non-starter, while Agostini gave up and handed his pistons over to Baker, who had noticed some power drop in the closing stages of the first heat. Cecotto's bike had been easily fixed and the young Venezuelan, now with a totally fresh engine, was seriously aiming for a strong comeback, with lap times as low as 1.53, almost at the physical limit of the track. It would solve nothing, other than prove his superiority. Starting last in the pack, Cecotto charged past 18

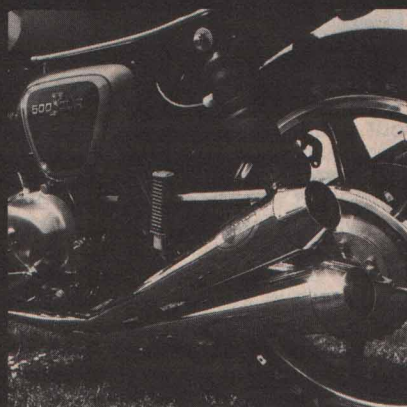
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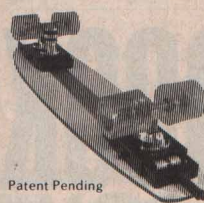
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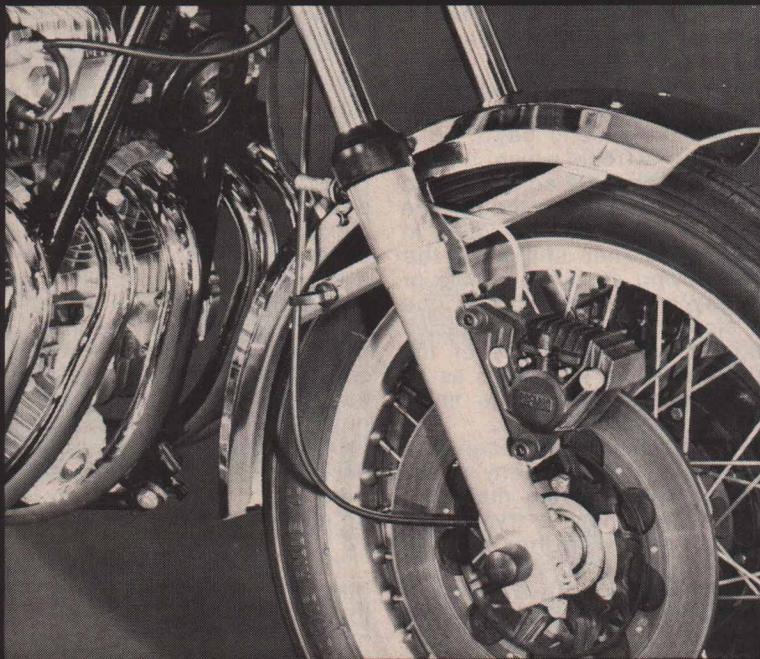
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# HOOKER HEADERS



# Next Issue



## Benelli 750-6

### STEVE "IMOLA" BAKER

continued from page 69

riders in the first lap, then the engine packed. Of the semi-official Yamahas, only Baker's was going strong after the piston transplant.

These bikes are currently the ultimate expression of road race machinery, and their reduced reliability seems to confirm the impression that any further improvement in terms of dependable power will imply some modification to the basic design. Big-end failures are now common practice, while last year the 750 Yammy was regarded as a most reliable racer. It still is in the standard form.

After Cecotto had to call off his brave attempt to inject new interest in a dull race, the second heat reverted to the previous format, with Baker facing only one competitor, the stopwatch. He did it again, because he lapped in 1.54.80, repeating, though totally unchallenged, his performance of practice day and setting a new official track record.

Rougerie and Sheene were again locked in battle for second spot, with the French rider leading the duo when drama struck. Sheene pitted for fuel first and was off in a matter of eight seconds. Rougerie, no long-



er pressed by the British ace, remained in second spot comfortably until pit time came for him too. His lead was enough to allow him to rejoin the race still running second, but when Rougerie got out of the pits, Barry was 12 seconds ahead of him, the Frenchman's pit stop having taken some 25 seconds. It happened when the quick-fill hose was applied to the tank; the filler tank happened to be empty. A traditional funnel-cum-jerrycan refueling had to be applied, with obvious results. Mouth foaming, the irate Frenchman rejoined battle at a pace supposedly beyond the potential of a standard Yamaha, going down to 1.55.23 in lap time, just one tenth of a second slower than Cecotto's qualifying time. It was a great show of gallantry, and it paid off, with some help from a broken expansion chamber that further slowed Sheene's bike. Pat Hennen's Suzuki suffered the same problem while the brave young rider was a strong fourth, battling with Kataya-

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ma. By race end, he had lost another position to Newbold, the second man of team Suzuki GB.

When the checkered flag put an end to the one-man show, Steve Baker was 35 seconds in the lead, with Rougerie second by four seconds over third place Sheene. Katayama was a lonesome fourth, while Suzuki-mounted Newbold and Hennen dicing for fifth place all the way to the last yard. The best placing, actually the only placing, Kawasaki was in the hands of Yvon duHamel. Still limping, the great Canadian gave another demonstration of consistency and dedication, that he confirmed the next week in France by ramming his green triple into third spot behind Cecotto and Baker, who had to settle for second place at the Paul Ricard.

At Imola Steve Baker swept the prize field, having led from start to finish in both heats. Some 13 million lira ended up in his pockets. Now the lira is going down the drain, but by present exchange rate that still corresponds to some 15,000 bucks, which were really deserved by this gifted American who held the world at bay for a day, at least in terms of consistency and mastership.

#### RESULTS:

##### FIRST HEAT

Steve Baker (32) Yamaha  
Michel Rougerie (25) Yamaha  
Barry Sheene (7) Suzuki  
Bruno Kneubuhler (41) Yamaha  
Pat Hennen (40) Suzuki  
Takazumi Katayama (21) Yamaha  
Alex George (34) Yamaha  
Yvon duHamel (17) Kawasaki  
John Newbold (6) Suzuki  
Ron Haslam (36) Yamaha

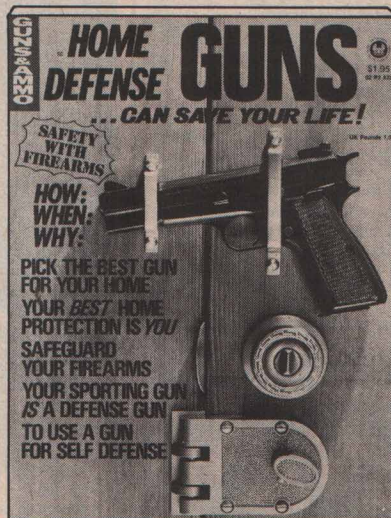
##### SECOND HEAT

Steve Baker (32) Yamaha  
Michel Rougerie (25) Yamaha  
Barry Sheene (7) Suzuki  
Takazumi Katayama (21) Yamaha  
John Newbold (6) Suzuki  
Pat Hennen (40) Suzuki  
Christian Bourgeois (132) Yamaha  
Yvon duHamel (17) Kawasaki  
Gerard Chouckroun (42) Yamaha  
Rene Ruitz (83) Yamaha

##### FINAL RESULTS

1st Steve Baker (32) Yamaha  
USA  
2nd Michel Rougerie (25) Yamaha  
France  
3rd Barry Sheene (7) Suzuki  
Great Britain  
4th Takazumi Katayama (21) Yamaha  
Japan  
5th Pat Hennen (40) Suzuki  
USA  
6th John Newbold (6) Suzuki  
Great Britain  
7th Yvon duHamel (17) Kawasaki  
Canada  
8th Gerard Chouckroun (42) Yamaha  
France  
9th Rene Ruitz (83) Yamaha  
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