

Rick O'Brien rode one of the rear-forked versions of the Harley back in March at Daytona Beach.



Fork experiments included gas, springs, gas and springs. The team bikes undergo constant changes as the Hly-D factory develops the production machinery.

Harley Has a Strategy Behind Its No-Trick Race Team

By Chet Heyberger

Who are these people?

Black and orange leathers, giant gold eagles stretched across their pure white jerseys, orange and black rings on their sleeves, unrelieved black-and-orange helmets, with black visors and dark goggles. Squads and crews attend these riders; black trousers and eagled t-shirts replicate the theme. Black and orange, a motocross Halloween costume. Where is the traditional yellow? Where are the racer's red and blue? What is this black and orange stuff?

These people are actually an American motocross team. Young riders on machinery built by an American motorcycle manufacturer. Harley Davidson.

Harley Davidson?

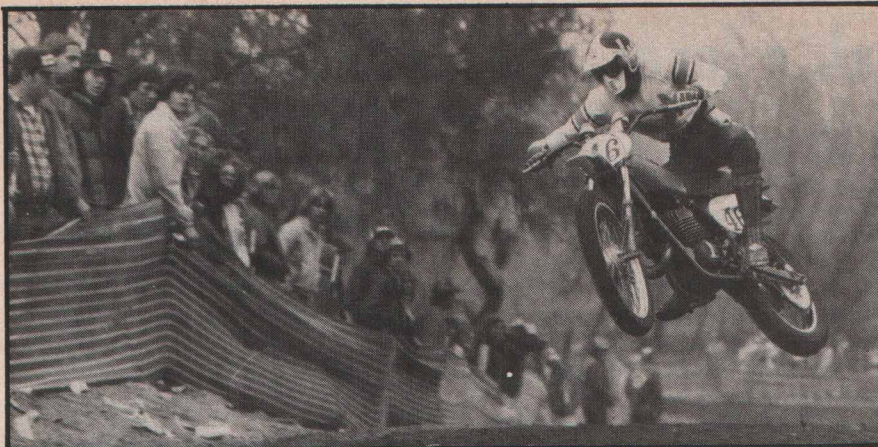
You mean panheads and knuckleheads, shovelheads and flatheads, whatever those are? Harley? Choppers and extended front ends, dressers and saddlebags, sidevalves and strange AMA racing rulebooks written to protect American manufacturers from the

Rex may be under contract as a development rider, but he's still a racer. On the track, he's serious.

COMPETITION SCENE



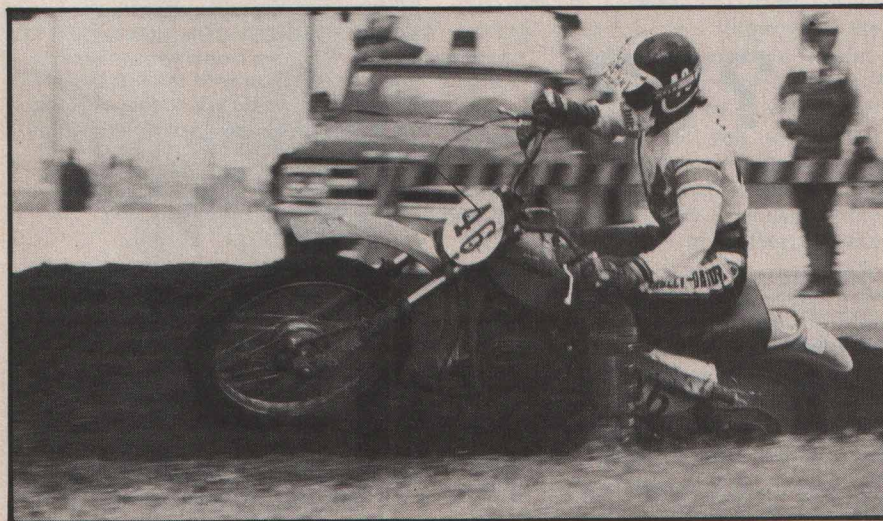
HARDLY A MOTOCROSS TEAM



In the Hangtown 250 National, Rex lost a base gasket and a condenser went sour. Resigned to a ratty-running motor, he spent a whole moto pleasing his fans with cross-ups.



O'Brien was Number One 125 Expert in District 17 last year. Harley is his first factory ride.



Unlike most factory bikes, the Harleys are strictly production-oriented: no titanium, no trick one-off swingarms, nothing you can't afford to buy.

Yellow Peril? Chrome and concealed shocks, stepped seats and lights everywhere, tape decks on a motorcycle? Motor Maids and Marlon Brando. Sonny Barger and Evel Knievel. XLCH, Sportster, Electra and Super Glides. County fairgrounds and popping bolt upright to toss it sideways at 90 mph. Windshields, V-twins, Milwaukee and York, Pennsylvania? Bronson doing stunts on his bike, but if you look close, isn't that J. N. on a Husky?

Harley Davidson.

Also World Champions of 250cc Grand Prix road racing two years running, and already in the lead this year. Harley also took the AMA Grand National Championship last year. They have AMF, American Machine and Foundry, behind them; that's a *Fortune Magazine* "500 company" doing over a billion dollars a year.

So think about Harley: flat track, mile, one-half mile, sure. But motocross?

YES, MOTOCROSS

The team is Rex Staten and Rick O'Brien.

Rex Staten, California hot shoe, local hero, Skyrocket Staten, Superbowl performer, Rex the Rocket, here and there again in the pages of the magazines tying a bike up in knots for the clicking cameras, berserk-o, banzai-bonanza, breaker of Maicos, CZ's, Suzukis, Rex preserved for posterity, busting berms. He's been in front of the best riders in the world, usually snapping whatever's under him in half during the process. Rex does not disappoint the fans waiting on the snow fence for bermshots, cross-ups, whips, snaps and endos.

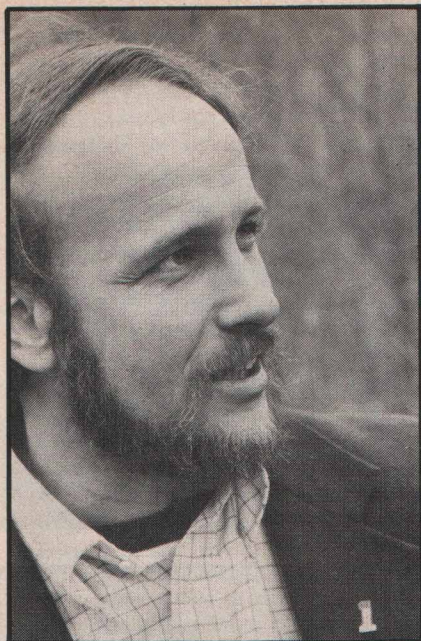
And Rick O'Brien. He's no relation to Dick O'Brien, Harley's racing manager, the legendary O.B. builder of the most competitive flat-trackers in the world and of World Land Speed record breakers. No, Rick O'Brien is the kid next door. He's fast, faster than you or I, but not as fast as the names, the national numbers with the rides, the people he races against every weekend from California to Georgia. Just an 18-year-old from Peoria, Illinois out on his first factory ride.

The team is John Ingham, Don Habermehl and Tim Dixon.

Ingham is the motocross team manager, with a degree in mechanical engineering, a long background of riding, experience with Harley Davidson and with Marubeni, the Red Wing suspension people. Habermehl and Dixon are the team's mechanics, Don from Harley's Experimental and Racing Department, Tim hired just for the motocross effort.

Harley has not stinted on this team.

BIKES



More evidence that Harley-Davidson is serious about dirt: they hire Bill Dutcher from Bultaco and let him use his motocross background in Harley's effort.



Rex missed a shift over the double-hump jump at Daytona and smacked his jaw on the crossbrace. Next time out he wore a full coverage helmet.

There are four of them, two racers and two back-ups, and they are in a constant state of flux. One week Rex will have gas shocks; the next, it'll be rear forks. Last week Rick had a leading axle fork; this week it was a conventional set-up.

None of the bikes are very trick. They run around 215 dry because no exotic metals are used. They pump out from 35 to 40 horsepower, just to stay within competitive range of the other bikes on the national circuit, but max horsepower isn't the goal.

The basic 242.6cc engine and five-speed close-ratio box is Italian, but the frame, glass and engine mods are all American. Suspension travel varies with all the development work, but it runs around nine inches, front and rear.

Absolutely no emphasis is placed on getting these machines up to state-of-the-art trickness. Hly-D uses only the best of what's conventional: no unobtainium axles or hand-made frames. Production is the criteria. You won't find it on the racers unless it can be mass-produced inexpensively.

That puts Rex, the anchorman of the team, at a disadvantage with the novel items the other factory riders are racing. It shows in the results: Rex DNFed at Hangtown, got 11th at Phoenix, and finished seventh at Rio Bravo in Texas. His best placing to date was fifth during the 4-moto Supercross event at Pontiac, Michigan.

But Harley's not unhappy

Which makes you wonder what kind of motocross team these orange-and-black types are.

WHY GO RACING?

Privateers race for a lot of reasons: pride, girls, fame, fun, exercise, whatever. Factories go racing for one of two reasons. They used to say they went racing because it "improves the breed." But since when have 4-cylinder, 2-stroke water-cooled monoshockers had anything to do with street bikes? And how do you trace your aluminum and steel 250 back to a \$30,000 prototype that is hand-made and different in every dimension from its predecessor, its successor, or the other team bike?

"Well, it sells the brand," is the next answer. Proponents and believers here abound. These people build bikes of many sorts, including highly original designs that advance the breed in reality. But most often they build: copies of whatever was winning in Europe last year; a trick version of whatever Maico is racing; or a much-modified version of their production machinery. Lately the trend has been to hire a good mechanic, a *very* good

mechanic, and let him build *his* bike for whichever rider the factory assigns to him. Next year another factory will hire him for more money and the mechanic will build his bike again, only this time the color will change.

Racing does sell the brand—if you win.

So anyone who goes racing to sell motorcycles has a policy about hiring riders. They hire winners. The story is apocryphal, but the Europeans used to say that the only way to make money in motocross was to get a factory Maico anyway you can—pay them if you have to. Then win some on it and get hired by the Japanese next year.

None of which explains the Harley Davidson motocross team.

The factory is certainly not in motocross to sell Harleys by the boxcar-full. First of all, that would require winning. Those are the ground rules. And who could expect a winning season with just two riders, in just one class, and especially if Rex Staten and Rick O'Brien are the riders? Berserko Rex, capable of breaking anything on two wheels into myriad small, bent, fused pieces; Staten, with his well-deserved reputation for not noticing when a machine is coming apart under him; and O'Brien, the kid next door, fast, but not fast enough—what a team!

And consider further the prospects of selling Hly-D's by racing motocross. Your everyday, high school varsity-jacketed, Tom Hartman-like Harley owner has never heard of Roger DeCoster or Bob Hannah. At most he's interested in crowding a few more inches into his motor and taking the bike to the local asphalt runway to shave a couple more hundredths off his time.

Then consider Harley's motocross production bikes. Those, at least, they could sell with a winning season. Except that there are only one-and-a-third MX250's for each Harley dealer in the country. Last year they made a hundred of them and sent ten of those to Europe. This year Harley plans to make only a thousand of them, to be delivered by Christmas.

So what are these orange-and-black clad racers doing?

Having excluded the selling answer, there's only one other left. Harley Davidson is racing to develop new motorcycles. And if you think of it that way, the team of Staten and O'Brien makes all the sense in the world. Rex can break anything. They'll make it so that he can't. Rick represents the rest of us. If he likes it, we will.

And Rex is good. If he wins, that's so much more gravy on the potatoes, icing on the cake, raisins in their bran flakes.

Meanwhile, it's fun to watch. And interesting to speculate. And hard to wait for the production bikes.