

# inside europe

Five years ago a bunch of American pioneers crossed over to Britain to inaugurate the Transatlantic Trophy match race series. The United Kingdom and the U.S.A. fought it out on three tracks in four days over the Easter weekend. With the exception of veteran all-rounder Dick Mann, the Americans looked like a bunch of turkeys on the tight and swervy English pavement circuits, and they lost heavily.

But year-by-year the gap closed, until in 1975 America won the series for the first time. This year they brought over what was probably their heaviest team ever, including three former AMA No. 1's (Ken Roberts, Gene Romero, Gary Nixon) and the hottest name to emerge from this season's early road race internationals, Steve Baker from Bellingham, Wash.

As it happened, the Americans lost this time, with 384 points to Britain's 412, but the '76 match races provided some memorable action, and offered an insight into the different ways that American and British riders and teams operate. Generally, I think the Americans do it better—and I don't say that merely to patronize this mag that pays me bucks for this material.

What really impresses me about contemporary American road racing is the emergence of the highly effective rider/tuner pairings. At the press conference called a couple of days prior in a London hotel to launch the match races, there was enough technical ability to build a whole fleet of Daytona 200 winners. Okay, so it was the riders who delivered the ritual patriotic utterings about "doing our level best to get that trophy back home, etc., etc., etc.," but the tuners were also very obviously present. There was abrasive little Kel Carruthers, the power behind Kenny Roberts; Don Vesco, provider of bikes for Gene Romero; Irv Kanemoto, who keeps the edge on Gary Nixon's Kawasakis; Bob Work of Yamaha in Canada, mentor to Steve Baker, and the highly articulate and perceptive Kevin Cameron, who's paired up these days with Ron Pierce, himself no mean hand with a wrench and a file, as well as a fine rider.

These rider/tuner relationships are not only effective in getting results, but the sharing of publicity and glory they generate seems, to my jaded mind at least, far healthier than the hero-worship cult that flourishes in European

road racing.

As Kevin Cameron put it, "When Kenny Roberts goes racing he shares center stage with Kel Carruthers. And it was Irv Kanemoto who literally rebuilt Gary Nixon's career after Triumph had dropped Nixon when they figured he'd broken his leg too many times."

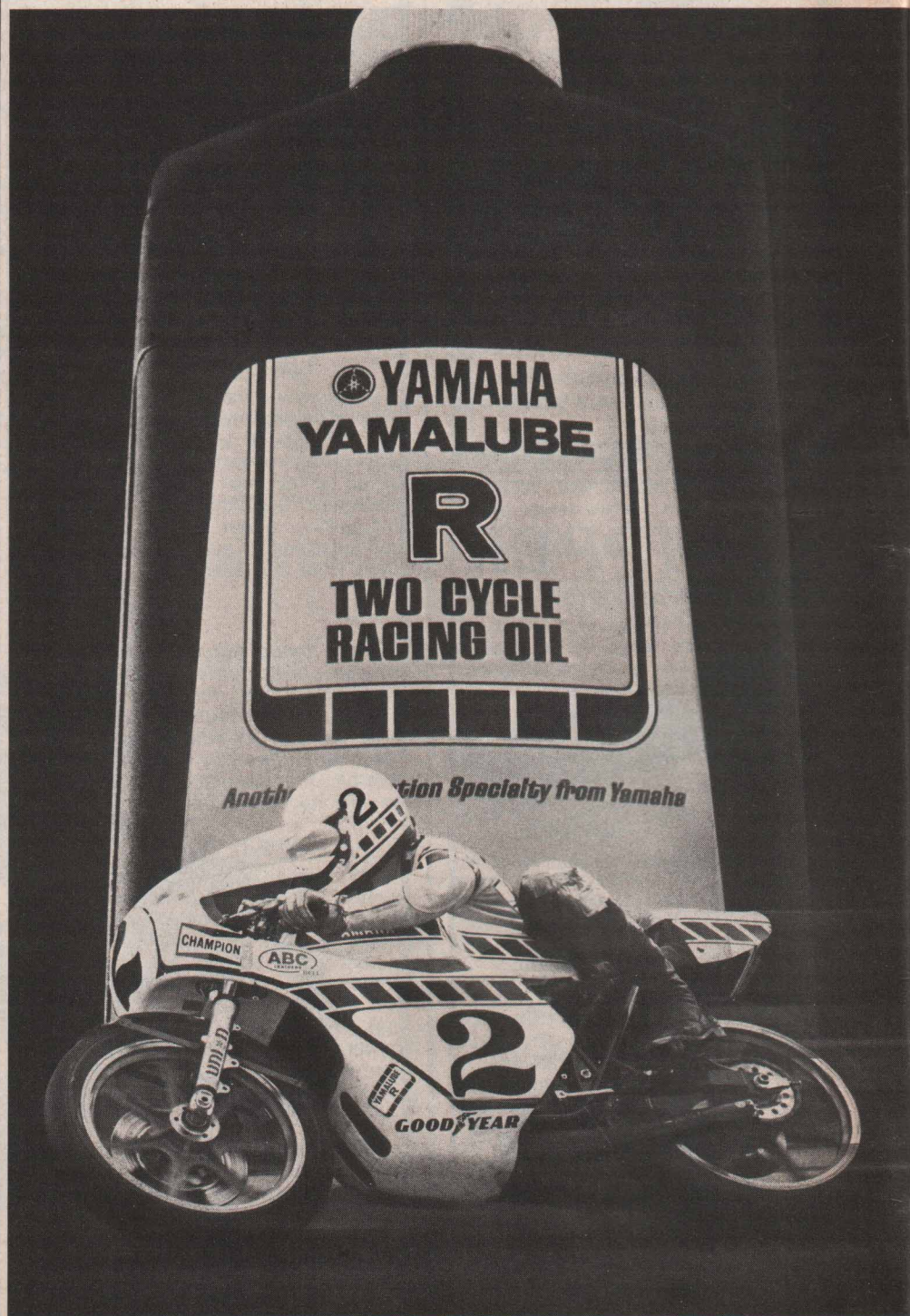
All this makes a mature contrast to some of the more inane happenings on the European scene, where top riders are often given the Osmonds-mania treatment. Briton Barry Sheene is one of the major recipients. Take this gem from one of the leading British motor-

cycle papers, in announcing their new book on Sheene:

*Exclusive extracts from this exciting new book. Number one: 'Why I wear blue briefs.'*

Yeah, we just can't wait. Or this comment from Suzuki team manager in Britain, Merv Wright: "If Barry Sheene wants a corned beef sandwich strapped to his tank—we must not question it."

Admittedly, Wright (the former Suzuki race manager in the U.S., incidentally) did not intend his comment literally, but you get the drift of how folk in Europe tend to cream their jeans at the mere mention of these latterday





folk heroes.

Maybe the whole farce was epitomized some weeks before the match races when Sheene declared that he might not ride—because Phil Read, and not he, had been named as team captain! Anyway, our Barry, who's a good kid and a hell of a motorcycle rider when he can avoid the quote-hungry press hacks, wisely and rapidly reconsidered, and was there on the grid when the action started.

These pre-race verbal fisticuffs between Read and Sheene were not the only fiasco involving the British operations at the match races. The other

target of scandal was the Norton Cosworth Challenge, the race bike built from one-quarter of the famed Cosworth V8 Formula One auto engine. The Cosworth is a water-cooled parallel twin four-stroke (natch), and many wondrous claims have been made about what it's going to do to those wing-ding two-strokes once it's fully developed. Oh really? The bike was too slow to even qualify for the big Imola International in Italy (won by Steve Baker) early in the season, and then in the opening leg of the match races at Brands Hatch circuit the bike was troubled by gear selector problems, and anyway was too

slow to live with the two-strokes. It finished 11th and last, a lap behind winner Baker, and was bundled away in the Norton transporter without contesting the second race at Brands.

Two days later, for the second round of the series at the 1.35-mile Mallory Park circuit, promoter Chris Lowe had to search the paddock to check whether the Cosworth had even arrived. It hadn't—and there was no communication from the Norton team to explain why. What had happened was that minutes before race manager Frank Perris was to leave for the track, he received a dramatic phone call from rider Dave Croxford. Croxford's 11th hour decision was that he no longer wanted to ride the Cosworth.

In a comment on the problems of running the Norton four-strokes against the three-and four-cylinder two-strokes he said later, "It seems that when it rains I'm in with a chance of winning a race—I've been praying for rain for two years now."

The incident was, however, typical of the British approach to the match races, which seems ragged and inconsistent in comparison with American attitudes. The match races carry nothing like the world-wide international prestige of, say, Daytona or Grand Prix events, yet the Americans always seem more serious about it than the Britons. Maybe it comes down to a simple matter of pride in what they're doing . . .

The rapid schedule at which the match race circus operates means that the visiting Americans often have little time to learn circuits. Steve Baker, for example, could get in only about 10 laps of the 2.61-mile Brands Hatch track on the morning of the first round. Yet by the end of the day he had won both races there—and established a new lap record. Baker, Roberts and Sheene dominated both legs. The two Americans were using the famed OW31 750cc Yamahas, only five of which were built before Yamaha's recent relaxation of racing activity. The OWs have a frame based on the 500cc GP bikes, with the engine lower in the frame, and the motor itself produces slightly more torque and power than a "stock" TZ750, if such a thing there be.

Bob Work estimated that the OWs were worth at least a second a lap to Baker on the snaky English short circuits, so it was no wonder that he and Roberts dominated so much of the proceedings. One wonders what Sheene might have done had he had similar power, because the factory Suzukis are noticeably slower than the best Yamahas this year, as was demonstrated so clearly at Daytona back in March.

So while Sheene got in among Roberts and Baker at Brands and managed to split them in the first leg, the Americans got their act completely together in the second race and finished 1-2, with Sheene third.

Match race venom flared briefly in the first race when Briton Dave Potter

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## Ask Kenny Roberts about Yamalube R. If you can catch him.

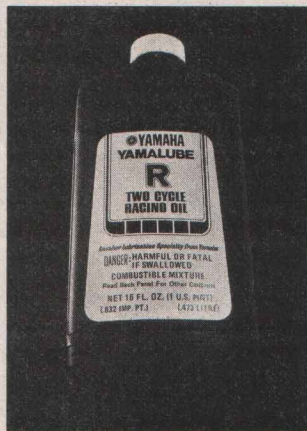
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and Romero wanted the same line at Druid's Bend. Romero fell, and claimed later: "This guy just chopped me up so badly. He took my front wheel clean from under me."

Nixon, the old campaigner, finished fourth in that race, behind British Kawasaki teamster Barry Ditchburn. In the second race Read, the seven times world champion, took fourth on his Yamaha from Pat Hennen, the 21-year-old San Franciscan who plans to contest 500 and 750cc GP events in Europe this year.

Brands left the Americans in control by 137 points to Britain's 122, but fortunes were to be leveled up two days later at the second round at Mallory Park. This is a quirky little track with only five turns, yet it's demanding and dangerous, and has seen some fearful accidents, particularly on a blind downhill left-hander taken at 90 mph, and appropriately named Devil's Elbow.

By sheer forceful riding, Sheene was able to make up on Mallory's swerves and its 15 mph hairpin what his Suzuki triple may have lacked in power, and he won the first leg in dramatic fashion. Recovering from a midfield start, he made up four places on the third lap alone, before overpowering Baker after just six laps.

Roberts, too, had started slowly, but on his way through the pack to finish second he joined Sheene in setting the first 100 mph-plus lap for the little track. The exact speed the two riders shared was 100.83 mph, and it's a measure of the massive strides being made in machine and tire development that this represents a lap time of just 48.2 seconds—no less than 1.2 seconds lower than Sheene's previous record for the track which had been set only seven months previously.

British Kawasaki rider Mick Grant was third, holding Baker back in fourth place. But Baker still astonished the crowds by an incredible riding trick. At Mallory, they're used to seeing the big 750s pull wheelies as riders stomp through the gears on the way out of the hairpin. But Baker was getting the wheel up on the drive out of the Esses, at a point where he must have been making around 100 mph. The mind boggles slightly—modern road race bikes (or at least the OW31 Yamaha with the right rider) are now so hideously powerful that they can pull ton-up wheelies at will.

Nixon had a heart-stopper on the 90 mph Gerards Bend sweeper when the gear lever dug in and gave him an unscheduled downward change. "Nasty, but we managed to hang on together," said Mr. Super Cool.

With the benefit of a cleaner start, Roberts led the second race from start to finish, and Baker improved to get the better of a tussle with Ditchburn's Green Meanie to take second place. Sheene made another midfield start,

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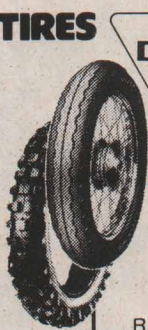
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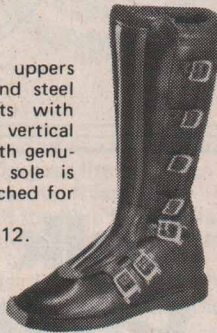
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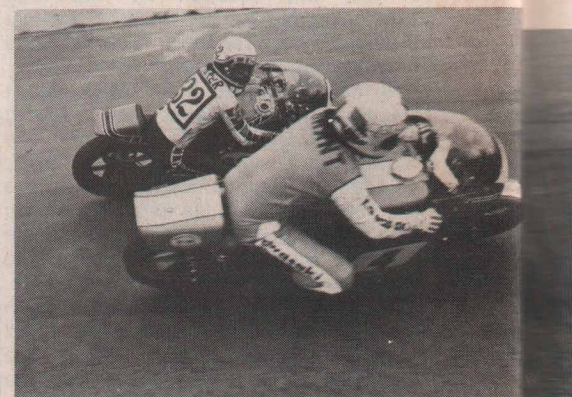
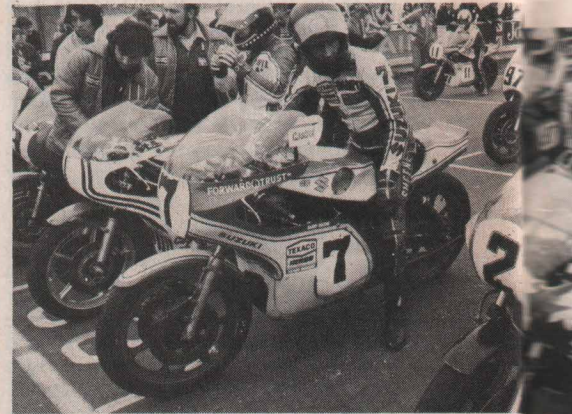
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pulled up to third, but could make no further impression on the OW-mounted leaders.

Better downfield placings enabled the British to pull back at Mallory, ending the day at 264 points to America's 263. Oulton Park, the 1.6-mile circuit near Liverpool, would be the decider.

At this stage the Americans, under team manager Gavin Trippe, must have been feeling reasonably confident. They had the two best bikes and the two quickest riders, to make up for what they lacked in bottom end finishing positions. And, sure enough, Baker and Roberts cleaned up in the opening race, taking first and second places after moving past early leader Hennen. The race wasn't without excitement though—Baker was pumping so much performance out of his bike that he had to roll the throttle off along the start/finish straight to get the front wheel back on the ground in time to brake for the succeeding corner!



British stalwart Sheene charged up into third position, but even with Hennen in fourth race and Nixon eighth, the U.S. still lost points on this race because British riders swamped positions 5, 6 and 7, and 9, 10 and 11. It left America five points behind, with one race remaining—there was still hope.

Two dramatic crashes totally altered the picture in the last bash, however. Roberts and Baker broke out ahead once again, with the latter moving into the lead. Then, Roberts had the frightening experience of looping his feisty four-cylinder charger at over 100



mph as he accelerated uphill and the monster bike reared up. He escaped with cuts and bruises, but America's score suffered. Sheene also had an amazingly lucky escape. His Suzuki pitched sideways under power on the exit from a turn, and in a freak accident Sheene was actually pitched over the side of the fairing, yet he held on and brought the bike to a halt 400 yards up the road. Then he rejoined the race!

In this second leg, Baker tore no less than 5.8 seconds off the lap record which had been set only weeks previously. But British riders Phil Haslam and John Williams were second and third, and the final score left Britain 28 points ahead.

Baker, the little 23-year-old with the baggy-ass leathers, pigeon-toe walk and perpetual look of surprise at the attention he's suddenly getting, was the best performer of the 1976 match races, winning four of the six legs, to the one each of Roberts and Sheene. Final individual scores gave Baker 92 points, Sheene 77, Roberts 75, and consistent



"Betcha my bike's faster'n yours." Barry Sheene (7) and Kenny Roberts (2) on the grid at Brands Hatch.

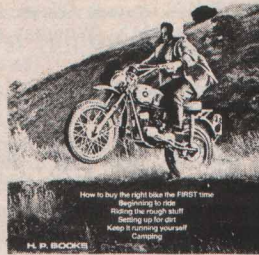
Steve Baker (32) casts surprised look as Limey Mick Grant steals inside at the Mallory Park hairpin. Baker had few reasons to worry, won four out of six match races.

Hennen 72. Other American scores were: Nixon 57, Randy Cleek (Yamaha) 36, Ron Pierce (Kawasaki) 26, Romero 14, Pat Evans (Yamaha) 12.

If the Americans had more practice time they could probably win the match race series every year. But it's nevertheless a great event in motorcycling, attracting a total of 130,000 spectators this year. It also indicated that in 750cc racing Sheene is about the only European rider who can stay with the big three from the Americas, Baker, Roberts, and Venezuelan Johnny Cecotto.

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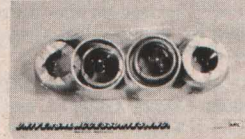
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