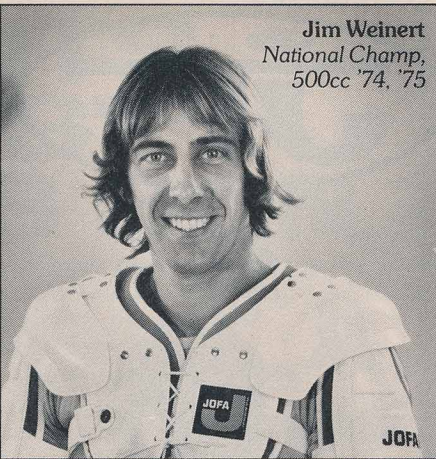


**Marty Smith**  
National Champ,  
125cc '74, '75



**Jim Weinert**  
National Champ,  
500cc '74, '75



By Mike Nicks

If I lived close enough to collect the winnings, I'd be willing to bet every PC reader a six-pack that you couldn't name the rider who has the lightest factory Suzuki in world championship competition. It clearly isn't Barry Sheene and the road race crew, hacking round on those three- and four-cylinder 100 hp chargers. But it's not the motocross team either, penned in as they are by FIM minimum weight restrictions. The man who's on the receiving end of Suzuki's ultimate efforts in weight paring is one Nigel Birkett, who, shortly before this column was written, was presented with a 325cc motorcycle weighing just 165 pounds, with petrol and ready to ride. See, I knew I was on a safe bet.

Unless you only started following motorcycling yesterday you must have guessed by now that Nigel Birkett is a trials rider, and if you hadn't heard of him up to now, the odds are you would have shortly, because it looks as if he's going to come good in a big way. But the story of how an almost unknown 22-year-old from an obscure village in northern England gets to ride one of the best bikes in his sport says a lot that has been stressed several times before in this column about the unique world of trials.

I've said before that trials operate on very low budgets compared to other major motorcycle sports, even at world championship level, and the Birkett/Suzuki relationship only proves that point. Standard Japanese practice in motorcycle racing is to step in quickly, tempt the best riders away from European factories by waving very large contracts and thus be ready for instant wins. But when they signed up Birkett last year, Suzuki was chancing their reputation on a kid who had previously ridden in less than a half-dozen world title rounds and had scored only a single point from them. The obvious reason is that the Japanese feel that trials don't yet offer a large enough market for production bikes to justify spending the sums they spread on motocross and road racing, which in one way works for the betterment of the sport. The trials effort depends far more on individuals, less on money, and competition between the Japanese and European teams stays more even. That 165-pound flyweight bike, for example, is very much the product of Nigel Birkett's

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recommendations and the skills of Suzuki development engineer Tim Koyama. Birkett tells the story this way:

"Suzuki made their first 325cc works bikes last year, and I got mine only two days before the weigh-in for the Scottish Six Days Trial in May. Tim Koyama, who's now working on anti-pollution four-strokes for Suzuki, came over with the bike.

"I think that original bike weighed about 190 to 200 pounds. Obviously I didn't get much chance to practice on it before that year's Scottish, but at the end of the first day I found I was in fifth place. On the second day I moved up to third, and then on the third day I got to second place. By this time Tim realized we could win the thing, and his attitude changed—suddenly he was trying to get me out of the bar in the evenings and into bed early! Anyway, on the fourth day the reed valve in the engine broke, and from then on the bike was down on power. The petrol tank also kept bursting, and the bobweight on the clutch came loose.

"But I still finished eighth overall, which was really pleasing, and we sat down afterwards to work out ways of improving the bike. I told Tim the things that I felt needed changing. One thing we haven't agreed on is the gear-box. I said I wanted a six-speeder, because a very high top gear stops you from burning out the motor on the road



Malcolm Rathmell drops a mark by "footing" on his works Montesa. But he took an early lead in the 1976 world trials series and already looks in championship-winning form.

routes between sections. But Tim said going from a five-speed to a six-speed would add an inch to the engine width. But he went away and said he was going to work really hard on a bike for the 1976 Scottish, and this latest 165-pounder is the result."

Sprinkled with titanium and magnesium, including a magnesium carburetor body, the bike remains a five-speeder, but otherwise Birkett is highly impressed with Suzuki's low-profile, but highly enthusiastic trials

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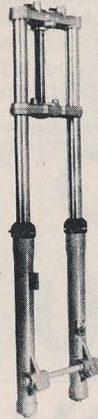
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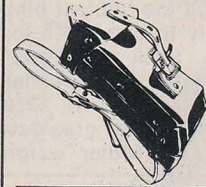
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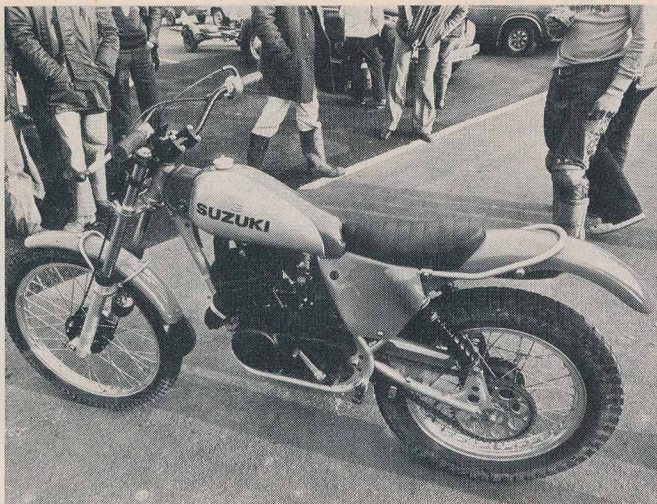


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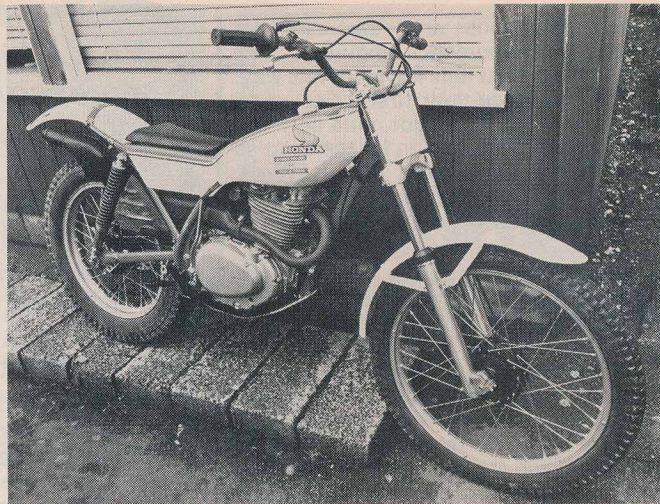
The lightest bike in the world championship trials is Nigel Birkett's 325cc, 165-pound works Suzuki.

creation. "It's so different from the previous model, it's unbelievable. It's a lot zippier and it revs higher, and once I adapt to it I think we'll be fine."

Trials are still unhampered by minimum weight rulings, so factories are at liberty to make as many experiments as they want in this area. Birkett's Suzuki is still the lightest bike in trials—and is likely to remain so for some time. Even Mick Andrews' latest 370cc Yamaha six-speeder weighs 175 pounds, while the 1976 works Hondas developed by greatest-ever trials rider Sammy Miller weigh

in at 194 pounds—they're 301cc variations on the four-valve XL250 four-stroke.

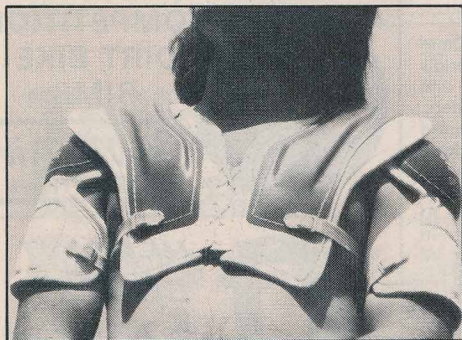
Even Bultaco, who like their works riders to run bikes as close to the production item as possible, have been tempted into the weight watchers' game. Their top Finnish rider, Yrjo Vesterinen, took his 325cc Sherpa to Austrian engineer Walter Luft, who specializes in paring excess bulk off bikes. By prodigious drilling, the substitution of nylon parts and reaming away areas of the frame carrying excess metal, Luft took about 20 pounds



One of few four-strokes in big-time trials; only nine of these 194-pound, 301cc prototype Hondas are in existence.

off Vesterinen's machine. The irony of all this was that Vesterinen disliked the finished product, and the bike is now at Bultaco's Barcelona factory, where the competition department will attempt to find a compromise. "The balance of the bike had been impaired, and the front wheel kept pawing the air," factory executive Oriol Bulto told me at the recent British round of the trials series.

Birkett is hoping that meanwhile he'll be able to reward Suzuki's faith by performing well in this year's world trials rounds. Last year he finished fifth in the British championships and



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11th in the world championship after competing in only five rounds. A pointer to his likely form is that he's already won one of the 1976 British championship rounds—his biggest success to date.

Although much responsibility for the Suzuki trials program rests firmly on Birkett's shoulders, the financial rewards are not that great. Certainly, they would be laughed at by a motocrosser or road racer in a comparable position. But as Birkett says, "I know that in trials I'm not going to get killed or crippled, so I'm not complaining."

**A modest weekly retainer**—out of which he must pay general travelling and accommodation expenses—expenses for world championship rounds and bonuses for wins, are Birkett's returns for his efforts. He certainly couldn't afford to give up his job as a motorcycle mechanic and live on the income he gets from trials riding.

Even on the world championship trail, when Suzuki's British importers are footing the bill, conditions can be basic. "The three of us in the team have to travel on the Continent in a well-worn Ford Transit van. It's now doing its second season. When we did the Spanish and Belgian rounds earlier this year it was definitely economy running. In Spain I slept in a camp bed, and in Belgium we ended up sleeping three in a bed to save money!"

**Birkett has a wise head** on young shoulders, however, "With Suzuki, trials is at the baby stage at the moment. They're really doing it on a shoestring. But if I can ride well for them and help them to develop a good bike, who knows, I could be a professional trials rider on good money in a few years' time."

**The contraction** of the British motorcycle industry in recent years has left a number of component manufacturers facing problems. With the massive reduction in orders for original equipment on factory-made bikes, they've had to make the difficult decision whether to pull out of motorcycling or accept the challenge and fight it by looking for business in other countries.

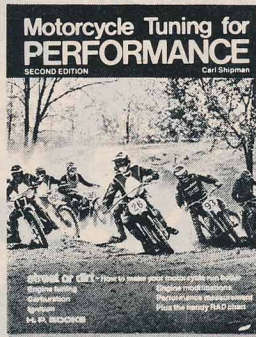
One company that's taken the latter course, with an immense amount of success in a highly competitive field, is Girling, the shock absorber people. Girlings were used on Heikki Mikkola's 1974 500cc world championship-winning Husky, and are also original equipment on production Huskies. Now they've added Maico to the list of companies fitting their shocks as standard equipment, and are also supplying to Bombardier in Canada. Girling will service many of the motocross GPs this year, and hope to get about 25 to 30 percent of GP lineups using their gas/oil shocks. Their latest development is an attempt to break into the trials world, working in liaison with a Continental manufacturer that's already big in motocross and enduros, and wants to also get into trials.

**Girling executive** Danny O'Reilly says: "The original equipment business

Continued on page 73

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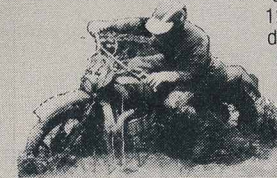
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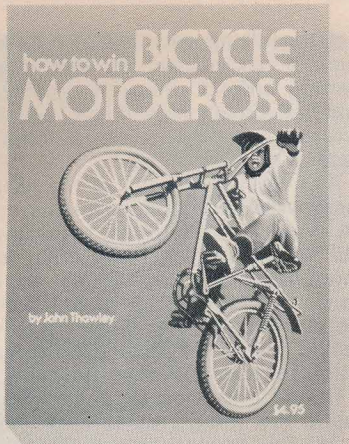
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Girling will make about 150,000 shock absorber units this year, and about 50 percent of their gas/oil production will be sold in the USA.

**Would you prefer** one world champion or three? For some years now there has been talk of converting the five solo road-racing championships into a single class as in Formula One car racing, but now this theory seems to be spreading to motocross.

Ken Shieron, secretary of the Auto-Cycle Union, organizing body of motorcycle sport in the United Kingdom, is one man who thinks the present 125, 250 and 500cc world motocross titles should be replaced by one series. The idea may be put before a future meeting of the FIM, (Federation Internationale Motocycliste) world governing body of the sport, where it may well find a measure of support.

The one-series idea is unlikely to gain sufficient backing to be put into force. The supporters of the mono-class system claim that having more than one world champion reduces the value and prestige of the title, which is true; that a single class will make it easier for the sport to attract sponsorship, which is questionable; and that at present some countries find it difficult to finance GPs, which is probably because they lack the ability to promote properly.

On the other hand, there are certain points that I feel make the multi-class system valid. Far from struggling to find countries to run GPs, the FIM in fact has plenty of volunteers, and if only one class were run there would be perennial queues of disappointed nations waiting their turns for their numbers to come up in the ballot. Under the present system, some countries can run as many as four GPs in a year, including the sidecars, which surely enables the sport to penetrate to different areas and thus reach a wider audience. Multi-class racing also promotes variety, with different companies often specializing in certain classes. And finally, if two of the solo GP classes were abolished, alternative championships for, say, the 250s or 125s would immediately spring up, thus perpetuating the multi-class ideal in practice, if not in name.

The single class theory will probably be blocked by the numerous FIM member countries with vested interests. For example, Spain has always been strong in the 250cc motocross GPs, but weak in the 500cc section, so is unlikely to back any plans for one-class, open-capacity racing. Who knows, Brad Lackey, Jim Pomeroy and Marty Smith could yet pull off a triple world championship trick for the U.S.A!

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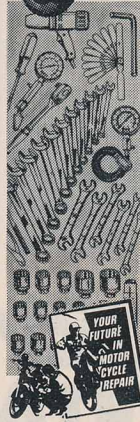
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