

SUPERBIKE



DIGGING THE DIRT

LUST IN THE DUST AND LOONIES IN THE BOONIES

LONG DISTANCE INFORMATION

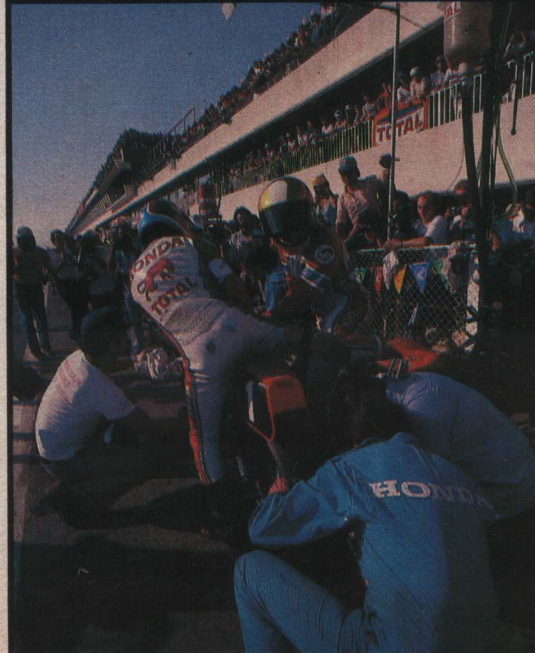
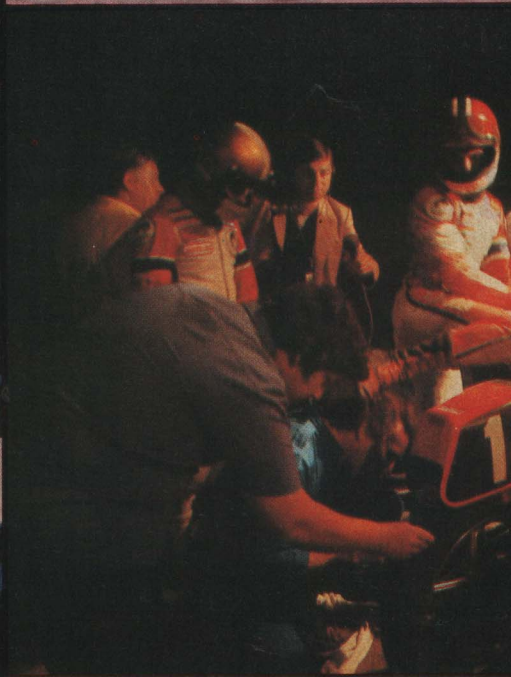
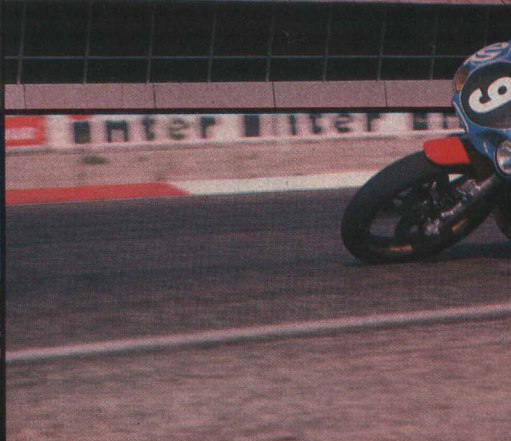
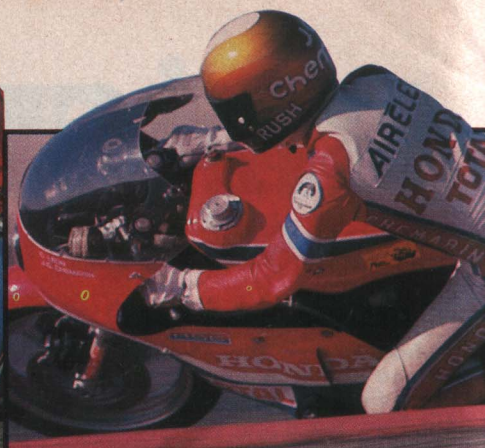
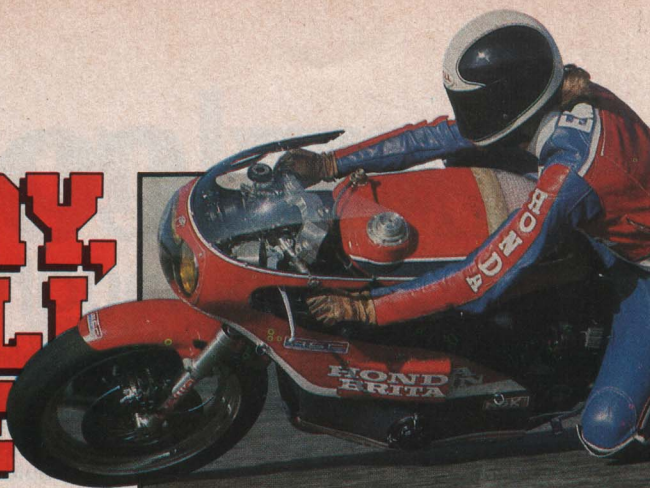
DUBROVNIK (AND BACK!) ON HARLEY'S 1300

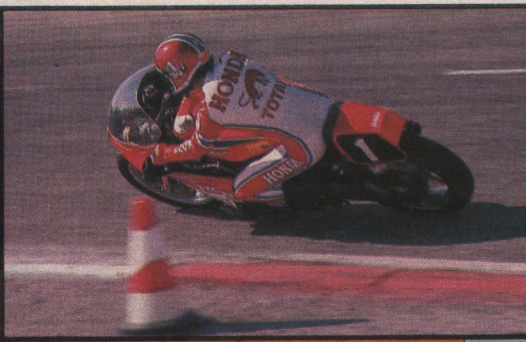
BLACKMAIL CORNER

FAMOUS RACER GETS 'EM OFF SCOOP

ALL DAY, AND ALL OF THE NIGHT

There's a certain magic about endurance racing: big four-strokes hurtling through the night, bedraggled bikers drossing through the small hours while the dark pits are frenetic with spasmodic bursts of high energy. Ace photographer Don Morley was on hand at the Bol D'Or, the 24-hour classic held at the Paul Ricard circuit, and later at the final round of the international Coupe d'Endurance





at Brands Hatch. He captured the colourful essence of racing as a fairground attraction. Since the French do these things with a flair the British cannot rival, most of the pics are from that shambolic Paul Ricard race.

French flair? Name one British circuit where bare-back and bare-front beauties disport themselves on the beach just a short step away from the racing. Did anyone say Scarborough?

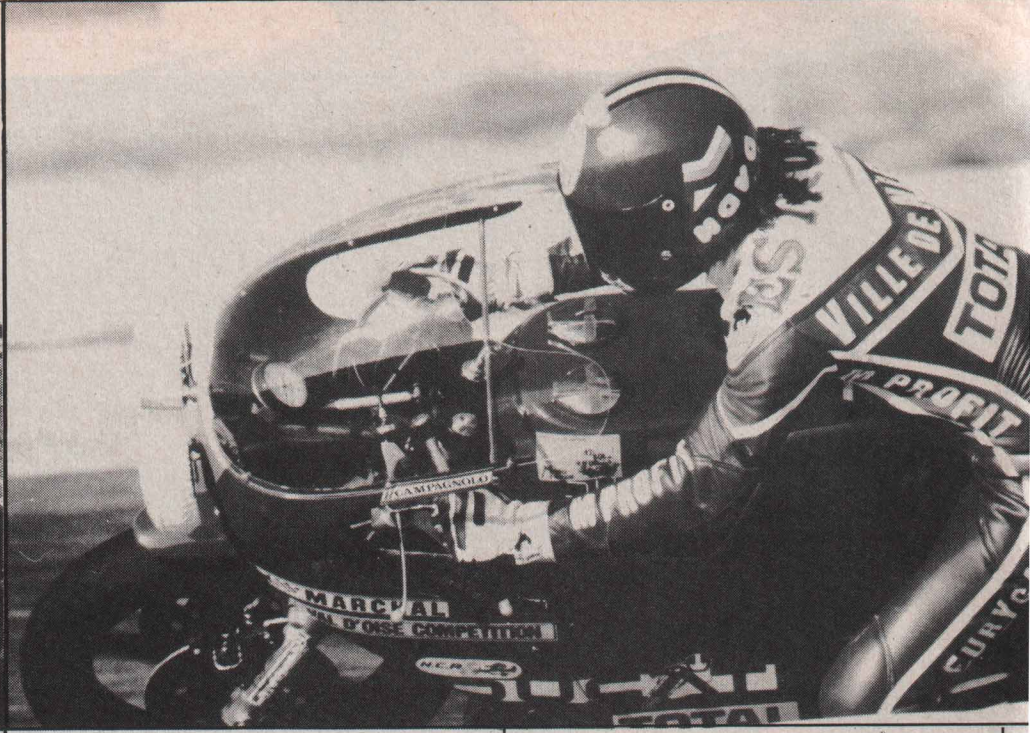
The shambles was also executed with flair. See lunatic French fans flocking on to the track to applaud Honda France idols Leon and Chemarin before the full 24 hours. The race was cut short by seven minutes. See lunatic fans cluster above the Paul Ricard sign at the track-side. Three fell off, one died. And reports were rife of two-wheel carnage on the roads round the Mediterranean circuit. Apparently the French lions of the road take their racing seriously enough to emulate the pile-ups. See also the enterprising M, Maingret with radio communication on his Kawa (number 20 above left), and the brave soul hurling his Honda Six to a did-not-finish.

Brands Hatch was more sedate, and won by Honda Britain, with Stan Woods and Charlie Williams. Leon and Chemarin came second, and tied up the championship in the process.

And not one naked lady sunbathing in sight throughout the whole of Kent.

Overleaf, we've one man's account of his day-and-night at the races: one of the hundreds who made the pilgrimage to the South of France. So why did he leave before the end? Read on . . .





A DAY AND A NIGHT AT THE RACES

ONE MAN'S PILGRIMAGE TO THE BOL D'OR

Georges, as he said his name was, unwound himself from the exotic glassware of his Honda Poser, stretched a leathery limb, and cast an eye towards the Bol D'Or Special.

First he noted the Box Stock trim. Then the GB badge. Then he strolled over, sat down on the café terrace in the Provence sunlight and ordered coffee.

We were near Aubenas on a hot September Friday just about 24 hours and 150 miles from the start of the 1978 Bol D'Or, the world's toughest endurance race.

"Le quatre cent, c'est bon, n'est ce pas?"

This remark just about summed up the situation for Georges, myself and his two mates. For they and their snarling café four-

pipers had just been blown-off by a gleaming, brand-new bought-at-a-discount Yamaha RD 400, last year's model going cheap.

It was called the Bol D'Or Special. A name given in a moment of irony while spanner-wanking with a friend the day before I caught the ferry for a four day blast to the Paul Ricard circuit near Marseilles and home again.

While the Continentals take their race-going seriously - spending a fortune on glassfibre, tuneful zorsts and occasionally even the odd cam or shocker - my little Yamaha was tuned to the nines with . . . a pair of ace-bars. In, yes I admit it, the very worst tradition of the bypass cowboy.

Just what possessed me to risk blowing up the Special by thrashing it roughly 450 miles a day over those amazingly rapid French back-roads, I'm not quite sure.

I was particularly unsure about 250 miles into France from Calais when splashing through four inches of rain which was eddying through the ripples and pot-holes on the N28 to Rouen, and then the N138 through to Le Mans.

By then the cold feet were evident - well-worn Ashmans hold out the water for about 150 miles - but they had been metaphorical since the alarm went off at six that morning and I had stumbled to the window to peer out at one-of-those-fucking-days.

The ferry (voluntary plug here - straight on and straight off the Sealink, hardly a foot to the ground, and if you take that for granted try getting on board an Italian or a Greek ferry) just about finished me off. Watching the rain roll into France from the sea, flexing a shoulder aching before I had even started, thinking of that nice warm flat in north London with a nice warm lady who just happened to be overtly pissed-off at my self indulgent burn-up with a conspicuously vacant rear seat.

It's a pity that phrase of the good Dr Hunter S Thompson has become such a cliché. Because it was as applicable as ever: "fear and loathing".

Courage rose, however, over the second brandy and hot chocolate-at a wee café in a pretty town called Château-du-Loire, not a lot short of Tours and getting nicely south of that wind hammered plain.

It had stopped raining. The sky was clearing. There was a pink tinge and the shepherds could just get delighted tomorrow. The aches and pains from 350 miles hunched over a lightweight bike at 80mph in the rain had blended beautifully into a sort of well-fucked feeling, and the sudden prospect of not having to gun along a thousand and a half miles wet

and cold was making me very happy indeed.

The last 100 miles to darkness, and a cosy if spartan room above a café, were just great. You can't get that feeling any way but on two wheels and a fast strange road. Suddenly there was only the road and the motor, yowling, humming and moaning between 85 and the ton, and it hadn't even thought of missing a beat all day.

The red sky fulfilled its promise and by the time I had zapped south of Clermont-Ferrand the next day, it was actually hot. The sweepers were getting tighter, I was getting the taste for the limits (being cautious and beyond the first wild flush of youth, I like a few hundred miles to warm up) and there were even a few signs of the droves of French bikers who make the Bol D'Or like a Muslim makes Mecca.

I figured Le Puy would be a good place to stop for food and fuel. It is one of those weird medieval towns with a couple of churches stuck up on huge rocks and an extraordinary, kitsch, giant statue of the Madonna perched in the bowl of a valley somewhere there in the *Massif Centrale*, the mountains in the middle of France.

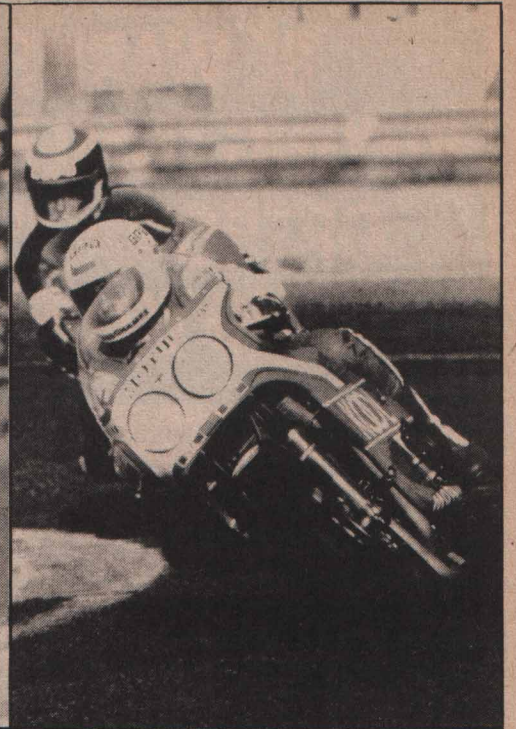
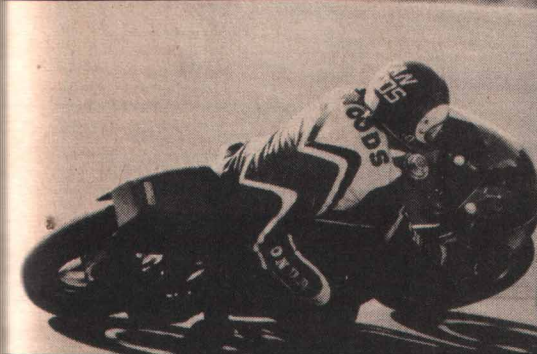
Just before I got there, I called at a lay-by and dug out the little plastic bag and the packet of Rizlas. The best grass I've smoked in years. Columbian, for those who are interested, and very rare this side of the Atlantic. Not the usual sort of thing. This one makes you really high. If you're a hippy, it'll put you in touch with the Cosmos. If you're a biker, and it's a good day, it'll put you in touch with the Limit.

It was a good day, and that's where friend Georges comes into it.

He went past on the nicest looking Honda I had seen so far, just as the man at the gas stop was letting the last few drops of essence fall into the tank. In the wake of the Honda were two other guys. They made a nice noise. It summoned the demon. Franks were fumbled for, tank bag attached, kickstart prodded, chin lowered, throttle opened.

They had about four minutes start, these boys. Judging from the map, we were about to go over the mountain pass through the Southern *Massif* and with the road to Aubenas on the other side, it should be about 50 miles long. I aimed to catch them halfway. I fancied a dice.

The Special, and indeed to my stoned but tuned head it was about to be christened as such, howled up to the red line in second, third, fourth between the hair-pins, and pulled an honest 95 on the straighter bits before it



stood on its nose deeper and deeper into the bends. I got to like the feel of my boots skimming the tarmac while the bike stayed dead on line over the bumps. Before long I was into a wired-up, super-serious, bug-smattered, foot-scraping lunacy of a burn-up. This bike plays racers for real.

Georges and co came into view just nine miles later. That was a bit sad — they weren't trying. When they caught sight of the Bol D'Or Special in their streamlined mirrors, they did gas it just enough to make two or three miles interesting, although they didn't give me what I really wanted — my personal Bol D'Or with some heavy opposition.

Not that this put me off scratching down that mountain road . . . until. Christ, it can't be. But it was. A lovely pile of gravel, four foot high, ready for the road works, parked like a sleeping whale right there in my lane 20 yards away.

Visions of digging the bike out of a gravel bank or digging a gravel bank out of me.

Amazing how fast these little bikes will slow. And amazing how fast they will jump four feet sideways at the last moment to go scurrying down one edge of a gravel bank.

After that I stopped for the coffee and handshake with Georges. Funny, that Magic Stone of Columbia had been all used up in those 40 furious miles.

The real mass craziness started a few miles short of Avignon, on the main road and 80-odd miles from the Ricard track at Le Beausset. These people are big-road burners by nature. Drove of them, heading down from Paris and the North on the wide-open N7 or, if they're rich, the A7 autoroute.

There were about as many Jap specials as you could hope to see. They blasted along at around 90 and it transpired that the real test of the Frenchman's nerve is not so much the angle of lean in the bends, but out-psyching juggernauts when both desire the same patch of blacktop in the suicide lane. Stimulating in its own way.

Much the most impressive sight of the great cavort to the Bol D'Or was the swarm of kids on such creatures as stripped-down, weight-shaved mopeds and fully café-raced Suzukis, Yamahas, and believe it or not, Honda 125cc singles.

Clip-ons down somewhere near the front axle, feet by where the rear indicators should have been and Les Pilotes quite unselfconsciously decked out in full race leathers.

A lot less impressive, but maybe inevitable given the adrenalin flowing, were the two

smash ups I saw as the hordes streamed through the mountain road that leads to the circuit. One guy and his lady were splayed out in front of a car, the cause, apparently, being the rider's over-dedication to a racing line on an open road, while another had left the lane to smack a pine tree some 50 yards into the wood on one side. Many policemen were trying to keep order with much blowing of whistles.

The Bol D'Or Special cools it. The Bol D'Or is a race that really happens in the pits. You can grow weary of watching over-sized race bikes lurching around the track, although the odd half hour basking in the Mediterranean sun enjoying the bark of a Ducati, the amazing thunder of one of the BMWs, or the immaculate style of Christian Leon can be rewarding.

Stars of the pit show turned out to be Pops Yoshimura and his team of half dozen silent, nimble fingered and hyper efficient Japanese.

It started when an exhausted Ron Pierce came shoving the Suzuki with its high American bars into the pits. He had pushed it half-way around the circuit after the ignition failed on the back straight.

With no signs of hurry, the six Nipponese descended on the machine, perfectly orchestrated by a few signs and barely audible words from Pops.

They finished up actually cutting and filing a new ignition back plate right there in the pits before the special Suzuki could be coaxed back into life an hour later.

The revered Pops, reclusive and camera shy, proved as fascinating to the world's press and everyone else in the pits as to me. He had to fight through the throng every time he wanted a spanner. It was the best show of the night.

Almost next door an English team, Darvill Constructions Ltd were cutting a much lower profile. Rider Alastair Copland, clad in experienced looking leathers, roared off across the pit bridge from a change-over, only to return the very next lap. A clip-on had broken.

The Darvill Team, a lady and two middle-aged gents, one of them carrying the proverbial hammer, engaged upon a miraculous bodge to get him back on the track in all of half an hour.

All this, just 20 yards from where the French and the British Honda works teams were performing their slick routines for the ever present French TV cameras, was a wondrous sight.

Part of the spirit of the race is what you might call crowd enjoyment, or, everyone has a bloody great party. There's a rock band, film shows, goody shops for leathers and sci-fi

trick-bits, dozens of bars untroubled by opening hours and more places to eat than you could find in the average British town, let alone race meeting.

Somewhere in there I bumped into these two guys who seemed kindred spirits, so together we attacked the fare, drank numero plastic cups of red wine and black coffee, shared a little of the Columbian, and generally got into the swing of the thing.

Around 3am Cherston Jones (that's how he introduced himself) and his side-kick Peter decided it was time to blow. They had left their bikes hard by the paddock. Cherston's was a full blown Harris race framed Z1 and a goodly crowd was poking around it — that's a real ego trip at the Bol D'Or where there's hardly a stocker on view.

A comedy transpired; they were a little high. First, Cherston (it can't be his real name and he did say he was a secondhand bike dealer) couldn't find his screwdriver for the ignition, then he lost his gloves, then something else. With that sorted out we got the Bol D'Or pit scene when the lights and two pots wouldn't work. An hour or so later they left to a rousing cheer from their new French fans.

By now, in the small hours, there were a lot of people wandering about at the track looking red eyed, pale and bleary, and searching out a cosy corner in which to spread their sleeping bags. I joined them.

Have you ever woken to the sound of echoing four-stroke racers not 20 yards from your thudding head?

I opened my eyes, then lay still while I listened for the sound of my favourite bikes from the night before. One of the Laverdas and a Guzzi were missing. So was Patrick Pons' TZ with lights. Perhaps they were just in the pits. Keeping track of the race was no job for this hour of the morning.

Revived by café-au-lait, it was nice to see Wes Cooley on the Yoshimura popping wheelies on the home straight.

But the bikes had settled into single file, most of the ones I had wanted to finish had retired, and everyone there knew who would win: Honda France.

Somehow, although there was still five hours racing to go, the party was over. The excitement had gone; it was the morning after the night before.

The urge to see the end was up against the yen to hit the highway and the highway won.

I pulled a heart-pumping wheelie as I rode away from the Paul Ricard circuit. It seemed the right way to leave.

Tom Peterson