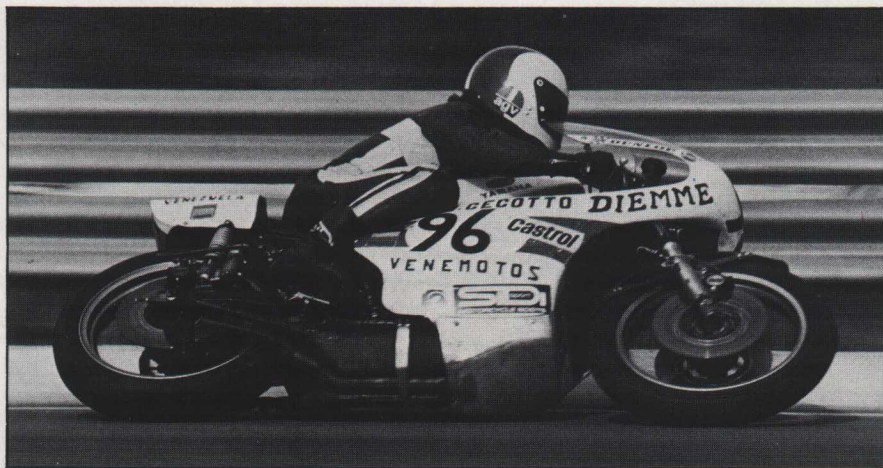


The start of Cecotto's climb to superstardom, the TZ700 with which he finished third at Daytona and won at Imola.

Back from the wilderness



Racefans at Daytona in 1974 were far too excited watching Giacomo Agostini thrashing America's best (not to mention the rest of the world) on his first competitive outing with the Yamaha team to notice a teenager crackling round halfway down the 100-strong field, struggling to keep a 350 Yamaha twin up to the pace of the big seven-fifties. And even if they had noticed, the name Johnny Cecotto would have meant nothing at all to them

A couple of months later, at the classic Imola 200 in Italy, the youngster was there again, overshadowed totally by the bigger bikes.

But what a different story at both of these races by the time another year had rolled around

By then, the name of Johnny Cecotto was on everyone's lips. "The Venezuelan Wonderboy" was what the world's press were calling the 18 year old from Caracas - and with good reason.

He had finished third in the Daytona 200, slicing through the field from the back of the grid at a pace which could have won him the race had it been 250 instead of 200 miles, and made a conquering return to the Imola 200 by vanquishing all of the established superstars of the day.

Since, then Johnny's career has had all the ups and downs of an Italian opera singer's temperament ... with his own volatile Latin-American attitudes often playing their part in this. In his first season in Europe he raced to an incredible World 350cc Championship title. What a debut for any teenager on the Grand Prix scene, let alone one from a continent which had hitherto produced less than a handful of GP contenders.

The following season, 1976, was one of the "down" years, however. He handed his 350cc title back to Walter Villa and really had only a superb win in the Daytona 200 to remind him of his superstar tag.

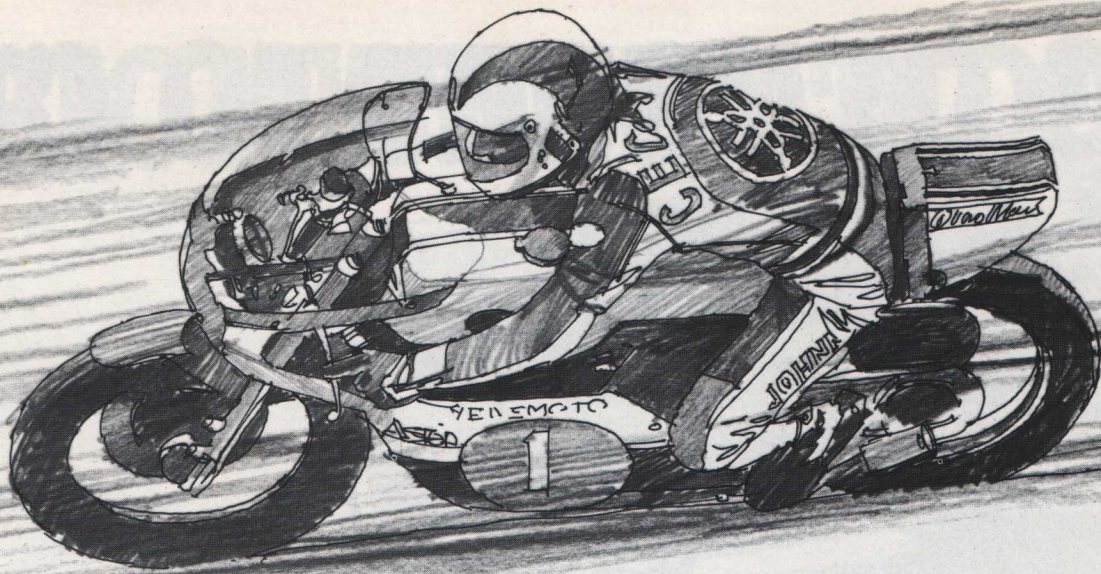
1977 was also a "down" year but through no fault of Johnny's. He was involved in the horrific pile-up at the Austrian Grand Prix which killed one rider and injured several more, Johnny included. He suffered a badly broken arm and was out of action for most of the season.

When he did get back in the saddle, however, it was a new and determined Cecotto. He took wins in the 500cc class in both Finland and Czechoslovakia, plus a second in this premier class in Sweden and a 350 win to complete the Czech double.

Cecotto was back from the wilderness and 1978 was to see him once again wearing a World Champion's crown.

Still only 22 years old, Cecotto was born in Caracas, Venezuela to an Italian immigrant, Giovanni Cecotto and his wife. Christened Alberto, he picked up the nickname "Johnny" in later years and Johnny he will remain to the racegoers of the world.

Giovanni Cecotto had himself been a road racer of note, winning the Venezuelan Championship on a 500cc Norton. When Johnny was just 16 years old, his father bought him a 750cc Honda four and a World Champion was in the making. Two rides on the Honda were enough to bring Johnny to the attention of the Venezuelan Kawasaki importer but then came an even more important contact. He was signed up by Andres Ippolito, one of the most powerful men in Latin American motorcycling. Ippolito is the Venezuelan importer of Yamaha machines and



CHAMPION CECOTTO

that country's representative on the Federation Internationale Motocycliste. An influential man who could, and would, pull the necessary strings if the occasion warranted.

Under Ippolito's managership, Cecotto's career began to gather impetus. He was already by far the most successful rider in Venezuela and outings elsewhere in South America had proved him to be almost certainly the quickest Latin American of them all.

The trips to Daytona and Imola with his 350 twin in 1974 enabled

Cecotto to dip his toes in the water of international racing without causing too many ripples. Following those outings, he felt confident enough that, with a full 750, he could do business.

The rest is history. He arrived at Daytona in 1975 and shattered everyone by qualifying third fastest, doing it with such style that no-one amongst the onlookers doubted his incredible natural ability right from the start.

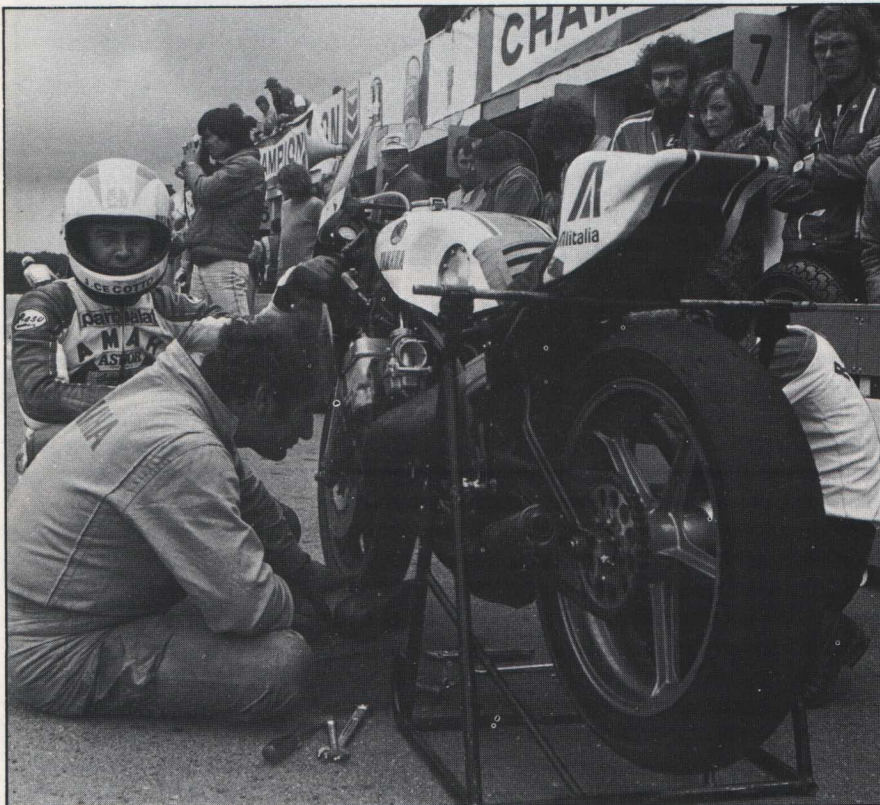
Remember, too, that this was the year that the Yamaha factory

runners, Agostini, Kenny Roberts (Yamaha USA) and Steve Baker (Yamaha Canada) were out on the new monoshock racers while here was this "unknown" mixing it with them on a standard production TZ700.

The race was just as amazing. With minutes to go, startline officials spotted oil leaking from Cecotto's machine and he was pushed off the grid to fix it. Not only that, he was pushed right to the back of the 100-man field! From the very front row, to the back of the grid. Just like that!

At that point, Cecotto's chances were written off by most of those present. The oil leak (quickly traced to a loose screw holding a transmission oil line) was soon fixed but there seemed no way that a teenager with very little big race experience could force his way past 100 riders to the head of the field.

But force he did. By the time 200 miles were over Johnny was into



No prizes to those eagle-eyed readers who spotted our "deliberate mistake" in the last issue of Circuit. Yamaha XS models are of course some of the world's most popular 4-stroke motorcycles - not 2-stroke as was erroneously stated in Circuit's 79 Model Review.

CHAMPION CECOTTO CHA



Leading team-mate, Steve Baker on seven-fifties in 1977.

Winning at Imola on the 750 in 1978, the start to a Championship season.

third place behind Gene Romero (whose team-mate Kenny Roberts had gone out with clutch trouble) and Steve Baker. For the whole 200 miles he had forced on while others were settling their pace, passing many-time World Champion, Giacomo Agostini, a few laps before the end to join the leading pair in Victory Lane.

In the post-race interviews Cecotto told fans, through an interpreter, "If I had started at the front, I would have won the race". Not one of the 60,000 fans doubted his claim.

For the rest of that season Cecotto amply proved his claim to be one of the world's best. In an amazing debut in the World Championships he did the 250 and 350cc double at the French Grand Prix, passing Yamaha's Japanese factory star, Itikugiro Takai, in a dazzling outbraking manoeuvre to win the 250 race and then thrashing current champion, Giacomo Agostini, to easily win the 350 on a standard TZ350 twin.

Then came the Imola win to emphasise his capabilities on the 750 and the rest is history. World 350cc Champion at his first attempt ... a superstar in a single season!

Even during that season there were flashes of controversy that have continued to follow Cecotto's racing career. Incidents like a punch-up with a marshal in Sweden and a temper tantrum at Silverstone when, dissatisfied because his Yamaha had broken in the first 750cc heat, he turned out on Barry Sheen's Suzuki for the next one. Add to that a



playboy attitude to life and a few spectacular crashes that seemed to be the result of his over-enthusiasm with the throttle and it is easy to see why many people were prepared to write off the Venezuelan when the 1976 season failed to produce the same kind of magic as its predecessor.

"Success has spoiled him" said the critics "he's more interested in playing the superstar role than racing".

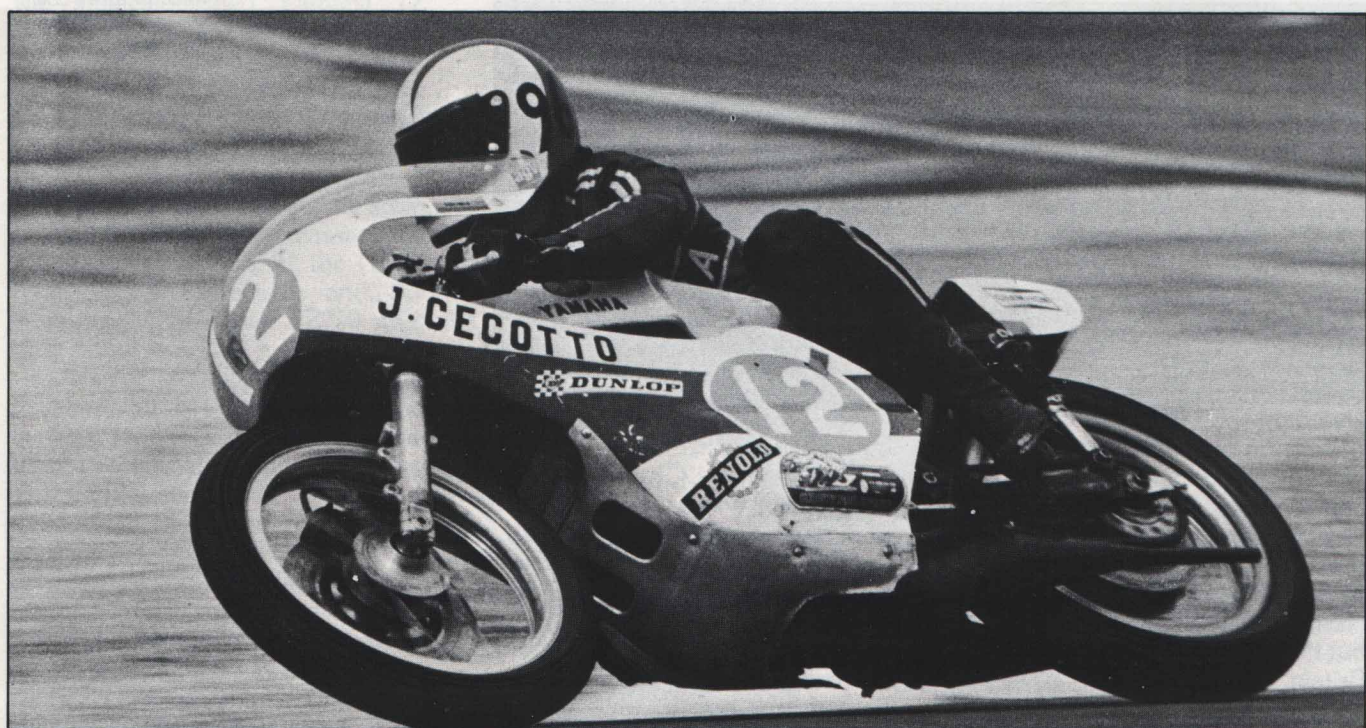
That might well have been the case, but the only person with any real clue to the comparative failure of his 1976 season must surely be Cecotto himself. Remember,

however, that he was having to cope with the superstar role when barely out of his teens and it is a far, far greater thing to handle than most people imagine ... as many young soccer players and other sportsmen have found. The temptations are great.

1976 is now a long way behind Cecotto, however. He overcame the disappointments of that year, overcame the bad crash at the 1977 Austrian Grand Prix and hit winning form again when he got back in the saddle after a summer-long convalescence.

In 1978 it was an obviously - determined Cecotto who started the

CHAMPION CECOTTO CHA



season in Venezuela. Unfortunately he went out with machine trouble on the 500 but a couple of weeks later opened up his 750cc World Championship quest with a win over Kenny Roberts at Imola. This began a battle between these North and South Americans which was to go right through until the final race of the season.

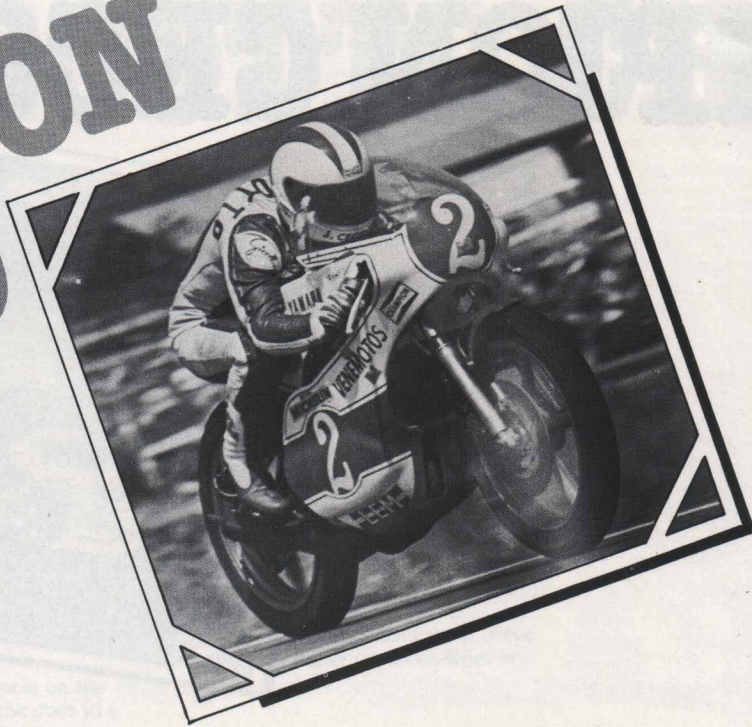
A fourth place in Spain in the 500cc class and second to Roberts in Austria kept him in contention for the 500cc title but then two retirements in France and Italy all but put paid to his chances of that title before the season was even half over. Racing is so tight these days that a

rider can afford to have very few retirements if he is after a world title.

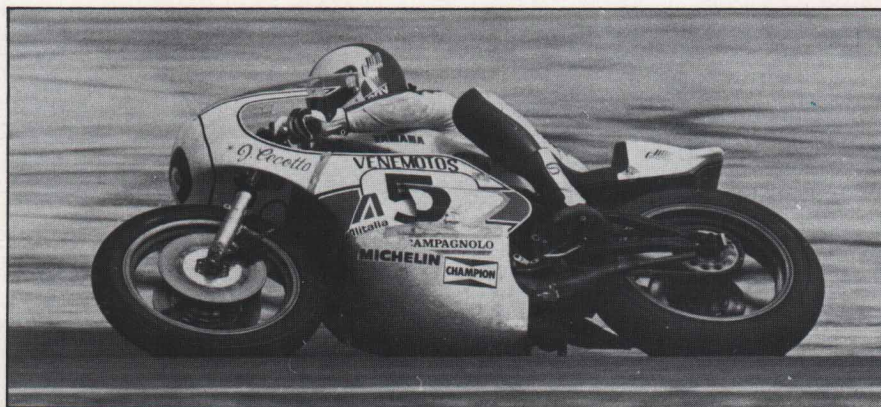
In Holland Cecotto proved himself still to be one of the masters of the glamorous 500cc class when he beat both Roberts and Sheene, despite an incredible last lap effort by Kenny. But another retirement in Belgium plus low placings in Sweden and Britain meant that he had no chance of the title. Even so, the 500cc season finished on a reasonably high note, with a second place at the Nurburgring behind Virginio Ferrari and ahead of World Champion, Kenny Roberts, and former champ, Barry Sheene. Despite the retirements, Cecotto

European debut ... a 250 and 350 double at the French GP.

CHAMPION CECOTTO



Cecotto tucks down around his 350 twin. Venezuela 1977.



Riding the 500cc Yamaha four, Venezuela 1976.

ended up third, behind Roberts and Sheene, in overall 500cc points.

The 750cc series was a much happier story for Cecotto. He battled all year long with Roberts, the pair of them totally dominating the series for Yamaha. Cecotto won their first two clashes, at Imola and Paul Ricard, but then had to give best to Kenny in Britain, Spain and Austria.

Johnny's title hopes took a knock when he failed to finish in Germany but Kenny too was having problems. He was unable to take maximum advantage of Cecotto's misfortunes, only taking eight points for his fourth place behind Christian Sarron, Gianfranco Bonera and Greg Hansford.

Next it was Roberts' turn for misfortune. Two retirements in Belgium and Holland, which allowed Cecotto to go back into the 750 Championship lead by winning the Belgian race and taking 10 valuable points in Holland for third place behind Bonera and Takazumi Katayama.

At Laguna Seca in the USA, the pendulum swung back the other

way. Kenny Roberts made a triumphant return to the States as 500cc World Champion and celebrated it with a win in front of his home fans. Cecotto failed to finish ... and the decider would come a week later in Canada, the final F750 event of the year.

The odds were still on Cecotto, however. Roberts had to finish second or better while Johnny needed to score just five points to be absolutely certain of the title, whether Roberts won or not in Canada.

In the event, the final clash was somewhat anti-climatic. New American sensation, Mike Baldwin won the race with Kenny second. Kept well-informed of the situation up front by his pit, Cecotto went just as fast as was necessary to hold on to fifth place and a safe six points. This was one time when the notorious Latin-American temperament certainly wasn't needed and Johnny rode out the race with complete coolness.

Champion Cecotto was back!