



Kenny Roberts full-time on the Grand Prix trail! That announcement right at the end of 1977 was probably the most exciting news of the coming season for European race fans.

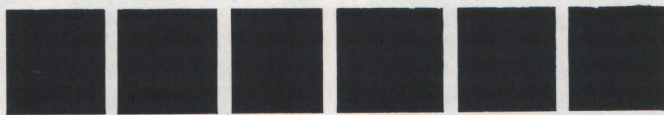
The 26 year old Californian is such a superstar both in his native United States and in Europe that it is hard to believe that 1977 marked only his sixth season of expert-class racing! In those six seasons he has racked up an awesome amount of statistical ammunition to back most people's contention that he is the greatest all-round motorcycle racer that the world has ever known.

The Grand National Championship series of the American Motorcyclist Association (now the Camel Pro Series) takes in no less than five different types of racing. It's mainly a dirt track series though Formula 750 road racing does form an integral and important part of the Camel Pro trail.

On the dirt there are four

KENNY ROBERTS

THE GREATEST ALL-ROUND MOTORCYCLE RACER EVER



distinct types of racing. The pinnacle is "the mile" where riders average 100mph for a lap of the mile - long dirt oval jockey down the straights in 130mph slipstreaming bunches! Half-mile ovals are not so fast (still good for near 100mph straightaway speeds) but the racing is a bit more rugged on the tighter tracks. Then there is short track racing, on tracks under a quarter-mile in length. It's all arms and elbows here, with

riders bouncing each other off-line by sheer physical contact if they can't find any other way!

Finally, there is TT racing. It's kind of a cross between dirt-track racing and motocross. The surface is graded dirt, just like the ovals, but the turns go right as well as left and the track incorporates everything from sweeping radius "speedway" turns to tight hairpins and usually a big Evel Knievel-length jump!

American Championship chasers use regular 180mph Formula 750 racers for the road races while the dirt events (apart from short track) are limited to twin-cylinder 750cc machines. The slam-bang short-trackers are kept down to 250cc lightweights.

Roberts has won many times in each of these types of US racing and 1975 he became the only racer ever to win at least one race of each type during a single season!

He first came to the attention of American racefans in the early 'seventies when he came as a teenage novice racer to the indoor short track races that are a popular event during the USA winters. These are open to any professional racers...from novices right up to the expert licence holders. Kenny won many of these tough-fought races and immediately established himself as a man to watch in the future.

The 1970 season saw Kenny's entry into American professional racing...as a

KENNY ROBERTS

novice rider limited to 250cc machines both for dirt and road racing.

Sponsored and managed by airline pilot and motorcycle racing super-enthusiast, Jim Doyle, Kenny immediately forged strong links with Yamaha and, in fact, has never ridden any other brand in his professional career apart from a few events on Montesa and Suzuki machines just as he was making the transition from sportsman racer to full-time professional. Once Kenny had decided on racing as a career, he signed with Yamaha and has been with them ever since.

Kenny spent most of his "novice" year dicing with another future National Champion, Gary Scott and the same situation continued in 1971 when the pair moved up to the Junior bracket and the bigger 750cc machines.

Throughout their two formative professional seasons, Roberts and Scott were streets ahead of any competition and the two of them have been always in the top four places of American Championship competition since they entered the Expert ranks in 1972.

During the 1971 season (as a Junior) Kenny took his first steps into road racing and was taken under the wing of former World 250cc Champion (1969), Kel Carruthers. By this time the Australian had forsaken the European Grands Prix and was leading the American Yamaha road race team as well as preparing his own race engines.

A great deal of the credit for Roberts' incredible road racing successes must go to Kel, who spotted the teenager's talent early on and nurtured it to greatness.

Quitting racing in 1973, Kel moved into the race preparation business full-time, building the American Yamaha team's road race engines and occasionally assisting with the dirt track program.

Kel will head up the mechanical and management side of Kenny's 1978 Grand Prix program.

In his first year as an expert on the AMA Championship

trail, Kenny opened up with a win in the second race of the season...the short-track at the Houston Astrodome in Texas. That, however, was to be his only win of the year. Despite this he scored enough points to place fourth in the Championship standings but was somewhat ruffled to see his arch-rival, Gary Scott, take the "rookie of the year" honours by placing a close second to eventual Champion, Mark Brelsford.

In 1973, however, it was Roberts all the way with Scott in second place but not even close on points. On his way to the Grand National Championship, Kenny won the short track at Houston, the "mile" at Colorado Springs and the Ascot half-mile. He was always in contention for a road race win but never actually managed to take the winner's laurels. At this time Yamaha were still having to use their 350cc machine against the 750cc opposition of Kawasaki and Suzuki.

The 1974 road racing year was different, however. Yamaha brought out the TZ700 four-cylinder racers and won five of the six Championship road races. Kenny won three of these, at Atlanta, Laguna Seca and Talladega.

In addition he won the mile-track race at San Jose, the Santa Fe short-track and the Peoria TT.

These victories, plus a solid string of points-scoring places, gave him another comfortable National Championship victory over (who else?) Gary Scott.

Unfortunately, that was the last time (to date) that Kenny was to hold the National title. The 750cc Yamaha twin-cylinder dirt-tracker was based on the 650cc XS street engine and was already getting close to the limits of its development.

On the other hand, Harley Davidson had developed a totally new racing engine for their dirt-trackers and definitely had the advantage in terms of horsepower and traction.

Since then the American Yamaha squad has extracted some amazing horsepower from the twin cylinder engine, getting some 85bhp at the rear wheel! However, the venerable XS650 has been stretched to the limits of its reliability and Roberts has suffered numerous mechanical breakdowns over the past three years. Harley, with their

"designed for racing" engine have a better reliability record and just as much horsepower.

In addition, their vee-twin engine configuration results in better traction from the turns whereas the Yamaha tends towards wheelspin rather than grip.

Despite these drawbacks and the fact that Kenny has not won a National Championship since 1974, most people agree that the past three years of adversity have seen Roberts at his gritty best. In 1975, 1976 and 1977 the Championship has been fought out to the bitter end (the last two years have seen it decided in the actual final race of the season!). In each of those years Roberts has always been one of the three or four riders scrapping it out right down to the last lap of the last Championship race!

For many people, 1975 was perhaps Kenny's finest season to date. He placed second to Gary Scott in Championship points but then set a record by becoming the only American racer ever to win one of each kind of Championship event during a single season.

He began with a TT win in the Houston Astrodome and followed that with a short-track victory at Dallas. A short 'dry spell' in mid-season, ended with a road race victory at Laguna Seca and then came the win that people are still talking about with awe almost three years later.

In a desperate attempt to wrest dirt-track supremacy from Harley Davidson, the Yamaha team had chassis specialist, Doug Schwerma, construct a dirt-track racer using nothing less than a TZ700 road racing four as the motive power!

First time out for the beast was at Indianapolis and, in a heart-stopping race, Kenny wrestled the monster from 15th place in the opening stages, to third place on the last lap and to the win, by an incredible bikes-length margin, at the finish line.

He tried the machine again in a couple more mile races but even he felt that it was just too hot to handle. The AMA agreed and banned the multi-cylinder engines from dirt-track racing at the end of the year.

That left just a half-mile victory needed for the "grand slam" and that came, against all odds, at Ascot Park, California in the final dirt track race of the season!

Then, just for good

measure, Kenny rounded off 1975 with a win in the Ontario road race.

Kenny was still winning on the dirt-tracks in 1976, taking half-mile wins at San Jose and Terre Haute plus the short-track at Dallas.

That was the year that Steve Baker was the American road race sensation, Kenny's confidence in this area perhaps being dented a little by heavy crashes at Oulton Park in the John Player Transatlantic Trophy Series and in the Imola 200. He got back in the groove late in the season, however, with a win at Riverside in California.

Despite these wins, Kenny slipped to third in National standings behind a new teenage sensation, Jay Springsteen, and Gary Scott.

The Yamaha dirt-tracker was already stretched to the limits of reliability in the face of the Harley onslaught. One rider, even of Roberts calibre, on a machine developed from a street engine was no match for the might of the Harley team, who had even pulled completely out of road racing to concentrate full-time on their dirt track programme.

Last season it became even more obvious that road racing was going to be where Kenny Roberts should direct much of his future effort. For the first time since he started his National Championship career, Roberts could not take even a single dirt-track victory.

In road racing it was a different story and Kenny won Championship races at Charlotte, Loudon, Pocono, Sears Point and Riverside as well as taking second place to Steve Baker in the rain-shortened Daytona event.

Kenny was unquestionably American Road Racing Champion but it was little consolation for his fourth place in National standings behind Jay Springsteen, Gary Scott and Ted Boody.

"I'm back where I started in 1972" said a disappointed Roberts at the end of the year.

Kenny's disappointments in America mean celebration for European fans, however. The American Yamaha team have scrapped their National Championship program, realising that it is weighted too much in favour of the dirt-tracks to give them a real chance without designing a whole new engine.

Therefore, they have added their weight to the Roberts' Grand Prix effort in Europe as well as planning to bring him

back to the States for National Championship road races that do not clash with his European commitments.

Kenny has now scored 25 National Championship wins in his career and is just three races short of Bart Markel's all-time record.

In addition he is just one race short of Dick Mann's all-time record of 12 road race Championship wins.

There is every possibility that Kenny could break both of these records during the 1977 season as well as competing in the European Grands Prix!

During his career so far, Kenny has made only occasional visits to Europe but has still impressed his incredible road racing abilities on the fans with superlative efforts in such events as the John Player TransAtlantic Trophy Series, Britain's Race of the Year at Mallory Park, the Dutch 250cc TT at Assen, the Imola 200 and the Moto Journal 200 at Paul Ricard.

His only Grand Prix appearance was in the 1975 Dutch TT at Assen when he dived for the lead with World Champion, Walter Villa, overbraked and crashed at the hairpin in the late stages of the

race and then remounted to finish third.

For his 1978 Grand Prix attempt, the 5ft 6ins, 135lb Roberts will ride in both the 250 and 500cc classes for Yamaha as well as attacking the World F 750 Championships.

The whole Roberts family, including wife Patty, five year old son Kenny Lee and two year old daughter, Kristy Lee will uproot themselves from their \$200,000 home in Kenny's hometown of Modesto, California to follow the Grand Prix trail. Not that they'll be actually "roughing it" however, as they'll be travelling and living in a \$50,000 motorhome as well as the occasional hotel during longer stops.

Only problem is that, with three World Championship classes to contest as well as a number of other major International races and the occasional flight home for an American Championship race, Kenny won't have much time to indulge in his hobbies of trail riding, fishing and horse-riding!

"Plenty of time for that after I've got a World Championship or two" he grins!

