

Jon Ekerold—He Did

A privateer World Champion doesn't come along very often in the tough world of motorcycle road racing, so when the fairy tale finally comes true for some hard-working member of the Grand Prix fraternity, he has the admiration of even his closest rivals.

Such is the case with South African Jon Ekerold, who saw his dream materialise at the Nurburgring in 1980—the 350cc World Championship after six years of intense personal effort several thousand miles away from home.

Ekerold has never come close to the financial security and comparative ease of a factory contract despite being an obvious 350cc class contender since his third place in that category in 1977. He's always led the nomadic life of the privateer, living in the paddocks of the GP cir-

cuits, sometimes down to just the price of a last bag of chips but right there, nine times out of ten, when the prize money is being counted out.

Jon came to Europe with his Championship dream in 1975 after an apprenticeship in South Africa that included the National 350cc Championship in 1974 and a win over visitor Barry Sheene, in a 1972 international.

He arrived with two Yamahas, an aging van and less than 50 pounds in his pocket. It was a mixed start to that 1975 season. A second place in his first European race (at Rouen) put some petrol in the van and some food in his belly, but things were still tough. They were to get tougher.

At Magny Cours he crashed and lost both a finger and his thumb. Ekerold has always been accident prone. He doesn't fall off much more

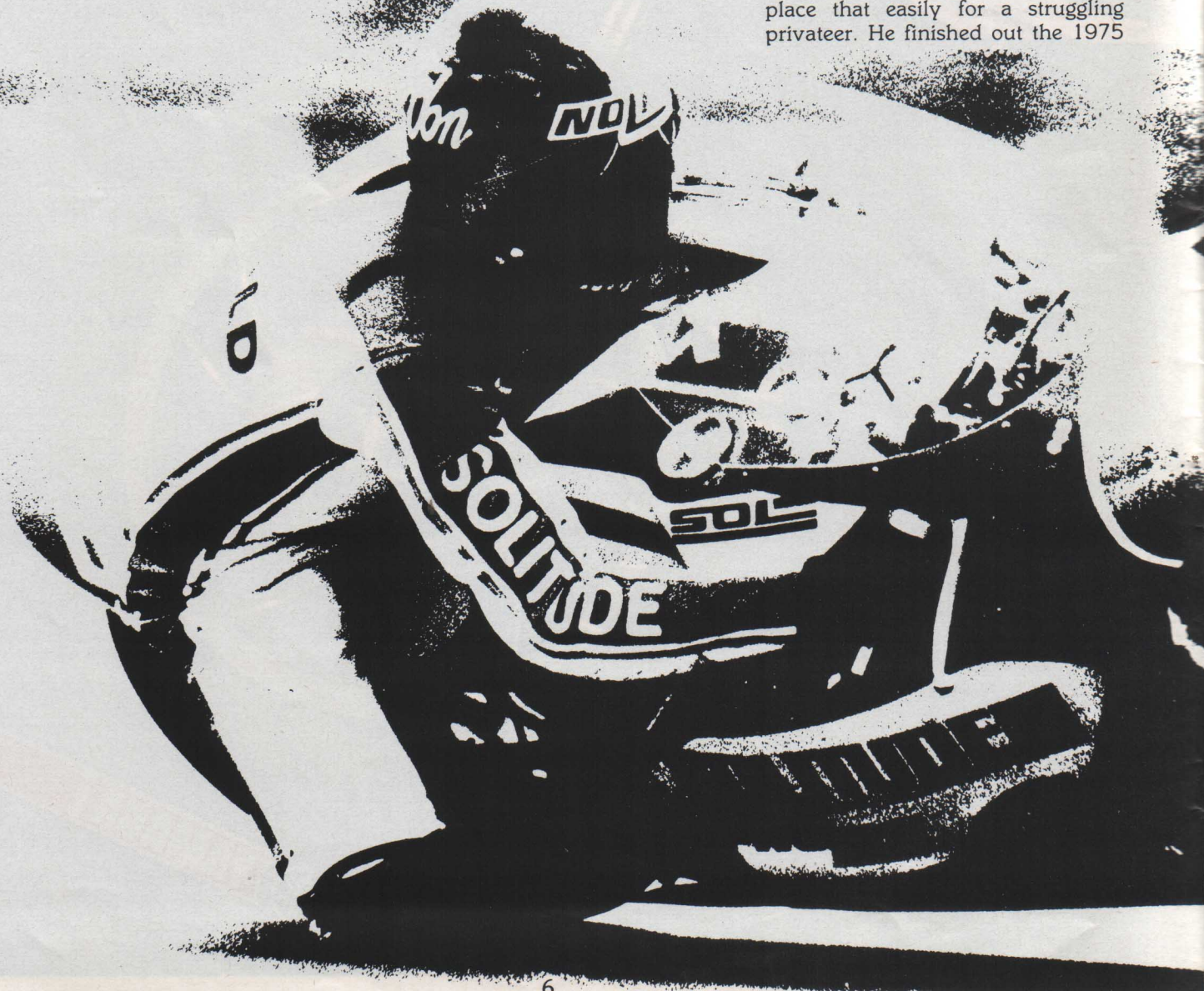
than the average rider but he unfortunately seems to get hurt more often.

His career injuries include a broken back, broken wrist (repaired with plastic bones), eight broken ribs, the loss of the finger and thumb already mentioned, broken collarbones (five times) and two broken legs.

This led to a reputation as bit of a "berserker" but last season Ekerold confounded them all by staying aboard and becoming the only rider to score points in every 1980 350cc Grand Prix.

Obviously, Ekerold isn't a man to let injury deter him and he proved this after his 1975 Magny Cours crash by riding the Austria Grand Prix three weeks later and finishing second to Yamaha team rider, Hideo Kanaya.

He was tipped right then as a "new GP star" but things didn't fall into place that easily for a struggling privateer. He finished out the 1975



It His Way

season with little more than the Austrian ride to sustain his reputation and a third place in Germany was the best that came his way in 1976. The Grand Prix win that had seemed so close after his Austrian debut was a long time coming.

It finally came in 1977 when he won the French 250cc GP from fellow South African privateer Alan North. That was still the only GP win for another two years but it proved both to Jon and the public that the potential was there. Throughout the 1977 and 1978 seasons he scored points steadily in both 250 and 350cc categories, using private Yamahas all the way. He piled up the points so well that he placed third in 350cc points in 1977 and fourth in 1978. These efforts were coupled with eighth and ninth 250cc class placings, so at least racing was now paying its way. He had the sponsorship of Dutch builder Kees van Opstal, from 1977 right through to the end of 1979, and was able to field the kind of machinery that would at least give him a chance of a GP win.

It was 1979, unfortunately, that saw Ekerold back in the "crash and burn" routine. He won another Grand Prix . . . the West German, and found himself leading his friend and fellow South African, Kork Ballington, on Championship points when the flag dropped for the Italian GP.

Ballington had come to Europe around the same time as Ekerold but a double GP win at Silverstone had brought him to the public eye and the notice of Kawasaki GB. The result was a works contract for Ballington with the only factory seriously contesting the 250 and 350cc classes of Championship racing. The combination of Ballington's skills and a factory bike had led to the World Championship in 1978, so beating Kork had become a bit of an obsession with Ekerold for 1979.

He freely admitted to journalist Nick Harris that the feeling of leading the World Championship in 1979 was just too much for him. "It was win or bust at Imola," he said. The



result was "bust"—one of his collarbone injuries, to be exact. Later that season he broke the opposite collarbone plus the same one again, and his leg, when a broken con-rod caused his bike to seize in the Yugoslavian GP.

So one could hardly blame Jon for beginning 1980 with the attitude that it was this year for the World title—or retirement. Especially as he was 30 years old and a devoted family man with three children left behind in South Africa during the racing season. Kees van Opstal had decided to stop sponsorship for 1980, but Jon's reputation was such that he soon hooked up with German motorcycle dealership Solitude Motorcycles of Stuttgart.

He had as good machinery as any other private rider for 1980, his frame of mind had been tempered by the crashes of 1979 and his Championship chances were aided by the fact that it was Kork Ballington's turn to suffer misfortune. The 1978 and 1979 250 and 350cc Champion was sidelined by an intestinal illness.

This still left the works Kawasaki of Anton Mang to cope with, however, and the young German was at the peak of his form.

Sixth place in the season opener in Italy was followed by wins in France and Holland, plus second spot to Mang at Silverstone.

At this point, Jon appeared to be in the driver's seat but he, of all people, realised that nothing is certain in racing until the season is finished. His worst fears looked like being realised when mechanical problems dropped him to tenth in Czechoslovakia while Mang (newly-crowned as 250cc Champion) rocketed to the 350cc win.

This meant that it was all down to the West German GP at the Nurburgring . . . giving Mang the psychological edge of the "home field advantage."

Jon, however, also received a massive psychological boost when his wife Sandy and six-month-old son Antony flew in from South Africa to be with him for the most crucial race of his career. Having barely had time to see his new baby before flying off for another season in Europe, their arrival was just the tonic Jon needed.

He went out and battled with Mang throughout the West German GP in one of the greatest races ever seen at the historic "Ring." When the chequered flag finally fell, it acknowledged Jon Ekerold as winner of the 1980 West German Grand Prix and new 350cc Champion of the World. □