



**Getting
sideways
with**

KENNY ROBERTS

So Kenny Roberts has clinched his third World 500cc Championship in just three years on the European Grand Prix road race circuits ...

So we're getting kind of bored writing about how "King Kenny" rocketed away to another title and we're willing to bet that you're probably bored reading about it ...

So we'll assume that everyone knows that Kenny Roberts can ride a road race bike and we'll give you a look at the other talents of 'KR' ...

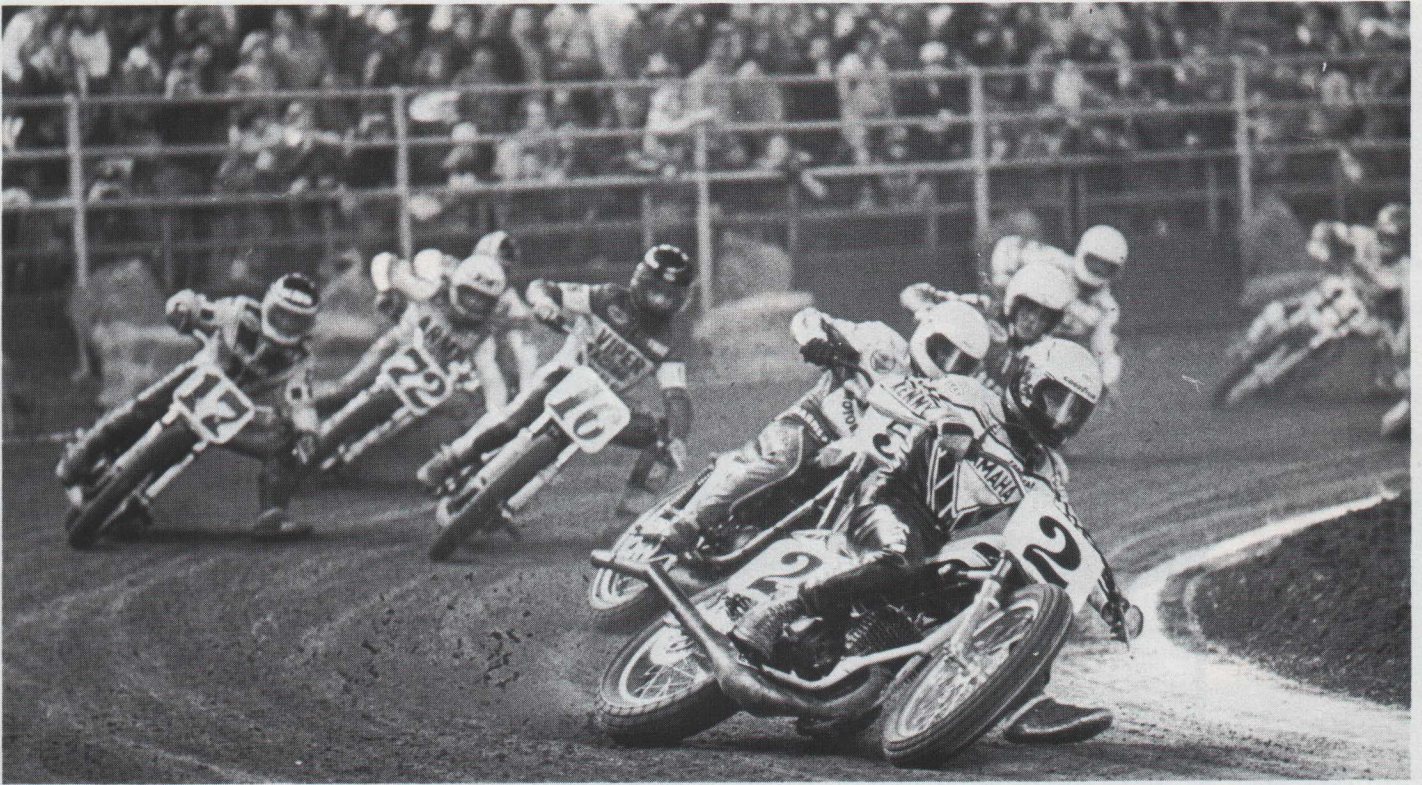
Most people in Europe also know that Kenny was one hell of a dirt track rider in his early days on the American Grand National Championship trail but unless you know exactly what is involved on the American Championship scene you've no idea just how incredibly good he was. Cancel that was ...

Kenny Roberts still IS one hell of a dirt track racer. He proved that earlier this year by re-appearing at a US Championship race after a two

year total absence from the rough and tumble of the loose ovals ... and winning!

Let's back-track a bit and set the scene for you by describing the American Grand National Championship circuit. It comprises five separate forms of racing, only one of which (road racing) is in any way familiar to European fans.

King of the dirt track events - and many will say it's the absolute pinnacle of motorcycle sport - is "the



February 1980: Back to the rough and tumble of short-track racing.

mile". Twenty five guys on 750cc racers, slipstreaming at 130mph on the straights and posting lap averages of over 100mph for race distances of anything up to 50 miles!

Kenny Roberts won three mile-track Nationals during his career. One was in 1975 and is still the most talked-about dirt race in history.

At that time Yamaha were still continuing the unequal struggle against Harley Davidson ... trying to match a bored-out, overstressed, parallel twin, converted street bike with a 750cc vee-twin that was pure racer from the drawing board up.

Kenny had been Grand National Champion in both 1973 and 1974 and the time was August 1975. Time for desperation tactics in a year where the lack of road races and the superiority of the HD dirt bikes had put Kenny's coveted "Number One" plate in jeopardy.

The "win or bust" solution that Yamaha came up with was a 100hp Yamaha TZ700 four cylinder road race engine jammed into a dirt-track chassis ...!

We've never seen the 1975 Indianapolis Mile, summed up better than by this recent piece by Dave Despain in the American Motorcyclist Association's magazine. We quote ...

"The shriek of that awesome, four-cylinder powerplant down the Indy backchute was as mind-bending as the machine was fast, but Lord help anybody who tried to ride it through corners. Lean it over and things would drag. Try to steer with the throttle and the rear tyre would light up like a dragster slick. Keep it between the fences and you were damned lucky.

Desperate for points and far behind the field as the leaders streaked away, Roberts searched for a means of taming the monster, leashing all that horsepower and somehow transferring it into quick lap times. The key was raw courage. In the end, Kenny simply gave the beast its head and held on, trusting his instincts, skill and luck to keep him alive. He hurtled into the turns at 130 miles-per-hour and knocked the edges off the haybales in a classic struggle to get his machine turned while keeping it upright. Always the throttle was turned on, the engine emitting that eerie shriek.

Having found his answers, Roberts swept by the rest of the

field like they were tied to a post, but the white flag for the last lap caught him 100 yards short of leaders Jay Springsteen and Corky Keener. Half that margin melted away on the backstretch, most of the rest of it through turn three.

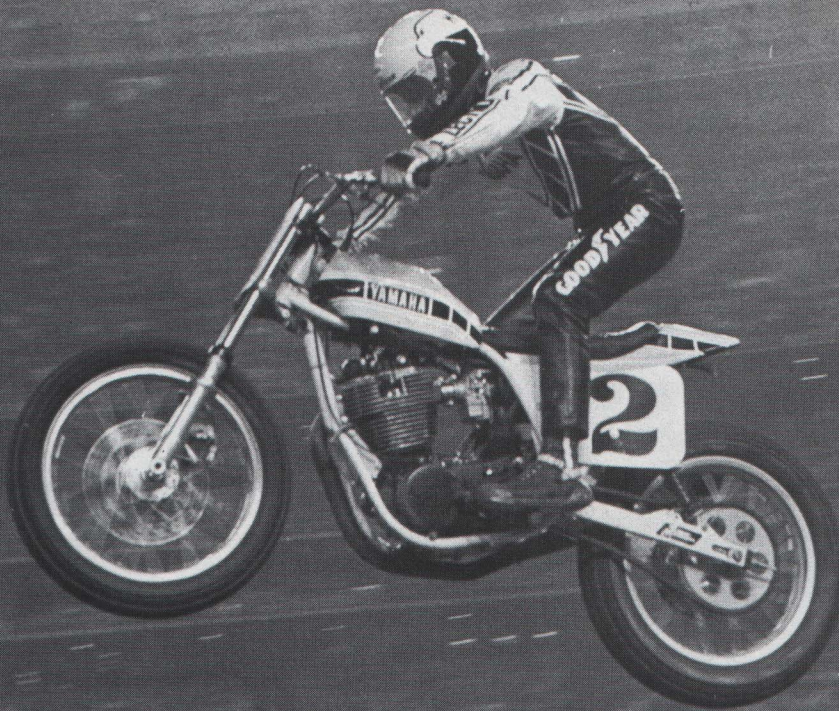
"I heard that screamin' "son of a bitch" comin' and I knew there was nothing we could do," Keener recalled later. Roberts was running at least 20 miles an hour faster than the lead duos as he swept by at the line to win by half a foot.

"They don't pay me enough to ride that thing", Kenny said later. And the AMA agreed that such equipment did not belong in the hands of mortals, so it banned the bike (along with all other multis) as a potentially lethal weapon."

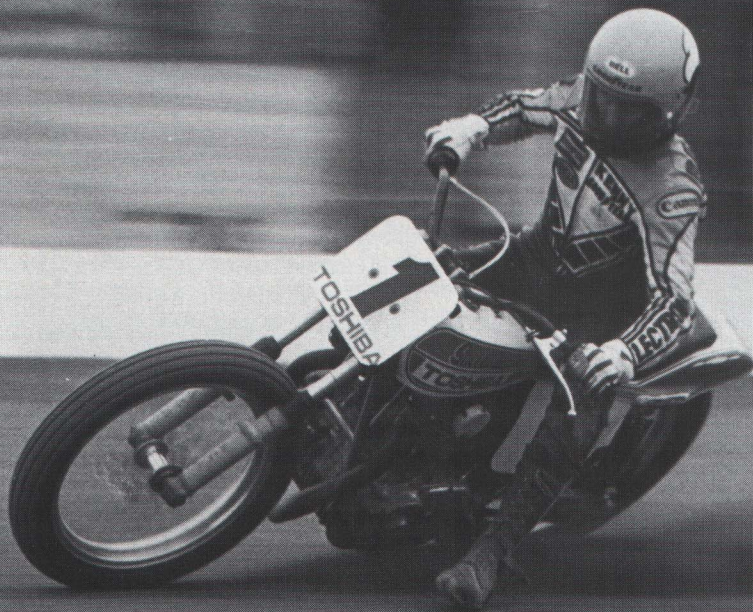
That, ladies and gentlemen, sums up Kenny Roberts on "the mile"!

Only slightly down the scale of things on the "National circuit" comes the "half-miles". Tighter tracks than the mile, more elbow-banging, more front wheels run over outstretched left feet ... and still 90mph speeds!

Kenny showed the British public at least a glimpse of his half-mile skill



February 1980: Just like he'd never been away. Roberts wins the Houston TT.



September 1980: A return to the half-mile at Haldon in England

when he rode at Haldon, Devon late in 1979 on a dirt "long track" that was little more than two long straights joined by two hairpin bends.

Eight thousand people journeyed to Devon during a petrol crisis, in rain and fog at the end of September and spent the day perched on a hilltop to watch "King Kenny" getting it sideways. They weren't disappointed but Kenny was.

"I'm having to drop down to second gear on these corners" he said. "We stay in fifth on the real ovals back home!"

On the "real" half-miles, Kenny won four Championship events and countless non-Championship races.

The smallest form of oval track racing is the "short track". Anything under a quarter of a mile qualifies and bikes are limited to 250cc. This is real push and shove racing with lots of physical contact and riders heading for the haybales after a bit of not-so-gentle persuasion from hard-charging rivals.

Mr Roberts won six of these at National Championship level and, again, innumerable non-title rivals.

Some measure of his ability came at the Houston Astrodome in February this year when he placed third after a dash to the flag in which a fairly small blanket could easily have covered the first three men. Not bad after two years away in the comparatively-relaxed world of Grand Prix road racing!

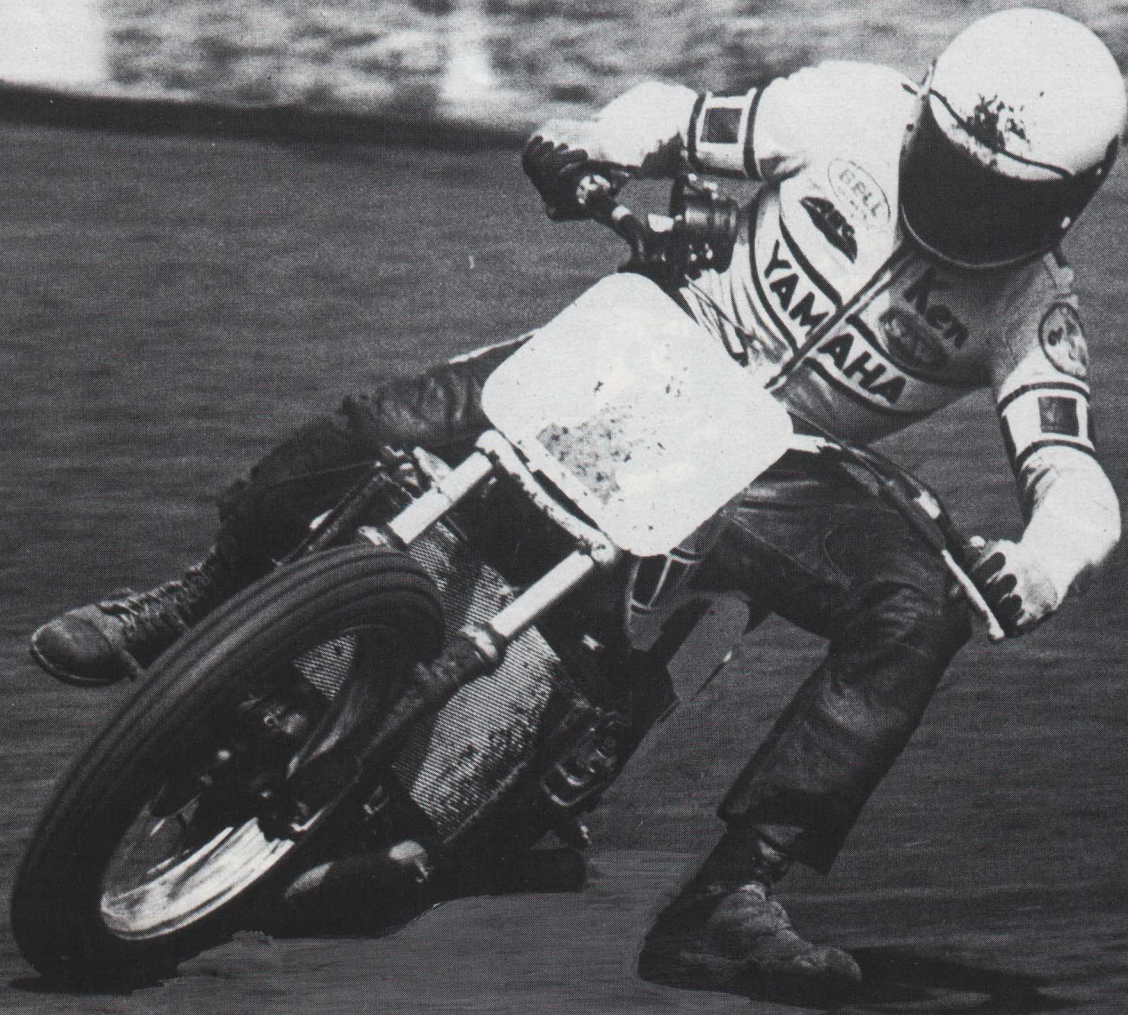
The final type of American dirt-track event is the curiously-named TT Steeplechase. It's a kind of combination motocross and speedway. The track features huge jumps and differing-radius right and lefthand turns but is graded smooth.

Kenny won a whole lot of TT races at non-Championship level but just two "Nationals". One of these, however, was probably the most amazing race of his amazing career.

It was February, 1980. Roberts had been away for two solid years on the GP road race trail (winning two World Championships in the process). In all that time he had never got dirt track racing out of his system.

"There's no feeling in the world like getting it sideways on the dirt tracks" he told the press just before his British "demonstration" race at Haldon.

So there he was on a Friday night in February, under the roof of



August 1975: Taming the "beast". The awesome TZ700 dirt-tracker.

Houston's giant Astrodome (like a covered-in Wembley Stadium!). Beneath him thumped a 500cc Yamaha four-stroke single and around him roared the 750cc engines of the new stars who had taken over the US scene during his absence.

"I drove a thousand miles here to see Roberts on the dirt again" said one fan in the ticket line. He was well rewarded.

None of the old magic had faded. Roberts told the press at Houston that he figured he had a good chance of making the top three.

"The only mistake Kenny made all weekend was underestimating his own potential" said the AMA's Dave Despain.

The start flag dropped and Kenny promptly roared off to win, thus equalling the 28 National victories of another American legend, Bart

Markel.

He had been helped to this point by 13 road race National wins and when he made that fourteen at Laguna Seca, California, in August 1980, Kenny had written another page in the record books. He had become the most successful American Championship racer of all time, with 29 victories to his credit.

As well as holding the all-time US National win record, Kenny also did something else which no other American racer has ever matched. He won one of each type of National event during the space of a single season! Only one other rider, that superb all-rounder, Dick Mann, had ever won one of each before - even during his entire career. Kenny did the "Grand Slam" in 1975!

Add all this to the three World 500cc Championships that KR won

in just three Grand Prix seasons and you'll see why any sane man must rate Roberts as the greatest all-round bike racer that ever put on a pair of leathers.

Should anyone be short-sighted enough to doubt that, let them hear this quote from another of the best all-rounders ever ...

After witnessing Roberts' win in the 1980 Astrodome TT, another American superstar well-known to British fans, by the name of Gary Nixon, was heard to say to Dick Mann.

"You know, if we had good equipment and a couple of months to get in shape, we could still go out and beat those kids".

"Sure thing, Nixon" replied Mann. "And if I had your eyesight and Bart Markel's guts, I could have been Kenny Roberts!"