

Farewell to a motocross SUPERSTAR

Heikki Mikkola - one of the greatest riders ever to straddle a motocross machine - has retired when still at what many people consider to be the peak of his career. The tough Finn, however, has standards way above those of most people on the motocross scene and, after a season beset by injuries, has decided that time has come to retire from championship racing. Mikkola won't be lost to motocross enthusiasts, however, as he has been retained by Yamaha in an advisory capacity for the 1980 season.

Concentrating mainly upon the 500cc World Championship Series, 34 year old Heikki will act as an advisor upon team strategy and preparation. He will also scout promising young riders for future seasons and will act as a liaison man between the Yamaha team and the motorcycle press. He will base himself at home in Finland, where he lives at Hyvinkaa with his wife, ten year old daughter and five year old son. There, after spending the off-season at his favourite pastime of hunting, Heikki will also act as a development and test rider for future Yamahas.

Heikki's fifteen-year career in motocross began in 1964, when he combined the sport with enduros, ice-racing and snowmobile events. Concentrating upon motocross he was signed to the Husqvarna team in 1968. By 1974 he had hit peak form and wrested the World 500cc Motocross Championship from Roger De Coster.

The Belgian took it back in 1975, after a tough battle all season with Heikki. Then, when Mikkola felt confident of regaining the crown in 1976, Husqvarna inexplicably switched him to the less-important 250cc class. It won them, and Heikki, another World Championship but Mikkola was dissatisfied. It was the 500cc crown that he wanted, the most important motocross championship of them all.

It was at this point that Yamaha stepped in. They had not been involved in motocross at factory team level for two years and many people thought that Mikkola was crazy to pin his faith on a totally new machine for 1977.

By season's end the doubters had to eat their words. In the very first GP with the new Yamaha, Heikki got into the points with a third and fifth place in the two motos. Two weeks later in Holland he led both motos from start to finish and the die was cast. From that point until he clinched the Championship, he had just one retirement and never finished lower than fourth. Most of the time he was way out in front, collecting maximum points!

If anything, the 1978 season was even more devastating. Mikkola and the Yamaha were rarely challenged and he brought Yamaha their second World Championship in two years ... the fourth in his career.

The 1979 season brought disappointment, however, Heikki badly injured his knee just before the first race of the season and, though he struggled to complete the opening Grand Prix he was forced to quit.

All through the early part of the season the leg bothered him but, even so, he still pulled himself into contention for his third World Championship by mid-season. Just as it seemed the leg was back to full-strength, and just as he hit winning form, there came another crash, at the Canadian GP. The knee was injured again, some ribs were cracked and that was effectively the end of Heikki's bid for a third title. As it turned out, it was effectively the end of Heikki's riding career though no-one realised it at the time.

Therefore, Heikki will be spending the 1980 motocross season in the pits. It's bad news for the thousands of motocross fans all over the world but there isn't one of them who will begrudge "one of the greatest" a well-earned rest!

