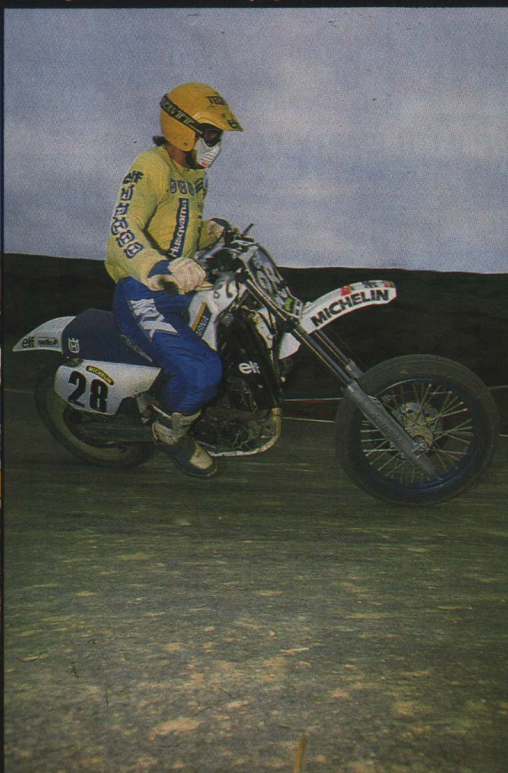


Supermotards!

Dirtbikes that go road racing. They're cheap, they're macho and they ought to do it over here. Rupert Paul reports from France.



Above: Series runner-up Peterhansel. It's not every day you see a motocrosser's pegs scraping tarmac. Boniface (17) was fourth behind Pidoux (28) who ignored the laws of physics all season.



The French word *motard* means 'biker', so it doesn't take an insupportable mental effort to deduce that *Supermotard* means 'Superbiker'. Unfortunately that's about as close a translation as we can get because despite appearing to be English, *Superbiker* is an American word used to describe a species of racing motorcycle entirely unavailable in this country. Whether the said species could live and breed in the UK is open to question but it seems to do pretty well in France.

The original, early eighties concept in the US was for a half tarmac/half dirt race series based on motocross bikes. For some reason it flourished and five years ago the French, whose love of dirt bikes is far greater than ours, imported the idea. Since then it's become an established part of France's biking scene. Sponsors are big names like Camel, Igol oil and Dunlop, prize money is a faintly tantalising £500 per meeting and although there aren't many races they are well attended.

The main differences between motocrossers and Supermotard bikes are the ones you can see. Supermotarders also tend to gear their bikes quite high, giving theoretical top speeds of over 100mph against the 90mph you'd get from a typical 500cc motocrosser. All-out maximum can't be very different from the 115mph we got out of a CR500 a couple of years ago, but as a rule Supermotards yields relatively low racing speeds. Good job too; if the bikes went any faster their appalling aerodynamics would wreak some very unpleasant side effects.

To begin with the five race

PERFORMANCE BIKES



'87 series was dominated by a Husqvarna rider called Stephane Peterhansel. He waltzed the first round in May, did the same again in June at round two, and came second in July when '86 champ Mingels crashed on the last corner.

After that things got a bit wierd. The fourth round was cancelled at the last minute and when Peterhansel failed to materialise for the final following a desert expedition, Mingels cruised to an overall win by coming second.

All the same, when I went to the October final at Nantes I couldn't see the point of running something so similar to motocross. The riders were the same, the bikes were the same, the track was half the same, so what was the difference?

It turned out to be location. Motocross meetings are held out in the country, and to get to one you have to be keen.

The Supermotards event, on the other hand, was in the middle of the Parc des Expositions de la Beaujoire — or in plain terms, the town's main leisure park.

The track was run over the park footpaths and interspersed with neat little sections of imported earth. Spectators could stand close enough to the track to touch the bikes. Overhead, among the trellises and climbing plants, trendy and faithfully reproduced music lilted out of cunningly placed speakers. Out in the lake, windsurfers cruised on the breeze. It was a genuinely nice place to be.

The result was that when the race began at five in the evening the park was full of people who would normally never dream of going to a race meeting. Snappily dressed Peugeot 205GTi owners ducked from the flying grit as the pack thundered past for the first time. Old grannies stood inches away from the action — and loved it. Kids who had the energy ran from corner to corner of the ultra-twisty circuit, thereby observing almost an entire lap. As a way of making bikes trendy and interesting to a wide variety of people it was pretty foolproof.

The French bike press have known about this for ages and have often asked when the manufacturers would cotton on and start offering similar bikes for the road. This is a good question; after years of churning out ever-faster and more complex race replicas the Japanese have manoeuvred themselves into a corner from which there is almost no escape. Megabikes might impress journalists but they scare off a lot of potential customers and infuriate

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legislators to the point where in the USA, for example, Honda have decided not to bring in the RC30.

If the manufacturers are going to sell motorcycles to the world in increasing quantities

again they're going to have to try a different tack. Strangely enough, that's exactly what they're doing with Yamaha's TDR250, Honda's AX-1 and the NX250. Just like Supermotards they're not anti social, you don't have to do 150mph on them to have fun and they put a lot more emphasis on style than power. Could the recession of the

motorcycle market really be reversed by a bunch of mad Frogs tearing around town centres on bastardised dirtbikes? I think we'd need our own series here before we knew for sure — preferably based around the country's main centres of population. Anybody fancy an early start to the British Superbiker Series in Hyde Park?

Les Pilotes

Your average Supermotard *pilote* is, in terms of experience at least, no spring chicken. The series is (a) popular with the public and (b) doesn't have too many rounds which makes it ideal for all kinds of loonies to dip into in their spare time. Mingels, who has just won his second Supermotard championship on a Yamaha (without actually coming first once) has been a motocross rider for 20 years. Peterhansel, (Husqvarna, second) might have won if he hadn't crashed his Yamaha in the Egyptian Rallye de Pharoahs and missed the last round. Pidoux (Husqvarna, third) is an ex-national enduro and ISDE rider. He is also a complete demon on a motorcycle. Next year he may be joined by the two Sarrons (that's right, Sarron. As in Bol d'Or).

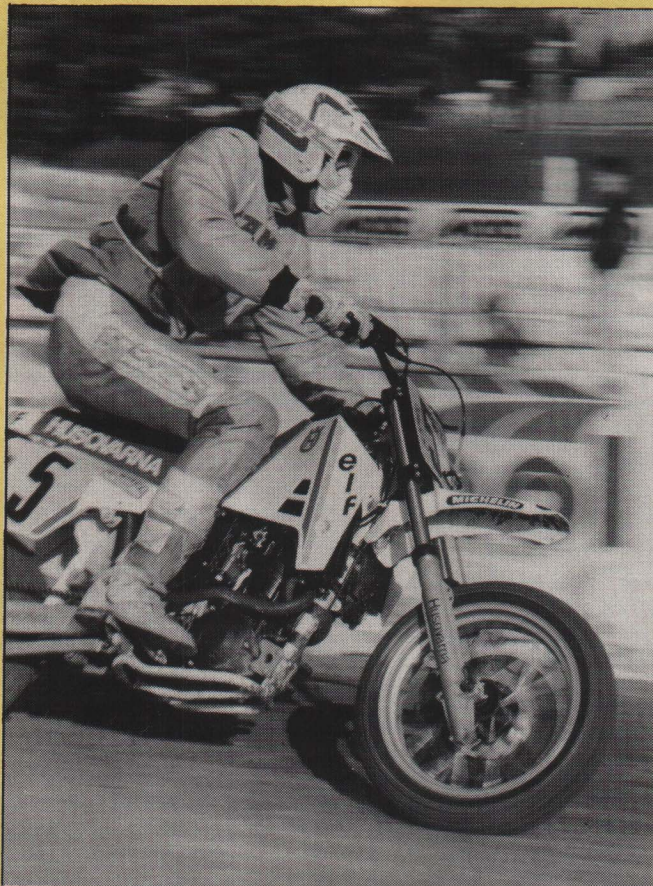
Tenth in the championship this year was one Michel Merel. He was also series organiser.

"The purpose of Supermotard is to find the *pilote* who goes fast everywhere — on the road and on the dirt," Michel confided. It's more popular than Moto Cross."

Only moments before I'd been discussing the same subject Jean-Marc Forchini, who went on to finish 20th in the race. "It's less popular than Motards Cross," he'd said as he checked over his CR500 Honda. I wasn't sure who to believe until I told Jean-Marc where I'd come from. "You rode all the way here from England just for this race? Really? That's ridiculous."

"Why not? I said. "We haven't got anything like this."

And this is very true. In Britain, roadbikes and dirtbikes are so far apart that the one hardly acknowledges the existence of the other. Supermotards borrows technique, riders and machinery from both.



Above: Pidoux's demonic four stroke Husqvarna single out for blood. Note flat front tyre, twin exhausts and water cooling. Meanwhile Z1000R fairing (below) makes short work of also-ran.



Supermotarders' phrasebook

Verifier la composition du terrainto dismount unexpectedly.
 Du standard, rien que du standard race preparation.
 Complètement gaga overcome with enthusiasm.
 C'est fini pour moi. J'ai les deux chevilles cassées I can't win this race. My ankles are broken.
 Bougger cela pour un jeu de soldats sod this, I'm going home.
 Emporté au nirvana mental state of leading rider before the final corner.
 Merde, j'ai fait un oreille de cochon de ça first thought of leading rider following final corner crash.
 Laurent Pidoux et le 510 Husky en glissade, et en roue arrière s'il vous plaît look at that flash git Pidoux.
 Ce n'est pas le tasse de thé de tout le monde spectators are under no obligation to enjoy proceedings.

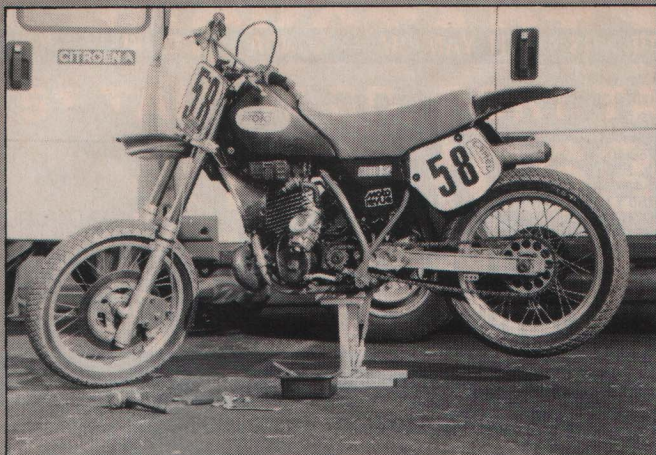
Les Motos

Take one 500cc motocrosser. Add eighteen inch front wheel, massive Brembo disc and caliper to suit. Obtain pair of roadracing wets, taking care to cram on the biggest rear you can find. Adjust chain, chop front mudguard, drum fingers on petrol tank and wait for your first race.

OK, so it isn't quite as simple as that. Some of the fast boys go for trick exhausts, maybe a bit of engine tuning, and everybody plays around with suspension, gearing and tyre pressures. There's even a choice of tyre compounds (*choix de gomme*, as they say in the paddock), but really the bikes don't need to be particularly trick. A Supermotard's ultimate weapon is riding ability. The legendary Pidoux demonstrated this in the finals by riding his apparently uncompetitive Husqvarna 510 four stroke single against a pack of raving two strokes, and beating the lot of



Series winner Mingels (1) watches with d



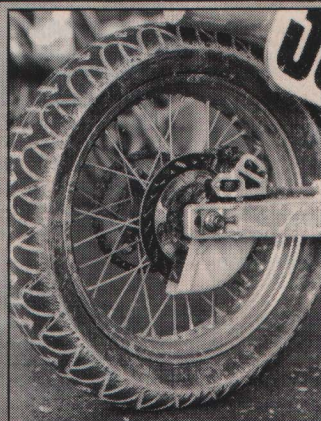
Down at the bottom end of the entry list we find tired old dogs like this YZ490. Mudguard amputation aids stability at speed.

them. No other four stroke rider (and there were at least 20 of them — all wimps we thought) even qualified.

So the bikes are relatively cheap, easy to modify and look great. There's also a big spread of makes. Honda CR500s are the most popular, followed by 490 and 500 Yamaha two strokes, Kawasaki KX500s, KTMs and

Kawasaki KX500s, KTMs and Husqvarnas. The top ten of season placings contained two from each factory which is about as even as you'll get.

The only bikes that never got a look in were an XT500 (a current model in France) and a couple of charming, but hopelessly slow CR250s ridden by the Gilbert sisters.



Dust and tarmac makes the tyres look weird. It's only a cut Michelin Hi Sport.



Belief as Peterhansel (4) takes his rear wheel steering theory to the limit.



Many riders are quite happy to cruise around quietly, which is fine until they get blitzed by a mad dog like Daniel Pean (27).

Below: The Mingels cornering style was immaculate.



La Course

The circuit is half dirt, half tarmac and the riders have worked some fairly bizarre ways of getting round the corners. Depending on the length of the preceding straight bikes will be more or less out of control by the time they reach the corner — small front wheels, big mudguards and low tyre pressures don't do anything for high speed stability. Then it's just a question of braking like mad at the last second and charging into the turn 15 abreast.

On the dirt the method is to slide round motocross style — weight forward, elbows up, inside foot poised for an almighty dab. On tarmac, there aren't any berms to ride round and the bikes get totally sideways and totally banked over very suddenly. You can tell the really cool boys here because they don't even bother to put their feet down. When things get a bit frantic, early throttle opening becomes even more important. This usually means you can see bikes banked over, sliding the back end and wheelying all at the same time.

As an exercise in machismo, Supermotards rivals motocross but with more braking, no jumps and less grip.

Surprisingly, the road race wets grip best on the dirt — the bikes always slide like crazy when the corner changes to tarmac halfway round. Racing wets normally overheat and break up if used exclusively on hard surfaces, but Supermotards get away with it by being light and relatively low powered. The dirt sections of the course help cool the tyres down a bit too.

Racing etiquette is pretty straightforward — go for it. The top few riders are in a class of their own and several of the back markers appear to be terrified of getting in their way, with good reason. Being overtaken can be a terminal experience. Two semi finals sort out the wallies, the top nine finishers going through to the 20-grid final. This leaves two more places for the rest of the field to slog it out over three laps of last chance repechage. The winner of the final gets 20 points, second gets 17, third gets 15 and so on.

Technically speaking there was a four stroke class but with a few notable exceptions the standard of racing was so pathetic that it was embarrassing. The only rider who dared to mix it with the two strokes was Pidoux but then he more than made up for the limp wristedness of his plodding colleagues.