

THE LAST TANGO IN ONTARIO?

After three tries, people finally began to realize that beautiful Ontario Motor Speedway just wasn't the best place to hold a motorcycle race.

by Sam Moses

The electric sign outside the gate at Ontario Motor Speedway said AMA CHAMPIONSHIP MOTORCYCLE RACES TODAY, but there should have been a few words of warning added to the sign, like maybe UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT. Since it was built, Ontario has had more ups and downs than a Bobby Riggs' tennis ball, and has been about one-tenth as successful. The track lost money from the beginning, a large portion of that loss coming from the motorcycle races. Last year the city of Ontario (owners of the track) announced that the corporation operating the track had lost nearly \$10 million in three years. With a \$2 million annual interest payment and each race losing more money, something had to be done. The operators backed out. The motorcycle races were called off. A prospective new lessee appeared. The races were back on. The deal fell through. The races were off again. On again off again on again until the track was finally taken over by a group including J.C. Agajanian and Parnelli Jones. The race was scheduled again, for the weekend of September 29 and 30. They could have saved their energy.

Case in point:

Track maintenance was poor. Oil and rubber slicks causes numerous crashes. In the Junior race, 12 riders crashed on slicks. In many places the most powerful bikes couldn't use full throttle because of wheelspin. Immediately preceding the Expert race, an AMA official walked up and down the grid carrying a blackboard that read TURNS 6, 19, 20 SLICK. EXCESS RUBBER. There were also tricky white lines painted at the edge of the track; the old complaint was that Ontario was so featureless that it was difficult for the racers (both car and motorcycle) to see the edge of the track, so the pavement was ringed with white lines. That may have helped the cars, but for the bikes it spelled trouble; the paint was slippery, and a bike could barely cross a line without the rear wheel taking off sideways. The only choice a rider had was to either take his chances

crossing the slick paint or narrow his lines through the turn.

Case in point:

The track security force had new orders from the management. No photographers were allowed anywhere near the circuit; in many cases they were allowed no closer than the spectators. This of course led to a few heated confrontations. (One security official to a photographer: "Get behind the fence or I'll knock your lights plum out, Ace!"), and in at least one occasion, an actual rolling-in-the-dirt fistfight. While the overstaffed security force was patrolling the infield, the understaffed turn marshals couldn't keep up with the crashes on the track, and many times a fallen machine stayed in place for two or three minutes before it was moved out of the way of the racing.

Case in point:

The races were too long. That was the AMA's doing, not Ontario's. By Sunday evening there were few defenders of the 125-mile heat idea. The five-lap heats were the most exciting races of the weekend, and the most exciting main event—the Junior race—was the one that had been shortened to 80 miles. Saturday's 250cc race was a dull parade after the third lap. Even Roxy Rockwood, the enthusiastic AMA announcer, went to sleep.

Case in point:

The word was out: Ontario may be a super facility, but it's a lousy place to watch a motorcycle race. A spectator was lucky if he could get within 50 yards of a corner, and even then he was separated from the track by a fence that looked like it belonged around a penitentiary exercise yard. And the grandstands were no better; watching a motorcycle from there was like watching a fly buzz around the rim of a rum glass. Like one female spectator said, "The fence is great for keeping gate crashers out of rock concerts (which Ontario has been holding lately to help pay the bills), but they ought to make a golf course out of the rest of the place."

But despite all the hassles and annoy-

ances some people went home happy, and despite the third consecutive poor crowd turnout, some people went home rich. On Saturday the happy people were the Yamaha team, as Kenny Roberts led a 1-2-3-4 factory Yamaha sweep in the 250cc race. And Sunday's money makers were the Green Wave from Kawasaki, as the big race was a Kawasaki sweep from beginning to end in both heats, with Yvon duHamel, Gary Nixon, and Art Baumann running away from the field.

NOVICE RACE

Race week had been shortened from last year's five days to three, which was a step in the right direction. Friday was practice and tech inspection, and on Saturday all the heats were held, along with the 250cc race and the Novice race. The Novice field lacked a couple of its brighter stars, in particular the riders from the East, because California was a long way to go for the small purses paid to Novices. Absent was Jay Livingston, this year's top Novice, and Gary Blackman, this year's winner of the "Parkesburg Cup." Parkesburg, Pennsylvania seems to be the Place To Be From in road racing. Ed Smith (the Parkesburg Procurer) and Fast Eddie Fisher (father of Gary Fisher, who was the original Parkesburg Flash) brought a new Parkesburg Flash in place of Blackman: William Peters Jr. Smith keeps digging new Novices out of the woods, and every Tuesday and Thursday he sends them over to Gary Fisher's house to have them drink out of Fisher's well. In the fastest Novice heat Peters ran a strong second, but in the main event he didn't do as well. "He's a good runnin' Novice," Smith said, "except he was runnin' too good off the road. He must have been sneaking over to Fisher's well on Wednesdays, too."

The race was won by Wes Cooley, young enough to have a mother young enough to be the daughter of one of the riders that Cooley beat: 62-year-old James Miller. Cooley got a slow start, but worked



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEE STANLEY AND TOM BEESLEY

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his way into third in three laps, then took the lead on the sixth lap, when the early leader, Ron Ishnael, slowed, eventually dropping out. Second was Kevin Stafford and third Richard Seifried, with the good runnin' Billy Peters eventually taking sixth.

250cc JUNIOR EXPERT RACE

It probably was a good thing that there were only a handful of spectators, for the 250 race could be summed up in three words: boring, boring, boring. The Yamaha team of Kenny Roberts, Kel Carruthers, Don Castro and Gary Fisher out-classed the field and led for all 39 laps, with Roberts on top all the way. On the first lap eight riders were in contention for the lead, and Castro's swoop past most of them off the banking and into turn one provided a fleeting moment of excitement, but that was about it. Yvon duHamel poked his Kawasaki Bighorn between them on the infield until the bottom end dropped out, and Gary Nixon (on a private Yamaha) held onto fifth until he had to pit (and later retire) with a funny gearbox. Then young aggressive Steve Baker took over the top non-factory spot with his Deeley Yamaha, and for the last 100 miles they paraded around, a half dozen seconds between them. Nothing more happened until the last lap, and that was more of a non-event: three riders ran out of gas. Ron Pierce stopped in the infield, Baker stopped just yards shy of the finish line and pushed across, and Art Baumann sputtered past Baker at the end, who had also lost his position to teammates Jim Dunn and Jim Allen.

With the exception of the Kawasakis of duHamel and Baumann, the only other non-Yamaha was the Yoshimura 350 Honda twin of Jess Thomas. But even that was lost on lap ten; the Honda locked up in a fast left-hand bend, and Thomas was spit off at 100 mph. The bike was just about destroyed, but Thomas was only shaken up. Next year the 250 Yamahas will be water-cooled, and Kawasaki doesn't even plan on racing their singles. If Thomas gives up on the Yoshimura Honda, the field may possibly be exclusively Yamaha.

JUNIOR RACE

The Junior race had been shortened to 80 miles from 125, not because the AMA was worried about boring the crowd away, but because they were worried that with two 125-mile Expert races to be run, the Sunday schedule might have been too crowded. Whatever the reason, the 80 miles was just right.

The heats had been won by Vesco Yamaha teammates Pat Evans and Mike Devlin, but Evans' heat was a phenomenal 37 seconds faster. Following Evans in that heat (by eight seconds) was Pat Hennen, who was riding a home-built Suzuki 750 built at the home of Ron Grant, Hennen's sponsor. Hennen's bike used a Rickman

frame and a modified street engine, and was *fast*. Third in their heat was factory Harley rider Scott Brelsford, and all three of them had a faster time than Devlin, who filled the fourth spot on the front row, one slot ahead of Bob Endicott on the Action Fours 500 Honda.

Brelsford got a hole shot at the start and it carried him through the first lap, but on the infield on the second lap he was swooped by Evans, Hennen, and Devlin. On the third lap Hennen led, as teammates Evans and Devlin weaved along behind him trying to shake each other's draft. Evans succeeding in shaking Devlin; on the fourth lap he took over the lead with an incredible 2:08 time, which would have been among the best of the Expert times. He kept it up, and disappeared from Hennen by the rate of two seconds a lap. Tim Rockwood bumped Brelsford out of fourth with his Boston Yamaha, but then things got slippery. Rockwood was the second of six riders to go down in the slick last turn, soon joined by Mike Hishiki, riding a works Honda left over from Daytona. Brelsford was black flagged for an oil leak, which had contributed to the slippery track.

Devlin began pushing Hennen for second; he stuffed a wheel inside him in an infield turn, but got on the gas too soon and slid out. He remounted without losing his place, but Hennen had gained some breathing room. Later Devlin candidly admitted that he had been riding over his head to stay with Hennen, and that he was lucky not to have lost any positions.

In the last ten laps, Evans mysteriously began to slow. His lead had been up to as much as 16 seconds, but with four laps to go it was only four seconds. With two to go, Hennen blew past Evans on the straight, Evans sitting up as he went by the pits shrugging to Don Vesco, who was giving him pit signals. No one in Evans' pit knew what he meant, but they all waved him on. He stayed on Hennen's tail, and as they got the white flag he was in Hennen's draft. Evans repassed Hennen going into turn one, and led the rest of the lap, winning by a second.

After the race Evans explained why he had slowed.

"Vesco and Ron Grant were pitting beside each other, and I kept seeing these signs that said 'easy,' so I figured Hennen had dropped out. Even when he passed me I saw a sign that said 'P1,' so I thought he had made a pit stop or something; that's why I was pointing at him and shrugging when I passed the pits. But I was reading Grant's signs to Hennen, because their board also said 'PAT' across the top. That 'P1' sign was to Hennen, after he passed me!"

For the first part of the 1973 season, Evans couldn't even get a license because he was still only 17, and his father wouldn't sign the AMA application. So he helped in the Vesco pits, and as soon as he turned 18 he got his license by himself. By

then it was already mid-season, and he hadn't raced for nearly a year, so it took a while for him to get back in the groove. Before Ontario he didn't have enough points to transfer to the Expert class for next year; in order to transfer, he had to win the race, since a win means an automatic transfer. His brilliant win got him the Expert transfer, and he proved to himself and a lot of other people that he could do it without his daddy's dollars.

EXPERT 125-MILE HEATS

Few people expected the Kawasakis to go the distance. Although Kawasaki had won four of the previous eight road races, those races had all been 75-milers. Ontario



Track official versus photographer. And the race goes on . . .

was 125 miles. Twice. But after almost three hours of racing, after those two 125-mile stretches, there was nothing but green in Victory Circle. The Green Wave struck fast, struck hard, and stayed around for the duration.

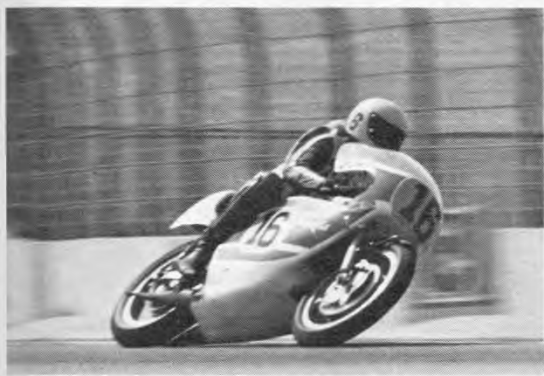
DuHamel and Nixon put on a real show, and for most of each race they were close enough together to make the racing interesting. Nixon occasionally passed and led for the \$50-per-lap lap money, but duHamel had things under control all afternoon, and by the time the flag fell at the end of each heat he had a lead of about ten seconds. The win was worth almost \$35,000, counting a \$10,000 contingency bonus from Kawasaki.

"I crashed the last two years here—twice last year in fact," said duHamel. "I told myself before the race that I had to go steady to finish and not fall off. Although it was hard not to ride as fast as I could, I managed to hold myself back. That's not easy for me to do, you know."

As duHamel spoke, Nixon's eyes rolled. Then duHamel dropped the mind-blower.

"On the first turn of the second heat I bumped someone and broke my clutch lever off," he said, pointing down to the alloy stub on his clip-on. "I had to ride all of the second heat without a clutch."

Then someone suggested to Nixon that



DuHamel plays chase; he caught Nixon and won each heat by ten seconds.

edge. The first time was in practice on Friday, and the other two were in the first heat.

"The seat brackets broke on about the fifth lap, and I could barely keep from falling off the motorcycle," he said as the Triumph team frantically repaired the battered machine between heats. "Shifting gears was really hard because my legs were falling all over the place, and that's how I crashed both times—I missed a shift, and went off into the dirt."

The first crash was a quickie, and he got going again without stalling the engine ("Have you ever tried to lift a Triumph triple with clip-ons off its side in the sand?" he asked), but the second crash really broke up the bike; fortunately it was only a few laps from the end of the heat, and Scott only lost the last couple laps.

Scott had had a bet going with Steve McLaughlin that he would finish better than McLaughlin; Scott and McLaughlin were the only two riders who had finished every AMA ad race so far this year. Despite Scott's crash he won the bet, since he finished the second heat and McLaughlin crashed in the first heat when his Yamaha seized. McLaughlin escaped with only a nasty strawberry on his back.

"It's a good thing I'm experienced at this," he said. "Otherwise I might have gotten hurt."

Most of Scott's fellow four-strokers also had trouble. Dick Mann and Gene Romero, Scott's teammates, rode consistently but out of contention. In the second heat they stayed together like twins, with Romero finally edging Mann after a 125-mile dice.

The Harley team went home early. On the eighth lap both Cal Rayborn and Mert Lawwill came putting down pit road and parked in the pits side by side, as team manager Dick O'Brien stood between the bikes and scratched his head. Rayborn was out with a suspected broken top end, Lawwill with a suspected broken bottom end.

The John Player Norton team fared even worse. After coming all the way from

Organization was the key word in the Yamaha pits during the 45-minute break between heats.

someone I know might be watching.

"Trying to follow Yvon in traffic is unbelievable. He gets about an inch ahead of a guy and says 'that's good enough,' then pitches it over in front of him; then up on the other side of another guy by another inch. No wonder he knocked off his clutch lever."

Art Baumann rode the other finishing factory Kawasaki steadily into third. It was his first finish in a road race all year. For the first half of the season he couldn't keep himself upright, and then when his riding settled down, he couldn't keep the bike together. But the Ontario third was a satisfying end to a frustrating season.

Probably the hardest-riding rider all weekend was Gary Scott. In the Saturday heat race, Scott pushed Nixon and Cliff Carr all around the infield, and on half a dozen occasions in the five-lap race actually passed them in the turns. Since Scott's Triumph couldn't play the horsepower game, he had to make up time on the straights by riding on the edge in the corners. Three times he went over that

Pat Evans was sensationally fast in winning the Junior race on his Don Vesco Yamaha.

he might not have been riding as hard as he could, because with three road race wins already, he didn't want to be greedy.

"I wanted to be greedy, take my word for it," Nixon fired back. "I was riding so hard to keep up with Yvon that I had my foot out a couple of times in the slow turns," he said, looking down at his boot, which was rubbed through to the skin and sliced like a piece of pie in a cheap diner. "But then I figured I better cut that out;



Roberts, Castro and duHamel, in military formation.



Principal characters in the Kawasaki sweep were Nixon, duHamel, black-bearded Steve Whitelock (duHamel's tuner), beaming Bob Hansen (team manager), Baumann, and Chris Young (Baumann's tuner).



The beautiful Mrs. Steve McLaughlin.

England, Peter Williams got no farther than the grid. He had switched to Good-year tires on Sunday morning and cut a full three seconds off his lap times, so he had been optimistic. But when he lined the machine up for the start, he noticed fuel leaking from the monocoque fuel tank. With no time to repair the leak, he had to pull out. His American teammate, Dave Aldana, was riding a monocoque brought over from England, but Aldana only made a few laps before pitting with a sick engine. After going back out for another try, he had to give up as well.

The only riders to challenge the Kawasakis were Kenny Roberts and Paul Smart, and theirs was only a token challenge. Roberts, who had been awarded the Number One plate by Mark Brelsford in pre-race ceremonies, pushed to the limit the whole way, contrary to what many would have expected of him. Even though he had clinched the championship he was giving it all he had, the sign of a true champion. He was in fourth almost all afternoon, and in the second heat never gave Baumann a moment's rest.

Smart was having carburetion problems on his Suzuki. It caused him to get poor starts in each heat, but he worked his way up to fifth both times.

Forcing his way into sixth was Steve Baker, making up somewhat for the previous day's disappointment. Baker had a super weekend as fastest non-yellow Yamaha, and never set a wheel wrong. Those first six duplicated their positions in both heats.

After a 25th in the first heat due to a wobbly rear wheel and overshooting his pit during the gas stop, top rookie Expert road racer Jim Evans (MotorCycle Weekly Yamaha) outrode top 19-year veteran Expert Kel Carruthers for seventh in the second heat. Evans, Carruthers and Gary Fisher had a great three-way race until the gas stops. Fisher locked the front wheel and tipped his Yamaha over in his stop, falling on his tuner Gary Feil, who was holding the quick-dump gas can. The can broke, and so the Yamaha team refilled Fisher's tank with a funnel. That was against the rules (fire hazard), although any team would probably have done the same thing. After the race Fisher was disqualified from the second heat.

When the overall results for the two heats were combined, the first six were of course the same. Seventh through tenth were Carruthers, Romero, Ron Pierce (Yamaha) and Ron Grant (Suzuki). Eleventh was Mann, and twelfth was the beautiful Butler and Smith BMW, ridden so smoothly and ably by Reg Pridmore. If there were an award for the cleanest looking and crispest sounding machine after the 250 miles, the BMW would have won hands down.

As the Kawasaki Victory Circle celebration began, smog settled over the circuit and the PA system played "Leader of the Pack" to the empty grandstands. Of course the winners were happy, but few people were optimistic about the future of the race. Like Vietnam, it seemed to be a monster that should have been backed out of before it got out of hand.

If there was one message that was clear, it was that motorcycles and Ontario don't seem to mix as a profitable (for the owners or spectators) combination, at least not under the present conditions. **CG**

Novice Results

1. Wes Cooley, Yamaha
2. Kevin Stafford, Yamaha
3. Richard Seifried, Yamaha
4. John Solimine, Yamaha

250cc Results

1. Kenny Roberts, Yamaha
2. Kel Carruthers, Yamaha
3. Don Castro, Yamaha
4. Gary Fisher, Yamaha

Junior Results

1. Pat Evans, Yamaha
2. Pat Hennen, Suzuki
3. Mike Devlin, Yamaha
4. Ralph Hudson, Suzuki

Expert Results

1. Yvon duHamel, Kawasaki (1-1)
2. Gary Nixon, Kawasaki (2-2)
3. Art Baumann, Kawasaki (3-3)
4. Kenny Roberts, Yamaha (4-4)