

# RACE OF THE AMERICAS

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## MOTOCROSS IN GUATEMALA



*Turn Left At The  
Third Volcano.  
You Can't Miss It.*

**By Rick Sieman**  
With Special Thanks to Kurt Muller  
and Luis Canella

You sit on the starting line waiting for the start of your race and you have a few minutes to look around. To your left is a massive volcano, with smoke lazily curling from its snout. Straight ahead is a range of angular, crusty mountains. To the right, more volcanos. But these are sleepy, peaceful ones. Dormant.

Your eyes wander down the starting line, all green and grassy . . . a lot like the grounds at any well-kept park in the world. At the edge of the grass you see dense woods. No, not woods . . . actually jungle. Just like the stuff you see in the old Tarzan movies. Huge cypress trees mingle with a bizarre type of evergreen that nearly defies description.

Overhead, huge black clouds mix with fluffy white puff balls. Sunshine

breaks through in patches. Those clouds are not all that high above your helmeted head. This isn't sea level, buster. Not by a long shot. You're sitting on a bright yellow RM250 Suzuki at 6,800 feet in the middle of Guatemala. The mind reels a bit and another look at that smoking volcano off to the left doesn't help.

This is definitely not Indian Dunes.

☆ ☆ ☆

The phone rings in the well lit and tastefully decorated Dirt Bike offices. It's Jim O'Neal. "You doin' anything Thursday or Friday?"

"No. Nothing that can't wait. You want to go riding up at Frazier Park or something?"

"Not exactly. Hey, you know there's no District race this weekend, right? So that leaves Sunday clear."

"Well, I *should* clean out the garage. I think something died in there about a month ago. What do you have in mind . . . exactly?"

"First let me ask you this . . . can you get free for a long lunch on Monday or Tuesday?"

"Sure. No sweat."

"OK. That leaves only Saturday to

worry about. Is Saturday anything special?"

"No, more or less. What's the deal here, O'Neal?"

"Here's the picture. It's obvious that your schedule is more or less clear for the next six days. I mean, there's nothing worldshaking going on. So what I've done is arranged for us to go race in Florencia Park. Whaddaya say?"

"Sounds good to me. Let's go for it. That's the new race track up near Fresno, right?"

"Ahhh, not exactly. It's more to the South. About three thousand miles further, to be exact. Oh yeh, I already told them you were coming, so that might help you make up your mind. Also, I got us a plane ticket. Is your passport up to date and . . ."

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Customs at the Guatemala City airport was like customs places all over the world. Some guy eyes you suspiciously and fondles your bags and clothes. We bribe him with a few T-shirts, discreetly, and he dispenses with the formalities. O'Neal offers him a copy of Motocross Action and the customs man considers this an insult. I





offer him an autographed "From the Saddle" glossy photo and he considers this a threat. We narrowly escape with our stickers and riding gear.

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Luis Canella blasts his huge Chevy van through the streets of Guatemala City. Heavy metal rock music rips out of a massive pair of Pioneer speakers. Luis dials in a bit more bass and deftly slips between a 60 Dodge and a Mercedes Benz taxi. He frowns, "My horn is broken. Man, I just can't drive without a horn in this place. You gotta let people know when you're coming through."

O'Neal and I lounge back in the recliner seats and take in the scenery. The van would be at home in any custom car show in the States. "I did the interior myself," says Luis. "It took a lot of time, but I wanted it done right."

Paneling, fuzzy carpeting, huge tinted side windows . . . the works. We wonder what it cost him, but don't ask. Luis is the Yamaha distributor for the entire country and he sells about three thousand bikes a year. "We don't sell too many pure racing bikes. I think

I sold about 21 new YZs this year. The 125s. On the 250 YZs, only about a dozen. Most of the bikes we sell are the 125 and 175 DT dual purpose models. Probably the single most popular bike in all of Guatemala is the DT175. They don't break and they run forever." A rider on a TT500 roars by the van, pulling a beautiful wheelie in the process. He waves at Luis and Luis waves back.

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The practice track for Kurt Muller is only a few minutes from the city. When we arrive there, a handful of riders are putting in some laps. One of the riders is on a full-blown Mugen water-pumper 125 . . . and he's smoking it. Jamming it into turns and snapping cleanly out. He's Nelson Rivero from Venezuela and he could dice it out at any track in the world with the local pros, it appears.

A bit later, we see Kurt ride up on an obviously brand new RM250. This seems a bit strange to us, as Kurt is the owner of Guatemotos, a Honda shop in the "bike" part of the city. We find out later that Kurt spent a great deal of time working with Suzuki and still had

a fondness for the yellow fliers.

A medium sized, slim person, Kurt is a ball of energy. He tries to walk in three different directions at the same time, while yelling "No problem" and waving his hands at full speed. Kurt's wife says, "I wish I could find a way to plug our television set into that guy. We could sure save on the electricity."

The track is long and a bit narrow for racing, but absolutely perfect for practicing and riding. The ground is tacky and moist without a hint of dust. A dense forest surrounds the track. It's a truly beautiful place and we tell Kurt this. "This place is nothing compared to Florencia," he says with wide eyes. "Ahhh, Florencia. You'll see. You'll see!"

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"¡Tres cervezas mas, por favor!" Three more beers, please. We improved our Spanish quickly. The local suds is Gallo (pronounced Guy-O) and it's great. There's a drawing of a rooster's head on the can and we spend a lot of time "biting the head off the chicken." Regular geeks, us.

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The starting line was packed from end to end in each moto. Here, the 100cc International class gets ready to charge the flag.

## GUATEMALA

"Over here is the service department," gestures Luis. We walk into a huge building loaded with bikes in various stages of repair and disrepair. Mechanics are all over the place, doing everything from tune-ups to major rebuilds. Most of the bikes, as Luis tells us, are dual purpose, but a surprising number are big XS triples and fours.

In the middle of the floor are three white YZs. All 250s and all G models. Lordy, but they sure look good compared to the yellow stuff we ride here in the states. Luis tells us that you have to be careful when you put gas in the bikes, because if you pour gas over the tank too much, it'll start to yellow up some and lose its looks. At least it doesn't look like one of those Suzukis, he says with scorn. A real Yamaha man, through and through.

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A lot of time is spent shaping the bikes for Florencia. New tires, cleaning the filters, tightening nuts and bolts. Luis asks me to check his bike out. It's running rich, so we whip out the Official DB Jetting Box and put in some smaller brass. The bike starts to pull harder and better.

We find out that Guatemala City is over 4500 feet above sea level. Another American from Texas is griping about how slow the Yamahas are down here. We don't tell him that it's really "up here." After all, he's in the same class as we are.

I whip out a set of Boyesen reeds from my gear bag and we slip them in Luis' Yamaha and do a little more tuning. A half hour later, Luis has the fastest Yamaha in Central America. That night, he buys the Gallo.

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"How am I going to get the bike over to Kurt's place?" whimpers O'Neal. It's late at night and the air compressor at Luis' place is shut off. More air is

needed in the freshly mounted two-ply Metzeler tires. "Just ride it over," replies Luis.

"On the street?"

"Sure, no problem. Just watch out for cars and don't make too much noise."

O'Neal rides the bike cautiously up to the first major intersection and shuts off the engine when he sees a cop. *Uh oh, I think. Don't worry Jimmy. I'll mail you a file.*

The cop walks up and starts looking at the YZ with obvious curiosity and genuine interest. He asks something in Spanish and O'Neal looks at me questioningly. He can only say, 'Tres cervezas mas, por favor' in Spanish. A few minutes later, we take a picture of the cop sitting on the back of the bike with Jim in the saddle. Both are smiling and there's no hassle. Try that in the States sometime and see what happens. O'Neal buys the Gallo that night.

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Guatemala City is clean, very clean. Even in the poorer sections of town, you don't see trash and garbage strewn around, as you do in so many big South American cities. Actually, Guatemala is in Central America. Here, the climate is different from what you might have in mind.

The temperature is much like that of Hawaii, with none of the humidity. Normally, you can expect to see 78 degrees be the peak for any given day, with a 10 to 15 degree drop in the evening and morning. We were there during the rainy season, which meant that it would probably rain at least once during every day. However, the rain never lasted all that long and the sun would come out and dry things off quickly.

Politically, Guatemala is very close to the United States, even though they are continually puzzled why we give aid and arms to Communist-backed countries like Nicaragua. For those who study politics, the Guatemalans can't stand Jimmy Carter and desperately want to see Reagan elected. The antics of Carter's bozo brother Billy filled the news and papers every day in Guatemala.

Oil was recently discovered in Guatemala, making them a new emerging power to be reckoned with. They need 27 million barrels per day to be self-sufficient and right now, they're up to 17 million barrels per day. In a short while, they'll be able to stand completely on their own.

Gas goes for about two bucks a

gallon and deisel fuel for 99 cents per gallon. There's absolutely no problem finding open stations and the attendants are very courteous and will actually pump the gas for you. It used to be that way here in the States a long time ago, I've been told.

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From the balcony of the El Dorado Hotel, one can see a massive volcano off in the distance. Luis pointed off to the right of that impressive peak and told us that the Florencia track was in that direction. Once a year, the government lets the racers use that magnificent facility. The rest of the year, the public picnics, sight-sees and marvels at the grandeur which surrounds them. There's no environmental hassle. The place is shared in a sensible fashion.

Guatemotos—Kurt's shop—seems to be the nerve center of activity for wandering racers. Some of the Mexican team racers are there, as well as that blazing fast Honda rider from Venezuela. Kurt has a fistful of riders representing his shop. It's very late at night. Our bikes are all more or less done and tomorrow is Saturday, the day set aside for practice before the race.

None of the bikes in Kurt's shop are ready, except for the Mugen water-cooler. A frantic air can be felt. Tools are everywhere and Kurt is trying to do everything at once. Somehow, he succeeds, and we all head out for a late dinner and drinks. Kurt buys the Gallo, despite protests from all around. He smiles and says, "It's OK, it's OK. No problem."

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Florencia is only 45 minutes from the city, as the van flies. Luis is at the wheel, with some New Wave music vibrating the interior. He fiddles with the treble, bass and balance, while twisting the massive van around a tight turn. The trailer on the back does a quick tank slapper, then straightens out, bikes rocking sickeningly from side to side. The kid from Texas looks white-faced. O'Neal is tapping his foot wildly out of time with the music. I am busy eating my fingernails down to about wrist level.

"You can see the city real good from this next turn," yells Luis above the music. "We're up good and high now." Indeed we are. Below us, Guatemala City lies spread out on different leveled tiers. From this high up, you can see the breaks in the earth, where past pressure tears have created ravines and canyons. It's a wildly beautiful scene and it makes you realize, that perhaps

the earth has not yet begun to cool off.

We climb and climb around the winding roads. Then we drop a bit, peel off on a dirt road and wind our way into Florencia. We're late for practice, but by this time, we're used to it.

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All of the jetting that was done in the city proved virtually useless. A 2500 foot gain in altitude made all of the bikes overly rich. Nothing ran clean. 250s ran like 125s and 125s ran like 80s. 80s and 100s ran like hairdryers.

We all spent some time in the jetting box and eventually got the bikes running crisp enough to work. Our timing was perfect, for after about three laps of practice, the rains came down. Only a few jerks stayed out on the track, much to the amusement of the spectators who were huddled in vans and under shelter. Unlike the gentle rains in the city, the rains on this Saturday in the mountains were thunderously heavy. In a short time, the course became a quagmire.

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As soon as the rain comes, it goes. An hour later, the sun is out, shining brightly.

After the rains, some of the riders go out for more practice. It's obvious that much of the track is tight and twisty, with trees being the markers for the turns. First gear, turn. First, shift to second, back to first and turn again. Then repeat. Once out of the woods, there are more tight, grassy turns, followed by the one long straightaway. You can't find one real jump on the track. However, the course is already bumpy and rutted. Good suspension will be needed on Sunday.

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After practice, we wind our way down from the mountains and head into the city for food and refreshment. Luis finds a pizza parlor and we seat our unwashed bodies down to indulge. The waitress looks at us curiously, but is polite enough to pretend that we do not smell like a herd of goats.

Ahhh, pizza . . . the universal food. We eat much more than common sense dictates. But, we tell ourselves, you must have sufficient carbohydrates the night before the race. We eat enough to race the Baja 1000 three times. That night, we stick the cowboy with the tab for the Gallo. He winces, but pays.

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That night, O'Neal and I are worried. You see, everyone has been late for everything since the day we arrived. We figure that maybe Luis will be late in the morning and we'll miss practice, or maybe even the start of our motos.

Not to worry. Luis is beating on our door before the appointed hour, looking fresh and eager. We demand to know why he's on time. He appears offended, "Gentlemen, some things are important. You should not be late for a wedding, a funeral, or a race. Today could be two of those three."

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On the way to Florencia, one can see trailers with bikes and trucks with more bikes. Just like the crowd that heads out to your track on any given Sunday. We glance at the skies. It's dark and ominous. Black clouds mix with fat looking grey rollers. No sunshine is breaking through. We mention to Luis the possibility of rain ruining the day and he dismisses it with a wave of his hand. "No way. It never rains during the race. Maybe before and



*Most of the track was tight and twisty with trees on many corners.*



# GUATEMALA

maybe after, but not during. Trust me. Trust the clouds. This is an important event. It wouldn't dare rain." Off to the right, a yellow/white flash goes from sky to ground. Four seconds later, we hear the thunder faintly. Still, no rain. Yet.

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By the time we get to the track, the clouds have moved over to the left a few kilometers and the sun is shining. It's early, but a large number of people are already there. The pits are colorful, with vans, trucks and trailers everywhere. Literally hundreds of street bikes are in the parking areas. A bunch of killer street bikes draw interested clusters of spectators. One Honda Six is fully tricked out, with special pipes and a maximum cafe set-up.

Banners are all over the place. Marlboro is one of the sponsors of the event and they have a booth handing out free smokes. The Gallo beer place is already doing a land office business.

We slip the van into a slot by the Yamaha of Guatemala pits and mingle around. It's like any race track in the world, except that the folks here speak Spanish, rather than English.

Good looking girls are wandering around the pits, distracting everyone. Little kids hang around in clusters of four and five, eye-balling the bikes and asking questions. Friends of riders scurry through the pits trying to find parts to get bikes running. "Hey, you got a spare shift lever for a Yamaha?" Just like here.

One thing freaks us out: we didn't see one loading ramp in the entire place. You want to unload your bike from the back of a tall pickup truck? Then you just grab the sucker with a few friends helping you and wrestle it

to the ground.

Same thing with milk crates and bike stands. Almost none were evident. The bikes either get leaned up against a tree or a vehicle, or propped on the sidestand.

Everyone seemed to share tools without any big hassle. And, strangely, all of the tools get returned. Riders didn't hesitate to loan a 12 millimeter wrench to a total stranger. Do that here and chances are very good that you'll go home with a lighter tool box.

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Everyone seemed to have a can of chain lube or two handy, but we saw not one single can of contact cleaner in the entire pits. In the States, contact cleaner is just about as essential as pre-mix.

Jets seemed rare, with a handful of main jets being forced to do the job. At 6800 feet, everything in the carb should be cleaner and many riders are forced to live with a certain amount of detonation and pinging at peak revs in order to get the bikes to pull cleanly down low and at mid-range. I make a mental note to see how many bikes seize during the actual race. Later, I learn that only a handful of bikes actually fry.

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There are no Open Class bikes to be seen. They run only 80s, 100s, 125s and 250s. From what we can tell, it appears that the 125s are going to be the hot set-up and should turn the fastest lap times. On a track this tight and twisty, an open bike would be a liability, not an asset.

We find out from Kurt that there will be riders from eleven nations riding today. One guy from Austria, three from the States, a huge gathering from Central America. Mexico and Costa Rica have big teams and appear to be very serious.

In fact, the Costa Rican team pulls up in a massive semi loaded to the max with bike and riders. They set up camp on the edge of the pits and keep much to themselves. They have a very serious attitude and the bikes look exceptionally well prepped. Most of the bikes from Costa Rica appear to be running clean. They've been here before and have obviously pre-jetted for the altitude.

This is a big race, make no doubt about that. Lots of National Pride is on the line. Before practice starts, there are some ceremonies to go through. A band assembles on the starting area and blasts a few hot numbers out. After that, all of the racers line up behind the band and march down the start straight. The United States is given the honor of being the first ones in line. Our hosts are treating us very well indeed. It sends chills up and down your spine to be marching behind a big band, with thousands of spectators lining the banners. It's special. Lord knows this was probably the goofiest American team ever assembled to represent our country, but what the hell. One over-the-hill editor, one slack-jawed cowboy from Texas and one real racer, semi-retired variety.

At the end of the field are tall flag poles with the flags of the nations flying proudly. We take our place in front of the Stars and Stripes and the band rips off stirring anthems. Man, oh man, at this point the chest swells out and the gut tucks in! It's truly grand feeling and probably as close as I'll ever get to acting like one of those international racers who indulge in this sort of thing every Sunday.

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All too soon, the festivities are over and it's back to the realities of race day. Practice goes off by classes; enough to warm up, but not really sufficient time



**A genuine military marching band was part of the pre-race ceremonies.**



**Our pit crew, with the chief mechanic in front.**

to learn the track.

Ahhh yes, the track. By now, it's full of ruts and very choppy everywhere. Not big bumps, mind you, but the small, square-edged ruts that no suspension can really handle. At higher speeds, you could just blaze across them, but in first and second gear, you feel every jarring, shuddering jolt. There are already a handful of flats after practice.

By the end of the last practice session, roots are starting to come up out of the ground. This is rich soil and the trees don't have to sent their fingers deep for water. Now we had choppy, cross-grained ruts with slippery roots popping up. Put a foot down for a turn and you might bring it back without a boot on it.

Traction was weird. You *thought* you had plenty of bite, only to have the top of the soil shift over and let the whole bike break loose. What worked? Most any tire, as long as it was sharp. Metzellers were going for a king's ransom, when and where they could be had.

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Before the start of the first 80cc moto, the place is packed with people. Estimates range from six to eight thousand people. And they all paid two quetzals, fifty centavos per head to get in. That's the same as two and a half bucks, US style. The quetzal is a very stable currency and has been paralleling the dollar for decades.

There are no slugs in the 80 class. Each and every one of the riders is strong and aggressive. They would be right at home in an NMA National. The class is small, with perhaps no more than a dozen riders. The fathers of the riders are just like those in the States . . . yelling, waving and imploring the mini riders to get it on.

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In the 100cc class, a large number of Hondas are on the line. Most of them carry Mugen stickers on the tank. I'm curious about the bikes and ask Kurt if it's possible that some of the 100s are, in reality, 125s. He says that there are probably a few cheaters, but the guys running up front are on sleeved down 125s. This is a big class and produces some of the tightest racing of the day. Luis Araya of Costa Rica puts together two solid firsts, though, to get the overall.

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Even though the 250 class race is supposed to be the premier event, all eyes were focused on the start of the 125cc race. Here, the Venezuelan rider Rivero, the pre-race favorite, is up



**The start area at Florencia Park was wide, smooth and grassy.**

against a huge field. Plenty of exotic equipment is on the line, including a very sanitary looking Carabella from Mexico, ridden by Walter Vecchi.

The first turn is wild and furious, with bikes going down and racers scrambling for that all-important lead. A pair of Hondas battle it out for the entire moto, with Javier Laitano on a Yamaha rudely sticking his bike in with the dueling pair of red machines. At the end of both motos, it's Rivero on the Mugen as the winner, but not easily. He makes one mistake in the first moto and garners a third. His last moto is a "must win" deal and the Yamaha spoiler from Costa Rica strangles first moto winner Arturo Robert back to third slot. That trick Carabella from Mexico pulls in a solid sixth, despite troubles in the first moto.

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The 250 class lines up for the start of the first thirty minute (plus two laps) moto and Jim O'Neal pulls a hole shot. Your writer hits a fallen Can-Am in the first turn, does a giant handstand, but saves it. By the time the heart beat resumes, 42 bikes are in front of the Guatemotos Express, our pet name for Kurt Muller's back-up Suzuki.

O'Neal gets freaked out by the flags on every corner and lets a few riders slip by. Every blind turn and downhill has a flagman stationed there and if the coast is clear, he waves a green flag. If there's trouble, a red or yellow flag. "I saw those flags waving and thought maybe a cow had walked on the track or something like that. It took me a few laps to figure out just what was going on."

Actually, it was a very safe idea and

later on, when bikes and bodies started to fall, the flag system was much appreciated.

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Up front, a terrific battle was being waged, with Kurt Muller, Jorge Martinez and Enrique Robert banging handlebars. It ended up after both motos with Guatemalan riders one-two. Just as the last moto of the day ended, a light rain started to fall and the black clouds which had been lurking around the park, closed in for good.

Then, the rains fell in giant sheets and everyone was forced to run for cover. Kurt had his big truck opened up and had a huge tarp spread out for folks to huddle under. He was also selling stuff from his shop like a wild man. What a promoter!

The bikes were left to sit in the rain, which wasn't such a bad thing, as the rain cleaned most of the mud of the day's racing off nicely. Lots of bench racing went on in little clusters around the track and cans of Gallo mysteriously popped up everywhere.

Eventually, the rain slacked off enough to let the promoters award the trophies. As it turned out, the winning country was Costa Rica with 148 points. Guatemala came in a close second with 132. Guatemala had some excellent riders, but the Costa Rican team had the depth. Already there were grumblings about "wait 'til next year."

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Ahhh, yes. Next year. It should be big, very big. We talked with the promoting club and they're talking about a hefty cash purse next year, rather than just trophies.

*(continued on page 70)*



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### MOTOCROSS IN GUATEMALA (continued from page 43)

And they're also issuing a challenge to some of the countries that never made it to The Big One. Where was Peru? Argentina? Panama? Well, I don't know about those who didn't make it, but one thing for sure. You can count on Team Dirt Bike being at Florencia next year. And, with any luck at all, maybe we can get together a killer team and take home one of those magnificent silver cups.

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As the Pan-Am jet climbed off the runway and rolled lazily through the air over Guatemala City, we could see black clouds forming around one of the volcanos off in the distance. But, the sun was shining brightly over the city. May it always do so. See you next year, Kurt and Luis. No problem. □

### RACE OF THE AMERICAS RESULTS

80cc

1. Herbert Lantan (Suz) ..... Gua
2. Jose Laitano (Yam) ..... C.R.
3. Otto von Shoroter (Yam) ..... C.R.
4. Jurgen Larsson (Suz) ..... C.R.
5. Adrian Roder (Hon) ..... C.R.
6. Rafael Arcia (Yam) ..... Gua
7. Juan Villaverde (Yam) ..... Gua
8. Rafael Hildebran (Yam) ..... Gua
9. Juan Carlos Letona (Yam) ..... Gua
10. Alejandro Gutierrez (Yam) ..... Gua

100cc

1. Luis Araya (Yam) ..... C.R.
2. Juan Pablo Meyer (Yam) ..... Gua
3. Leonardo Luconi (Hon) ..... C.R.
4. Mauricio Echandi (Hon) ..... C.R.
5. Erick Hirinachs (Hon) ..... C.R.
6. Leonel Duarte (Suz) ..... Gua
7. Alejandro Caceres (Yam) ..... Gua
8. Francisco Jose Munoz (Suz) ..... Gua
9. Marco Antonio Rodriguez (Yam) ... Gua
10. Ricardo Maldonado (Suz) ..... Gua
11. Otto Gonzalez (Yam) ..... Gua
12. Daniel Urrutia (Yam) ..... Gua

125cc

1. Nelson Rivero (Hon) ..... Ven
2. Arturo Robert (Hon) ..... C.R.
3. Javier Laitano (Yam) ..... C.R.
4. Antonio Flamenco (Suz) ..... Gua
5. Arnoldo Orellana (Kaw) ..... Gua
6. Walter Vecchi (Car) ..... Mex
7. Francisco Saravia (Suz) ..... Gua
8. Edgar Avila (Hon) ..... C.R.
9. Jorge Bardales (Yam) ..... Gua
10. Victor Granal (Suz) ..... Gua
11. Juan Carlos Ubieto (Yam) ..... Gua
12. Francisco Briere (Suz) ..... Gua
13. Guillermo Lozano (Yam) ..... Gua

250cc

1. Jorge Martinez (Kaw) ..... Gua
2. Kurt Muller (Suz) ..... Gua
3. Enrique Robert (Hon) ..... C.R.
4. Javier Hernandez (Car) ..... Mex
5. Rene Polaseck (Kaw) ..... Gua
6. Jim O'Neal (Yam) ..... USA
7. Jose Marote (Suz) ..... C.R.
8. Bernardo Laitano (Yam) ..... C.R.
9. Luis Arimani (Yam) ..... Mex
10. Jaime Rojas (Hon) ..... C.R.
11. Jose Villeda (Suz) ..... Gua