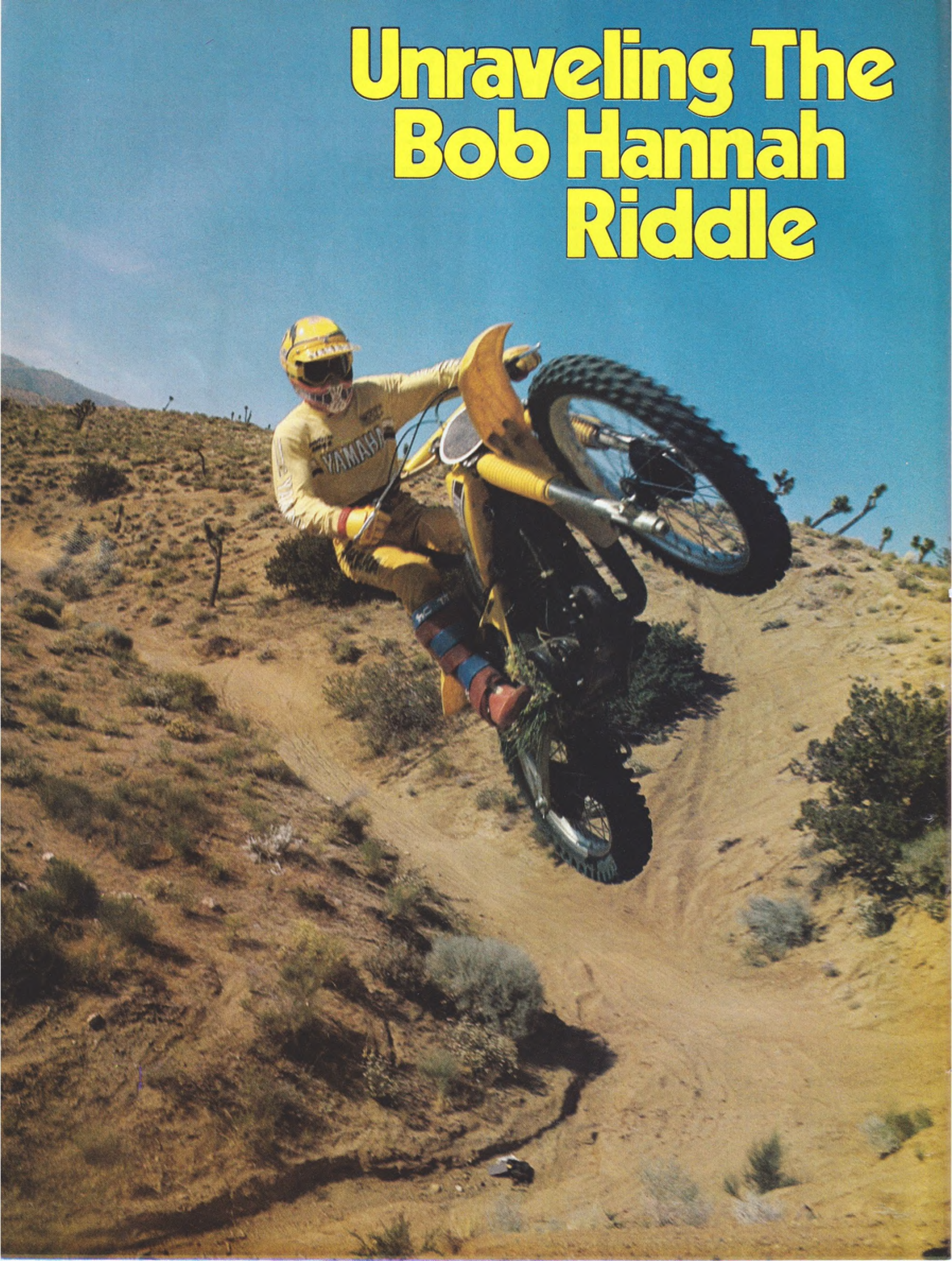
Unraveling The Bob Hannah Riddle



HOW DID HE GET TO BE SO GODAWFUL FAST?

By Joe Scalzo

Joe Scalzo, author of ten motorsports books, spent more than 60 hours with Hannah at race tracks, on the road, around campfires and aboard motorcycles to find out how he has become the motocross phenomenon of the Seventies. The story begins with Hannah and Scalzo contemplating a canyon wall deep in the California desert.

I dared him to try it.

Bob Hannah glanced at the near-vertical cliff with a grin and said, "You're on."

One kick got the Yamaha going and he steered it to the base of a high reddish bank of hard sand and rocks which went straight up for perhaps 25 feet to another level of the Mojave Desert. Climbing so sheer a wall was, in my opinion, impossible, but all morning and afternoon Hannah had been having fun accepting and meeting all dares. Even now, as he examined the 90-degree bank, the expression on his thin face wasn't one of apprehension but curiosity. He was figuring it out. Hannah's brother Grant, watching with me, spoke in an undertone: "Bob's going to have to do a trick with this one. It's too steep for him to just hit and fly over it."

Hannah turned and eased his way back between some bushes as high as his head, and positioned himself a couple of hundred feet from the bank. Turning again, and with engine revs rising, he began his run. It appeared he was going to impact the bank head-on. Instead he did something magical with the handlebars, his body, and the throttle, and all of a sudden 240 pounds of Yamaha and 140 pounds of Bob Hannah started right up the wall. A fly on a fence couldn't have been more perpendicular. Fifteen feet from the top, when dust mushroomed around the back tire, I realized he wasn't going to make it. Grant Hannah had reached the same conclusion earlier still and, though slowed by three broken ribs, was halfway to the bank when his brother's Yamaha lost its precarious grip, tipped, and fell backwards through thin air.

Instinctively kicking himself free of the falling motorcycle, Hannah landed, lithe as a gymnast, in soft sand at the bank bottom. The bike hit nearby. The two Hannahs were already discussing what had gone wrong when I reached them.

"It was laziness," Bob was telling Grant. "I just didn't feel like the extra effort to do what I had to do. And I haven't been practicing my bank-climbing enough." He looked at me. "I could stay here and try it more if you want. I might try it 20 times and not get it, or I might on the very next one. I've climbed this thing before."

I had seen enough already. My Yamaha was a sister to Hannah's bank-climber, one of several hacks he keeps and wears-out in a year of practicing, and we began the ride back to where Hannah had parked his truck. Hannah, as usual, got so far ahead I couldn't see his dust. When Grant ran out of fuel, Bob came back and began pushing him. Perhaps by then I had been out under the hot sun for too long, seen too many unbelievable things, but it seemed to me that even when using one boot to push his brother, Hannah was opening up distance on me!

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Weeks earlier I had not yet met Bob Hannah, but had watched him race, and felt I knew many things about him already. I knew that he was the most winning motocross racer in his country's history, with 15 national victories and two seasonal championships outdoors and indoors on two different size machines in just three years, and that before losing to Marty Tripes at Mt. Whitney, Texas in May, had registered victories in 22 consecutive motos and won six straight Supercross meets; that he made races into runaways, as at Hangtown where his margin of victory was one minute and 26 seconds, or cliff-hangers, as at Pontiac and Pittsburg indoors, where he overcame hopeless deficits in the closing laps; that his style was so unorthodox and wild and *fast* that nobody seemed able to hold him off if he didn't want them to, and that Gaylon Mosier at Pontiac, Rich Eierstedt at Pittsburg, and Don Kudalski, who crashed into an infield lake at St. Petersburg, had piled up and injured themselves trying, although getting injured was a state that was foreign to Hannah; that racing not with his amateur sobriquet "Hurricane" but with the provocative "Trouble" stitched on the butt of his nylon trousers, Hannah, competing in the 1977 Trans-AMA series, had at least three times blown away five-time World Champion Roger DeCoster, once by 25 seconds; that Hannah could out-run as well as out-race the other guys, handily winning a three-mile foot race among well-conditioned motocrossers at Pittsburg; that although he gave his home address as Whittier, a Los Angeles suburb, that in truth he was a recluse living in the Mojave Desert, in a trailer, with no telephone readily available so that even his sponsor, the Yamaha Motor Corporation, occasionally experienced problems reaching him; that the desert was so much his home that he had once spurned a Yamaha offer to put him in a Ferrari, preferring instead the four-wheel-drive Ford pick-up with the off-road racing suspension that I saw parked at the curb of the Seal Beach condominium where Keith McCarty, Hannah's mechanic, lived with his mother; that because Hannah did not always deport himself in the manner that certain people believed a champion should, and did not necessarily submit to demands for his autograph

PHOTOGRAPHY: RON HUSSEY, JOE SCALZO

Bob Hannah

as if it were a divine duty, a number of fans, and an element of the motocross press, were of the opinion that Hannah (as one journalist is supposed to have said) was "a kid who ought to be spanked;" and finally that, no matter what else Bob Hannah might or might not be, in the summer of 1978 he was, statistically or any other way, the greatest motocrosser in the U.S. If one cared to take the extreme view, and many did, he was the greatest in the world.

The first thing that came to me when I met Hannah was that he was a good two inches shorter than the 5-feet 10-inch figure found in his Yamaha press kit, and second, that without his semi-successful blond moustache ("Hannah!" the Honda rider Jim Ellis had once beseeched him, "shave that scraggly thing off") he would look years younger than his real age, 21. It was apparent, too, that Bevo Forti, mechanic for the privateer John Savitski, and a close but ever-taunting friend of Hannah and, particularly, Keith McCarty, was not only slanderous but wrong when, with heavy-handed humor, he had nicknamed Hannah "Buck." Though Hannah was only to smile one time the evening we met, I took a close enough look at his central incisors (which had to be capped after a childhood accident when the parallel bars chipped them) to see that his front teeth really do not project.

Over dinner at a neighborhood Marie Callenders, Hannah showed why the western states restaurant chain does a landslide cornbread business every time he comes to Los Angeles.

"Tastes better than that dirt clod you swallowed doesn't it, Bob?" asked Keith McCarty.

Hannah kept spreading honey butter on the cornbread.

"That's the height of determination," McCarty continued, "racing along wide-open, getting a dirt clod in your mouth, and swallowing it."

"It's being stupid," Hannah said, eating cornbread, "but I couldn't spit it out through my helmet. Can we get some more iced tea? And more cornbread?" he signaled the waitress.

A little later she came with the bill and Hannah looked at McCarty's plate. "He wants a refund," Hannah said. "He didn't like it."

"Something wrong with the food, sir?"

"No, no, that's just his way of kidding," McCarty said, smiling easily at Hannah.

I smiled, too, but not for long. Hannah, who had insisted upon paying for everyone's dinner, tore off the receipt end and deposited it on my plate. "Here, magazine writer. Go pad your expense account."

Back at Mrs. McCarty's condominium, which Hannah seemed to move through as freely as if it were his own, a situation which pleases everyone, since Hannah's friendship with the McCartys is more than just a racing one, he immediately went to the refrigerator. I was getting used to never seeing him without a bottle, can, or glass of something to drink in his hand. Whether iced tea or fruit juice, Bob Hannah consumes gallons of liquid every day. This was a blend of orange and apple juice that he'd mixed himself and, drinking it, he pulled a face.

"I think this orange juice is bad," he said suspiciously, "but without tasting it I can't tell." He poured some and took a big swallow. "It is bad," he said with triumph. "It tasted bad all the way down my throat." He emptied the glass, and the container full of orange juice, down the sink.

Next he complained that he didn't feel good. He also thought he'd pulled a stomach muscle. Hypochondriac Hannah, I found myself thinking, might be more appropriate than Hurricane Hannah.

"I should be training right now instead of sitting here," he said. "Well, I have to go pretty quick."

But he didn't leave. He sat across the room talking to Keith McCarty and his mother, and sometimes he answered my questions and sometimes he talked right over them. Hannah, for some reasons that are clear, and others that are vague, doesn't like "magazine guys." He mentioned the name of the publication that recently had seen fit to print a letter from a father taking Hannah to task, in vulgar terms, for refusing to give his son his autograph during a race. Hannah claimed he hadn't read the letter, but friends told him about it.

"I'd like to tell that guy about the big trophy Bob gave to some fan at Pittsburg," McCarty said defensively. "He gave it to some guy he'd never seen before, and the next time Bob was racing in the East that guy drove for 17 hours to come see him."

"Oh," Hannah said, "I'm a belligerent bleep. I'm a bad guy."

He said, "I don't mind signing autographs when I win, but I don't like people being there during the race. And these magazine guys. When I'm winning, they're writing and thinking I'm super. When I lose they think I'm a jerk." I started to interject that I had never heard him described as such, but Hannah was unstoppable now that he was hot.

"I *like* losing," he said. "I had so much pressure on me to win all the time that if somebody beats me, it's funny. When Tripes beat me two weeks ago, I actually thought it was kind of funny. Just let them laugh at me. It didn't bother me a damn bit. The next moto I won, didn't I? Last year when I lost a race my dad told me he had no doubt that I could have won it, but that it was a good thing I lost because otherwise I wouldn't have a friend out there. And that's right. I win every race and the other riders smile in my face but they hate my guts because I'm taking all the money and everyone thinks I'm a hero. After I got beat in the first moto in Texas, everyone on the starting

HANNAH ON HIS ADVERSARIES

Kent Howerton
"When I see Howerton, I see myself. When he's out practicing he's playing around running into the fences and berms, hitting and hopping through the tire markers—that's just how I feel, too. If Howerton doesn't have fun he doesn't go fast and if he's having fun, boy, you better watch out because that sucker's gonna whip you."

Jim Ellis
"When I don't have the hot day, and Ellis does, I've had him go right by me. There's about five tough guys, and he's one of them. Ellis ain't too shabby a rider."

Marty Smith
"He's the only guy I'd bet money on when he's riding good. My own money. When he's having his day he's another one of the tough ones."

Tony DiStefano
"He rides so relaxed I've seen him ride into a corner and just fall over from being so relaxed."

Marty Tripes
"His head is like a toggleswitch, on and off. Fast as he is some of the time, he could smoke me if he raced like that all the time."

Heikki Mikkola
"Mikkola rides like Ellis does; or I guess Ellis rides like Mikkola. Brute force. Whatever it takes to win, Mikkola does it. Ride tight-kneed; ride loose: Heikki doesn't care. If he was in a race with Roger DeCoster and both their bikes stayed perfect, Roger would probably win. But if a shock went out on both their bikes and they had to race that way, Heikki would win by a mile." M

Hannah gets deep into a desert berm a few miles from the tiny trailer where he lives. He rides to the max whether alone with only cactus to watch, or in the Los Angeles Coliseum in front of 62,000 ecstatic fans.

line for the second was friendly to me again."

"It was just like old home week," said Keith.

"And I just laughed at them," Hannah continued. "Those guys can't take losing. They don't know what the hell to do with a loss."

"The thing is," said McCarty, "when Bob's down, he's as good as everyone else is. But when he's better, he's 10 times better."

"Now you're talking like the rest of the world," said Hannah. "If you win a few, you're a hero. If you lose a few, they write you up as a jerk."

Saying this, he shot me a look of malevolence that, I was delighted to find out later, far exceeded his capacity for violence. "I've never been in a fight in my life," he said. "I've never been persuaded or pushed to fight anybody."

Hannah couldn't name a fellow motocrosser he felt he could whip.

"Boy," Hannah said, "I was in a good mood. But I'm not in a good mood now. I know I'm not because I've been swearing."

It was late, almost 11:30, and I felt rotten about keeping Hannah from his rigorous training program.

Less than four years earlier he had been a green rough-edged boy from the desert preparing to start in his very first motocross. Nothing that had happened to him since—the acclaim, the money—had been enough to smooth all his rough edges, which was probably a good thing. Bob Hannah is someone who speaks his mind, and undoubtedly always will be. On this particular evening he had sounded defensive, suspicious, cynical, confused, and honest.

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In Valencia, not far from Los Angeles, it was 90 degrees in the shade under the tree that Keith McCarty and I were sharing while Hannah practiced in dust and noise on the unshaded humps, hummocks and berms of the Indian Dunes riding park. Hannah was on No. 2, his works 250. Because he wanted to go play a bit, but not with anything so valuable as No. 2 (building it had cost Yamaha, I read in *Cycle News,* approximately $120,000), Hannah ex-

Bob Hannah

changed it for an unnumbered production Yamaha. His long, long wheelie carried him to a non-descript hillside that wasn't even part of the main riding park. Dotted with bushes, and rumpled from water erosion, the innocuous hillside received Hannah's full attention for perhaps 20 minutes, longer than he had practiced with No. 2. Jumping, climbing, going fast, going slow, it was as if Hannah had set-out to conquer and carve-up the hillside in every way possible. He did things to that hill that any promoter would have sold tickets for. He kept doing them until everyone else at Indian Dunes had parked their motorcycles to come and watch, a fact Hannah did not seem aware of. At last he found that by flinging himself up the hill, then making a knifing, turning jump to the left in mid-air, he could hurtle a pair of small gullies, make still another mid-air turn, and land, off-camber, facing back down the hill. The extraordinary thing was that he consistently landed without raising dust. "Just like a gazelle, or a reindeer," remarked Keith McCarty in an acute observation. Hannah reminded me of somebody landing on egg shells without breaking any.

Bored with the hillside at last, he rode back, parked, drank orange juice from a bottle and asked, "Did you guys see me almost eat it that one time?" We shook our heads no. "Well, I did. There's a fine-line trick to doing that and I almost missed it. That was neat. I could have played for three more hours on that hill."

As Hannah talked and guzzled more orange juice he undressed from his racing nylons and pulled on a pair of gray shorts but no shirt. He has a sharp, flinty athlete's body, totally devoid, except for his back's oversized trapezius muscles, of any bulk and of course any fat. His upper legs, like those of his training partner and friend John Savitski are like medium-sized tree trunks. When Hannah and Savitski go running together they can cover 10 miles without a break.

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On the subject of Robert William Hannah, there is no better authority, unless it is Hannah himself, than Keith McCarty.

"Why does Bob win so often?" McCarty asks rhetorically. "Two reasons. One, he works the hardest at it, and, two, he can't stand to be beat. A third reason could be that he keeps himself in such good physical shape from his training.

"But he's no prima donna, some

guy who'll fold up when the bike breaks. Bob snapped a clutch lever off at Atlanta a year ago and instead of stopping and crying he rode 45 minutes without the clutch. He didn't trust the shock absorbers we had at first, because two times they gave up on him and got him off. Even then he didn't quit. He knew Yamaha was working to fix them, and he still rode almost to his full capabilities.

"Things like that are how a rider gains a mechanic's confidence. Like when Tony DiStefano, whom I used to work with, broke his finger and didn't quit, I was proud of Tony. That's the way champions should be—anybody who's been a champion has done things like that. Unless I was sure Bob was going through the efforts he does, I couldn't work like I do. He's the only guy in motocross today really riding his bike to its full potential.

"I don't care what kind of a mood he's in, he tries. At the 1977 Superbowl his bike was loaned to Mike Bell to ride at Carlsbad the week before and came back with its frame cracked. Somebody just gas-welded it together while Bob and I were back east, and when we got home it was too late to re-do it properly.

"At the start of his heat Bob was run into and knocked down—knocked unconscious. The race went on without him. Some nurse started trying to drag him off the track. She kept dragging and he kept fighting. He was groggy. Finally he had to reach up and almost whack her in the face to make her stop. Then he climbed back on the bike, caught up, and qualified for the main event. The frame broke so bad it was almost impossible to ride the motorcycle, but he rode it 20 laps and finished seventh. Almost anybody else, I think, would have parked it.

"I've seen Bob do so many impossible things—and I mean *impossible* things that nobody else would even think of—that nothing he does surprises me anymore. He won at Dallas in 1977 when the track was so muddy nobody but him could do a lap without falling. He never took it out of low gear, and when he had to pull-off a tear-away lens he did it in the air over jumps so he could keep both hands on the bars in the mud.

"Any other rider who gets behind, you might worry about. But Bob, when he gets behind, enjoys catching up more than he does leading. Watch him. He'll get behind—not that he does very often—and then have fun getting so out-of-shape himself, and getting the guy who's leading so out-of-shape, that he laughs. He says it's humorous for him to watch guys fight so hard to hold him back. Most of them crash. But if Bob is leading and getting pushed, he'll let a guy by him, just to figure out the guy's lines around the track. Somebody may pass him on the inside once, but they'll never get the chance again.

Bob and tuner Keith McCarty joke around a lot. Being the winningest rider/tuner combination in American motocross helps to keep spirits high.

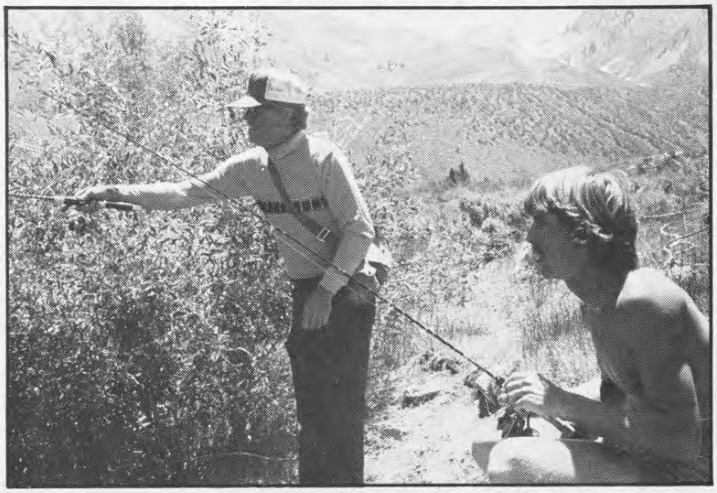
"Even if he's a minute in the lead he'll still be looking a track over, trying new things, looking for faster lines. He makes-up time by getting into the corners harder and coming off them harder. Many times he'll get into a corner harder than you'd think he should, in a gear higher than the bike can pull. Coming out, though, he'll be fanning the clutch, getting the revs way up, giving it a big burst of power.

"He always comes to do a good job, but you'll never hear Bob Hannah say 'I'm going to win.' He'd like to win them all, and until Tripes beat him he had, but winning them all takes luck. He knows what he can do and never says he'll do something and then not do it. Never bet Bob on anything—if he's betting his own money, you'll lose.

"There's two things I know he doesn't like. One is having people take advantage of him. He thinks a lot of and respects Roger DeCoster like we all do. But after Bob beat Roger at Michigan last year, he went to line-up for the second moto—as winner, he had his choice of starting places—and there was Roger sitting where Bob wanted to start. Roger's the five-time World Champion, and anybody else might have let it go. Not Bob. Roger wouldn't move when he asked him, so Bob started banging Roger's back wheel with his front wheel to *make* him move. When Roger still wouldn't, he bumped right into the side of Roger's bike—he almost knocked him down—and Roger turned around and flipped him the bird. We finally had to go to the AMA referee and get everybody lined-up properly. Bob did get to start where he wanted to—where he had a right to start.

"The other thing that he can't stand is people who pump him up—'Bob, you're the fastest thing out there.' His feelings for certain people have diminished because of that.

Hannah and his brother, Grant, ride stock YZ Yamahas in the Mojave desert. Both brothers grew-up on bikes.



Hannah's father lives a reclusive life in the High Sierras. Whenever he can, Bob joins him for a day of fishing.

Bob Hannah

Like I say, Bob knows what he can do. He always knows how fast he's riding compared to everyone else. In a race I don't have to give him those emotional pit signals that a lot of mechanics give their riders. I don't even have to give him many signals. All he wants to know is how much time he has to make up, or how much of a lead he has. I don't use a stopwatch, but when Bob's leading I wait until he passes and then count 'one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi,' until the second place bike comes. When Bob won Hangtown, I had to say the word Mississippi 82 times."

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Room 220 of the Holiday Inn in San Rafael, near the Sears Point track, Bob Hannah's room came alive when its occupant arrived early Saturday morning, accompanied by two friends from the desert named Keith Mertz and Tom Lathrop. Mertz and Lathrop seem close enough to Hannah that he's at his most relaxed around them: telling stories, listening to stories but, when listening, always appearing impatient and on the verge of interrupting to begin a fresh story of his own. The stories, naturally, were racing stories.

"If this place (Sears Point) isn't dusty tomorrow," Hannah was saying, "I'll be pumped. If it is, I'll be bleeped."

"I didn't think racing in dust was as dangerous as racing indoors," said Keith Mertz.

"Indoors are dangerous and I don't say they're not dangerous," said Hannah. "I don't say any of that crap. But indoors are fun. And racing in dust is dangerous.

"I'm used to dust in the desert," he told me, "but it's not good if you can't see because then you can't go fast. If it's dusty, I slow down. I shut off. But I've raced motocross in dust so thick that I couldn't see my front fender, and have heard people *passing* me."

"What maniacs were those?" I asked.

"I dunno. I couldn't see them."

After the laughter stopped, I said I had heard a report that many of Sears Point's choicest uphill sections had been bulldozed away over the winter months.

"Oh, you're not *serious*" Hannah said. "I hate dust but I'd rather have uphills for passing guys than flat."

"What's the difference between passing guys going uphill or flat?" I wanted to know.

"It's when you come back down the uphills," said Keith Mertz.

"That's right," said Hannah.

After a while everyone but Hannah left the motel room, which was too bad, because I had been learning more from listening than I ever would asking questions. My questions were standard magazine-writer ones: "What are your tactics?"

"There's nothing very technical about motocross. You've just got to go fast till the end, that's all. No secrets. If you're faster than me, I'm in trouble."

"Do you have a particular riding style?"

"It's something I never think about. Everybody says I'm wild, that's all, but it's not wild. That's the way I learned to ride. Where I ride, the way I ride, I'm used to flying around the desert saving it from 15 or 20 bad situations in an afternoon. If I fell off every time, I'd be dead."

"How do the other riders feel about you being popularly known as 'the greatest'?"

"It's an ego thing between me and the other riders and I don't think they like it. I've got a lot of good friends, but not many motocross friends. I'm just not in their circle. Maybe it'd be nice to be, but I've got my stuff to do and they got their stuff to do. I do know that if somebody kept telling me that, say, Marty Smith was the greatest, I'd be bleeped. It might be that Marty Smith and I could never be too good friends anyway because we fight on the track. He doesn't want to associate with me because he loves to beat me and I love to beat him."

It was when we got to the subject of reflexes—Hannah's cat-quick reflexes—that he became aroused.

"Now *there,*" he said, speaking in the rapid way he reserves for matters he considers important, "I was thinking the other day about the kind of reflexes I must have, and how they save me from crashes. I still crash. I've crashed more this year than I did last year. But I do seem to be able to gather things up and not crash in situations where most guys would. I've been lucky a lot of times, but not all of it's luck.

"You know that hill at Indian Dunes? The first time I rode over it and did that double jump, I almost crashed. A lot of guys would have. Ninety-five percent would not have done that in the first place, and the five percent that would might have crashed. I was clear off the bike, and just went, whoa! and held on and stayed on. I don't know how I did it, I just did it. Maybe it's from doing it so many times out in the desert.

"I'm really better at riding stuff like that than I am riding motocross," he went on. "I can just *do it.* In the desert I can do stuff that other people wouldn't have the first idea of doing. Like the wall of this room. How high is it—15 feet?" I looked at it and decided it was. "Well, in the desert I could ride up that thing to the top, then come down the other side. No problem. As long as there was the slightest mound of dirt in front of it for my wheel to slap, I could climb it, jump it. That's the kind of trick I like to do when I go riding out there."

By "out there" Hannah means the northwestern reaches of the Mojave, separated from Los Angeles by a range of mountains. Among its dry, sun-baked cities and towns are Lancaster (where Hannah was born, on September 26, 1956); Palmdale ("There are no palm trees in Palmdale," reports Hannah. "Somebody thought a Joshua tree was a palm tree, I guess."); and as a neighbor of Palmdale a place called Quartz Hill, which actually has a sizable hill of quartz that was visible from the house (recently torn down) where Bob Hannah grew up. The hill was where he learned to ride bicycles, and, later, motorcycles.

The closer one gets to the foothills of the Tehachapi Mountains, where the elevation raises to 6000 feet and more, the greener and steeper the topography becomes. This is among the finest trail-riding country in California, perhaps in the U.S. It has to be, if only for the professional racing talent that, over the years, has come roaring out of it: steeplechaser nonpareil Eddie Mulder, who lived just down the street from Hannah, and who used to go trailing with Hannah's father Bill and brother Grant; the great Barstow to Vegas winner Mitch Mayes, now paralyzed from a crash, and still a close friend of Hannah's; Ronnie Nelson, who set records for jumping and crashing at Ascot speedway—and Bob Hannah.

For all of its famous professionals, the Mojave has also spawned countless others who can do magic on a motorcycle, but who treat it as a hobby, not a profession. Keith Mertz and Tom Lathrop are two of these. "You could put either one of those guys, but Mertz in particular, on a good bike and he could beat a lot of people who are good motocrossers," Hannah believes. "I mean, tear 'em up." Perhaps so, but neither Mertz nor Lathrop want to race. They come to motocross races with Hannah, they watch him race and have fun with him, and then return to the desert during the week where Mertz works in heavy construction and Lathrop on a road-patching gang. Once, when I was in Quartz Hill with

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BOB HANNAH

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Hannah, Lathrop rode up on a big bulky street Yamaha, with regular street gearing, and after shooting the breeze with Hannah for awhile, turned and calmly rode home through traffic. *On the back wheel.*

But there is an even more exclusive Mojave Desert rider fraternity made up of men in their fifties and older who have been going there since they were young and who ride as if they still were. Prominent among them was Bill Hannah, Bob's father, who seldom rode fewer than 20,000 off-road miles in a year. Another is Mel Hannah, Bob's uncle, who owns property in the Tehachapi foothills, and who is said to have been the first man to ride over the fabled Matterhorn at Saddleback Park. ("But he's done way better stuff than that," says Hannah. "We have hills that make that look like a baby hill.") Still another is Mick McKee, the man who became Bob Hannah's coach. And a fourth is a big, gray-haired fellow with a remarkably soft voice whom I never heard Hannah call anything but "Brownie."

About 14 years ago Brownie and the other Mojave regulars started becoming accustomed to seeing a seven-year-old Bob Hannah going up and over hills (on a Honda 55 powered step-through bike his father had rigged for him, complete with a girl's bicycle seat and a moped gas tank). "Bob," said Hannah's brother Grant, 30, "had this charisma as a rider from the beginning. He never fell. You'd see him ride way, way over his head, and never fall."

Bill Hannah, in a tone seeking no correction, said, "Bob was *the best.*"

"The best?" Laughing, Hannah replied: "Dad, you wouldn't even let me go fast. Don't you remember when you grounded me for riding 45 miles an hour?"

"But, Bob," replied Bill Hannah, laughing along with his son, "you were only six-and-a-half years old. And I only took it away for a couple of hours."

"When Bob was 12, and so short he couldn't even reach the footpegs, we put him on a 650 Triumph," Brownie recalled, "and sent him up a steep hill. 'Oh', people said, 'you aren't going to put that little boy on that big motorcycle, are you?' Bob went all the way to the top on the back wheel. Remember that, Bob?"

Of course Hannah remembers, just as he remembers and knows every canyon, sand wash, and mesa occupying his favorite portion of the Mojave, the wild area where he learned to ride motorcycles. He points out an impressive hill: "See that: That's old Impossible. I climbed that when I was 12, 13 years old." He points to tire tracks on a wall 20 feet over a sand wash: "Those are my prints." He kicks a big rock: "Keith Mertz hit that rock once and ate it bad." He stops at the crest of a steep downhill: "Don't you wish we had one of these in motocross?" he grins, then circles around and flies off it at 65. The Tehachapi foothills are big enough, and Hannah is fast enough, that he can burn-up five tankfuls of gasoline there in a day. He can wear-out a brand new Yamaha in a month. He has his most fun alone, when he doesn't have to slow down to wait for whomever is with him. For 14 years he has been riding motorcycles here, and he says this is 90 percent of the reason he's the racer he is.

"When Lathrop and Mertz and I go riding out there," Hannah was telling me, "we never just *ride*. We have contests to see who can come down worst on the front wheel—wide-open in fifth gear—without eating it. We have fun. And when we lay-out a motocross track we lay it out so tough that even I have a tough time riding it. I've taken John Savitski out there a few times, and I know it has helped his riding. I'd like to take, say, Jim Ellis out there."

"You could really impress him," I said in agreement.

"No," Hannah said quickly, "that's not what I mean. I wouldn't do it to impress him. I wouldn't take him and run him through the worst parts just to make him have trouble. I'd do it because Ellis is the kind of rider who would enjoy stuff like that.

"But you can get hurt out there," Hannah said, "I mean, I've seen guys trying to climb old Impossible who flipped their bikes into trees crashing. One time I was riding with a helmet but no face mask and went over the bars and got my lip caught on the fender and it ripped it like a dishcloth. Thirteen stitches. Lips rip easy, you know."

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Four years ago last July 7th, Bob Hannah arrived at the same Indian Dunes park where I had watched him dissect a hillside and, competing in his first motocross and second organized start of any kind, and despite falling down twice in 20 minutes, won. A little more than a year later he won 17 motocross races in a row, and was made a member of the Suzuki team at a salary of $700 a month. Within two years he was the AMA's 125cc National Champion, and the super-star of Team Yamaha.

"I could always ride good," Hannah recalls, "and from the first time I

won a race, wanted to be the best. I just kept working at it until I got it."

Told this way, Hannah's success story sounds easy, almost pat: after all those impossible riding stunts he had learned in the Mojave, his talent on two wheels was so huge he could beat any rider, any track. It is tempting to believe this, but it happens to skirt the fact that, following that first victory at Indian Dunes in the Intermediate class, Hannah went weeks, even months, without being able to win in the more competitive Expert class. This certainly puts a chink in the theory that he was a natural rider, if, in fact, such a thing exists.

"I don't believe in natural riders," says Mick McKee, the individual whom Hannah credits with starting his professional career. Sitting in the living room of his home in Whittier, outside Los Angeles, McKee adds, "I believe in riders who work hard."

Behind McKee on a table were some trophies and a picture of Hannah smiling self-consciously, and next to that a photo of McKee's own son, Troy, 25. Troy is broadsliding a speedway bike. An up-and-coming performer at Orange County Speedway until breaking an arm in 1975, and then going through three bad years when the arm wouldn't mend, Troy has been talking about resuming his racing, but his father fears he has lost too much youth. "It's a young man's game today," McKee says. "Bob was 17 when he started racing, and even that seemed a little old for motocross."

McKee is an electrician by trade but his passion continues to be riding dirt bikes up, down and across the Mojave on weekends. His knowledge of racing is penetrating, but he has never raced himself. Although McKee appears to be in his mid-fifties, he is still a hard man to keep-up with in a Mojave sand wash. Recently while chasing McKee, Hannah's older brother Grant—himself no pushover in the dirt, and at one time a drag-racing record holder—smacked up and broke three ribs. Like Bob, Grant is a long-time friend of McKee.

In McKee's words, Bob Hannah was an "itty-bitty little kid, no more than 9 years old," when McKee first saw him topping Mojave hills, but that at 17, starting his first motocross, "Bob was a hungry rider who already thought he was the best." Says McKee: "He had great potential, and the good thing about Bob was that he hadn't raced before, had never imitated the bad habits of other riders, and had no bad habits to break. But of course he still had much to find out. He was used to doing wheelies and showboating across the desert. He didn't know about things like hitting a berm, or training and staying in physical shape. He had a lot to learn and that's why I give him all the credit. It took a lot of discipline for someone so young to do what he did."

What Bob did was accept McKee as his tutor, trainer and disciplinarian. McKee moved Hannah into his home, he charged him $20 a month room and board ("I didn't like doing that, but it was part of our disciplining program."); he found him a job during the week as a welder in a muffler shop and arranged for Steve Hurd, a former desert racer and area motorcycle dealer, to supply Hannah with a Husqvarna and a parts sponsorship of sorts; and then McKee put Hannah through a severe school of muscle and stamina-building by having him ride, run and practice daily. On weekends he took Hannah to Saddleback Park, Indian Dunes and other sportsman motocrosses. Constantly evaluating and criticizing Hannah's techniques, McKee, a hard-nosed taskmaster, pushed his gifted pupil hard.

"All my life I'd always rebelled and been on the defensive," Hannah recalls, "but I appreciated what McKee was doing for me. I enjoyed it. He was helping me. He'd always go to the Carlsbad GP and watch Roger DeCoster, and afterward he'd tell me I was dragging my foot too long in a corner, that I had to get into a corner deeper and stay on the front brake longer—things like that. I listened to him all the time."

McKee's wife Dot recalls that Hannah, during 1974 and 1975, never watched television, never went to bed later than nine, hardly ever dated girls, and was always up no later than seven to go running.

"That's absolutely right," Hannah says. "I didn't even have a car for two years. For two years straight I'd wake up, go run, go to work, come home and go practice my riding in a river bed near where the McKees lived." He still can remember how the Los Angeles smog irritated his sensitive nose, lungs and eyes, and how at the time he didn't care. Now he says he could never live in Los Angeles because of the smog.

Why Hannah spent the 17th and 18th years of his life going through such drudgery was not, surprisingly, because he was obsessed with racing and wanted to become a champion. He was not obsessed yet. The first motocross he ever saw, the 1973 Carlsbad GP, was so disinteresting to him he left long before the finish, not caring who won. The first cross-country desert race he participated in (he was leading, seemed on the verge of winning, but his bike broke down) didn't excite him and he never entered another one.

"Money," Hannah says forthrightly, "is what brought me to racing."

Hannah is not one of them, but there are those who would bill his story as "rags to riches." In fact he has a close friend who uses those exact trite words. Growing up in Quartz Hill, Hannah did not have a deprived childhood, but his family was not affluent, either. His father, Bill, spent 32 years working in Los Angeles and Lancaster as an aircraft inspector for Lockheed. Bob had a job while he was still going to high school, making $12.50 a night. It was loading chickens and sometimes trucking them over the mountains to market in Los Angeles. One night several evil-tempered old roosters pecked his hands so badly that he lost his composure and bashed a couple of them to rooster heaven. Late at night he once fell asleep at the wheel of the chicken truck and almost overturned it. Sleepy from all his nighttime drives, he dozed-off in class and a teacher hauled him before the high school principal for a lecture. "I got Cs in everything I took in school," Hannah says, "including athletics. I went out for the wrestling team because they said I wouldn't have to wrestle on weekends and could still go riding. The first time there was a wrestling match on the weekend, I quit wrestling. School's a bunch of bleep anyway. They just push you right through, man, they don't care. It's just something to do until you're 17."

When Hannah was 17 his parents divorced. His mother ultimately moved back to her native Canada with Hannah's younger sister, and Hannah's father left Quartz Hill also. His brother Grant had long since moved to Los Angeles. Left somewhat to his own devices, Hannah took a job washing dishes in a Swedish restaurant and was fired for malingering. He pumped gas in a filling station, wore a hard hat toiling in heavy construction, and got a bicycle shop job that paid him three dollars an hour. It didn't hit him like a bolt of lightning, Hannah recalls, but inside him the notion was growing that it might be easier to get paid for doing what he had done for more than half his life—namely, going like a bat out of hell on two wheels. He had $100 to his name, and spent $25 of it getting ready for his first motocross at Indian Dunes.

Hannah unleashed his raw, undisciplined talent he had developed

through hard work, at last, in the summer of 1975, winning 18 races in ten days. This mathematical impossibility was accomplished by competing in two classes at each meet.

"Bob listened good and he learned fast," says McKee, who gained self-satisfaction, rather than financial enrichment, from his two years coaching Hannah. That is all he ever wanted or expected to get. "A young rider is like any athlete who needs a coach," McKee says (presently he has several young riders after him to act as their coach, but has been reluctant to accept, fearing that they might not put-out like Hannah did). "Bob Hannah had direction and he did what he set out to do."

Winning big in Southern California had earlier brought Hannah a $700-a-month offer to race small-displacement works Suzukis, and in late summer he was shipped to Texas where he caught the flu, and then to New Orleans where what happened in the oppressive Bayou heat was scarey: for seven hours after the race Hannah was bedded in a hospital room with so severe a case of heat prostration that he couldn't tell what color the walls were painted. "I was so dizzy I couldn't even remember if I'd been in a crash or not."

Yamaha, having lost all its veteran riders to other teams, made a bid for Hannah's motocross services toward the end of 1975. The offer was $12,000 a year, take it or leave it. The U.S. headquarters of Yamaha and Suzuki (as well as Kawasaki and Honda) are all in the greater Los Angeles area and Hannah, fondly described by a friend as "still the greenest kid you can imagine" carried his unsigned Yamaha contract to Suzuki, hoping Suzuki would meet it. Not only did Suzuki refuse to meet it, but, the man in charge told Hannah, Suzuki wasn't going to send Hannah to any 1976 AMA nationals, preferring that he get more experience first. That man, Hannah says without a smile, is today holding down a low-level position back in Japan.

Hannah led an all-rookie Yamaha team to the 1976 Florida Winter Series, and won his first AMA race at Jacksonville, his maiden start on a sand track. Then he won at Orlando. He won at St. Petersburg. He won at Gainesville. He won at Cocoa Beach. He won 235 of a possible 250 points and the series championship. He had Steve Stackable, one of the best-liked veteran riders in motocross, who today is one of Hannah's better racing friends, complaining that Hannah's riding was wild and crazy.

For the Nationals he was put on a buzzing little ⅛-litre Yamaha (a water-cooled wonder that Hannah kept afterward as a souvenir) as the 125 series opened at Hangtown. Hannah passed 21 of the 22 other riders in eight laps, and he got the 22nd—reigning two-time 125 National Champion Marty Smith—on the ninth. He won Hangtown, plus the following two nationals, and, all in all, five of the eight 125 nationals and his second series championship in his rookie year. Stalking and harrying Hannah, the veteran Marty Smith, who is actually two months younger than Hannah, never gave up and their duels stand among the best in the brief history of U.S. motocross. The 1977 Motorcycle Racing Annual has a matchless picture of Smith, his handsome face contorted with rage, while walking back to the pits after crashing again trying to beat Hannah.

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Hannah telephoned me once. He made the call from inside the neighbor's house in Palmdale where he keeps his 26-foot trailer, which has no telephone. Both the house and the trailer are on a nameless dirt street, just down from the Palmdale Elk's Club. Behind the trailer Hannah built a steel shed for stowing his dirt bikes and other play-time gear, and in the trailer he keeps his clothing and little else. He sleeps no more than 40 nights a year in the trailer, and the rest of the time is either in motel rooms, on the road, or at the homes of friends. It has been said that Hannah actually lives out of a black attache case he carries, whose contents include a crumpled phone book, a travel schedule from Yamaha, travelers' checks, a toothbrush and razor, and a pocket calculator.

The calculator is for totalling up all his restaurant, gasoline, telephone and lodging receipts for the Yamaha expense reports he is so bad about turning-in on time. The expense account, the telephone and gasoline credit cards from Yamaha, the bonus paychecks and salary he receives from a contract that doesn't expire until the end of 1979, are among the nicer things racing has brought him. It was Yamaha money that enabled him to invest in duplex apartments in the cities of Anaheim and Upland. When he visits Yamaha's Buena Park facility he has been known to lunch with the company president. He makes additional income off his contracts with boot, goggle and other manufacturers of motocross attire, and from race promoters who use him for PR work which he previously would not do. He has also won so many Toyota pick-up trucks from the Supercross series he literally can't keep track of them (he plans on giving one of them to his 16-year old sister). All in all, Hannah's total year income from racing is phenomenal. The amount of income taxes he pays is equally phenomenal which is why, as of last July, Hannah was on the verge of selling his trailer, abandoning the Mojave after all this time and establishing a residence in Carson City, Nevada, where he can get some kind of tax break.

His income is at times dumbfounding to even Hannah. "I'm making more money in one year," he says, "than I ever thought I would in my whole life. I'm almost sure I make more money than anybody except Roger DeCoster: he's the only guy really making the big bucks now. I like having money, and now I'm used to having money and if I do this long enough and become a World Champion, I should really make some big money. I mean like a million dollars. Right now I can't think that way. There's a point when somebody's going to say, 'get the hell out of here, you greedy bleep.' That's not what I want. I'm happy now.

"I don't spend like I'm rich. In fact I'm probably too damn cheap. I used to never carry more than two bucks with me, but now I do. It's funny. Making money brought me into this, and I could never go back to being a privateer rider sleeping on the ground—I'd quit first—but once I'm in a race I never think about money. Not money, not spectators—I could run on an empty track and not miss the cheering—that isn't what makes me go fast. As far as buying things goes, I always say when I have my million bucks I will. But I probably should be doing it now."

With the exception of his gun collection (a .45 Automatic, 8mm Browning pistol, assorted bird rifles and other weapons), his fishing tackle, and the videotape camera he takes to races so friends can film him, all of Hannah's recent acquisitions have to do with the internal-combustion engine: go-karts, jet-skis, his 4WD Ford pick-up (recently sold and replaced by a big-engined yellow 4WD Bronco), the VW dune buggy he built himself and, of course, his newest, most sumptuous possession, a blue $37,000 Ferrari 308GTS he refers to simply as "The Car." It was a toss-up between buying a Turbo Carrera or the Ferrari, but Marty Smith already had a Turbo.

But The Car got left in a friend's garage and the yellow Bronco pressed into service to take Hannah and me to visit his father at Convict Lake in the High Sierras not long

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ago. A little sheephishly Hannah said, "He'll find out sooner or later that I got a Ferrari. I know he didn't want me getting one at first because he worried I'd wipe myself out."

But on our five-hour drive straight-up Highway 395 from the desert at Palmdale to the snow and high altitudes of Convict, I found Hannah to be the most moderate two or four-wheel racer I have ever ridden with. The Bronco's cruise control was set at 55 mph and remained there.

As we passed the Naval Weapons Center test station at China Lake Hannah said, half-serious, half-jokingly, that the only thing that might cause him to quit motocross would be the opportunity to be a test pilot. "But it takes 8-12 years of schooling. No way."

He pointed to more steep mountains as we started getting deeper into the Sierras. "That one mountain," he said, "when I was younger, I coasted down at 70 miles an hour on a Stingray bicycle. I probably coasted off every big downhill around here like that. I've *towed* at over 70 mph on a Stingray behind a van. I've burned out a lot of wheel bearings on Stingrays doing that." He paused and said the obvious. "That's part of the reason I'm so fast.

"There's so much I'd like to do but can't," he said. "The only reason I don't fly a hang-glider is because I don't want to take a chance of getting hurt right now, and messing-up my racing. Some stuff I do now for fun I worry about. I go to the Kern River up by Bakersfield, and jump out of a tree 65 feet into the river."

A few miles south of Convict Lake Hannah turned right off the highway and proceeded five miles along a dirt road to a meadow with a stream and a vista of snowcapped mountains on all sides. In the meadow were about 200 cattle and perhaps 35 trailers and campers of fishermen and people on vacation.

Like his son, Bill Hannah has no permanent address, but lives in a trailer. Only Bill Hannah *lives* in his. He spends November through May, the colder months, at the Bullhead City region of the warm Colorado River, but during May through October regularly parks on the same patch of ground near Convict Lake. A frugal man, he pulls the new 19½-foot trailer, which his son gave him for a present, with his 1962 Ford truck with 254,000 miles on it, and he carries along a Yamaha that he goes trailing with. He is an outdoorsman who cannot abide big cities, who in his spare time hunts for arrowheads and even makes his own.

Had he not been wearing a Bob Hannah T-shirt I never would have picked Bill Hannah as Bob's father. He is shorter than his son, and, when he took off his Bob "Hurricane" Hannah cap, his hair was white. It used to be red, just as Grant Hannah's is now. Bob is the only blond in the family. Bill Hannah looks ten years younger than his age, 63.

For the rest of the day, well into the night (we all sat around a campfire), into the morning and almost until noon, father and son talked. Those who think Hannah can talk motocross should hear him talk about the speed of a valley quail on the wing, the best ways to catch brown trouts, the best bait, the best lures, and so forth.

"Bob, you reckon you can beat that Hicky Mikkola in the Trans-AMA race?"

"It's Heikki."

"Oh, well, is Hicky coming for the Trans-AMA?"

"Yeah, and we're going to go riding and hunting together. I'd like you to come with us."

By then Hannah had been at Convict Lake for more than 24 hours. He was bored. Bob Hannah has the capacity to get bored any time, anywhere, doing anything, unless it is racing. With the promise that he would see his father again soon, Hannah left Convict. Instead of turning south, we went north, driving to Carson City to examine some property.

Later, on the expensive lakefront at Lake Tahoe Hannah saw a For Sale sign on a magnificent house that looked to be in the $200,000 range. We stopped. Although he was wearing his regular gray shorts and I was similarly attired, and both of us were unshaven from the night of camping at Convict Lake, Hannah knocked on the door and the owner, a nice man drinking a can of beer, showed us in. He toured Hannah through the whole house, taking no notice of our scruffy appearance. Only the man's wife, looked at us with some astonishment. Or perhaps fright.

"What do you do for work?" the man asked, showing us out.

"I don't work", said Hannah. "I race motorcycles."

"That's work," the man said.

Hannah thought we could make it back to Los Angeles in less than ten hours, which we did. Untrusting of anyone's driving but his own, he drove all but three of them. Just before he fell asleep we had been discussing his father's come-what-may attitude toward life, which seemed at such a varience with Hannah's own.

"I *know,*" Hannah agreed. "No one else in my family is like me." A moment later he went further. "I don't know anybody in racing who's like me. If everybody else wanted to race as badly as I do, what a hell of a race you'd get. Racing is really all I want to do. I don't know if anybody else *knows* what they really want to do, but racing is all I want to do. And as much as I want to do it, my mind wanders at times. So I take time off to go see my dad. Or I go hunting or fishing. I talk about all I want to do. But I do that for one day, and I'm ready to go back to work. I get tired of girls, even. I don't play around that much with anything."

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A predatory bird, probably some species of hawk, circled 200 feet as Bob blazed up and down old Impossible Hill in the Mojave, climbing it eight times in a row. But taking a bite out of Bob Hannah would have gotten the hawk only a beakful of indigestible gristle.

Two days earlier in the Los Angeles Coliseum, during the Superbowl of Motocross, Hannah had done everything except set himself on fire. He had gotten a bad start. He had overtaken almost everyone, then been banged-off the track by traffic. Catching up again, he had barged into still another pile-up. Back he had come again to repass almost everyone who had passed him—he was passing some of them for the third time by now—all to the cheer of 62,000 fans. His performance had clinched the 1978 Supercross Series. The only thing it hadn't done was win him the race. Victory, by about one second, had gone to his teammate Mike Bell. Hannah had been second.

"I was going crazy", Hannah said, recalling it. "I hit one bump going uphill and just went *whoooooa*. One leg came off the pegs and I almost stuck it through a wall. I was going too hard, I knew I was going too hard, but those jerks who fall down and crash and sit there and think it's the end of the world don't realize that it's not the *end* of the world. You get up. You keep going.

"Hey, that's how I like to *ride*. Don't tell me I have to keep my foot on the footpegs—it's faster for me not to. I was riding like that because I was there, and the race was there, and I might as well go for it for as long as I'm capable. I won't be capable forever." This could be his one abiding fear, for what will he do with himself when he isn't? "But while I'm fastest, I'm gonna prove I'm fastest." *M*