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The Jury Speaks: The Future of Racing

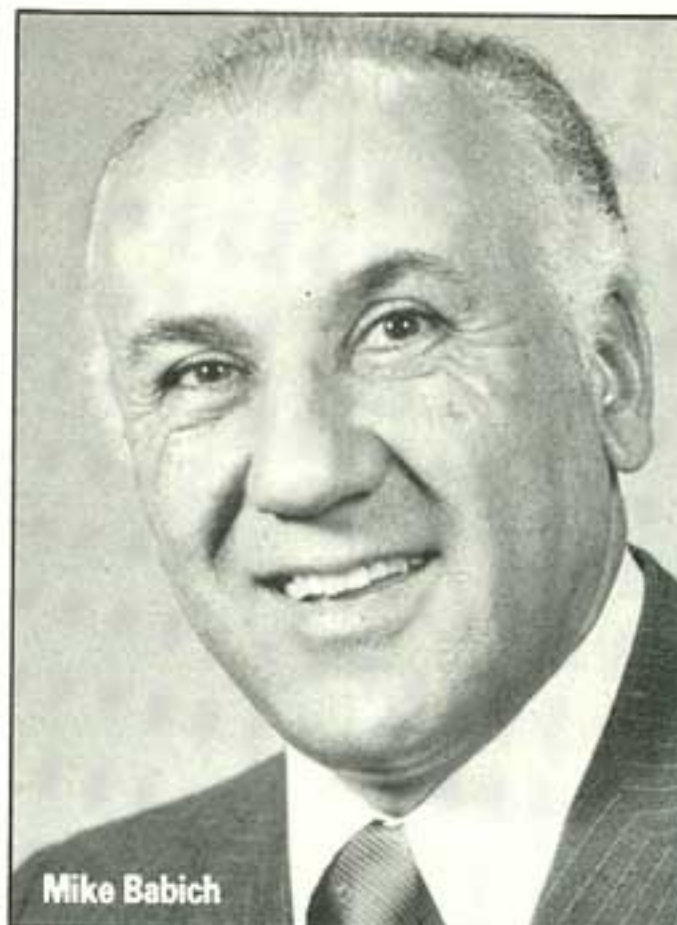
The movers and shakers in racing comment on the health, problems and future of motorcycle sport.

BY TERRY WHYTAL

When you want to know what's happening, you've got to ask the people who know. So when the issue of racing and its relative health for the next few years was raised at CYCLE GUIDE, that's what we did. As far as CG is concerned, the economic conditions of the last year pose real questions about racing's ability to survive in an era in which both the spectator and sponsor dollar will be increasingly difficult to come by.

To get the answers, we polled the most important of racing's movers and shakers, those people who because of their position or expertise have the power to dramatically affect the future of racing. The movers and shakers include advertising men, for they control racing's purse strings. They include promoters, because they should be sensitized to the kind of entertainment the public wants to see. They include technical people aware of the latest developments in hardware. They include administrators who determine the formula and format of racing. And lastly, they include team managers and racers who play important roles in each of these aspects of the sport.

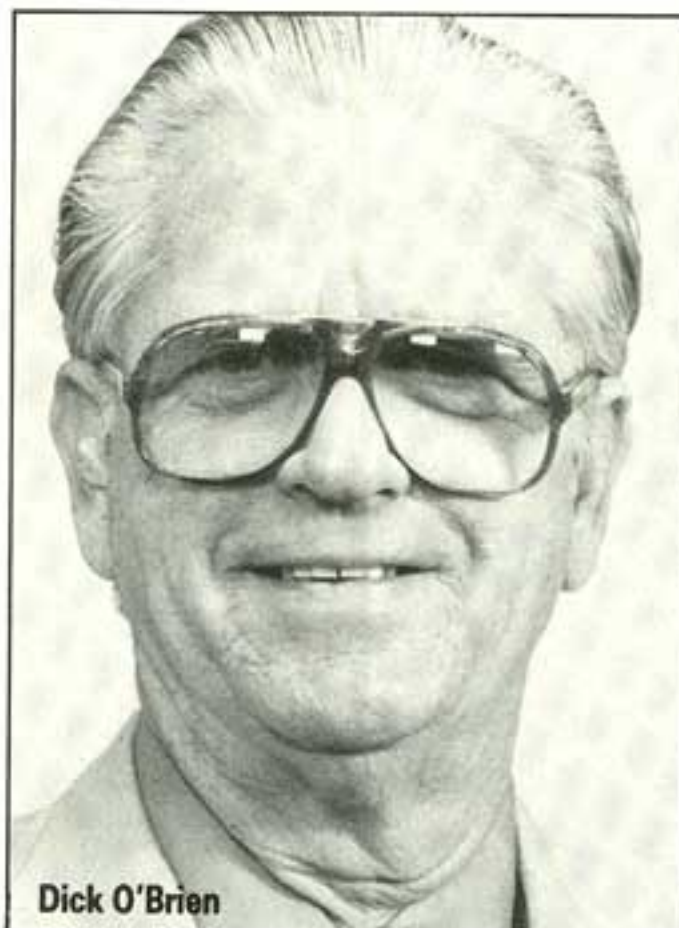
We think you'll get a better grasp of what the future is all about through this collective pulse-taking. But even more importantly, we've identified the voices you should listen to in the future if you want to know what's happening in racing.



Mike Babich



Kenny Clark



Dick O'Brien

• When Goodyear itches, the whole sport scratches, so closely are tires and speed related. You can't race without speedy shoes, and Goodyear has spent much time and effort developing the right kind of tires for specific applications—among them the first motorcycle roadracing slick and the sticky DT2 flattrack tire. Goodyear is also important to motorcycle racing in another way: It uses racing as a direct advertising promotion for its products. And this advertising has much to do with the way motorcycle racing is perceived by the public.

The man at Goodyear who has the surest grasp of what's happening to motorcycle racing is Mike Babich, who has been with Goodyear for 35 years, the last 16 in Akron's racing services department. Babich says, "We're expecting quite a bit of growth in roadracing, especially now that several American riders have done well in Europe. More people are riding bikes for both pleasure and business, and we anticipate strong, steady growth."

"Our development of tire technology is fairly slow and conservative at present. Big leaps seem to occur mostly when a radical new machine pushes us to new limits or when competition is tough between tire companies . . . Formula 1 will remain our No. 1 priority because of its great exposure, but also because the top five riders really push the tires to the furthest extremes, and the tires we make for them will work for others, including Superbikes."

• At Yamaha, Kenny Clark holds the reins of the motocross, roadracing and off-road teams. And because of the range of his responsibilities, plus Yamaha's fundamental and long-standing commitment to racing, his voice rings with a power and authority that other team managers lack.

To begin with, Clark says, "the motocross season is too strung out. We will have to tighten the schedule to fewer races. We have to give the spectators an urgency in racing—one-day events or one big series. When we do that we will see a tremendous growth in the sport and the riders will become superstars."

"The AMA has done quite a bit to help roadracing lately, making it easier for enthusiasts to enter racing on the pro-am level. It will take many years, but roadracing in America could eventually grow as it has in Europe. Roadracing is a logical outgrowth of street riding and more people will be riding street bikes in the future."

Clark forecasts a resurgence in dirttrack racing thanks to renewed interest among the manufacturers, but he thinks off-road racing will decline in importance as land closure problems intensify. Yet his over-

view is very positive, and he also says, "You will see more effort from the manufacturers to develop four-stroke race bikes so Uncle Sam won't put us out of business with the pollution laws."

- Harley-Davidson has dominated dirt-track for years, and through the winning and losing seasons, team manager Dick O'Brien has controlled the team's destiny. His job gives him a perspective on dirt-track that others in the sport lack.

O'Brien counters claims that dirt-track is in declining health. He says, "More brands will help bring out more riders, but actually the spectator picture in most parts of the country is real good and the economy hasn't hurt too much. The expense for the riders is tough, though."

O'Brien seems to welcome the involvement of Honda, Yamaha, Suzuki and Kawasaki in flat-track, but he doesn't believe the racing formula should be changed. "Look at short-track, where the problem is a smaller engine doesn't necessarily mean less cost. They are harder to tune to the highest performance level, they spin at higher rpm so they wear out faster and when they break, you can just throw the engine away because of the damage at higher rpm." The current formula is better, he claims, because "at any half-mile race there are probably 20 to 25 motorcycles capable of winning the race because engine development is so equal . . . We'll see more riders who can make a mistake and recover and get back in the race, unlike the old days when the machines were so marginal you couldn't make a mistake or you were out of the race."

- Honda's Chuck Sun is the 1980 champion of 500cc National motocross and one of the handful of our riders who have competed seriously in MX world championships. This background, plus his thoughtful manner, gives Sun an air of authority that many of his peers lack.

"I think motocross racing in the States will continue to get bigger and better and that the crowds will grow larger," Sun says. "The riders will progress also, with the level of competition becoming ever higher in the next few years. The riders are more dedicated now, and with everyone training much harder than in the past, the competition will only get tougher. Already the stamina and drive of the top racers is making outdoor races almost sprints, with little effort made to pace. Soon a National will be so intense it will be like a 45-minute stadium race."

"The veterans will probably dominate the future of motocross and it will be much



Chuck Sun



Dick Burleson



Roger De Coster

harder for new talent to break into the upper levels. So many guys—Glover, Hower-ton, Barnett and several more—are really just now coming into their prime. They're in top condition and have the confidence from winning that will make them tough to beat. Before, there were only a couple of riders on top at any one time, but now there are so many up there that new riders will have it hard."

- In the world of woods riding, Dick Burleson is King: Last October, he clinched his seventh National enduro title. But Burleson's right to speak for enduro and Six Day riders about the future of their sport is also founded on his position as chief of Husqvarna's East coast office in Lorain, Ohio.

As usual, Burleson's analytical mind cuts to the heart of the off-road riding situation. "The two big questions facing enduro and, indeed, all off-road riding," he says, "are land closure and the price of gas."

"Land closures have hurt us in some areas, but I believe they will taper off in the next year as we learn to work within the system. In some localities, the clubs have played the game well and have good cooperation from government. We need to do a better job of salesmanship—and a little PR work—and then I believe we will have plenty of places to ride."

"Gas prices really hurt the sport when they climbed so fast, but now I believe riders are getting used to the cost. And we are still getting by cheaply compared to Europe. The local level will probably grow more than the national because of the cost of traveling, though."

Unlike other forecasters, Burleson believes that off-road riding actually has a future in this country. "I think we will follow the European trend to more enduro riding," he says, "as people discover the fun of riding without the pressure of other forms of racing. You also get to ride for longer time periods and at a pace you can feel comfortable with."

- Roger De Coster's prestige within the motorcycle world is unquestionable, yet his true stature as a mover and shaker is best measured by his notoriety within motorsports in general. At a recent gathering of racers who use Bell helmets that included Superbike racer Eddie Lawson, Indy car driver Gordon Johncock, sprint car driver Ronnie Shuman and sports car racer Dick Barbour, five-time world motocross champ De Coster was the only man whose name was known to all of the others.

Despite his recent change from motocross rider to team consultant for Honda, De Coster looks doubtfully ahead at the

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future of motocross. "There are really only four factories that support motocross in this country on a large-scale basis. The expense has just become too great and the one big change that motocross needs is to attract outside sponsors . . . so in a few years racing won't be so heavy a burden on the manufacturers."

De Coster believes the manufacturers should spend their money on grass-roots racing instead: "It is nice to watch a stadium race sometimes, but the kid who buys a bike wants to go riding himself. And if the sport is to grow, we must insure that he can do this. Perhaps the big money races should help support the lower levels of the sport and help with preserving riding areas. This is important for the sport and we can't wait for the AMA to lead the way or it will never happen."

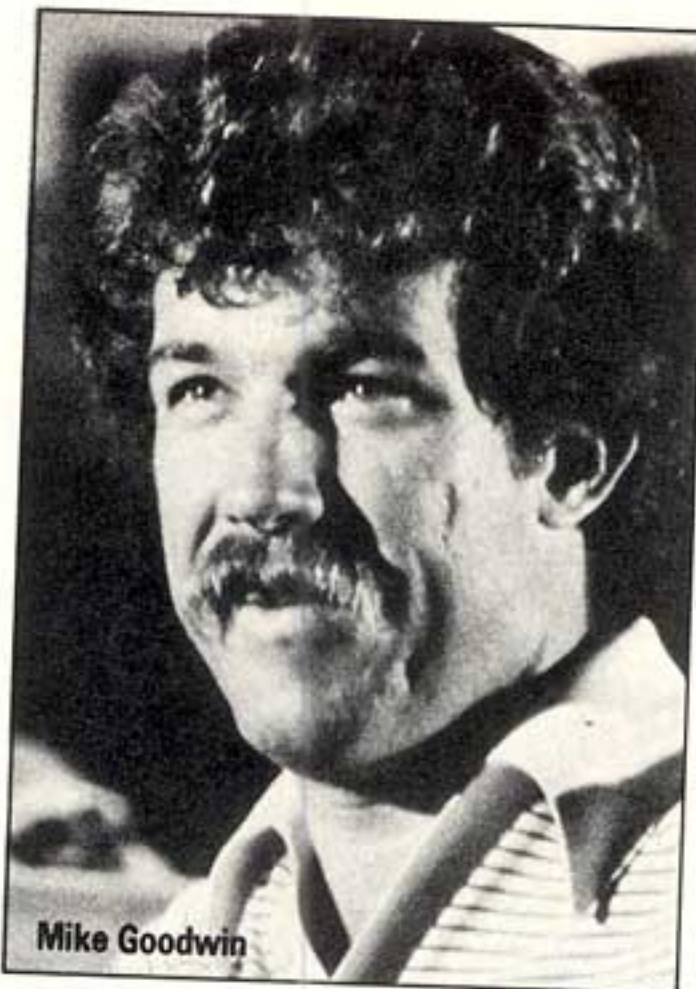
"We need the big stadium races to interest people in bikes, but we need to balance the big and the small. We need to balance where the money in racing goes or there will be a slowdown."

- Mike Goodwin virtually created stadiumcross racing when the former music promoter turned to organizing the first Superbowl of Motocross in the L.A. Coliseum in 1973. Perhaps more than any other figure in racing, Goodwin should be in touch with commercial reality.

"In Supercross racing, we have to create the market," Goodwin says. "It hasn't been around long enough to have a stable potential and that is why we are hurt by a bad economy. Stadiums are so expensive to promote and advertise that we must have good cooperation from the AMA and sponsors to keep it going through a double-dip recession."

Even so, Goodwin foresees an extraordinary future for his sport. "I'll be amazed if we are not in 20 NFL stadiums in five years," he says, "and drawing 50,000 spectators per event. Because of TV exposure, increased purses and more promotion, I expect the top ten riders will all make from \$150,000 to a half million a year."

Many manufacturers are beginning to balk at the costs of supporting motocross racing in the face of declining sales of production motocross bikes, but Goodwin thinks the advantages of stadiumcross are compelling. "I realize the cost of supporting motocross racing teams is high for the manufacturers, but our job as promoters is to merchandize the event well enough for them to receive a strong value. Imagine if 15 stadium events were broadcast on national television. How many bikes would it help Honda or Yamaha or anyone sell if they won the race?"



Mike Goodwin



Terry Vance



Bill France, Sr.

- The legitimization of dragracing is a recent phenomenon. With the support of the Japanese manufacturers, it has become recognized as more than something for the kids with greasy jeans. Thanks to the backing of a concerted ad campaign by Suzuki, Terry Vance has become the symbol of this change in dragracing's public image. And while his on-track victory margin over competitors like Bob Carpenter and Sid Pogue might seem small, the two-time No. 1 Pro Stock speaks with authority.

"The future of dragracing has never been brighter," Vance claims. "We have factory participation on a higher level with more contingency money than ever before. There are going to be some big bucks coming into the sport and this will contribute to growth. But at the same time, a guy can come into dragracing for less money than other motorsports by modifying a street bike he already has and then going to his local dragstrip. If a National event comes to his town, he can step right in and run a National."

Though dragracing's vitality depends on technological innovation, Vance doesn't know where the next leap forward will come from: "Top Fuel and Pro Stock are pushing pretty hard right now and I can't see any big speed improvements . . . but the other classes are ready. There are some ideas for rear-engine bikes and other things that look good on paper and should make the sport even more exciting."

- Bill France, Sr.'s status as a mover and shaker rests on his control of the most important motorcycle speed event in America—Daytona—which makes him the country's most important race promoter. His close ties with the AMA have had a tremendous effect in determining roadracing rules, from the approval of the TZ750 to the creation of the Superbike. Indeed, his refusal to pay starting money to European riders indirectly led to the current Formula 1 formula.

Though some reports claim that Daytona International Speedway's attendance for its yearly motorcycle races has declined recently, France foresees nothing but good times ahead for himself, his Speedway and motorcycle racing.

"I can't see anything but the best for motorcycle racing," France says. "Each year the attendance for our events grows. As more people in the U.S. turn to motorcycles for transportation, I expect interest in bike racing to continue to expand."

"Superbikes appear to have a bright future and will hopefully spark more interest by the factories. It would be nice if Superbike racing could keep the cost down and

enable more rider participation. We know the fans are interested and that people want to see more brands in racing.

"I don't anticipate too many changes in motorcycle racing. The racing is good, the format is good and the attendance is good, and it appears that it will get better with the years to come."

- Kenny Roberts' AMA and FIM championships lend him a lot of prestige. But Roberts has become a spokesman and a leader as well, a role he grew into while attempting to put together the stillborn roadracing World Series.

Roberts identifies the gulf that separates American and European racing formulas as the most important obstacle the sport must overcome in the next five years. "I'm afraid we may be separating ourselves from the rest of the world," he says. "We still race 750cc GP machines and now the Superbike class has really become too expensive for beginning riders . . . Six years ago, I proposed that we limit GP bikes to 500cc and that the Superbike class should be more production oriented. The bikes should have to use the same cams, heads, pistons and cranks that they came with from the factory."

As far as making racing a successful spectator event, Roberts believes that sponsorship is the key, "A company pays to get good advertising, but in America, with dirttrack and roadracing so separated by having too many races, a roadracer can't be No. 1. A rider just doesn't have the time to do both with 30 events scheduled. I would like to see us go to 20 premier events, maybe seven of them roadraces. Then we would have better racing, more roadraces, bigger purses with less expense, and the riders could do well in all events. Dirttrack will hold its own in the years to come and hopefully roadracing will grow. It's hard to tell how much, but it does look good. We just have to be careful not to alienate ourselves from the rest of the world."

- There's no question about the AMA's role in determining the course of American racing, and as the head of the AMA's racing commission, Mike DiPrete's voice speaks loudest.

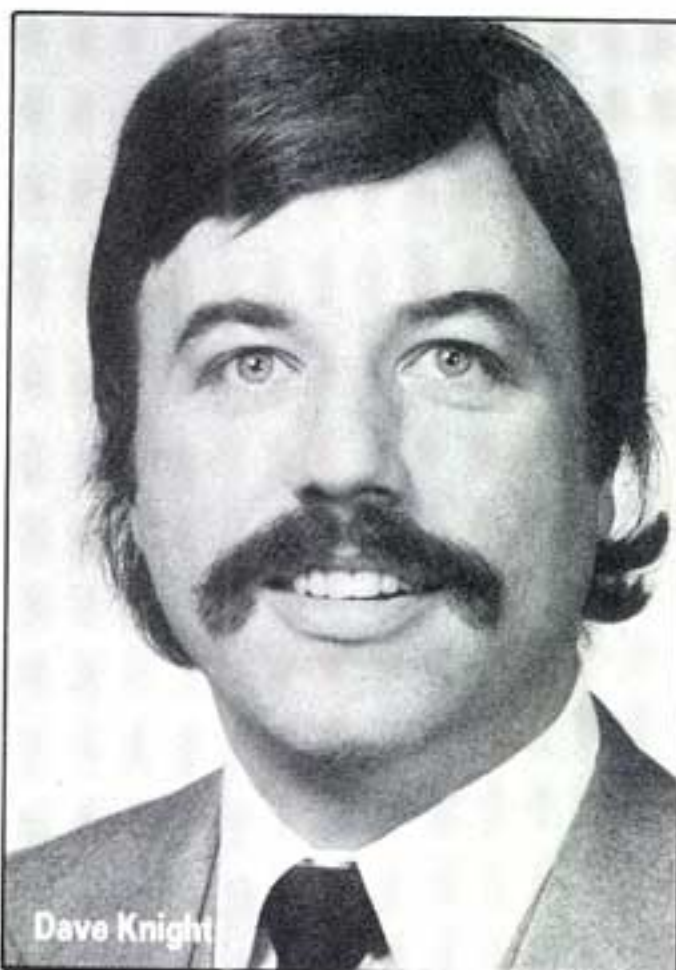
"Roadracing in the U.S. appears to have the greatest potential of the major forms of racing," DiPrete says. "The Superbike class has shown a large increase of interest from both spectators and riders, and Formula 1 has held its own. The more manufacturers we have involved in the future, the better the response we will see from the public and from promoters who are willing



Kenny Roberts



Mike DiPrete



Dave Knight

to advertise more when top riders are on hand. We've talked about a 500cc GP class, but the feeling is that we should give Superbike and Formula 1 a couple more years before we decide.

"We have cost problems with dirttrack and we also have work to do. There is a controversy about a 500cc or 750cc class, carb restrictors or no restrictors, and we've got to straighten these things out. The spectators are holding their own, but the expense for riders is getting out of hand.

"Motocross may have peaked on the outdoor level, and there are problems with indoor races drawing full crowds . . . our regional qualifier system for motocross has not worked well and most promoters have lost money. We will probably go to a system where a non-Expert rider cannot race a National without first gaining points in Regionals. This should insure a continuing pool of experienced riders who are better trained for long motos and are ready for the Expert ranks."

- Racing really runs on money, not gasoline. And the biggest wallet in racing belongs to R.J. Reynolds, which has made the AMA's Grand National series the most successful motorcycle racing series in this country.

The man who keeps track of the R.J. Reynolds purse strings in motorcycle racing is Dave Knight, and he's predictably satisfied with the value R.J. has received from the AMA since its program began in 1974 with the first Camel Pro events. He says, "The inherent strength of the series is apparent when you realize that we are able to sell out many dirttrack races in a recessionary year against increasing competition for the entertainment dollar. We are certainly confident that flattrack will continue to be a major race format, especially with the new interest shown by Yamaha and Honda."

Even so, Knight reckons there's no further potential in flattrack simply because the racing arenas don't have additional room for more spectators, and the kind of racing that can lure large crowds holds the greatest attraction for potential sponsors. "The booming motosport we see in the future is roadracing," he says. "There are many existing tracks with capacities of 50,000 or more and the growth of street riding in the U.S. should generate more interest. It could be that the roadracing and dirttrack parts of the Winston Pro series will have to be separated into their own series because we have no more race-dates to run more events. Or it could turn out that regional races could set the stage for fewer National events." ●