

PHOTOGRAPHY: GAIL HAWKINS

For the second straight year at Unadilla, the official timekeeper decided the overall winner. Bob Hannah was denied his first Grand Prix victory by a hard-charging Kent Howerton who fell, rescourted, and made up six seconds, all in one lap—the last one. By Dave Hawkins

STOPWATCH GRAND PRIX



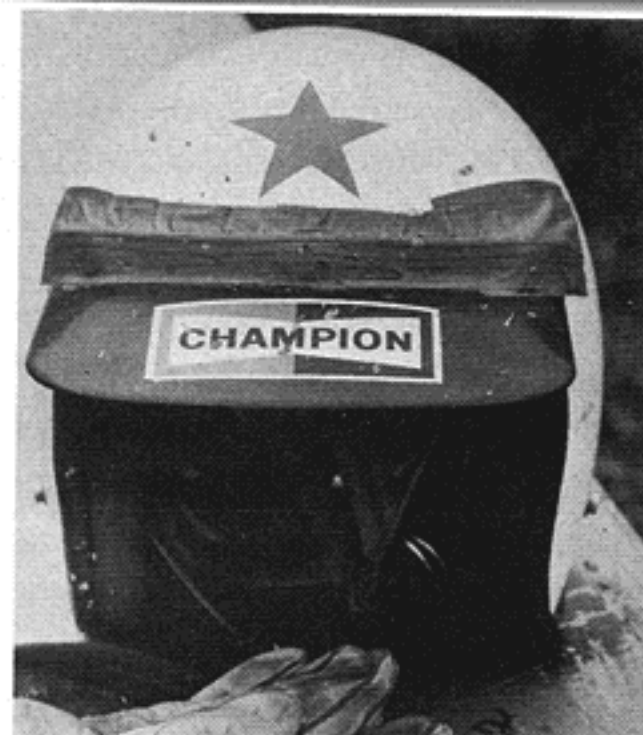
GRAND PRIX

● NINETEEN-SEVENTY-NINE MARKS THE second year that the United States has hosted a 250 World Championship motocross race. In just two short years the race has become a classic. Over a mile in length, the track is routed through loamy valleys and up stony hillsides. There are no artificial jumps, no man-made obstacles; the entire track is the way motocross turf is supposed to be, natural terrain.

The entry list for this year's race was rich with international riders. Nine of the current top 10 riders, representing six different countries, were present to battle



Jean Claude Laquaye was instructed by a proven source—six-time World Champ, Joel Robert.



For the second straight year the Russian invasion was turned back by a troop of young American riders.



for the all-important world championship points. Defending champ Guennady Moiseev and fellow Russian, Vladimir Kavinov, were at Unadilla on KTMs. Points leader Hakan Carlqvist traveled from Sweden in hopes that he would wrap up the title for Husqvarna. To cinch the championship Carlqvist would have to score seven points more than second-place rider Neil Hudson, a Maico-riding youngster from England. Rolf Diffenbach, a West German, was Kawasaki-equipped and Kees Van Der Ven, a Dutchman, was on a Maico. Georges Jobe, Jean Claude Laquaye and Jaak Van Velthoven filled out the remaining points leader positions from Belgium. In all, 15 Europeans gathered to battle the track and the Americans, who were led by Bob Hannah, Kent Howerton and Marty Tripes—the top three finishers in the 250 national series.

On race day a quiet morning fog covered the Unadilla Valley Sports Center motocross track. There was nothing soft or quiet in Carlqvist's interview being broadcast over the loudspeakers. "Bob Hannah and Marty Tripes are good riders, but they also have big mouths." Shortly thereafter, Carlqvist backed up his mouth and posted the quickest qualifying time of 2:25.3. Marty Tripes was just 0.4-second back; third was Howerton at 2:26.9. Eight of the top 10 qualifiers were Europeans, who easily adapted to the natural circuit. Hannah was back at eleventh.

The equipment was as varied as the nationality mix. None of the bikes was

After a last lap fall, Kent Howerton charged back to finish the second moto only 30 feet behind Bob Hannah.



Rocketing off the berm on the outside, Bob Hannah nips Russian Vladimir Kavinov early in the first moto.

near the FIM limit of 196 pounds, but as a whole the Americans' bikes were much lighter. Bob Hannah's Yamaha, tuned and trimmed by Keith McCarty, was the lightest bike at Unadilla: 204 pounds. The factory Suzukis of Kent Howerton and Scott Gillman were next at 206 pounds. The Europeans' machines, especially the KTMs, were the heavyweight champions. Kavinov's factory-sponsored KTM was 234 pounds, while teammate (and World Champion) Moiseev's bike was 219. All the Husqvarnas weighed around 222 pounds while the SWM of Jean Claude Laquaye was slightly heavier at 229.

Kavinov proved that reactions, not feather-light bikes, get holeshots. He

rocketed his bike, built out of spare parts at American KTM, into an early lead. Second was Carlqvist, and last year's winner Marty Tripes was third, just ahead of Mike Guerra and Jim Turner. Behind the Americans came Moiseev and Kees Van Der Ven on a Maico. In tenth position was Laquaye, coached and managed by six-time World Champion Joel Robert.

After just one circuit Carlqvist had blasted by Kavinov and into a five-second lead. Since Hudson was back in ninth place, worth only two GP points, it seemed that the first moto would wrap up the 250 title for Husqvarna and Carlqvist. The Swede was extremely fast and didn't

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have any difficulty holding the lead. In fact each lap he stretched out his lead.

No sooner had the champagne been brought out in the Husky camp than Carlqvist began to slow. The bubbly stuff went back to the cooler. Carlqvist's bike had a shock come adrift, and the lame motorcycle wouldn't last long. On the second lap the nut securing the top of one shock to its frame lug had backed off and the shock bounced off. Carlqvist retired and Kavinov quickly recaptured the lead holding a 10-second advantage over Marty Tripes.

Marty was turning laps in the 2:29s, the quickest laps—race or practice—of the day. Mike Guerra held third ahead of Jim Turner. On lap five, Marty flew the Honda out of the huge gully inelegantly dubbed "Screw-U," and closed a bike's length on the leading Russian. In the next right-hand horseshoe turn, Tripes took the outside line, hit the berm, held the throttle on longer, slipped by Kavinov for the lead and quickly stretched out a comfortable six-second lead.

The Eastern Bloc riders have a different riding style than do the Americans. In turns where Tripes, Hannah and Howerton would plaster a berm, the Russians will, almost without exception, take the shorter inside lines. While the home riders sail off jumps poking holes in the sky, the

Kent Howerton raced two strong motos finishing with one unbelievable lap. He reeled in Bob Hannah for the overall and sent the Europeans home with an embarrassing lesson on Motocross, American Style.



Older than Unadilla motocross itself, this vigilant guard has kept watch over the pit gate for many years.



Bob Hannah (seated) and Marty Tripes (sat upon) shake pre-race jitters with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

Soviets keep low to the ground, in part to compensate for short-travel suspensions and in part to keep the power on the ground as long as possible. While the Americans would be quite flashy and sprint around the track, Kavinov and Moiseev would plod through their laps, marathon-like.

At the halfway mark, Tripes thrilled the huge crowd by increasing his lead while Moiseev had joined his teammate as the Russians filled the place and show positions. But all was not well on the Russian front. Kent Howerton had moved from his lack-luster tenth-place start, and he began lurking near the rear fender of the World Champion. Once Kent made contact it took him only one lap to step by. Hannah followed Howerton's lead and pushed Moiseev and Kavinov back another position, to put the Americans—Tripes, Howerton and Hannah—in the top three positions. On the back section of the track, Kavinov got his KTM into a tremendous tank-swap then did a slingshot exit over the bars. Kavinov hit the earth, head first, like an artillery shell, but after living through the impact the Russian got back in the race. The fall, though it looked like it would have killed a normal person, only dropped Kavinov back to seventh. Tripes held the lead safely, but Howerton and Hannah had tangled up in a two-man race and were pushing each other very hard. When the

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Stopwatch *Continued from page 96* checkered flag came out, Tripes had won easily on a relatively stock (i.e., our definition) Honda.

Howerton followed almost seven seconds back with Hannah another three seconds behind for third. The top-ranking Americans in the national series had finished the first moto in the top three positions. Then came the Russians. Moiseev was fourth, and Kavinov collected fifth after a remarkable recovery. Mike Guerra was sixth, followed by Mark Gregson, Kees Van Der Ven, and Georges Jobe. Frank Stacy was tenth, the last FIM points-paying placing.

After a brief intermission, the second moto went off. Tripes looked like a good bet to win his second 250 GP. At the same time neither Howerton nor Hannah could be counted out. One thing was certain, an American would win the overall.

Howerton made his bid for the win immediately. When the gate hit the Unadilla grass, Howerton pulled off a tremendous holeshot. He rocketed his Greg Arnette-tuned Suzuki into a four-bike-length lead after the first turn. Vaughan Semmens made his only appearance of the day near the front as the Maico-mounted Englishman was second. Kavinov had another good start—third, Carlqvist fourth. At the completion of the first lap, Semmens had dropped to ninth place, then retired. Carlqvist moved past Kavinov into second. No sooner had Carlqvist moved by the Soviet than Hannah did the same. Bob looked like he had his sights set on his first GP victory as he then blasted past Carlqvist.

Carlqvist let Hannah go, fearing that he might suffer the fate of Akira Watanabe in 1978's 125 USGP. "All I needed was seven points more than Hudson. So when I saw Hannah pull up on me I let him by. I didn't want him to crash me like he did Watanabe last year. My pit crew gave me the signal that Hudson was out so I took it easy for the rest of the moto."

It appeared as if that was exactly the Swede's strategy. He obviously cruised and still no one even came close to him for the remainder of the moto. Just seven laps into the second race Tripes pulled off with severe stomach cramps. "It was like the cramps you get in your sides after

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Stopwatch *Continued from page 103* running. I could barely move. Every time I hit a bump I didn't think I could stand it. That shot the whole race."

With Tripes out, the real racing was to be found up front. Either Howerton or Hannah could win the race. And at the halfway point the advantage belonged to Howerton. When the riders were given the halfway sign, Hannah moved by Howerton. If the moto ended with Hannah in the lead and Howerton second, the rider with the quicker total time from the two motos would win.

Again at Unadilla, the timekeeper would decide the overall. This year everyone was ready at the watches. The track announcer kept the crowd informed; it would take a time difference of more than 3.18 seconds for Hannah to win overall. Everyone knew that all Howerton had to do was keep in touch with Hannah and the victory would be his. As Hannah desperately tried to stretch out a lead, Howerton refused to drop off the agonizing pace. Lap times were unbelievable 2:25s. At that pace Hannah and Howerton quickly detached themselves from Carlqvist in third.

With just three laps remaining racegoers saw something that rarely happens in American motocross. Hannah was actually being reeled in by Howerton. Though Hannah would later complain about his front brake, Howerton saw the race differently as he closed in on Hannah. "I've raced a lot with Bob. And I know when he is really trying. Today he wasn't slacking off one bit. He was diving deep into the corners." As hard as Hannah tried to open up a lead, he could not break away from Howerton. Both riders received the two-laps-to-go sign less than a second apart. All Hannah had to do to win the overall was beat Howerton by more than three-seconds-and-a-whisker. All Howerton had to do for the overall was stay inside the time window.

A crowd gathered at the finish line with a bit more than one lap to go. Stopwatches were everywhere. Hannah appeared out of the back section, jumping off a near 45-degree uphill; less than a second later Howerton plunged off the incline as well. Kent's leap took him beyond the landing area, and his Suzuki actually landed on a slight downhill drop-off. The over-shot sent the bike into a lock-to-lock tank-slapper. Kent kept the gas on. The last turn before the finish line Hannah held the lead. Bob crossed the line; stopwatches started. Kent crossed the line and the watches stopped. One-point-eight seconds. If Howerton could hold that close for another lap the victory would be his.

After the finish line the course goes down a small hill then around a long sweeping horseshoe just in front of the announcer's tower. It was on that sweeper that Howerton shocked every-

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Stopwatch *Continued from page 104* one again. He tried to pass Hannah.

Kent's front tire hit a rock and washed out. "Howerton is down!" screamed announcer Larry Huffman. The fans threw up their hands in disbelief. What seemed to be a sure photo-finish was all but wiped out. Hannah jumped the ledge into Screw-U; Howerton followed 6.5 seconds later. The race was over.

Over to everyone but Howerton.

Kent began a charge that seemed impossible. "That last lap was all I had. When I went down I thought the race was over but Bob could make a mistake also; that is the only thing that kept me going." As everyone ran across the infield to watch the two complete the last lap in the back section, the impossible seemed to happen again. Howerton was gaining on Hannah in every turn. Would he have enough time? Could Howerton make up *six seconds* in one lap on America's premier motocrosser?

Howerton: "It didn't seem like I was even on the track that last lap. For sure I was in the air more than I was on the ground. It took all the strength I had to keep going—but I was going to give this race everything I had."

Hannah emerged from the back section with only a three-second lead. Howerton was riding furiously. The pair dropped down a steep downhill, made the 180-degree turn and started up the hill. Howerton got a tremendous drive at the base and blasted up the side of the hill, making up a few precious fractions on the leader. Again Kent crested the hill, got airborne, overshot the landing area and again swapped down the other side. He could now see Hannah just a hundred feet ahead. As the riders made the last few turns, out of sight from most of the spectators, an eternity passed in the Yamaha and Suzuki pits. Then they came into sight. Not one but *two* riders. Howerton was only 50 feet behind. The crowd thundered. Hannah hit the finish line tucked in like a road racer. Sixty-nine hundredths of a second later Howerton crossed the line, also in a crouch.

Kent had made up an unbelievable six seconds on Hannah on the last lap to win. Just two hundred feet past the line, fatigue caught up with Howerton. As he turned around to head for the pits, his head bobbed back and forth from exhaustion. He had given the race everything he had, and on this day it was just enough. ●