

MIKE BELL

Staying in Shape and Staying Competitive When You're Too Tall

Mike Bell has been in and out of the motocross limelight in a rhythm synchronized with recurrent knee injuries. His pseudonym, "Too Tall Bell," stitched across the rear of his nylon pants, rings all too true each time he dives through a tight berm only to find there is no room for his gangly legs.

But over the years and through countless knee injuries, Bell has always played a leading role on the Yamaha factory team, a testimony to his on-track abilities and the off-track charm and diplomacy that have made him a likable personality among fans and promoters alike.

Bell signed with Yamaha in '77 and missed most of the following year because of knee injuries. In '79 he lost the 500cc national title to Danny LaPorte by

three points. Since then, Bell has finished runner-up in the 250 and 500 nationals and won the Supercross title in 1980. On four occasions he was invited to ride Supercross events in Europe and Australia, and all four times flew home with the winner's trophy.

Bell is perhaps more analytical about racing than most of his competitors. His recuperation periods, painful and frustrating though they have been, allow him to make a study of his competitors from the sidelines, to analyze their riding styles, lines, strategies, strong and weak points, and perhaps learn things about them that they, themselves, do not know.

His repeated knee injuries have also allowed Bell to try just about every form of rehabilitation training available, as

well as determine which training regimen keeps him in the best shape.

This was to be the year when he pooled his collective observations and years of experience to win both the 500 national and Supercross titles. But early in the season, after winning the first three motos of the Golden State Series, Bell's knee blew up again and he was back under the knife.

When the nationals rolled around in the spring, Bell was fit once again. He fared poorly at the first national, and wrenched his knee again in Pennsylvania. Then Bell began his comeback, culminating with his Superbowl victory, his first indoor win in two years.

We were interested in what Bell had to say about getting and staying in shape and how he copes with his injuries.

After all the trouble you've had with your knees, have you ever thought of taking up something a little less abusive?

Not really, but I suppose if I ever do quit motocross, my knees will probably be the reason. That's all I can see that would really stop me from racing. But right now I plan to race motocross for a long time.

When you get injured and can't train as hard as the other guys, aren't you simply going to be left behind?

Not necessarily. Physical conditioning has a lot to do with peace of mind. If you know you're tougher than those guys, you've got a psychological advantage over them, whether or not they know it. But if you get on the line and think, "Gee, I didn't even work out this week," or "I'm really not in very good shape," how can you maintain a good attitude?

How do you train?

I do a lot of swimming, bicycling, jumping rope, and general calisthenics. The main thing I do is ride. I do 65-minute motos twice a week. I always bring someone along to time my laps so I can analyze each one and find out how much time I lost by missing a berm or something. I really believe riding is the best thing you can do.

Do you use any Nautilus equipment to get back in shape after an injury?

No. My doctors don't want me to put too much load on my knee. I usually work it on an Orthotron machine. It's hydraulic and you work against the fluid. If I have a problem with my knee halfway through an exercise with the Orthotron,





all I have to do is stop and the machine stops with me. If I had a problem on the Nautilus machine halfway through an exercise, I would have all that resistance still on my knee. That could injure it more.

A lot of other riders seem to be using Nautilus programs to keep in shape.

Nautilus is okay, but with our schedule it's hard to maintain a routine. I am too busy testing and riding to go to a gym. If you are in good shape at the beginning

of the season, training becomes more a maintenance thing. Plus, the season takes a lot out of you, and you don't want to overtrain. That can be just as bad as not being in shape.

You say you've also learned a lot during your downtime by watching the others.

Yeah, just the way some of these guys seem to try so much harder when they're not in first, yet they are actually going slower. They start riding too hard and can't keep things fluid or keep up the

needed motion. They might try so hard they leave it in one gear too long, or they might hit a berm too hard and scrub off too much speed. They just concentrate too much on the guy in front of them. I've done it too.

In Washington, [Donnie] Hansen was running second, and I think in his mind he knew he was going to have to settle for second. He was the same distance behind Glover the whole way, and he maintained that pace instead of going crazy. When Broc made a mistake, he was right there. If he had been trying too hard, he might have lost time. Darrell Shultz did that the second night in Washington. He was riding hard and staying close to Barnett, but then he'd hit a berm too hard and just go sideways. He'd lose ground and have to try and get it back again.

But how do you keep a smooth pace on a Supercross track, where the terrain can change so dramatically on every lap?

It takes experience to learn which lines to take, whether to cross the grooves or just get in them and go for it. Sandy tracks really change, and they get progressively rougher throughout the day. I think it just becomes reflex. It has for me, but everybody makes a mistake sometime. You'll see Hannah out there with both feet flying off the pegs, yet he can still remain calm and get the job done. That's the mark of a champion.



PHOTO: DEXTER FORD

That's the Hannah trademark; feet off and flying.

Well, he seems smoother to me now. Even though he still does that, he has the ability to be loose. It's real hard to be like that. Some guys are just wild; others are smooth, but don't go fast enough. When Bob is riding good, he's really good. He's phenomenal to watch.

How do you think Barnett differs from Hannah?

In many ways they are the same. A lot of guys will build a good lead. They will be going great, but they just exhaust themselves. Hannah or Barnett will be all alone out there, and you can see there is something inside them pushing them harder and harder, even though the second-place guy is 40 seconds behind.

They are both in excellent shape. Hannah is more the lean, mean type, and Barnett is shorter and stockier. They have very different builds, but are pretty equal in ability and endurance. I know Bob used to run 10 miles in under an hour before he broke his leg. I'm not sure what he does now. Barnett does the same sort of thing. I think he uses up about five gallons of gas on his bike every day, and when he's through riding, he runs for an hour.

Everybody has his own theory. Some guys think you have to train with weights.

All Hannah does is run and ride. Riding a lot works well for me.

A motorcycle does things you are not prepared for. It gets out of shape suddenly or gets into a situation you hadn't counted on. That's what makes you tired. If you rode each lap perfectly without the bike ever getting out of line, you probably wouldn't get very tired. It strains you in weird places, and I think the only way to simulate that is by riding.

So you think physical size and the kind of shape you're in play a big part in it?

Definitely. Motocross and Supercross are almost getting to be like road racing. If you give a guy the slightest advantage, he's gone. Sometimes I would have a good lead in the series and everything would be going great, and just one mistake would turn it all around. It's really tough. You have to stay competitive, you have to stay in good shape, you have to be sharp, and you have to keep developing the bike. I think it's more precise than it used to be. Everyone is getting faster and faster; you have to work constantly to improve yourself.

And the better shape everyone is in, the faster the races are going to be. You can be a good rider for two or three laps, but you can't win a race without being in good shape.

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—Ken Vreeke