



Bet It All On The Start

In three of the four Qualifiers at the Daytona Supercross, the rider leading out of the first turn went on to win his event. Forty-one racers lined up for the Main, each knowing he had to get the holeshot. By Dave Hawkins

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVE HAWKINS

● WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT MOTOCROSS? If you were raised on Torsten Hallman, Joel Robert and Roger DeCoster, you know it's a European sport. Tracks are carved out of natural, grassy hillsides. Thousands of spectators crowd the area surrounding the course. They're fanatics. They know every rider in the field. They shout and cheer for their heroes, boo and ridicule the foreign riders. They go berserk when the leaders dice it out, swapping the lead, fending off charges by third-, fourth- and fifth-place riders.

Now . . . what do you know about Supercross? If you think you can apply your knowledge of motocross to this other sport, you're mistaken. If you wish to understand Supercross, you have to come to it fresh, and you have to be able to

appreciate a finely executed holeshot.

Supercross: its name is as American as World Series. It resembles motocross—European motocross—because it features first-rate motocross riders on legitimate motocross machinery. Yes, the names are the same. Beyond that the similarity ends. Supercross tracks are man-made—usually dirt piled into stadiums where football teams vie for the honor of playing in their own Superbowl. Man-made obstacles substitute for natural obstacles, and Man proves he is a vastly more creative and insidious designer than Nature. Triple jumps 45 feet from peak to far peak put Belgian hillside dropaways to shame. Supercross spectators must be catered to: promoters pack the field so each spectator always

has a rider or two in front of him. Promoters pale at the thought of anyone being bored for an instant. But then maybe boredom is a legitimate concern: there's certainly no excitement watching the leader. A good rider taking the holeshot is virtually assured of victory. Supercross tracks are so narrow and there are so few good lines, passing is nearly impossible unless a leading rider errors grossly or a trailing rider is astoundingly good.

Supercross at Daytona is business as usual. The track features alligator pits—huge divots shaped like shoe boxes—double jumps, triple jumps, grandstands full of spectators and a packed field of National riders. The only variation from the norm is the track being located outdoors. It's actually squeezed into the dirt area between the front straight and the pit road of the road-racing oval.

Suzuki's National 125 champion, Mark Barnett, timed the gate-drop of the first qualifier perfectly and led through the first turn. Mark's start produced the first concrete evidence that Daytona would be a follow-the-leader track. Barnett led from gate to flag. Riding a Honda, Johnny O'Mara was second—also from start to finish. Johnny trailed by five seconds the first few laps then relaxed to hold a secure second, 11 seconds back at the finish. Donnie Hansen pushed David Bailey back to fourth on the first lap, and they too held constant for the remainder

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of the qualifier. The only passing was done by Bob Hannah—one of those astonishingly good riders. Hannah charged relentlessly the entire race and picked up from seventh to fifth.

Darrell Shultz grabbed the lead of the second qualifier start. In Atlanta the week before, Shultz had been the last rider to qualify for the main. He was forced to race his qualifier, then a semi and finally the consolation race to make the main. "I didn't want to wear myself out before the race again, so this week I decided I had to get a good start."

Following Shultz through the first turn were Richard Coon, Warren Reid and local Florida rider, John Reinholt. Shultz held a three-second lead after the first lap, but Reid was pressuring Coon, and the two closed to within a second of Shultz. On the fourth lap, Reid's pressure forced Coon to bobble. After the track leaves the front section of the tri-oval the riders follow part of the asphalt pit road to a twisty infield section. Coon overcooked it across the road trying to hold off Reid; he hit a single jump in good shape, but the double jump following it launched him straight up and off the track. "I hit the first jump too fast and really skied it over the double jump. I was so high I thought my nose would start bleeding. It didn't—but I thought I saw the Empire State Building off my right." Reid trailed Shultz at the checkers by a sec-

ond, and Coon recovered to take third, 16 seconds back. Kris Bigelow edged out Reinholt for fourth.

After back-to-back Suzuki wins by Barnett and Shultz, riders from other factories were anxious to break the string. In the first turn of the third qualifier a crazed backmarker T-boned Chuck Sun and knocked him flat. Yamaha's Donnie Cantaloupi exited the turn with the lead, trailed by Broc Glover, Mickey Kessler and Arlo Englund. Kent Howerton was in fifth, nine seconds back. As the pack roared off, Sun retrieved his bike only to discover the clutch lever dangling by the cable. Without a clutch, Sun had to push his bike in neutral, jump aboard, click it into gear and hope. The engine started and Chuck gave chase, almost a half lap down.

On the second lap Kessler passed Glover for second. "A berm got pushed out by the fence," Glover said, "and I hit a pole with my handlebar. I went over the bars so fast I didn't know what happened." Glover got going and re-passed Kessler in the following lap.

By lap four both Steve Martin and Howerton had squeezed past Kessler. Kessler had had enough: over a jump he overshot the landing area and landed on Howerton and his Suzuki. The crowd went wild. Kent wasn't thrilled at the near fatal pass-attempt. "What a wild man! He crushed the top of my pipe, bent my

fork tube and cut up my knuckles. A little farther over and *who knows?*" Cantaloupi stayed ahead of the "Ben Hur" action and maintained his lead, followed by Glover, Howerton (who simply refused to go down after the direct hit), Steve Martin and Kessler.

Sun had continued to move through the pack the entire moto. As the referee was waving the checkered flag, Sun tried to swoop two riders in the alligator pit just before the finish. He got one and finished ninth (to transfer to the main a rider needs an eighth or higher), which forced him to race a semi and do well there to transfer to the main.

Factory representatives got a shock watching the fourth qualifier. Maico rider Carlos Serrano got the holeshot, and for a short while it looked as though he had the race to himself. That is, until Denny Bentley, Suzuki's newest star, put on the pressure. Denny trailed by two seconds the first few laps, learning the track, feeling out his 250. Out front, Serrano began looking as if he was simultaneously on the border of disaster and on-the-gas. "I didn't understand why he (Serrano) was taking such rough lines," Bentley said. "I could see he was getting tired. He would start to lose the front and then just barely save it. I decided to try for a last lap pass." Behind Bentley were Mike Bell, Marty Smith and Rick Burgett, who be-

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tween them have more years of National motocross racing experience than Bentley's age—17 years.

After a very rough straight there was a sharp little jump that launched the riders sideways into an alligator pit. It was there that Bentley made his move on the last lap. Denny went by cleanly and quickly. Serrano finished second with Bell, Smith and Burgett trailing.

Bentley was calm but nevertheless thrilled. "I can't believe I won. I used to read about Bell and Marty Smith; they were my heroes. Here in the pits I get nervous thinking, 'I really beat them.' It's hard to gauge how fast you're going when you're riding. I saw Bell—he's a jet—and I stayed in front of him. It's hard to believe." Bentley shines as a rider brighter than any youngster we've seen since Bob Hannah showed up on a Husqvarna at Saddleback Park in California.

The two semis were taken by Kawasaki's Goat Breker and Chuck Sun; Doug Longwell transferred from the consolation race. Sun's win wasn't one of his typical get-the-job-done no-nonsense races. "I felt good on the bike. You really get tense waiting to race, so I got out front early and decided to get loose and have some fun." Chuck threw his bike into double cross-ups over the triple jumps. The crowd roared its approval. On the last go-round Chuck lapped a backmarker over the triple jump, over-

shot the landing and bounced off the rear of his bike. He held on but looked like a flag tossed in the wind. Roger DeCoster, managing Honda's racing efforts, was not as thrilled as the crowd about Sun's flamboyant semi-victory. "If he wins the main, I will forgive him."

As the qualifiers to the main selected their starting positions, each one was thinking how important the start would be. When the gate dropped 41 riders jammed into the first turn—a turn that safely accommodates about 10 riders. Shultz exited with the lead, and Cantaloupi and Bentley squeezed out Jim Gibson and Donnie Hansen for the front three positions. Chuck Sun (hit again), Bob Hannah and Mark Barnett, all strong contenders for the win, were banged up pretty good, virtually eliminating their chances of placing well.

On a clear track Shultz clocked off a 1:50 lap, fast but safe. As he found his pace Darrell ran off a string of 1:46s to stretch his lead on the pack the first few laps. Cantaloupi, less than a second behind Shultz, refused to back off. Bentley dropped to fourth on the third lap when Gibson used a little experience and pushed the youngster out of his line with a pass.

At the halfway point Shultz held a two-second lead over Cantaloupi, with Gibson, Bentley, Marty Smith and Hansen following them. By lap 10 of the 12-lap race, Hansen had pushed Smith aside

and set his sights on fourth-place Bentley. On the last lap Hansen block-passed Bentley while he was in a berm; some lessons are learned hard. The move pushed Bentley over the berm and out of fourth place.

Shultz rode flawlessly. He won, having led every lap. Cantaloupi, too, rode a great race but never had an opportunity to get past Shultz. Jim Gibson was third with teammate Hansen fourth. Denny Bentley was fifth, leading Smith, Howerton, Barnett, Bell and Rex Staten. Barnett had charged from his first-turn spill and grabbed eighth; he was the only rider to pass a significant number of racers.

With his Daytona win, Shultz took charge of the Supercross standings with a five-point lead over Mark Barnett. "This last off-season was really tough for me," Shultz said. "All winter I thought about not having a ride. It was no secret—Suzuki was thinking about getting someone else. All because I was crashing *all* the time; I wasn't smooth *or* fast. Suzuki decided to keep me, and I decided it was time to change. My reputation as a crasher was true, but no more. I know I'm as fast as Bell or Howerton, yet I was almost out of a ride. I realized I crashed because I wasn't concentrating. I wasn't concentrating because I wasn't in good enough shape. So I started running a lot more, body building and trying to have a positive attitude."

That, evidently, is what it's all about. ●

