

# A World Apart

## ★ The 250 National Motocross Championship ★

By Don Phillipson

● NINETEEN-EIGHTY-ONE WAS ENOUGH TO make saints cynics. Those Boys of Summer—baseball players—were dropping pop flies, blinded by dollar signs. To clear their vision, they staged the first strike in the history of the game. The grand old tradition of Wimbledon—second home of the world's most genteel tennis players—was defiled by a young American named John McEnroe who, in essence, told everyone who wore an official cap the whole lot could bloody well stick it where the sun don't shine. It seems the pressure of being a public figure got to John junior.

As if that weren't bad enough, two of the best motocrossers this country has ever produced romped across America entertaining crowds by knocking each other down.

Is nothing sacred?

It's as if we set out to give the hype-and-jive radio announcers and TV flakes raw material for inane Supercross advertisements. Rollerball motocross is what ignorant sportswriters say Howerton and Hannah are all about.

Who knows? Maybe the sportswriters see us more clearly than we see ourselves. It's enough to make a cynic of a saint.

It's also enough to make you realize that what Kent Howerton and Bob Hannah do with motorcycles differs not only in degree but in kind from what amateur racers do with them. Howerton and Hannah live in a world apart from non-professional motorcyclists.

They're businessmen. They use their motorcycles as we use hammers and wrenches and typewriters. They feed their families and buy their homes with

the money made from going god-awful fast on motorcycles.

There's much confusion about all of this. When the baseball players struck, people immediately took sides. I'm for the owners. I'm for the players. It was ridiculous. How can anyone morally defend millionaire owners? They're barely more than feudal slavemasters propping up an archaic and rotting system. How can anyone defend millionaire players? It's laughable—a bunch of precocious crybabies scrambling for all the bucks they can get.

It's business. I care not about the distribution of wealth among their industry. Just entertain me. I'll lay my bucks down to get the chance to admire your skill on the field. But I don't care how much you make any more than I care how much the president of General Motors makes. Granted, I'll whistle when I read the figures in *Time*, but I don't really care.

The situation clouds when we apply the same logic to motocross. It can't help but be complicated. It's closer to home. After all, those guys are riding motorcycles, just as we do. Aren't they?

No, they're not. They're out on the course pounding nails or twisting a wrench. It's nine-to-five. When the gate drops they punch a clock.

The racers themselves—intricately bound up in a sport which has mysteriously become a profession—probably don't even fully appreciate that fact. No one buys his first motocross bike thinking, "I'm gonna get so good with this I'll make two-hundred grand a year."

Ridiculous.

Kent Howerton and Bob Hannah started riding because they loved it. In

the beginning they asked nothing of motocross.

When did it all change?

Where did my sport go?

It hasn't all changed, and private sport isn't completely absent when National riders head for the first turn. Very little is as simple as black and white. Howerton or Hannah certainly must get as pumped as any 125 Novice when he wins a moto. But for a professional there are other pressures, other major consequences of a poor ride or a good one.

Failure to appreciate this, failure to understand that these guys live in another world, leads unequivocally to ill will and the choosing of sides.

None of that is necessary.

For our part, it's only necessary to try to understand racers who passionately devote themselves to a sport and somehow find themselves chasing money and glory—and sometimes find themselves bowing under the unrelenting pressure. With that understanding maybe we'll be less apt to think of any pro motocrosser as a flaming lunatic.

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The 1981 season started out normally enough. Two-time 250 National Champion (1978-79) Bob Hannah was making his comeback after recovering from a broken leg suffered during an off-season water-skiing accident. Kent Howerton was defending 250 National Champion; he had become champion after thoroughly trouncing a field of racers which was, after all, devoid of Hannah.

Nineteen-eighty-one was the showdown. Could Howerton repeat as champion with a healthy Hannah on the starting line?



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The primary and utterly straightforward fact regarding the racing season is that no one other than Howerton or Hannah had a chance at winning the championship. Between them, they won every moto of the season. Howerton won 13; Hannah won three. Howerton repeated as 250 National Champion.

The soap-opera dramatics of the season overshadowed the truly excellent drama on the racetrack. Howerton and Hannah developed such a feud that their preoccupation with it dominated *Cycle's* interviews with the racers. We excerpt quotes from those interviews, conducted by Contributing Editor Dave Hawkins, to shed some light on the people behind the racers and to allow you, the reader, to defend our athletes someday when future sports historians pigeonhole motocrossers as "part of the pro scene."

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**March 29th, 1981. Sacramento, California.**

Neither Howerton (Suzuki) nor Hannah (Yamaha) grabs the holeshot in the first National of the year. Kris Bigelow (Yamaha) beats the field to the first turn, but Howerton quickly shows how blazingly fast he is. He charges from fourth place to first in one-half lap; by the end of the

first lap he has a five-second lead. No one challenges Howerton as he easily wins the first moto of the year.

Hannah has a terrible start and spends the entire moto working through the field. He finishes second. On paper, trailing Howerton by only three points, it looks as if Hannah is within shooting distance of Howerton. Not so: Hannah is frustrated by bike problems and edgy about Howerton's apparent superiority.

In the second moto Howerton proves he can run at the 100th percentile all day long. By the end of lap one he has a 10-second lead. Donnie Hansen (Honda) chases Howerton until he crashes, which allows Hannah to move into second behind Howerton. They stay in that order until the checkered flag, at which point Howerton has nearly a one-minute lead over Hannah.

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**Hannah** "I thought I lost it (the championship) already. I wasn't satisfied with the bike—not even 50 percent satisfied with it. Or myself. If you don't like the bike you're on, you're beat already."

**Howerton** "Beating him by 50 seconds in each moto gave me confidence, naturally. But it seemed like through the whole series he was going to be hard—he was going to be the one in second place. And you don't gain that many points from one race to the next when

you finish first and the same person finishes second consistently. I knew he would be the main competition."

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During the following week Howerton and Hannah both headed south from Sacramento to Saddleback Park, California, for the second National of the season. Each was thinking about much more than racing; each was pondering news items and rumored quotes attributed to himself and the other.

After winning both motos at Sacramento, Howerton was ecstatic and optimistic; he was quoted as saying he wanted to win every moto of the season. Hannah was furious.

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**Howerton** "Well, what do you want to do when you go to a race? When you think you're going to win a series, you have to look for different goals. Nobody has ever won every moto in the whole series. It was a goal I tried to do last year and he wasn't even there. I don't see why he should take that personally. I made the same statement last year."

**Hannah** "He got through saying the week before that he was going to beat me so bad every week I was going to quit . . . I think his head's swelled up like a balloon. The Suzuki boys told me that (the quote about beating)—that's a fact . . . Well, he's got me wrong there. I read

an interview where he said I've never been as fast as him or never will be. I say to that—bullshit. Over the last three years he must have an awful poor memory. When did he beat me? Very, very slim occasions."

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**April Fifth, 1981. Orange, California.**

In the opening laps of the first moto, Hannah dices for the lead with Donnie Hansen while Howerton starts working up from fifth. Soon the inevitable happens: Hannah edges away from Hansen; Howerton quickly passes the Honda rider and pulls up to within a second of a fast-moving Hannah.

In a left-hand turn Howerton makes a quick and clean pass. Hannah follows closely, looking to regain the lead. He follows Howerton down one of Saddleback's clay hills, heading toward the three berms at the bottom. Howerton gasses it, trying to pass some lapped riders before the turn and force Hannah to follow them through it. Hannah sees the move and holds on the throttle, attempting to stay right with Howerton. He does more than that, entering too fast and bumping Howerton.

Howerton doesn't like the move, and bumps Hannah in retaliation in the next corner. From now on the bumps get harder and the riding wilder, until Hannah simply takes aim . . . and fires. It happens with about 10 minutes left in the moto, with Howerton leading. Howerton sets up for the left-hand horseshoe turn which

routes the riders into the sandy section. Hannah collides with Howerton and sends him flying; the Suzuki rider falls across Hannah's bike and on his way down catches his arm across Hannah's spinning rear sprocket, cutting it deeply. Incredibly, Howerton picks himself up, climbs back up the hill to retrieve his bike, re-passes Hansen—who has slid into second during the melee—and then catches and passes Hannah on the last lap to take the moto win.

In the second moto, Hannah pulls away from Hansen after the two share the holeshot. Howerton, too, eventually gets by Hansen, but Howerton is never able to make a move on Hannah. Howerton's arm—bulging and bleeding underneath bandages—prevents him from seriously challenging Hannah.

Hannah breaks Howerton's three-moto win streak.

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**Howerton** "I didn't feel very good at Saddleback at all. I could ride faster than Bob, but it was uncomfortable . . . I was pushing myself. I hated the track . . . It built one big berm that lent to close riding. If you were going to pass somebody, you had to get kind of close to begin with. I passed Bob right next to the start straight where there's a little off-camber turn going up; I just turned inside of him and passed real easy.

"Where he passed me was stupid. It was just a block pass—off-camber, very much off-camber, with a good solid berm

all around it. I was in the berm and he rode way high up on the fence, dropped straight down in the berm and then made a 90-degree left-hand turn; I ran into him, which knocked me off the track and I skipped across two berms. I thought that was pretty bad on his part; I went through the next two corners and caught him, and I did the same thing right back—because if you let a person do that more than one time he thinks it's perfectly all right.

"He flipped his wig. He couldn't believe that someone else was going to do the same thing back to Bob Hannah, so he went totally berserk. I just went wide open from there on out and it just got steadily faster and faster from there on, both of us challenging each other to see who could turn faster. Naturally we hit several times trying it. Finally he got tired of playing that game. When I passed him, he decided to center punch me deliberately. Had I been feeling a little bit better that day, I would probably have just parked and waited for him and settled it there. I think that would probably have been the best thing to do—stop the race and then figure out what's going on, instead of racing."

**Hannah** "It should have been over with after Saddleback . . .

"But if he wants to fist fight, we'll fist fight. I don't know really what he wants or why he got so pissed. It's over with for me the next day. If he's still pissed about it—that's all right with me too. Let him mourn on it for the next ten years.



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"There was no need for any bumping. Okay, maybe one time. But he's got the bike on me . . . He was riding better than me. Why touch me? There's 500 damn places to pass on that track. Why touch me at all?"

"I didn't start the mess. But I'm not going to back out early either. You run into me and I'll run over you. You punch me in the face and I'll punch you in the face. What are you gonna do? Sit there and say 'Oh, yeah, he hit me.' If you do, you're pretty stupid—in my book. If people don't see that, then they don't see the way I see."

"They're (the press) talking about me all the time; they gotta talk about something. Do you ever hear about Goat Breker running into anybody? . . . He may be running over everybody in sight but nobody says nothing about it because they're not talking about him. They're always looking at me—not to brag—they're always yakkin' about me. Either the guy hates me or the guy likes me—one or the other. And hopefully more people like me than hate me, but you can't please the world. And if they don't like me they can kiss my ass. I don't care. If you don't like me, kiss my ass. I didn't ask you to like me."

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**April 12th, 1981.**  
**Whitney, Texas.**

After the fracas at Saddleback, the racers are ready to return to the business of racing. Howerton is lucky even to be here. He's developed an infection in the arm he cut at Saddleback; mid-week he was rushed to the hospital.

In the opening moto Hansen and Howerton are among the first off the line. Hannah has some problems and is stuck mid-pack; that proves to be too much of a deficit to overcome. While Howerton and Hansen battle and pull away, Hannah steadily picks off riders. Still, he manages only third. At about the halfway point Howerton edges out Hansen and goes on for the win.

Though Hansen takes the holeshot in the second moto, Howerton passes him on the first lap and begins building a lead which will not be challenged. Hannah has just broken into the top 10 and he's pulling up fast. In the second half of the moto he passes Rick Burgett (Yamaha), then Hansen, to take over second place. But Howerton is gone, and they finish the moto in that order.

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**May Third, 1981.**  
**Atlanta, Georgia.**

It's been four weeks since the last National. Howerton has won five of the six motos and placed second in one. Hannah has won one, placed second in four and third in one. Howerton is clearly dominating but the points standings don't show it. He leads Hannah 147 to 133. A DNF by

Howerton at this point will allow Hannah to take the lead.

In the first moto Howerton gasses it out of turn one to edge by Donnie Hansen. Hannah is in fifth. Within five minutes Howerton and Hansen have a sizable lead over Hannah. Hansen, trailing by just a few seconds, keeps the pressure on Howerton but can't get in close for a pass attempt. Howerton takes the checkered. Hannah has a race going with Warren Reid (Kawasaki) for third place. He tucks in ahead of Reid at the finish line and beats him by a wheel for third. Howerton extends his series lead by another five points.

In complete contrast to the smooth moto one, the second heat features wild action. In the first turn several riders go down. Hansen, David Bailey (Kawasaki) and Bigelow thread through the corner first. Howerton is in sixth while Hannah puts the move on the top three.

Suddenly, Howerton crashes, dropping to 14th. Hannah, temporarily unaware of Howerton's misfortune, nevertheless passes Bailey for second place and pulls up on Hansen to challenge for the lead. Hannah puts some aggressive moves on Hansen and passes him.

Howerton is in a frenzy, cutting through the top 10 riders as if they were novices. He zaps Bigelow and Bailey, then Hansen and now has only Hannah in front of him. Hannah and Howerton dice for a while, then Howerton makes his move. Hannah is ready to try to regain the lead but his silencer falls off, robbing his bike of power. Howerton chalks up his seventh win. Hannah scores yet another second.

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**May 17th, 1981.**  
**Southwick, Massachusetts.**

This is a two-man battle. Though others—most notably Hansen—have dived with Howerton and Hannah, clearly no one can challenge them. Howerton simply goes incredibly fast; Hannah is going incredibly fast, but he's doing it wildman style, taking chances to hang in there with Howerton. Now the questions are: Can Howerton avoid a disastrous DNF? Can Hannah keep the pressure on without killing himself?

Howerton passes Wayne Boyer (Suzuki) in the opening minutes of moto one. Hannah charges past Steve Martin (Suzuki) and sets out after the leader. Howerton can't let up; Hannah won't. The two have a half-minute lead on third place by the halfway point of the moto.

Howerton falls—but he's up in an instant and maintains his position.

Minutes later Hannah falls. He too is up quickly, but the error has allowed Howerton to build an insurmountable lead.

Howerton-Hannah: 1-2.

It is clear that each is forcing the other to ride at his maximum potential, and maybe a little beyond. There can be no slacking. In the second moto Hannah grabs the hole shot; Howerton is several

spots back. Within the lap the two are parrying for the lead.

Neither backs off. By the halfway point the two have well over a minute lead on third place.

Howerton maintains his poise and takes the checkered. Hannah is riding extremely well but never quite meshes with the bike with which he's still not totally satisfied.

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**May 24th, 1981.**  
**Mt. Morris, Pennsylvania.**

Howerton looks unbeatable. He's won nine of 10 motos going into today's sixth National. It's easy to imagine his competitors being overcome by a sense of terrible desperation.

The gate for moto one drops and Howerton quickly works his way into the lead. There's tight action going on behind him as Hannah dispatches Bigelow, Reid and Hansen. Burgett joins Reid and Hansen and the three of them mix it up for third, fourth and fifth. Hansen and Reid are on the gas and both eventually pass Hannah, who is struggling with his bike. He's crashed a couple of times already and finishes fourth while Howerton easily takes the win.

That's 10 of 11.

In the second moto Howerton and Hannah surge to the front, each swapping the lead with the other. With Hansen struggling mid-pack, there's no one to challenge the pair. They build an enormous margin between themselves and third-place Bigelow. Neither Hannah nor Howerton backs off, and the scuffle turns into trench warfare. Finally the two crash after tangling with each other. Hannah's up first and off. Howerton scopes on him and gives chase.

Hannah's bike begins to falter, and Howerton passes him and takes the win while Hannah and his ailing bike fade back to seventh.

That's 11 of 12.

**Howerton** "At Mt. Morris I thought, 'Why should I even worry about trying to beat him?' Why should I try a berserko pass when he was riding so bad he couldn't even stay on the bike? He fell off three times in one moto. I knew I could just wait for an opportunity to pass him easy. I could make those opportunities that day because I was riding that much better than he was. Why should I want to run into the berm and get tangled again? I don't like to get hurt."

**Hannah** "I don't like to bump a teammate. It's a lot harder to ride with your teammate out there than it is to ride with Howerton—if I run in and bump him, well, he's Team Suzuki; he's an enemy. I run him over and go on . . . You race for yourself. I don't go out there to race so Bell can buy a new house next week. I go out there to make my own money. The same for him. If he runs over me I'll be mad for 10 minutes, then next week we'll be bud-

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dies again. That's the way it should be—  
we're racing, not playing baseball.”

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**June Seventh, 1981. St. Petersburg,  
Florida.**

Howerton has a chance to wrap up the title today. If he wins both motos, Hannah can't catch him, even if Hannah wins both motos in Colorado. This tough series is working toward a climax.

Once again Howerton builds a lead in the opening lap. Dave Hollis (Yamaha), Hansen and Hannah are pursuing, each trying to nail down second.

The heat and humidity—each approaching 100—are devastating. Hannah too is blazing and pulls away from Hansen for second. Howerton has enough of a lead to pull into the pits and have his crew drench him with water.

Moto One. Howerton and Hannah: One-two.

In the second moto it is, fittingly, Howerton, Hannah and that excellent rider who is so consistently up at the front, Donnie Hansen.

Hannah launches off a jump several feet above Howerton and steals the lead from him. He never looks back as Howerton and Hansen motor on for second and third.

It is Hannah's first victory in a National since Saddleback and breaks Howerton's string of nine moto wins.

Howerton has not yet clinched the Championship. However, he has only to finish 17th or better in one of Colorado's motos to secure the title.

It is virtually the end of the season.

**Howerton** “The first moto I won very easily with no problem at all. But it was such a hot race; if you haven't had a hot race all year it's easy to forget. I just came back and forgot and drank a whole bottle of ice-cold Gatorade. I got stomach cramps. So I went to the line of the second moto with a stomachache, and I really didn't know how I'd feel in the race. I said I was going for the win, just like I always do. But what happened was I just didn't feel like riding. My stomach cramped up and I kept bending over and I kept hitting bumps wrong, which made it worse. And no matter how hard I tried everything went worse. So I just said, “To heck with this—I don't need to do it.” So I just settled for second place.

“You can't do everything perfectly all the time.”

**Hannah** “I used to like the guy. I don't dislike him right now. I *don't* like his attitude. When I beat him, I beat him. When he beats me, he beats me. Every time I beat him this year he has a goddamn excuse. ‘Aw, Jill didn't fix my oatmeal right. My little arm was sore. I couldn't ride this week.’ Why don't he admit it once in a while that I beat him? He never does. When does he admit that somebody beat

him? If not me, somebody else. If Barnett beats him at an indoor he has a damn excuse. When you beat *me*, you beat me. And if somebody beats *him*, he beats him. Nobody's unbeatable. And I say he's riding great this year. He beat me in the 250. I admit it.”

**Howerton** “It (losing) will never be easy. The thing that I had to come to grips with was the fact that Mark Barnett could beat me . . . For a while there he'd beat me and it just hurt. I couldn't stand it. I knew I should be able to beat him. Then I finally realized he's gonna be able to win races . . . I know that if he wins the race he deserved to win the race.”

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**June 14th, 1981. Castle Rock,  
Colorado.**

It's all over but the champagne. Unless Howerton crashes himself out of contention in both motos, he's virtually assured of the title. Representatives of Suzuki wish to take no chances; they want Howerton to wrap it up safely and conservatively in the first moto so that nothing can go wrong.

But racers will be racers: Howerton grabs the hole shot in the first moto while Hannah dices with Hansen and Hollis. The game plan, though, has stuck in Howerton's mind; in the first 10 minutes Howerton has pulled into the mechanics' area and watched Hannah go by, then

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watches as Hansen passes.

There's nothing to do now but count the laps. Hannah wins the moto, Hansen takes second—and Howerton cruises into third place and nails down his second consecutive 250 National Championship.

The only thing in Howerton's mind now is closing the season with a flourish. He has the chance to do exactly that as Hansen grabs the hole shot with Hannah close behind. The leading two are having an excellent battle while Howerton chases them. Hannah goes down while dicing in close with Hansen. Howerton passes Hannah while he's down. It takes three quarters of the moto, but Howerton finally passes Hansen.

Howerton goes on to win the moto, his 13th win of 16 possible.

**Howerton** " (In the first moto) I went into the first corner and everybody started slowing off and there was nobody on the outside of me so I just left it on and got the hole shot. Then I thought, 'Now what do I do? Donnie is behind me—that's not too bad—I'll just race and I'll see what happens.'

"About four laps into the race, I went through the mechanics' area and Steve threw up Bob Zero, which meant Bob was right on my tail . . .

"The Japanese were concerned about the way he (Hannah) has been riding. I really didn't even think about it. I was just going for the win. That was my strategy. It really didn't occur to me to slow down. I knew I should be more cautious than normal but they were a little nervous and I thought, 'What the heck—it's not going to make that big a difference to get a second or a third place.' I didn't want to get hurt.

"So I pulled right over and Bob looked at me like, 'What are you doing?' It was like he was pissed off, jumping up and down on the seat and flipping me off. I thought, 'That's weird. Here I am giving him the race and he's all hacked off.'

"He was so shook up he could hardly go around the corner. I did a wheelie all the way up the straightaway. You could hear the people yelling. They couldn't believe it. Donnie was right behind me and I thought, 'I might as well let Donnie go too; he's close enough to race with Bob.' So I just let him go. I followed those guys the rest of the race like that.

"I finished third; no big deal. It made everybody else feel happy—and safe. Suzuki wanted the title and they got it, so they were happy. I was happy I got it. But then after it was over I wished, 'God-dang, I should have won it, because it was easy.' But you don't know that during the race. Maybe if I'd pushed a little I would have broken; so really it was better to play it safe."

**Hannah** "He didn't need it (the first moto victory). Why prove it when the championship's over? I agree with him . . .

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philosophy. It may be a belligerent one . . . I don't know why you have to try to please everybody.

"Let's put it this way: if I wasn't getting any money for motocross, I'd quit motocross and do something else. I like racing, but I'm really tired of it . . .

"I'm just not back at it good enough yet and maybe never will be again, I don't know . . . But I've already won enough. I'm glad I've won what I have and don't have to do it all over again. I don't have to prove anything anymore. I've already proved it."

**Howerton** " (When you race) you're a performer out there, and when people come there they're paying to watch you. They want to get some entertainment out of it . . . When they go to a race they want a chance to see people and meet the people. That's part of your job. You're supposed to talk to the people and not kiss them off . . . You know I stay at the races late and I don't get back until everybody is back from the race. I think it's paid off. I think people like me for what I am and not just because I can win races . . . I don't know why it's so important but I don't like to have it in the back of my mind that somebody doesn't like me.

"I want to do it (race) 'til I think I'm not competitive . . . When I'm not competitive there's no point in me being out there . . . I'm paid to win races, and I've always based my contracts on that, year to year . . . This year I finally realized I'm gonna be fast for awhile—and I'm getting faster every year. So I decided to go for a three-year contract and not just worry about the year-to-year hassle. Last year it was a big problem with Honda trying to get me and everything. Finally I just decided Suzuki has treated me the best and I don't really know about Honda. They offered me more money but I just feel confident with the people at Suzuki . . .

"When I win a race it's not because I'll get the bonus money. I feel good because it makes all the guys there happy. Tosh (Koyama—Team Manager) gets all excited; naturally the mechanic feels good. There's a lot of people that put in an awful lot of effort, and if they're just being paid to do their jobs and go to the race and not get anything out of it—then what's the point? It's not enjoyable; it's a chore."



Kent Howerton and Bob Hannah are currently preparing themselves for 1982. They have a lot in common—both ranking among America's premiere motocrossers, chasing the same goal, being in the midst of multi-year contracts. But they also have a lot separating them: they're very different personalities, which is never more apparent than in their comments. Ultimately, their clashing this year may simply have been the inevitable result of their being in a world apart from each other. ●