

Mixin' Motocrossers And Flat-Trackers

The place: The Houston Astrodome. The event: the weekend-long season opener of the AMA/Winston Grand National Championship series. The winner of Saturday night's short track: Jay Springsteen, who tied Kenny Roberts for most Grand National wins—29. The winner of Sunday's TT: Ricky Graham. The Big News for the weekend: Steve Wise, who finished third in the TT.

Steve Wise? Steve Wise the motocrosser? He's big news at a TT National? He finished third?

You betcha. Steve Wise, a former Team Honda motocross star, currently Team Honda TT/Road Race/Superbikers star, rode in his first-ever Class C event, the Houston TT National, and finished *third*.

Wise, winner of the past two ABC television-supported Superbikers races, has a new deal with American Honda. They have entered Wise in all Grand National TT events and selected Superbike road races. It's a new field for him, but he's shown spectacular style on the pavement and on the smooth track in his Superbikers outings.

Everyone who attended the TT race in Houston has *something* to say about Wise. But, depending on who you're talking to, bringing the flamboyance of motocross to short track is either the best or the worst thing that ever happened to Class C.

Indeed, it's only because of a recent rule change that Wise is out there qualifying. Now, any AMA expert-licensed rider can ride in any type of expert-level competition he chooses. For instance, if Kenny Roberts wanted to race the Supercross at Daytona on his Saturday off, all he must do to get in the final is qualify, just like any expert-rated berm-blaster.

At Houston, Wise skipped practice and went straight to qualifying, where he ended up 34th. Not great, but good enough to get in the program.

In his heat race, Wise started near sixth, then began making his way toward the front. He immediately set the tone for the evening by flying off the infield jump twice as high as anyone else, then squaring off the slower turns, motocross-style. Along the way he came across 1979 Grand National Champion Steve Eklund. There was what appeared to be a slight tangle, and Eklund went down. Eklund was visibly upset, and promptly made his way over to the AMA referee, hoping to



get some kind of negative ruling on Wise. Eklund believed he had been knocked down on purpose. Gary Scott was watching and said, "What Wise did wasn't dirty, but he shouldn't be out there on a motocross bike."

Eddie Lawson and his KR500 tuner, Steve Johnson, both said that Wise never touched Eklund. Whatever happened, Wise was *spectacular*.

In his semi, Wise moved into the lead on the third lap, nailing down first and a transfer to the final. In the main, only three of the 15 bikes were 750 Harley-Davidson XRs. Ricky Graham, H-D mounted, took the lead on lap four with a narrow margin over Mickey Fay, Mike Kidd and you-guessed-it—Steve Wise. Round and round they went, with Wise lofting an easy four to six feet higher than the other riders over the infield jump. The crowd *loved* it! Long-time Houston observers thought it was the most enthusiastic group of spectators they had ever seen at the Astrodome.

Throughout the race, Wise circulated between second, third and fourth places, passing in mid-air and diving underneath riders going into the turns. Near the end, Wise's bike's rear brake torque arm broke, leaving him with no rear brake. Graham still held the lead, Fay moved into second, and Wise finished third.

Even though the crowds had thoroughly enjoyed Wise's one-man show, hot opinions raged through the pits after the National. Most of the comments were negative, but there were several people who had a positive view for the record. Lars Goodman, of Can-Am motorcycles, said, "I was super-impressed by Steve Wise . . . A couple more riders like him would've made things much more interesting. He made quite a few of the regulars look like amateurs. I only wish he had been on one of our motorcycles."

Eddie Lawson, a very accomplished dirt tracker in his own right, said "Steve Wise was the best rider on the track."

There's no doubt people are wondering if Wise is for real. If Houston didn't convince them, they have only to check out his performance at Daytona on a Superbike. Initial reports had him turning 2:08s. That's fast, about four to five seconds off a good strong lap run by Kenny Roberts, who's run around Daytona's oval about as often as Wise has run around the Carlsbad motocross track.

No matter what anyone believes, Steve Wise says, "From what I learned at Houston, I really believe I can win the next three TTs. I really believe that."

We'll see.

—Mark Homchick