



● The Loudon National on June 19 and 20 was not simply another road race meeting. It was the reestablishment of a long tradition, broken in 1974 when the vast numbers of bikers and campers that lined the highways near the track were just too much for law enforcement officials, the AMA, and the press.

The very first New England area spring-time motorcycle national was held long before the war, on a cinder track in Massachusetts. The event grew, and over the years moved several times, eventually gaining AMA sanction. Laconia became a focus for motorcycle enthusiasts from all

over the country, a name and an event known to all.

Not only were competition enthusiasts attracted, but also the road riders who took part in the AMA's Gypsy Tours, and eventually also those riders who took the Marlon Brando Wild Ones image as their model. There was a split in the nature of the Laconia fan which widened with time. The event grew in importance, and so did the number of paying spectators. At the same time, the social aspects of the event grew as well. Laconia became an annual opportunity to camp out at the roadside among many other bikers, happy to es-

cape for a weekend from the frowning straight world and live for a glorious moment in freedom, beer, and ten solid miles of choppers. Simply because of their numbers, if for no other reason, all of these people could not see the race. They were there for the happening, and at its peak in 1974, there were an estimated 30-50,000 people lining the ten miles of New Hampshire Route 106, adjoining the track, oblivious to the men, machines, and drama on the inside.

At this point, everything stopped. The AMA and local authorities doubted their ability to maintain order in such a mon-

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strous gathering of humanity, and so the National Road Race at Loudon/Laconia was no more.

Ten years before, with fewer people present, there had been a nasty incident at nearby Weirs Beach that quickly escalated as bikers, local youth, the National Guard and police suddenly were at one another and many people were hurt. It was smoothed over, but the memory remained. With more people, and attitudes no better than before, one unlucky confrontation would be all it would take to convert the whole area into a war zone.

The 1974 event was peaceful enough, SEPTEMBER 1976

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The battleline was drawn hard and sharp: Gary Nixon and his Kanemoto-Kawasaki pitted against the OW-31s. It would be a contest of divine inspiration versus divine technology.

By Kevin Cameron

PHOTOGRAPHY: DENNIS CAPRIO



Loudon's aces are either on the gas or the brakes—hard. See why Steve Baker was a double winner?



Roberts, wearing last year's leathers in practice, watches at the pit wall. Every year he likes Loudon less and less.



The hazards of passing on one of Loudon's multi-line corners

Gary Nixon hammered his KR750 way out front, and then fell

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as it turned out, and was certainly one of the largest displays of counterculture since Woodstock. Impromptu drag races were staged, with bearded and costumed "marshals" holding up traffic to clear a patch of asphalt. Improbable-looking competitors, often stark naked, attempted zany and incredibly dangerous stunts of their heavy machines. The road was solid-packed, treeline to pavement, with every kind of alternative culture freak, weekend "outlaw," party-goers, along with all the many others who had come to see them.

John Jacobson, my race sponsor, a long-time supporter of road racing and a New England motorcycle dealer, began to look into the possibility of promoting future events at Loudon. Early in 1975 it seemed that only he and Gary Nixon (whose skill on the Loudon circuit is transcendental) were in favor of any future at all for the fifty-year tradition.

Meetings were held, attended by the AMA, Mr. Jacobson, the state governor's office, and the police. They made a remarkable discovery: there was no law against roadside camping! Jacobson began to wade vigorously against the tide

of opinion, believing that the Laconia races *could* run again, provided that they were returned to their proper focus; motorcycle competition. In due course, a law was promulgated to ban roadside camping, and in 1975 a major AAMRR club race was held on the date of the deceased National. There was no trouble of any kind.

This showed the truth of Jacobson's assumptions; that motorcycle race fans are no different from any other kind, and that if large concentrations of people could be properly entertained, everything would be fine.



Secret Knowledge, Hidden Touch: No one knows more about traction at Loudon than Gary Nixon.



Production class winning Moto Guzzi, ridden by Mike Baldwin and prepared by Reno Leoni, disappeared from the BMWs.



with Nixon out, Roberts forged a lead, and then . . .



Brake problems slowed Super-BMWs of Fisher (24) and Pridmore (63)

Nothing was easy. The AMA, nervous as ever about its image, offered objections of every kind. The track surface was too bumpy, there were too many bushes, spectator facilities weren't sufficient. They wanted to see the purse money well ahead of time. With repeated meetings, letters and phone calls, Jacobson smoothed down their ruffled fur. If this, that, and the other could be guaranteed, they *might* sanction a 1976 race.

The various area police forces were also worried. Further meetings were held, with Jacobson continuing to present the matter as legitimate business and not SEPTEMBER 1976

hysteria. His rational and methodical arguments brought progress and understanding. An island of possibility began to emerge as the seas of doubt receded. Still, the advance was slow, requiring all of Jacobson's considerable energy and negotiating skill. Even up to the last minute, when tentative agreement had been reached with all parties, lawsuits and restraining orders kept shooting up like dandelions, and the AMA was still fussing over the paving controversy.

The results were a satisfaction for everyone. The attendance for the two days was a new record. The racing was

safe and well-managed. There was no roadside camping, and there was no trouble about it. Bikers bought weekend tickets, stayed in the prepared camping areas near the track, and watched the race from the new perimeter road that allows spectators to walk around the entire track.

A fair number of people entered the track without paying, but Jacobson was happy with this, too, because there they were at the track, not out on the road, facing tense police and guardsmen as in years past.

For next year, it can be better. This success has cleared the uncertainties

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away, and made the event attractive to potential sponsors. There are plans for further improvement of facilities, and for better advertising and promotion.

Even the infamous "promoter's fee," the AMA's new levy on the riders' bank accounts, was returned to the purse as the main event came to the grid. It had not rained, there had been no riot, and the gate had paid for everything.

The special interest for the road racing fan was the renewed battle between Gary Nixon and everybody else. Gary has won the last two races here, in 1973 and 1974, and his special knowledge of this track would have made him the clear favorite here were it not for the Yamaha OW-31s of Ken Roberts and Steve Baker. The OWs have been the stars of the season, pushing forward the frontiers of 750 excellence in a sweeping gesture encompassing power, braking, handling and weight simultaneously. At Daytona, Venezuela, Imola, Paul Ricard, and at the English Match Races, they had made other machines appear an inferior species.

Each of the three leading OW riders had small shares in Formula 750 points, while Gary Nixon, with characteristic determination and persistence, had plugged away at every round, finally winning in Belgium and taking the points lead for himself. Although Loudon was not to count in F750, it would be the same alignment of forces, with Gary's special knowledge of the course as an added factor. It was to be a contest of divine inspiration versus divine technology.

Nixon's tuner for the fourth year is Erv

Kanemoto, who says with commendable modesty that Gary will get out front if you only give him a half-decent bike. Nevertheless, you can be sure that Nixon's semi-worked Kawasaki KR-750 is many times the machine it was when Erv first opened the crate. There was to have been a special chassis for Loudon, a massive structure of 1 $\frac{3}{8}$ " tubing (1 $\frac{1}{8}$ " is usual) based on the proven frame already built by Kanemoto for Nixon's Suzuki, which won this race in 1974, but the frame was held up in production.

This is not to say there were no other actors in the play. Gene Romero was there on a Vesco Yamaha looked after by Don Vesco himself. (His streamliner is languishing for lack of sponsorship.) Ron Pierce would ride my restored-to-health Kawasaki KR-750. Rapidly up-and-coming Randy Cleek was on Larry Worrell's (Mississippi Round Man) much-modified TZ-750 Yamaha, benefiting from Larry's European undercover work. Yvon du-Hamel, on the sole factory Kawasaki, was all but paying his own way, having signed to do only three races in the US this year. Nevertheless, to the delight of his fans, he was there, and Kawasaki saw fit to send the parts truck with support for him and for Pierce and Nixon. Gary Scott, who may be working more now and enjoying it less, was to ride a private Yamaha, as was English discovery Ron Haslam. Nineteen now, Haslam looks like he will go far and won't be paying for pistons, either. Reserve rider on the English Match Race team, he rode brilliantly when called upon to replace Dave Croxford and the Cosworth Norton.

Loudon is used frequently; club racing

has never been stronger in the East. The ripples left by heavy racing cars are no surprise any more, just a fact of racing life. Many of the complaints that had worried the AMA had more to do with the poor state of 750 suspension in 1974 than with the track. Private 750 Yamahas, many of them still on original shocks and lacking the indispensable front fork modification, were truly dangerous-looking that year. Cresting any of several rises on the course, they would wheelie and go straight into a divergent wobble that only rolling off would cure. More than one rider rode the race at seven tenths because of this, and might well have gotten around quicker on a 350.

Today most builders know what to do for 750 handling, and it was a much safer-looking race and a faster one. There are still a few diehards trying to finesse it on old 350s, but no one seriously believes that lightweight handling and power add up to much alongside heavyweight handling and power.

Testimony to the improvement was the number of routine wheelies produced by the leaders in the race. Most motorcyclists think of wheelies as unnecessary showmanship, an impediment to performance. This is simply not true in 750 short-course racing. Today's engines have the power to pull the front wheel just about anywhere, and a wheelie is the natural diagnostic for how much throttle to use. Throughout all the testing that Ron Pierce and I did for this race, I could tell when things were getting close to right by the number of wheelies, and could imagine the grins inside his helmet, too.

The handling advances have allowed heavier braking as well. Gary Nixon was getting his back wheel off the ground repeatedly in practice going into turn Ten. This was not a momentary thing, but a controlled lightness at the back produced by violent braking. This was heating the aluminum brake rotors to a semi-plastic state in which metal actually flowed outward from in between the surface coatings, like the filling of an ice-cream sandwich that gets sat upon. The flowed metal bulged out at the periphery, fouling the inside of the calipers. Erv had to cut the discs after practice to remove this metal.

Loudon offers open practice every Thursday, \$25 for all you can eat. A fair number of riders were in the area early and showed up. I had arranged a Wednesday session for Kawasaki, and Erv had 42 combinations of cylinders, pipes, and heads that he wanted to try, despairing of getting even to the half-way point. His hard work in preparation showed Wednesday afternoon when Nixon broke the lap record (set by himself in winning the 1974 race at 1:12.2), running on his own, at 1:11.75.

The following day, he lowered it again and again, finally to 1:11.40. When so

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many people showed up on Friday, the track management decided to hold open practice again, and this gave the first indication that Nixon's numbers might be the lowest in sight. Despite our apprehensions, the OWs did not immediately drop out of sight into the tens with a sickening display of fitness, but remained, mortal and frail, in the fourteens and fifteens.

"They're just running-in parts," was the commonest explanation. Still, the Wonderbikes were wiggling and bobbling just as though they were being ridden hard by men who were trying.

The AMA got nervous about the unofficial practice Friday afternoon, so it was squelched to make way for sound testing and tech inspection.

John Jacobson throughout this time was in his usual pre-race state, ex-haustingly cheerful and six inches off the floor, with all the burden of work and worry as promoter added on top. He was almost impossible to find, but he was everywhere.

Ken Roberts looked mad from the first moment I saw him at the track. His expression is often serious, but we have all seen him attempt a smile more than once, and usually with good cause. This was different. The recent events have been a lot to bear; his 250 machines, formerly the world's best, are now only occasionally quick, but mostly so slow that he must ride the ragged edge just to get into the results. His big bikes are quick enough, since they get the bulk of Kel Carruthers' time, but there are other machines at least as good and maybe better. Formerly, Roberts' machines were nearly as unusual as himself, but with Yamaha Ltd.'s new multi-rider policy and Carruthers' enlarged responsibilities, the machines have dwindled, leaving Kenny to make up the difference himself.

Of course, a good part of it is the existence of the other very fast OW-31s of Baker and Cecotto, or of any number of quick private 250s. A really fast machine with a very competent rider can give fits to a brilliant rider on an indifferent ride. Now that Japan is again making its own speed secrets, there is no Carruthers monopoly on how to make TZs run. All this makes life hard for Roberts, requiring him to extend himself.

Given equal machinery, there are few who believe that Roberts would come out second best. All too often, and unpredictably, the machinery is *not* equal, and it is this that requires him to try the impossible, to ride as he did in England in his wild, dangerous, and fruitless pursuit of Steve Baker. Time and again observers have marvelled at the risks accepted and the disasters averted, all in an effort to make good the missing performance. It's remarkable that Yamaha International, with all they have at stake, and with their knowledge of Roberts' worth, can continue to supply inconsistent machinery,

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especially in the face of the excellent preparation enjoyed by Baker and Johnny Cecotto.

It is all the harder to understand when you think back over the truly outstanding record of machines prepared by Mr. Carruthers. Himself a former 250 World Champion, and several-time winner of AMA Nationals, Carruthers has been the source of Roberts' fine rides, his horsepower, and has also been in no small measure his coach as well. This must all constitute a fair personal investment, a great source of pride.

Mr. Carruthers is looking much more managerial these days, but it would be a cheap shot to suggest that he is now fat and happy, content to kick back and watch all that he has put together gradually go to bits. There must be much more to it than meets the eye.

Whatever the reasons, Roberts' eyes were smoking the whole weekend, and even when he was on the track he appeared different, his head down like a charging wild animal.

Saturday was the first official practice, and would also see heats and final of the Expert 250 event. Kawasaki's KR-250 inline twin would have a considerable advantage over last year's Yamaha here because of its broad rotary valve powerband, but Loudon is not so much of a machinery course. Yamaha has reacted to the little Kawasaki by re-aiming their back transfer ports, which increased the trapping efficiency (the proportion of the charge blown into the cylinder that is actually retained at the moment of exhaust closure) at lower RPM. This was formerly done by an extension of the inlet duct with a thick spacer, but the new engine seems to do fine without it. Its inlet port has been redesigned to eliminate much of the S-bend which restricted it.

The two West Coast 250 Kawasakis had a form of monoshock suspension with a single Monroe air shock on one side of the triangulated swing arm. This made room for the rear cylinder's exhaust pipe to be routed straight back, rather than wrapping its heat around the block to exit in front of the carbs on the left. Engine development is at a standstill on these in the States, but lots of new material is in preparation in Japan, probably for next season's use.

There had been a club race the weekend before, which had offered some novelties. There had been three 250 riders lapping in the 1:15 bracket (1:15.3 was the old lap record). One of them was Ron Pierce protégé Harry Klinzmann, and the other two were, of all things, Easterners: Richard Schlachter and Mike Baldwin. A further surprise was Baldwin's win in the Open GP class on his heavyweight production Moto-Guzzi, beating TZ-750s and lapping in the fourteens.

Between practices, Nixon sat in the grass on the shady side of the truck, leaning against it with his eyes shut, taking in the warmth of the day and avoiding

distractions. On at least one occasion he showed his concern for Erv Kanemoto's peace of mind by shooing away a persistent journalist. Erv, despite his tough and single-minded core, finds it hard to be anything but polite to anyone, but he did have a great deal of work to do.

The stage was set for the 750 final by the time the 250 heats rolled to the grid. Although people were talking about phenomenal times by Baker and Roberts on the super-cycles, my watches still showed the Nixon magic on top with continuous 1:12.0s and his nearest competition a full second away. A second is a lot when it takes only seventy of them for a lap.

The big guns in the first 250 heat were duHamel on the monoshock Kawasaki and Roberts on his Yamaha, but it was no contest; Roberts had another droner and Yvon went on to win, with the two East Coast riders, Schlachter and Baldwin, second and third.

The second heat, predictably, went to Baker. Shortly after, the final was lined up and Baker drove away with it, depressing the lap record to a new lightweight low of 1:13.6 on the fifth lap while pulling out a workable lead from duHamel, Nixon, and Baldwin. By lap ten, he had settled into a comfortable 1:15 pace. Ron Pierce, starting last with a non-finish in the heat, was carving smartly through the pack only to suffer a broken exhaust pipe while eighth. Nixon's promising ride terminated as the rear brake torque rod stretched off. Persisting in third place was Baldwin, his engine turning very noticeably lower revs than the competition. It was, finally, another uncontested win for Baker, riding intelligently to signals on a well-prepared machine, and another almost-happy day for Kawasaki with duHamel in second. Baldwin's third surprised West Coast racer-watchers and confirmed the good opinion of him we already have in the benighted East.

Saturday night was the time of testing for all the many preparations that had been made to prevent trouble in the area, but the time passed smoothly. Three thousand people attended the short track event, won by Randy Cleek, and many more took part in gymkhana-like exercises for motorcycles held in the campgrounds. Everyone had a good time, and even the usually hard-faced state police were unbending a little and looking relieved. Saturday's crowd was a new record, and it still hadn't rained.

Sunday morning was gray and dismal. I sat at breakfast in the New Hampshire Highway Hotel and thought about the many past times I had looked timidly into that room, with its long central table which in those days was invariably monopolized by the Harley-Davidson and Triumph-BSA teams. Here I am, I thought, part of the new establishment. Shall I try to look gruff and professional and remote? Mentally I imagined what I might look like, and had to laugh.

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The windshield of the truck was dotted with rain on the way to the track, yet there was nothing to do but ignore it. The rain clouds were to persist all day, and the forecasts kept many spectators away.

In the first practice, Baker did a 1:11.6, the fastest non-Nixon time I had seen, but it was not without cost. He had a heart-stopping slide in turn eight and slackened his pace.

The first 750 heat assembled on the grid for its ten laps, and we got what we were all waiting for. Roberts led, with Nixon sliding up alongside at every turn on the inside, hard on the brakes, spiraling under the classic lines of Roberts. We could all see it coming, as Nixon's times dropped into the tens, and on lap five he stuffed his way past Roberts to lead, establishing a new lap record of 1:10.5 two laps later. He won, wheelie-ing across the finish line as he has so many other times, this time from Roberts, and by seven seconds. The crowd loved it. I loved it. Roberts, Cleek, and Aldana followed him home. The second heat was slower. Baker led every lap from Pierce, McLaughlin, Romero, and duHamel.

Now that Formula 750 is being fought out primarily in Europe, and the AMA Nationals are no longer the big-buck main attraction, the tire war has taken a new turn. Goodyears were formerly the only tires for US racing, but these heat races were a mix of Dunlops, Goodyears and Michelins. Nixon's mysterious relationship with Michelin continues ("It's not what you think!", maintains Erv, when asked about it) and their tires are becoming more available. They are competitively priced, too. The Dunlops are much improved because they aren't waiting around in the tech center with their feet up, but are at every European race of any importance with tires and open notebooks. Their latest offerings are comparable with the Goodyears at the high tread temperatures common in US racing, and much better at lower numbers. I suspect that the largest part of Goodyear's production of 1381A big-bike rears will go to top gas drag racing anyway, now that the quarter-mile quick-step people have discovered them.

The weather gremlins kept sending over numbers of weak-looking clouds, like a preliminary reconnaissance for a big rainstorm. The main event was moved up accordingly.

Times have changed on our starting lines. There were only three 100% factory entries with any chance to win—the two OW-31 Yamahas of Baker and Roberts, and the Kawasaki of duHamel. Gone from the scene was the imposing tractor-trailer of Suzuki, along with all their entries. Gone, too were the supporting entries of the other factories. Instead, the works bikes of Nixon and Pierce were "semi-private accommodations," and our National Champion Gary Scott was on a dealer-prepared Yamaha. Of the 69 pre-entries,

only 11 were non-Yamaha.

The machines assembled on the grid, heavy with gas, and mechanics with rolls of duct tape over their wrists and clean rags hanging from their pockets helped riders with last minute adjustments to leathers and faceshields. Finally there was the pushoff and the warmup lap, and the last anxieties over late arrivals, people standing on the grid positions trying to wave their men back to their slots. At the two-minute board, the experienced riders moved back from the line a few steps, cheap insurance against clutch drag and the one-lap penalty for creeping. Then the flag, and the Nixon magic show began again. It was Nixon first, then Baker and

Roberts, McLaughlin and Cleek on private machines, followed by Pierce and duHamel on the Kawasakis. By lap five, Gary had pulled a usable gap on Baker, running a bit slower than his heat-race pace, not yet up to speed or fully locked-in to his rhythm. Lap six saw a 1.5 second gap and promise of more to come as the OW riders accepted their fate.

Then, with lap seven nearly completed, Nixon entered turn seven, a bowl-like right at the bottom of the hill, and somehow his continuity was broken. The front wheel lost its grip and never regained it, the machine sliding on its right side, grinding through the primary case over the tach drive. Gear oil poured out, blackening the



fairing as if charred by fire. Gary spent his momentum against his shoulder, burning through his leathers and receiving a terrible raspberry. Human error? A slick spot? A bad tire? All the questions were asked, and all that could be found was the stopwatch. Not yet up to speed, Gary's moves may not have been in their proper relationship to each other. So many people crash on the cooling-off lap, when the lap time suddenly increases. Timing is off, mistakes have room to crop up. We all hated to see it, but we know, too, that the man is not a God. He is only a very exceptional human being.

After the fall Baker led for a lap, but now Roberts was ready, and poured past to

lead the next laps, moving inexorably away, quite a different picture than the one I saw in England. This was indeed the old Roberts, head down and intent, and to good purpose, as Baker fell back. There was more evil luck, though. A slower rider, falling in turn eight, slid into Roberts' path and had him off and sliding. He leaped up and seized his machine, but there was no longer a clutch lever, and no possibility but the empty gallantry of destroying a good gearbox by pressing on, clutchless.

As he rode slowly back to the pit entrance, he turned and shook his fist, rigid with frustration and still-born energy. This crash was just one more meaningless circumstance that has prevented him

from displaying his unique ability this year.

This left an unchallenged Baker in first, with McLaughlin making a good second out of a sick engine with a fatal oil leak. His forced retirement elevated Cleek, and the finishing order was fixed by half-distance. The only change arose from the race-long duel of Scott and duHamel for sixth. Some feel Yvon is in his last year of riding, for his fire appears considerably diminished and his Kawasaki contract has given him little more than money too many times. The great riders are motivated first by victory and second by other considerations. True passion comes from within, and money does not qualify. On the last lap, duHamel's experience paid off and sixth place was his. The order was Baker, Cleek, Romero, Pierce (I loved to see my machine finish. Now I can see my shadow again.), Ron Haslam, duHamel, and Scott. There were three Dunlop tires on the first two machines.

It still wasn't raining, and the excitement wasn't over, either, as the heavyweight production race was lined up. This is the "Superbike Race" which at Daytona was dominated by the amazing BMWs. These unlikely-looking machines are testimony to what work can do, for despite the apparently greater suitability of the more modern Kawasaki and Honda fours, and the narrow, low build of the Ducati V-twins, BMW has made the effort, done the testing ("I spend about 70% of my time on the dyno", says Udo Geitl, of Butler and Smith) paid for their mistakes, and found the answers.

Riding for BMW were Reg Pridmore, with more production racing time than anyone on the continent, Gary Fisher, who works with the East Coast racing effort, and Steve McLaughlin, who is not only a fine rider but who believes strongly in the future of production racing.

Most significant, and largely overlooked, were Mike Baldwin and his Moto-Guzzi. He had cut 1:14.5s a week ago. He might do it again.

When the flag dropped, this Connecticut rider did just that, seizing the lead immediately and never giving it up or relaxing his pace. The BMS dropped astern until they disappeared from sight. Baldwin is super-smooth on this course, describing satisfying geometric arcs of maximum radius through all the turns like a marble rolling free in a salad bowl.

This class, with all it has to offer in the way of increased availability of racing, better brand identification, lower costs to the rider, and a fresh start for the sport, paid Baldwin only a paltry \$325 for his win. He received infinitely more in reputation.

At the end, with the thousands of fans pouring out onto the highway and the competitors packing up for their trips homewards, the event had been a success and the tradition had been restored. People come to sporting events to see life's struggles strongly and clearly drawn in sharp colors, and this time, they had certainly gotten what they had come for. ●

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