

MONTANA STATE CHAMPIONSHIP HILLCLIMB

*Up . . . Up . . . And . . . Oh
Well, Try Again, Bob*

By Brian George

THE BILLINGS BLITZ

There are hillclimbs, and then there is the Montana State Championship Hillclimb. This annual affair happens right outside of the city of Billings, and is run by the Billings Motorcycle Club. It's an event that brings the whole town out of their houses and onto a grassy field at the base of one of the nastiest grades in existence. The folks of Montana say that it is the second biggest get-together of the year in the state, rating just below the Boat Float. That's where the population tours up to the head of the local river, hops into river crafts of various shapes and sizes, then floats back home, partying all the way. A tough one to compete with, to say the least!

The hillclimb is an event that has taken years to cultivate properly, and wasn't thrown together in a hurry. The Billings Motorcycle Club has been around since 1906, and now led by Club President Tom Nelson, Carol Hammond and Darrel Devitt, the Club spends all year gearing up for the event. They round up sponsors, lease the land for the competition, prepare the hill, pits, spectator and parking facilities, and get in some advertising to the rest of the country.

Practically the whole town gets behind the climb each year, with cash donations for the purses and first rider over the top, food and beverages, or whatever they can. All of the businesses seem to get into the swing of the sport when the Montana State Championship Hillclimb rolls around.

Aside from the city being heavily involved with the climb, there are a

couple of other factors that raise this event up above the level of any other in the country. The club put up a total of \$4,150 in prize money, divided into three classes, Advanced, and Unlimited and \$1000 of it going to the first rider to go over the top of the hill with at least one hand on the bars. That alone drew riders from nine different states from as far away as California and New York, and from two Canadian provinces.

What made the event spectacular though, was the attention the Billings Motorcycle Club members gave to the riders. A path was carved alongside the hill's main track, to allow riders to exit the hill at an easier slant, rather than straight back down, after they had reached a certain point. And once you topped the 230-foot mark, there was a huge crane to lift your bike up over the peak. Along with that, the hill was fully lined with catchers to stop any runaway machines from careening all the way back down to the bottom. Those members of the club stopped every machine within their grasp, whether it was an easy swoop with the rope, or a flying tackle to get the job done. No less than seven catchers were on to every bike up the hill once it stopped forward momentum, and they stayed right with the bike and rider, either pointing him back down, pulling him onto the side trail, or hooking him up to the crane.

There were comments from riders who compete throughout the country that this was the finest hillclimb in America, not only for the hill itself, but for the fantastic effort put forth by the

sponsoring organization, and the whole town of Billings, Montana.

The hill itself is very interesting. It has been used for the State Championship for three years now, but it was first used back in the early 30s, when old Harleys used to attack it with a quarter-mile run before heading upwards. The last time it was used before the present run, was back in 1955, and from then until now, it has been left alone.

What a job nature has done on this 300 foot slope! Its present dimensions are 45 degrees at the base, 60 degrees at the halfway point, and an outrageous 87 degrees at the top. That's a mere three degrees from being straight up!

To the competitors who were viewing the climb for the first time, it didn't appear all that tough. Talk was going on during sign-ups that there was a possibility of a 250 going over the top in the first round. Those who had been up the grade knew different, however. Although the climb appears very short, there are a few deterrants along the way. The first is the dirt. The top layer is loose soil which provides a relatively little amount of traction and that only lasted for the first rounds of climbs in the 250 class. Then bikes started tearing at the base. That layer is hard-packed, with virtually no traction whatsoever for a rubber tire. And to top that off, right in the middle of the hill, at around 200 feet up, was a giant hole. It had formed in the previous year's climb, and during the winter, rains washed it out even deeper.

The only way to get by it would have



Some of the exotica came out in the Open class, like this four-cylinder Honda 750, with Simons forks and Fox Airshox.



Check out the Kawasaki Triple.

MONTANA HILLCLIMB



been to go around it, and the surrounding banks were straight up and off-cambered. As the day wore on, the hole got even deeper, and new ledges formed all the way up the base. Getting over would be no easy task, and it didn't look like any rubber-only tires could handle it.

That, in fact, was true. Through the 250cc, 500cc and Open classes, nobody got any further than just a few feet past the hole. In the Advanced class that went for the State Championship, the title was determined by footage, not time over the top.

It was up to the Unlimited riders to make it over the crest, with their chains, steel paddles and nitro fuel.

In the first round, nobody even came close. Halfway through the second series of attempts, the farthest anyone could manage was nearly 60 feet short of the top. It was up to the remaining riders to see who could pull out the stops and get to the big crane way up in the sky.

Of those riders, though, one did it. Bob Day Jr., of Burbank, California, took his stock-motored Yamaha YZ465, with standard gas and an extremely lengthened swingarm, and traversed all the way up the hill. In his first climb, he only managed to get up to the 220-foot area before his steel paddles bit too hard and flipped the front end over his head. But his climb up over the top was smooth and appeared almost effortless. The 465 chugged along to the hole, right up and around one of the banks, and from there, Day rolled it back across the path, over the right side of the path, and landed \$1000 richer on top. He became the first rider in 25 years to get a motorcycle up to and over the ridge of the hill.

Another rider still awaited his second turn back down at the bottom, though. The grand was already gone, but not the class prize money. That rider was Kerry Peterson, another Southern California hillclimber. Peterson currently holds the number one plate in So. Cal., and earlier this year grabbed the first

The machines of the Montana State Championship Hillclimb: Bob Day Jr.'s hill-topping Yamaha YZ465, the number two Triumph of Kerry Peterson, an ultra-trick extended Yamaha, and a snow mobile-climber with a torque converter. You get all kinds at a hillclimb.



Bob Day Jr. became the first rider ever to make it over the top of the Billings State Championship hill.

overall prize money at the Widowmaker. He was one of the only two riders to make it over the top this year.

Day had topped the hill with a very fast time, and Peterson had to ride all out in order to beat the Yamaha. He roosted the bright silver nitro-burning Triumph out of the gate a mere 20-feet from the base of the hill and began bashing his way up. In a style completely opposite to Day's, Peterson careened off of everything, charging every inch of the way with all the power he had. At the 200-foot mark, Peterson went into the big hole. He hit it wide open, and launched himself out of it and straight up. The steel paddle came down and threw up a cloud of dust fifty feet high. It appeared as if the bike had lost its momentum, but with the throttle still pegged, Peterson regained traction. The Triumph began working its way back up, right up the middle groove. By the time it hit the steep final grade, it had some steam back up, and rolled right over.

Bob Day Jr. had made it over in 12.20 seconds; Peterson awaited his time. The judges from the Billings Motorcycle Club gave the word: it took him 14.16 seconds. The time lost in the air and after the hole cost him the win. So the finishing positions for the two were just reverse what they had been in the



Kerry Peterson, southern California's #1 plate holder in hillclimbing, brought home the Montana State Championship title with this climb of 225 feet.

Widowmaker. This time it was Day with the overall victory and Peterson the bridesmaid. The trip over the top also gave Day top money winner status, with a combined total of class purse and over-the-top prize money surpassing \$1500.

Almost second billing to the \$1000 over-the-top purse was the competition for the Montana State Championship. As mentioned earlier, the Advanced class went for the honor, and to get into the class line-up, you had to be in the top of the 250, 500 and Open divisions after the first two rounds of climbs.

Only one rider transferred from the 250cc trophy class, and that slot was taken by Mark Polen with a 212-foot ascent, only two feet better than runner-up Ken Jansen. Kerry Peterson earned himself first in class money, and a shot at the championship in the 500 rank, after taking his Maico-chassied 500 220-feet up the hill, which was six feet better than the transferring climbs of Mark Lenhardt, Jerry Richter and Bob Day Jr. Their footage readings were 214, 213, and 212 respectively, narrowly edging out Dick DeRosa's climb of 211 feet, which wasn't enough to make the transfer cut.

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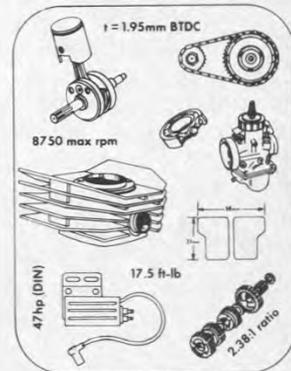
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In the Open category, Jim Polen, a Billings local, shot up to 223 feet before coming to rest on the side of the hill, and took the top transfer spot from the Opens, as well as first place class money. Mark Kimball and Mark Polen followed at 218 and 217 feet, with Steve Dewar, who has won this climb seven times before, tying the younger Polen in footage.

After two climbs in the Advanced runs, the title of Montana State Champion went to Peterson, with a run of 225 feet, the highest of any rubber tired bike all day. Lloyd Bergner came in second with a 221-foot run that was nearly ten feet higher than his fifth-place qualifying run in the Open class, and Mark Polen fell to third with a 216 mark.

With the win in the Advanced class, Peterson became the second-highest money winner of the event behind Day, while Jim Polen, Mel Kimball and Mark Polen rounded out the top five on the earnings list.

As the sun went down in the beautiful state of Montana, the spectators and competitors filed out the dirt road along the river that runs through the middle of Billings. They left behind them the hill that had finally been conquered after years of trying, and some special thanks to the Billings Motorcycle Club.

They had just been part of a special hillclimb, the state-of-the-art in this country today. It's got a club that cares, and a whole town that goes all-out for the festivities once every year. The hillclimb doesn't have a big name yet, but it's becoming a tradition. A tradition built on years of effort, and years of dedicated, hard work. □

MONTANA HILLCLIMB RESULTS

UNLIMITED

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------|
| 1. Bob Day Jr. | 12.20 sec |
| 2. Kerry Peterson | 14.16 sec |
| 3. Scott Juhlin | 241 feet |
| 4. Steve Stith | 227 feet |
| 5. Mel Kimball | 223 feet |

ADVANCED

- | | |
|-------------------|----------|
| 1. Kerry Petersen | 225 feet |
| 2. Lloyd Bergner | 221 feet |
| 3. Mark Polen | 216 feet |
| 4. Mel Kimball | 211 feet |
| 5. Mark Lenhardt | 211 feet |

OPEN

- | | |
|------------------|----------|
| 1. Jim Polen | 223 feet |
| 2. Mel Kimball | 218 feet |
| 3. Mark Polen | 217 feet |
| 4. Steve Dewar | 217 feet |
| 5. Lloyd Bergner | 212 feet |

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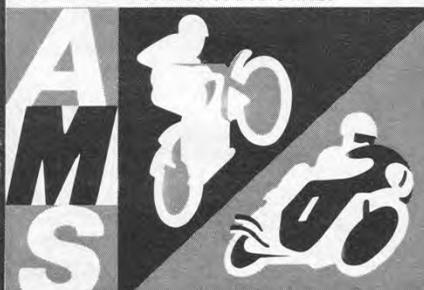
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