**Remembering Lone Star Motocross**

By Ron Pocher

Photos from the Kasson, Howerton & Wise Archives

Motocross Action’s Jody Weisel could most likely provide a more accurate depiction because a) he was there and b) he’s a professional journalist; but I was there too, and my memories of the early days of Texas motocross are among my fondest. Throttle twisting Texans are still waiting for the era that can even hold a candle to the legendary battles witnessed by the fortunate few who were lucky enough to be around in the ’70s.

Like most of the passions I still possess; my dad introduced me to motocrossing. I owe the old silver-haired fox plenty; but my love for motorcycles is a debt that I’ll never be able to repay. Ray still has one of the rare, yellow T-shirted Italian Puchaco Puxxings when we went to our first “big name” motocross in Dallas in 1968. Just a handful of enthusiasts could boast that they were in attendance for a round of Edison Dye’s “International Motocross Circus,” later dubbed “Inter-Am,” but my dad and I were part of that fortuitous group. Swedes Toresten Hallman, Arne Kringle and Ake Jonsson were aboard Husqvarna’s, the brand that Dye was then importing; while Belgians Joel Robert and Roger DeConter were joined by England’s Bob Backhouse, who all showcased their talents on CZ’s. The top American riders, now to the sport, were providing little in the way of competition in the year that followed the “Summer of Love.” We were both hopelessly hooked after watching just one lap of practice.

While we hit almost all of the famous Texas tracks of the day, like Rio Bravo, Lake Whitney and Mosier Valley at one time or another; most of our adventures took place in the south central part of the state. Lake Whitney Motocross Park, which still holds races today, is a pretty good example of how the majority of the Texas tracks were so carefully named “back in the day.” We always just called it Whitney but it was just a stones’ throw away from, you guessed it, both the town and the body of water with the same name. Whitney, which hosted its share of national motocross races back then, was also the site of the infamous “National Corn-O-Cross” in ’75. Weisel can tell you all about it in his “Jody’s Box” classics, at MXT-on-line; but basically whoever ate the most corn-on-the-cob in three short “motos” was declared the winner. “Losing your lunch” meant immediate disqualification and the field shrunk with each moto, as the first bit of “hurling” inevitably caused a chain reaction.

Going way-y back, Foster Road could be found just off of namensake near San Antonio and Austin Motocross Park, which has had four locations that I’m aware of, has always rested on the outskirts of the capital city with that same unique moniker. The track near Sayers, east of San Antonio, actually held an official Alias; Moto Sports Park, but we all just called it “Sayers.” The famous rock band, Aerosmith once played there, following a day of races on an early ’70s Sunday afternoon, long before they were anything more than some kids from Boston. Admission to the historic concert, but besides the usual gate fee, was the charitable donation of a canned good or some other similar worldly possession. I can’t remember the exact item required for entry, but it was right up our alley—cheap.

Lockhart MX was actually located between Luling and Lockhart and luckily it sat just a shade closer to the latter or we would have never been able to call it “Rockhart.” Jody mouth guards and Hallman chest protectors were very much in vogue at this once popular venue. I recall one savvy vendor selling off of Jofa’s, in a hurry, when Penton rider Henry Evans rolled in from practice with a mouthful of bloody teeth. Lockhart was the site of the inaugural “Com-O-Cross,” where kernels first flew at the ’72 Tex-AMA Winter Series event. Cycle Bowl and Cyclerama, site of the infamous “Let Brock Bye” saga, were San Antonio area tracks that were also running full swing during this era. Austin has always been guilty of having plenty of “hip” and it was already cutting edge in the early ’70s. If you hadn’t visited this gem since the days of the “Armadillo World Headquarters,” and rolled into town today, you’d think that you must have misunderstood your map. Once a cool little college town, Austin is now trying to catch Dallas on skyscraper count. Austin has been setting the bar for “American” music for years now, and back in the day, the usual cool casual wear, it was a trendy spot for the relatively new sport of motocross as well. Most of the central Texas fast guys lived in or around that area at the start of the decade.

Bill Kasson purchased the shop on South Lamar, that had previously been owned by the Parks brothers, in 1970 and renamed it Bill Kasson Yamaha. This would serve as the clubhouse or hub of Austin motocross for years to come. Bill ran the shop with the help of his dad in those early years and that trend continues as his son, Will, now helps carry the load. Like Pops, Will knows plenty about which grip to twist.

Once his new business was up and running, Bill had Zap Comix artist Tony Bell paint murals of his infamous “Mottecross Cat” and “Warlord Thodge” characters, dicing on their t-shirts with his picture “Warhorse” characters, dicing on their t-shirts with his picture.
fanatic who frequented the Kasson shop back in the ‘70’s was Mr. Bob Howard. Howard owned a couple of gentlemen’s clubs and could always be counted on to provide plenty of lovely “pit tootsies”. You could write a whole book about Bob’s adventures but his story sadly ended with a helicopter crash several years back.

Jack O’Leary Yamaha was another Austin shop that sported a pretty fast team back then as well. Gary Bigley was the man to beat in the 125cc Expert class in those early days of Texas motocross. Bigley always had his Yamaha’s custom-painted and looked rather dapper with his matching helmets. The real star of the O’Leary show, though, was Jack O’Leary, Junior. Bob Hannah and Danny Chandler had nothing on the younger O’Leary when it came down to being wild. Jack, Jr. only knew one throttle position – on. Despite practically foaming at the mouth while on a motocross track, O’Leary managed to stay on two wheels more often than not and certainly won his share of races during a time when the competition was at its fiercest. Jack also ran hurdles for the University of Texas track team in those days, and I recall him pulling off one move that could have only been accomplished by a national level sprinter. At the second version of the Austin Motocross Park - the old “sand pit” track that lay along the banks of the Colorado River; O’Leary went into a violent swap while blasting through a whoop-filled sweeper. Both of Jack’s feet were thrown from the pegs and they landed on the clutch side of his YZ, where he promptly took three, long, high-speed gallops before casually hopping back in the saddle. O’Leary never chopped the throttle and away he went, leaving us all laughing and shaking our heads in amazement.

Austin may have been the “hotbed”, but Houston also had its fair share of fast kids. Fred Hannah and Steve Hackney rode out of Cycle Shack and helped form the H&H Music Company Race Team. Robert Tuggle was also part of this high-flying group and Fred’s sister, Cecille, could work her way around a track as well and should be remembered as the “first lady” of Texas motocross. The bespectacled Robbie Holbert, who always ran a big “A” on his CZ’s number plates, negotiated the courses with both speed and style and was yet another quick Houstonian.

Cycle Shack, in Houston, was the first shop in Texas to carry Husqvarna and the Parks brothers, Doug and George, quickly followed suit when they added this line to their Austin dealership. My dad helped bring Husky’s to south Texas where they were first sold at Cycle World and, shortly thereafter, Kawasakki of San Antonio. Ray had the first 250cc “Cross” in the area while good friend, Chuck Hurst, rumbled about on the first 400cc. They had hoped to create local interest and that’s exactly what they accomplished. The year was 1970 and those models were still shift-on-the-right 4-speeds.

Jack Hicks, John Kasson and Jack O’Leary, Jr.
No story about Texas motocross would be complete without a few words about the original “Mr. Holeshot”, Wyman Priddy. Wyman could get off the line like no other, and although I never had the pleasure, word was, a nicer guy you’d never meet. Priddy had a fair amount of success on the national circuit and received factory support from Kawasaki during his heyday.

The three dudes that have enjoyed the most national level success during the history of Texas motocross are unarguably Kent Howerton, Steve Stackable and Steve Wise. The privileged few, that were into motocross and resided in the Lone Star state during their prominence, couldn’t have picked a better time to be a fan. Whenever any two or all three of these gents got together, it was guaranteed that you’d soon be jumping up and down and screaming until you were hoarse from doing so. Their early ’70’s battles were a riot and as much fun as I’ve ever had while playing the role of spectator, regardless of the sport. I can certainly imagine what it must have been like to be part of the Southern California motocross scene during that same era, thanks to this hasty trio.

While Howerton’s throttle hand sold plenty of Husky’s, and was obviously a pretty strong negotiating tool, my dad was also quite instrumental in helping Kent to land his ride with Husqvarna. Thanks to Howerton’s skills and hard work, Ray and I often found ourselves in positions we wouldn’t have otherwise been in. If you read Kent’s AMA Hall of Fame biography, it states that his first top finish in a national motocross was at the Lake Whitney round of the ’73 250cc series, where he finished fourth overall while aboard a CZ. The truth of the matter is, Howerton did finish fourth that day, against all of the factory riders, but he was actually riding my dad’s Husqvarna “demo” which sported no more than a better set of shocks (Bilstein’s, I believe), some mild cylinder porting, and a pair of Oury grips. Pete Szilagyi was covering that race for Cycle News and published my dad’s rather bold quote, which read: “Those California prune pickers will be meltin’ like lilies in this Texas heat”. Though it seemed humorous enough at the time, I remember reminding Ray that he probably wasn’t doing Kent any favors since, at that time, about 95% of the top motocrossers were from the Golden State. Szilagyi (an Austinite) joined in on the fun when he referred to one of Howerton’s many passes like so: “About halfway through the second moto, Howerton put a black pass on Gary Jones that made him look like a 250 Novice”. Ray and I were standing in the mechanic’s area,
at that very corner, and I remember it like it was yesterday. Jones got the last laugh though, as he captured his third of four consecutive national championships later that year.

Kent Howerton

Back in those days, the AMA Grand National Dirt Track Series always began in Houston, in January, with the Astrodome TT and Short Track doubleheader. The biggest motorcycle show in Texas always occurred that same weekend in the Dome’s Exhibit Hall. On the Sunday following the ‘74 races; Kent, Ray and I rolled both a new 400cc and the all new 250cc “Mag” right out of the Husqvarna display booth, then out of the Exhibit Hall and right into my dad’s truck; thus beginning Howerton’s “support ride” with the Swedish brand. Different friends helped Kent get to whatever nationals within reach that year (when my dad couldn’t make it), where he posted promising results throughout the season. We accompanied Howerton to the 500cc Carlsbad USGP during that summer, a race that we probably wouldn’t have ever seen, if not for Kent’s participation.

About halfway through the ‘74 season Howerton’s results proved strong enough that he received an invite to travel with the team to the remaining events on the schedule. Kent finally received a true factory bike just before the final round in New Orleans. When Marty Tripes jumped ship to ride with Can Am, and he showed his appreciation by posting his first national victory. That would be the last race where Ray and I were more than just faces in the crowd, and we are forever grateful for having witnessed the moment.

Husky rider Gary Semics also claimed his first national win that day, in the 500cc class, and Husqvarna threw an impromptu celebration dinner in the hotel’s banquet room. I dined right next to some fellow named Brad Lackey who treated me to my first ever glass of wine. Pretty cool memory.

If not for just one, but two flat tires, Howerton may have walked away with both the 250cc and 500cc crowns in ’75, but instead both titles slipped through his hands partly due to those untimely flat tires. Howerton did win the 500cc championship for Husqvarna in ’76 and until 2003, when Grant Langston captured the 125cc crown on a KTM, was the last rider to snatch an American motocross championship on a European mount. It was during his days with Husqvarna that Kent developed the technique of “clutching it” out of corners, in order to keep his Husky in a taller gear. He should be credited as the first racer to use this little trick that forced his mechanic, Eric Crippa, to install new clutch plates prior to each moto. The “Rhinestone Cowboy” went on to claim consecutive 250cc national championships in ’80 and ’81, while riding for Suzuki, before closing out his career in ’84 after a two-year stint with Kawasaki.

Stackable (21), Priddy (18) and Howerton (27) at Lockhart MX Park

Stackable came even closer to winning that ’75 500cc crown when he was one of six riders (including Howerton) who went into the final round, the now-famous “Battle of New Orleans”, with a mathematical chance of winning the championship. “Short Stack” was obviously the fastest rider on the track that day and had charged all the way to second in the first moto, when his front wheel suddenly decided that it didn’t need all those spokes. Steve nursed his factory Maico home in seventh, and probably realized he was going to need a little help if he were going to take the title. Stackable handily won the second moto and when the points were tallied, it was determined that if he would have fallen to just fifth at the end of moto one, the championship would have been his. “Stack” did win the ’75 500cc AMA Supercross Championship but that would be his only title in a career that saw many series podium finishes. Stackable was probably the tallest rider in AMA Motocross history and was “Smooth with a capital S”. Like Howerton, Steve also rode for the Suzuki and Kawasaki factory teams during his career. “Stack” should also be remembered as both the first racer to wear synthetic motocross pants and the first racer to have his own signature series of motocross apparel. Griffs introduced the “Steve Stackable Ultralites” in ’74 and Steve’s autograph appeared on the waist belt of each and every pair. Stackable had a great on-track fashion sense and can be credited with one of the more timeless quotes in motocross lore—"If you can’t be fast, at least look fast".
Steve Stackable

Wise began racing out of his father’s McAllen Honda shop and proved a local threat when Gary added Penton to his line. Once the Honda Elsinore’s arrived in ’73, Steve was suddenly more than a handful and provided both Howerton and Stackable with more competition than they may have wanted. Wise says that one of his favorite memories is an early ’70s battle that he and “Stack” had at the old “sand pit” track in Austin, during his short stay with Bultaco, while Stackable was astride a Maico. “I’m not sure of the year, but that race was of the old “knock-down-drag-out” variety”, said Wise.

Steve Wise

Wise may be the most versatile motorcycle racer to ever come out of Texas, and possibly even the nation. Wise is the only racer who can say that he stood on the podium at AMA Motocross, Supercross, Road Racing and Dirt Track Nationals during his career. Steve reached the top step in those first three disciplines and looked to have the ’82 Astrodome TT all but won when a late race mechanical issue dropped him to third. Like Howerton, Wise was also a two-time winner of the ABC’s Wide World of Sports, made-for-TV, “Superbikers” event. Steve can also boast that he was the first rider to win an AMA 125cc National Motocross race as a privateer, when, with the help of longtime tuner Jimmy Strait, he came out on top in the ’76 Maryland round. Wise got his first factory ride with Kawasakis, via a recommendation of Stackable, but enjoyed his most
success as a member of Team Honda, where he also did his road racing. Steve was also able to post many top finishes while on one of the earlier FMF teams and joins Howerton in the AMA's Motorcycle Hall of Fame.

I wasn't lucky enough to be at the '86 Anaheim Supercross, which most experts call the best race ever. I have seen the video and that's a fact that would be hard to dispute. I've also been fortunate enough to attend a couple of events at the “Big A” and they were both enjoyable occasions but the best race I ever saw, in person, took place in the Astrodome. The year's really not important but my guess would be 1975. Some may call me a bit partial and others may scream “big deal, it was a heat race”, but Howerton and Stackable were slugging it out “tie-toe”. I don't know how many times they swapped for the lead and, to be honest, I can't even recall who won. All I really know is that they were driving me and the rest of those poor Texans in the crowd, “plum apey”. The only thing that could have made it any better was if Stevie Wise would have been right there in the mix as well. Then it would have been just like the “good old days”.