

100 YEARS OF THE AMA

BY JOHN BURNS, JACK EMERSON AND KEATON MAISANO
PHOTOS: AMA ARCHIVE

Let's not get too weepy about it, but let's recall that the 1980s, for many thousands of us AMA members and motorcyclists, is when the motorcycle thing really came of age.



If you happened to be 20-something around the time President Ronald Reagan was elected, you were right on the cusp of when modern engineering (mostly Japanese) met rising prosperity for many Americans. If not exactly *prosperity*, then the wherewithal to scrape together the price of a shiny new Honda or Harley-Davidson and still pay the rent, whether you were a yuppie or a yokel.

Or maybe it's because everything from your 20s looks rosy 40 years later?



But the 1980s actually were rosy: AMA Motorcycle Hall of Famer Kenny Roberts paved the way for American domination of 500cc road racing, and fellow Hall of Famers like Cooley, Lawson, Spencer, Merkel and others followed his lead in AMA Superbike and Grand Prix competition.

Donnie Hansen, Chuck Sun, and Hall of Famers Danny LaPorte and Johnny O'Mara got the American motocross domination train moving with their win at the 1981 *MX* and *Trophee des Nations*, and HOFer Brad Lackey and LaPorte followed that up in 1982 with 500cc and 250cc world motocross championships.

And then there were the amazing (and amazingly high-tech) bikes: On the street side, the best-of-the-air-cooled-inline-fours Suzuki GS1000S and 16-valve GS1100 from 1980 and '81. The 1983 V45 Interceptor. The 1984 Ninja 900 (the first Ninja, mind you). The Suzuki GSX-R750 of '85 (in Europe and Canada, anyway). Honda's CBRs of '87, and the RC30 of 1988. The Yamaha FZR of the late '80s. Ducati's Desmoquattro 851.

And on the dirt side? Long-travel suspension, power-valve technology, disc brakes and liquid-cooling all came into play during the decade, with Japan Inc. mostly dominating the proceedings.

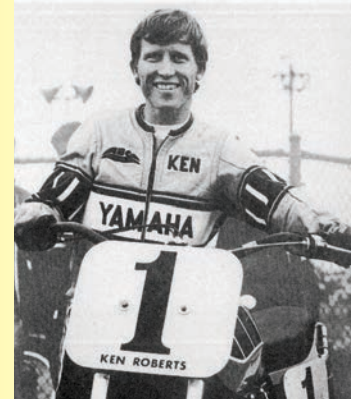
The AMA was plenty busy, too, fighting things like proposed bans on "Superbikes" from a certain Sen. Danforth; bans on motorcycles in HOV lanes, and in city parks; calls for motorcyclists to purchase special catastrophic healthcare insurance because of "their voluntary participation in risky activity"; and efforts to repeal the 55-mph national speed limit.

The AMA also created the American Motorcycle Heritage Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit that aimed to preserve the heritage and history of motorcycling in America, and which laid the foundation for the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame.

A coming-of-age decade? You betcha. Enjoy!

1980S

THE



KENNY ROBERTS
"King Kenny" won the last of his three 500cc world road racing championships, on his way to retiring as a rider a few years later. But the man who first kicked down the door to Europe wasn't quite done being involved in racing, not even close. Roberts was inducted into the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame in 1998.

ELECTRONIC FUEL INJECTION
Kawasaki's KZ1000G Classic cruiser was the first; traditionalists were aghast at the lack of moving parts and tiny springs, jets, and orifices to plug up.

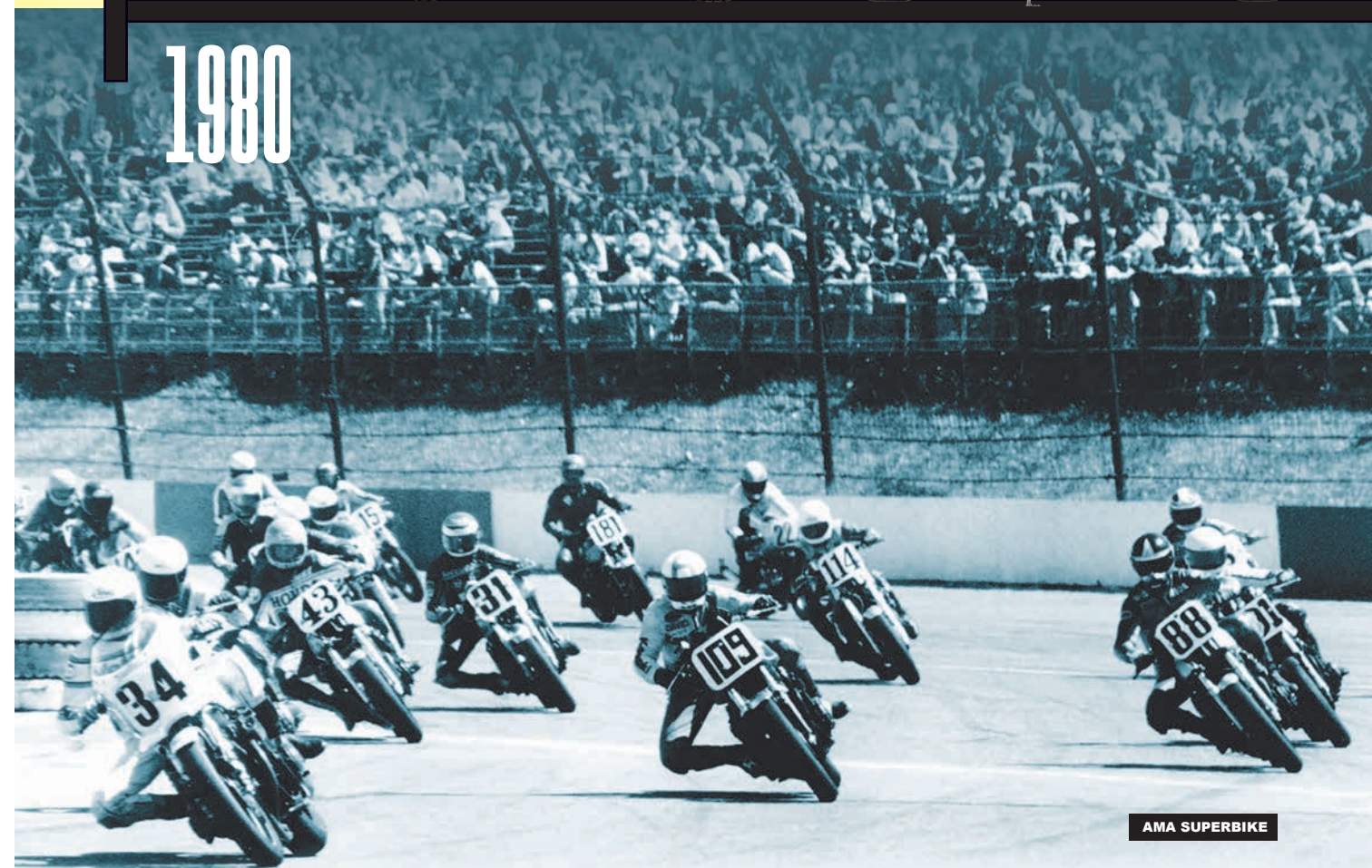
1980 YAMAHA PW50
Also known as the Y-Zinger, the "P-Dub" launched a million riderships...and is still in the Yamaha lineup, at \$1,849.



1980 BMW R80G/S
BMW had no dirt bike in its lineup prior to the first G/S, and it didn't afterward, either. But it did have a street-biased dual-sport-adjacent machine, which turned out to be what lots of riders would soon be looking for. The G/S was BMW's — and maybe the world's — first "adventure bike."



AMA SUPERBIKE
Honda entered AMA Superbike in 1980 with a kid from Shreveport, La., who gave Big Red its first AMA Superbike victory that year at Road America. AMA Hall of Famer Freddie Spencer finished third in the points that year, battling the whole way with fellow Hall of Famers Eddie Lawson's and David Aldana's Kawasakis, and 1980 champ and HOFer Wes Cooley's Suzuki. Superbikes were what everybody wanted to see, and the production-based class was on its way to becoming the AMA's premier road racing class.



1980

AMA SUPERBIKE

HIGH TECHNOLOGY SPINS THE MOTO WORLD ON ITS AXIS...AND WE ALL BENEFIT

SUSPENSION REVOLUTION

Rising-rate linkage-type rear suspensions in the form of Honda's Pro-Link, Kawasaki's Uni-Trak and Suzuki's Full-Floater debuted on production MXers so we could all fly higher and land softer. Suzuki RM125 and Yamaha YZ125 even got liquid cooling.

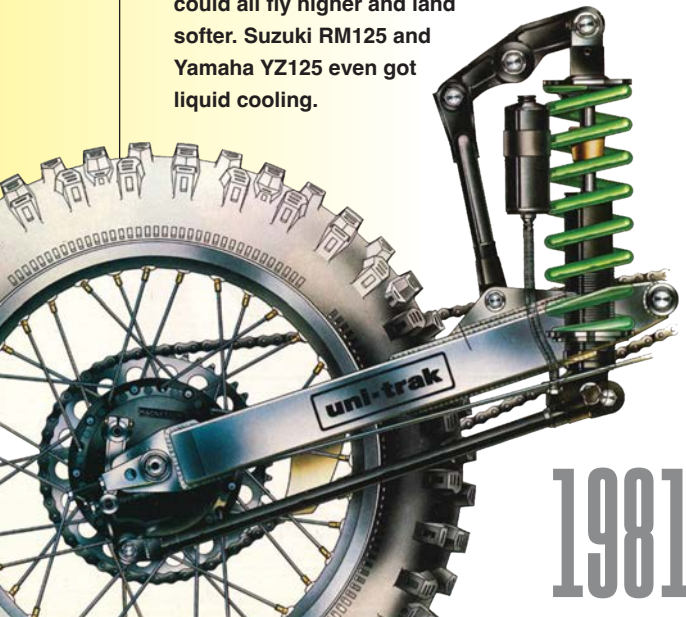


REAGAN ON MOTORCYCLING

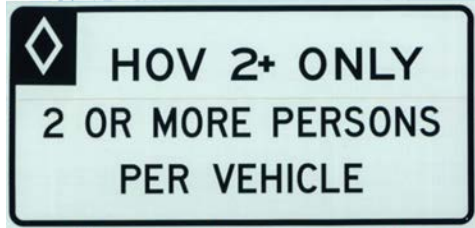
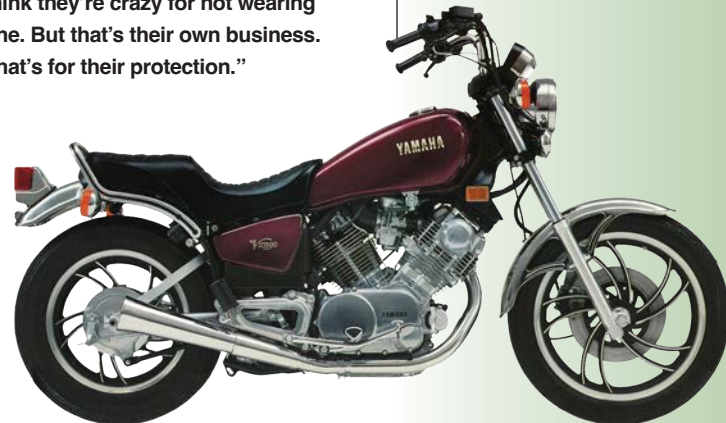
Prior to the 1980 presidential election, *American Motorcyclist* questioned the candidates on motorcycle-related issues. Eventual-President Ronald Reagan was one of the individuals that responded, and he talked about resource and recreation management, highway safety, energy, and the executive branch. Specifically on helmet use, Reagan said, "I won't support compulsory helmet-wearing for motorcycle riders even though I think they're crazy for not wearing one. But that's their own business. That's for their protection."

1981 YAMAHA XV920R AND 750 VIRAGO

The first Japanese V-twins imported to the U.S. broke a gentleman's agreement among the Japanese OEs to *not* offer them, and it made many Americans see red, too. Small dirtbikes and inline-fours were fine, but now they were messing with *American V-twin domination!*



1981



HOV HYPOCRISY EXPOSED

In 1969, High-Occupancy Vehicle lanes were introduced to American highways to ease traffic and reduce fuel consumption. Despite the federal government permitting motorcyclists to use the HOV lane in 1982, several states pushed back against the practice, causing the AMA's Government Relations Department to spend most of the 1980s fighting to give riders the right to use the lanes. While the AMA broadened opportunities for motorcyclists to utilize these lanes throughout the '80s, the fight continued into the 1990s as states continually found different loopholes to penalize riders for using the HOV lane.



1982 YAMAHA YZ1250

While the sum of the parts left a little to be desired *functionally*, the '82 YZ was the first to put all the components — linkage suspension, liquid cooling and a power-valve system (called YPVS, for Yamaha Power Valve System) together. It set the course for the future of the two-stroke MX era.

WORLD MOTOCROSS CHAMPS

AMA Hall of Famer Brad Lackey won the 500cc World Motocross Championship after a decade of trying on a works Suzuki with an inverted Simons fork. That same year, Danny LaPorte won the 250cc world title on a factory Yamaha — our first two American MX world champions.



THE BUYOUT

After being a subsidiary of AMF since 1969, a group of Harley-Davidson execs led by AMA Hall of Famers Vaughn L. Beals Jr. and Willie G. Davidson signed a deal to buy itself back for \$80 million.

Called "The Eagle Soars Alone," Harley-Davidson's emancipation included the Harley-Davidson name, parts and accessory business, and golf cart line. Just in time, President



Ronald Reagan signed a bill in 1983 that imposed a 45-percent tariff on heavyweight motorcycles imported to the United States, which hamstrung the Japanese OEs right about the time the Motor Company introduced its game-changing Evolution Big Twin engine.



MOTOCROSS/TROPHÉE DES NATIONS

The underdog team of Donnie Hansen, Chuck Sun, and AMA Hall of Famers Danny LaPorte and Johnny O'Mara — led by five-time world champion and HOFer Roger DeCoster — became the first American winners, sweeping the 250cc *Trophee des Nations* and the 500cc *Motocross des Nations*, beginning a 13-year period of domination by U.S. teams.

THE HURT REPORT

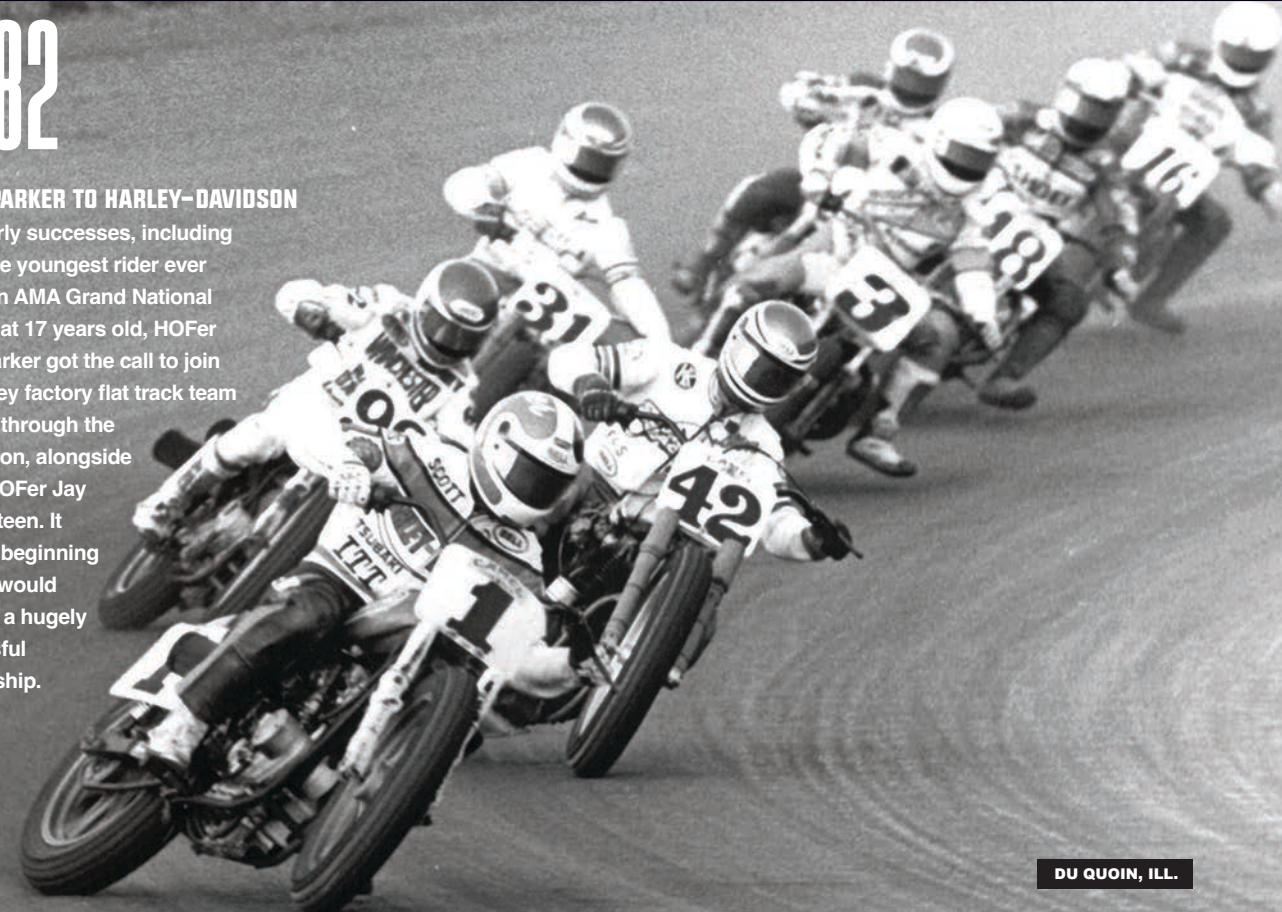
Professor and motorcyclist Harry Hurt issued a groundbreaking research report regarding motorcycle safety and the typical causes of motorcycle crashes, dubbed "The Hurt Report." This study was revolutionary in the world of motorcycle safety and helped establish more reliable training methods for new riders. The Hurt Report found that left-turning cars were the single largest catalyst for motorcycle accidents, and that unlicensed riders aboard new-to-them motorcycles were over-represented in crash reports. For his pioneering work in the field of motorcycle safety, Hurt was inducted into the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame in 2007.



1982

SCOTT PARKER TO HARLEY-DAVIDSON

After early successes, including being the youngest rider ever to win an AMA Grand National in 1979, at 17 years old, HOFer Scott Parker got the call to join the Harley factory flat track team halfway through the '81 season, alongside fellow HOFer Jay Springsteen. It was the beginning of what would become a hugely successful relationship.



DU QUOIN, ILL.

1982 SUZUKI KATANA

By the time the Katana sliced into town, Japan Inc. was selling thousands of inline fours that were mostly all great motorcycles but with nearly nothing to distinguish one from another. Then Suzuki hired ex-chief of BMW styling Hans Muth to update its image. The GS1000SZ was a show-stopper at the Cologne Motor Show, complete with highly uncomfortable but majorly stylish suede seat.



AMERICAN MOTORCYCLE HERITAGE FOUNDATION

In an effort to preserve the heritage and history of motorcycling in America, the AMA established the American Motorcycle Heritage Foundation in 1982. This 501(c)(3) organization sought to maintain an archive of all important documents and photographs regarding the growth of motorcycling in America. Just eight years after its creation, the AMHF opened the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame, which serves as a vessel to recognize and celebrate motorcycling's most noteworthy figures.



ST. LOUIS LOBBYING

After generating momentum in the 1970s, the AMA continued impacting legislation on behalf of motorcyclists in the '80s. One way was in a three-year fight against a St. Louis law prohibiting motorcycles in city parks. The AMA's lobbying culminated in 1982 when the St. Louis City Council struck down the law and replaced it with a strict noise ordinance.

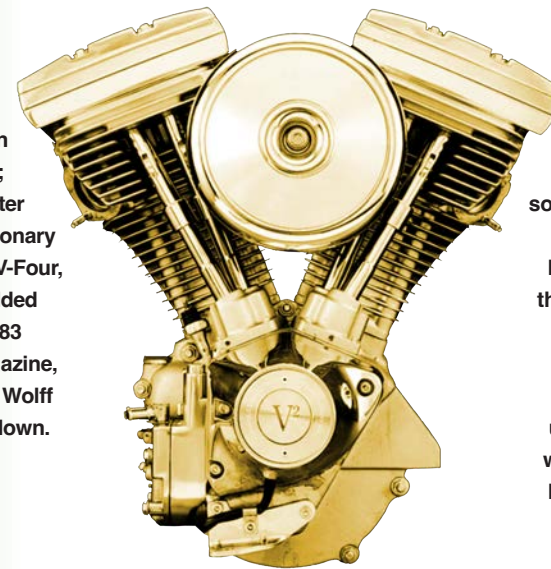
1982 HONDA CX500 TURBO

Honda's CX500 turbo was soon joined by Yamaha, Suzuki and Kawasaki's boost bikes. Honda punched it out to 650cc (shown) a year later. The trend would not last.



1983 HONDA V45 INTERCEPTOR

Some had Farrah Fawcett hanging on their bedroom wall; others had the poster of Honda's revolutionary new liquid-cooled V-Four, which appeared folded up inside an early '83 issue of *Cycle* magazine, with our own Thad Wolff aboard, and knee-down.



HARLEY-DAVIDSON EVO

Now that it was emancipated from AMF, H-D needed something superior to the old Shovelhead. It was a low bar, and the new all-aluminum 1,340cc Evolution engine cleared it easily. Sales were up 31 percent in '84, when the new Softail FXST ushered in the modern cruiser era.



1984 YAMAHA RZ350

After decades of building great two-stroke twins for road and track, the liquid-cooled RZ was the last of the red-hot Yamasmokers (in the U.S., anyway). You should've been there.

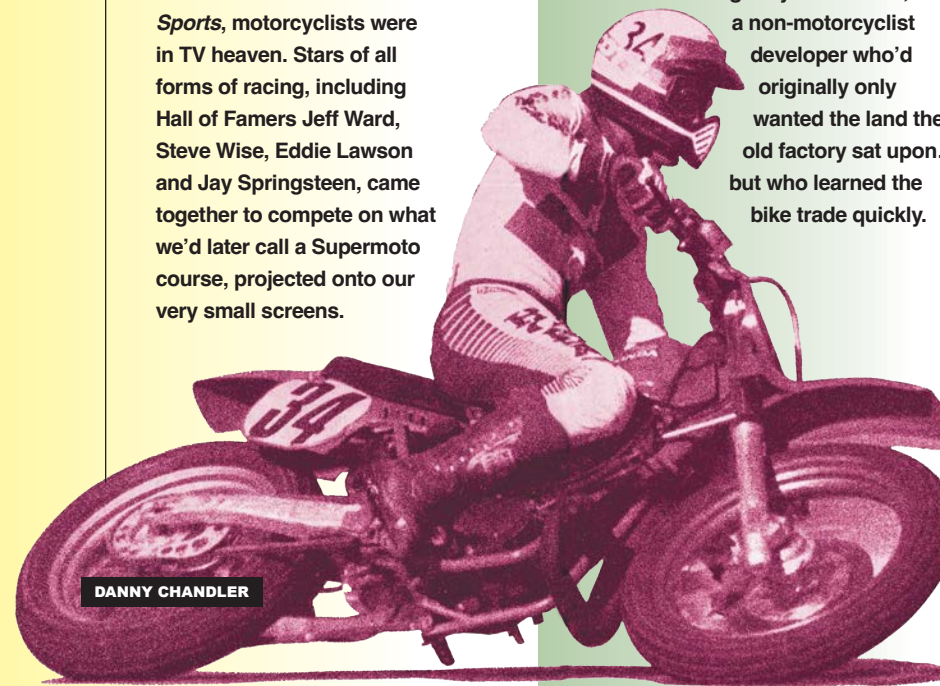
1983



DAYTONA BEACH, FLA.

THE SUPERBIKERS ON TV

When Hall of Famer Gavin Trippe and crew put together the "Superbikers" series on ABC's *Wide World of Sports*, motorcyclists were in TV heaven. Stars of all forms of racing, including Hall of Famers Jeff Ward, Steve Wise, Eddie Lawson and Jay Springsteen, came together to compete on what we'd later call a Supermoto course, projected onto our very small screens.



DANNY CHANDLER

TRIUMPH: THE END OF AN ERA

After nearly 100 years, Triumph went belly up in '83. Not to worry, though; the legendary name and rights were bought by John Bloor, a non-motorcyclist developer who'd originally only wanted the land the old factory sat upon... but who learned the bike trade quickly.



STEADY EDDIE'S RUN

After winning AMA 250cc titles in 1980 and 1981, and AMA Superbike championships in 1981 and 1982 for Team Kawasaki, Eddie Lawson bagged his first 500cc world championship in '84 on a Yamaha YZR, and three-peated with wins in '86 and '88. In 1989, riding for Honda, Eddie won again, becoming the first rider in GP history to win back-to-back 500cc titles on different motorcycle brands.

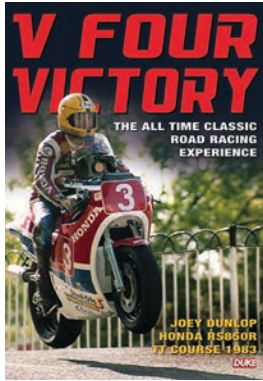
AMA SUPERBIKE RULES

In 1983, max displacement for AMA Superbikes went from 1,025 to 750cc, setting off a fierce Honda vs. Kawasaki battle; Yamaha and Suzuki were taken by surprise and sat the season out. Hall of Famer Wayne Rainey's old air-cooled GPz750 shouldn't have been competitive against the new Honda VF750F, but he won the championship that year anyway, albeit with some help from HOFer Rob Muzzy.

1984

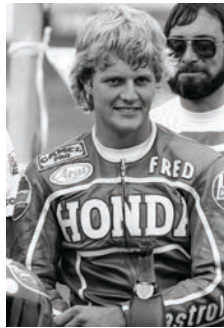
V-FOUR VICTORY!

Decades before the GoPro, Joey Dunlop's narrated lap around the Isle of Man with a giant camera atop his Honda's gas tank was an eye-opening cinematic experience. Your man Joey won the Senior TT six consecutive times from '83 to '88, and his nephew Michael just notched his 28th IOM victory, one more than Uncle Joey. Congrats!



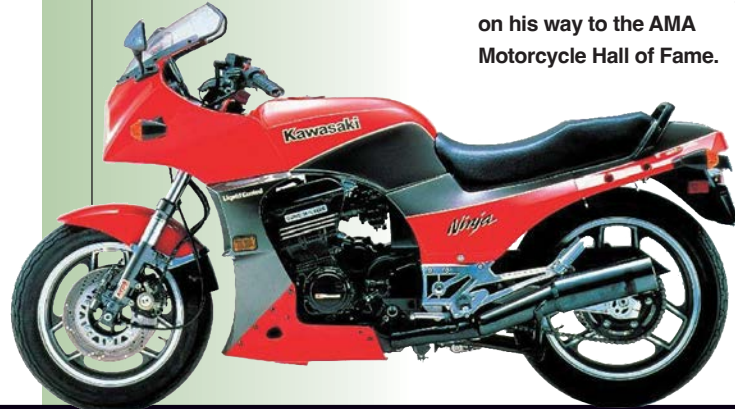
1984 KAWASAKI GPZ900R

Forty years ago the original Ninja ushered in Kawasaki's first 16-valve DOHC water-cooled inline four, an architecture that would serve it and all of Japan well for decades to come — not to mention Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*. Kawasaki U.S. exec Mike Vaughan got credit for the name; "them Ninja bikes" were just GPzs nearly everywhere else in the world.



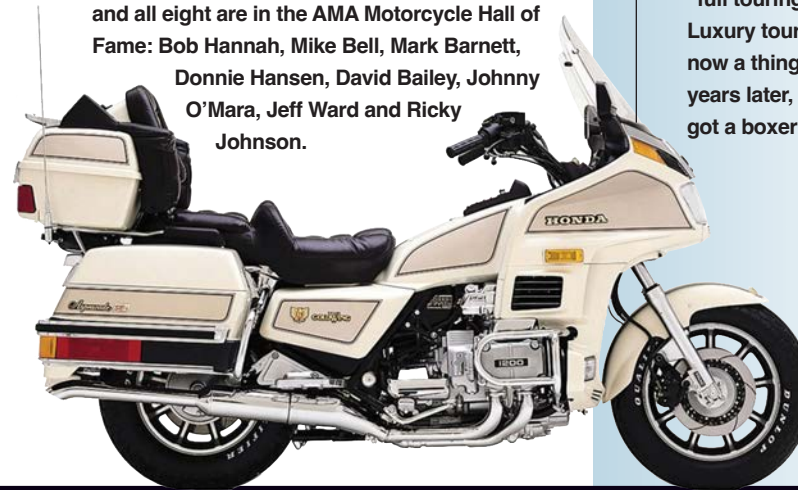
FLYIN' FRED THREE-PEAT

Fred Merkel won his first of three AMA Superbike championships: in '84 and '85 on Honda VF750F, then in '86 on the new VFR750F, on his way to the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame.



GOLDEN AGE OF SUPERCROSS

From 1979 to 1986, eight different riders battled to the AMA Supercross Championship, and all eight are in the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame: Bob Hannah, Mike Bell, Mark Barnett, Donnie Hansen, David Bailey, Johnny O'Mara, Jeff Ward and Ricky Johnson.

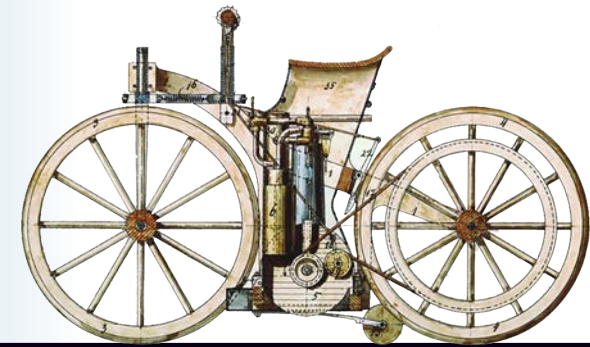


GOLD WINGS GALORE

Now with fully integrated bags and fairing, radio, cassette player, intercom, and LCD gauges, the redesigned '84 'Wing (and upper-crust '85 LE version) went the "full touring" route. Luxury touring was now a thing. Four years later, the GL got a boxer Six.

MOTORCYCLING TURNS 100!

Nov. 10, 1985, marked 100 years since the first test ride of Gottlieb Daimler's Reitwagen — the first motorcycle powered by an internal combustion engine. As part of the centennial celebration, a recreated Reitwagen made an 11-mile trip that saw several motorcycling legends spend time aboard the machine. In addition, the AMA hosted a celebration gala; money raised at the event went to the American Motorcycle Heritage Foundation, which aimed to fund a national motorcycle museum that would preserve the history of motorcycling. A replica of Daimler's Reitwagen is currently on display at the AMA Motorcycle Hall of Fame Museum in Pickerington, Ohio.



FREDDIE SPENCER'S DREAM SEASON

Already the youngest to win the 500cc world championship in 1983 at 21, Freddie Spencer started 1985 by winning the Daytona 200, as well as the Formula 1 and 250GP classes — the only time a rider won the three big races at Daytona. He then went on to win both the 250cc and 500cc Grand Prix world championships, becoming the only rider in history to accomplish that feat.



1984 HONDA RS750

While Honda was playing 800-pound gorilla, why not poke H-D's perennial champ XR750 in AMA Grand National flat track racing, as well? Honda's version of a 45-degree V-twin race motor thrust Hall of Famer Ricky Graham to the championship in '84; fellow HOFer Bubba Shobert won on an RS in '85, '86, and '87. When the AMA felt it was time to "level the playing field" by saddling the RS with intake restrictors, Honda said *sayonara* to the series, having made its point.



The 1985 Yamaha YZ's. They're not "virtually identical to" "very close to" or even "just like" our works bikes.

FACTORY BIKES NO MORE

The Factory Motocross era came to an end in '86, meaning all four Japanese factories would soon be selling to the public what they raced. Yamaha got the jump in '85 with new YZ ads proclaiming, "Motocrossers that not only perform at least as well as anybody else's factory bikes. But do it for \$98,000 less."



1985

HAMMER-RELIABLE HONDA

Honda's XR600R won all sorts of Bajas — but also five GNCC titles, four National Hare Scrambles championships, and three ISDE gold medals for Hall of Famer Scott Summers. Still sort of in production, as the XR650L — and only \$6,999.

1986 SUZUKI GSX-R750 & GSX-R1100

A year after the 750's worldwide debut, Suzuki USA deigned to import its all-new high-powered lightweight sportbikes, which really were the first street motorcycles that looked like they belonged on a racetrack. The fuse was lit, as guys like HOFer Doug Polen scored tons of GSX-R National Cup contingency bucks, and went on to even bigger and better things.



A RED, WHITE AND BLUE PLANET

Before 1970, only one American — AMA Motorcycle Hall of Famer Jack Milne, who won the 1937 Speedway World Championship — had won a world championship for the United States. To show how much things had changed in a decade and a half, the January 1987 issue of *American Motorcyclist* listed the 29 Americans that had earned individual or team world championships.

HURRICANE WARNING!

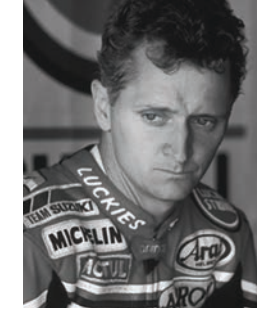
Honda's 1987 CBR600F Hurricane took the ultra-hot 600cc sportbike class to a new level on the street and on the racetrack, winning a slew of AMA and World Supersport titles over the years as the F, F2, F3, F4i, etc., all while still being some of the best all-around street motorcycles around.

1987 KAWASAKI VULCAN 700

The first Vulcan may have been the most conflicted of the Japanese Factory Customs: The black art of assimilating American chopper tastes into motorcycles that worked reasonably well was in its infancy, like dubbing *Easy Rider* into Japanese. The Vulcan made no attempt to pretend its first V-twin (DOHC) wasn't liquid-cooled or to hide its shaft drive, and there was no hiding its distinctive styling. But that first basic VN continued in production for 22 years, seldom missing a beat and butting heads with Honda Shadows, Suzuki Intruders and various Yamaha Viragos the entire time.

THE SCHWANTZ FACTOR

Texan HOFer Kevin Schwantz began 1988 by winning the Daytona 200 on a new GSX-R, then fled the country to ride Team Pepsi Suzuki's RGV500. He promptly won the opening GP at Suzuka, Japan, in only his seventh ride on a 500cc GP machine (including a pair of wildcard rides in 1986 and 1987). Little did the world know the dingdong battles it would be in for over the next five years, mostly fought by Americans. (Cue *The Star-Spangled Banner*.)



1988 DUCATI 851

Ducati entered the modern era with its first liquid-cooled, fuel-injected eight-valve Desmo L-twin, giving the Japanese manufacturers their first hint of a growing threat to come from Europe and taking the *Ducatisti* movement from fringe to mainstream.

1986



KEL CARRUTHERS, KINGMAKER

In addition to tuning Kenny Roberts to his three 500cc world championships, Hall of Famer Kel Carruthers also teamed with K.R. to win a pair of Grand National championships in 1973-'74 and a Formula 750 championship in 1977. He was crew chief for Eddie Lawson's 500cc world championships in 1984, '86, and '88, and another Yamaha rider whose three championships we'll get to next month. Being 1969 250cc world champ himself is but a footnote...



1987

SPEED LIMIT LANDSLIDE

A decade after the federal government instituted a max speed limit of 55 mph nationwide in 1974, the AMA joined the speed-limit debate in the pages of *American Motorcyclist*, and ultimately landed on the position that "a single maximum speed limit is not appropriate for a transportation environment as diverse as that of the United States." In 1987, the national limit was increased to 65 mph.

DANGEROUS DANFORTH

Sen. John Danforth's (R-MO) "Motorcycle Safety Act of 1987" blamed the proliferation of superbikes for an increase in fatalities and called the marketing of the killer machines "the moral equivalent of selling drugs to adolescents." Cooler heads and the AMA shot the bill right down.

1988

1988 KAWASAKI ZX-10

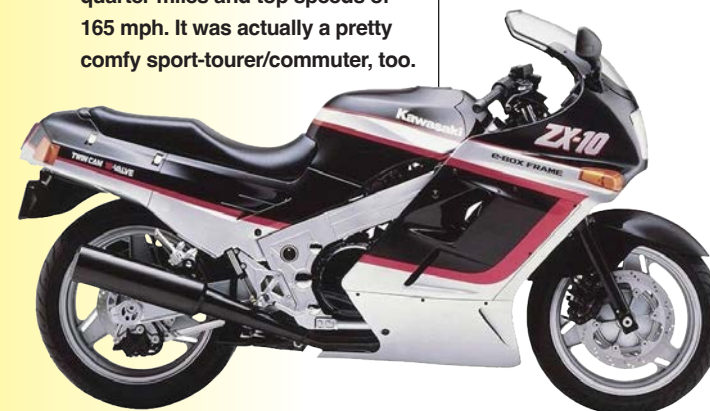
Kawasaki took what it'd been doing with the Ninja 900, 600 and 750 since '84 and went *big*, producing an even more potent four-cylinder in a monolithic twin-beam aluminum perimeter frame rolling on modern radials. Now we were looking at mid 10-second quarter miles and top speeds of 165 mph. It was actually a pretty comfy sport-tourer/commuter, too.

ABS ARRIVES

The first motorcycle anti-lock braking system appeared on BMW's 1988 K100RS "Flying Brick." It was heavy, a little jerky, and complicated, and the purists all poo-pooed; now ABS is mandatory in many markets (but not the U.S.) and has saved God-knows how many lives.

BATTEN DOWN THE HATCHES

When Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) put forth a proposal that would have required motorcyclists to purchase special catastrophic healthcare insurance because of "their voluntary participation in risky activity," the AMA recognized immediately that the legislation could not only decimate motorcycling as a sport and hobby, but would also have placed major financial implications on riders nationwide. The AMA quickly rallied its members to action, with members sending thousands of letters to Hatch's office, causing Hatch to ultimately eliminate any extra provisions for motorcyclists in his final proposal.



1989

HURRICANE HANNAH'S LAST HURRAH

At Unadilla, Bob Hannah finished ninth (after coming from 31st on the first lap) and called it a career after 14 years, 70 AMA wins and seven championships. Meanwhile, Eddie Lawson bagged his last 500 GP championship on an evil-handling V4 Honda.