

Ron Grant on the 1968 TR500 Daytona Suzuki

200-MILE EXPERT

Harley-Davidson's Cal Rayborn won the national points race again as he did in 1968, but it was far from being the easy victory of last year. The four-speed Harley 750-cc sidevalvers were, indeed, one of the favorites. But the AMA rule change which allows five-speed gearboxes made the Japanese Yamahas, Kawasaki and Suzukis a much greater threat, as they could be tuned for great peak power, yet have an extra gear to cope with the narrower power band.

Harley-Davidson obviously was nervous. In contrast to the we're-going-to-hit-it-in-the-stands-right-there attitude of 1968, the factory conducted engine development in great secrecy this winter, testing new heads, megaphones, high dome pistons and double throat carburetors. The horsepower tests, conducted on a one-cylinder mock-up, showed a significant increase over last year. But actual conditions at Daytona with fully assembled engines were something else again. Speeds of all machines were down and Harley was really in trouble!

Rayborn's machine, at 144.764 mph, was the only four-stroke running in the fastest 14 on the qualifying oval, a disappointment compared to 1968 when Roger Reiman's bike topped 149 and the first dozen on the starting grid seemed dominated by the orange and black Milwaukee racers.

The outlook for Yamaha seemed very bright as, first, Bobby Winters topped 149 mph. Speeds above 145 mph were also posted by the Yamahas of Ralph White, Mike Duff, David Lloyd and Rod Gould, fourth ranked 250-cc rider in the FIM world championship of 1968.

Ron Grant's bike was the fastest of the 500cc Suzukis at 146.412. He was extremely happy with his machine as it had arrived from Japan only a week before. Its speed was up about 10 mph over last year. Best of the Kawasaki 500 triples was Dick Hammer's at 144.694 mph.

Then, late in the afternoon, activity in the pits stopped. Everyone swiveled with a slow, reverent 360 degrees as Canadian Champion Yvon du Hamel, a lonely, sunlit speck on the vast grey banking, became the first man to top 150 mph (150.501) in qualifying. His 350-cc Yamaha, sponsored by Canadian distributor Fred Deeley Ltd., had nothing special going for it in comparison to the others, save for meticulous assembly and blueprinting by tuner Bob Work.

The Harley camp groaned, realizing they would spend the remaining three nights without sleep. The engines were torn down and reassembled again and again, then tested on a lonely road out in the Florida flatlands. None of the measurements seem to match specifications, and these were more critical than the tuners had dreamed. Carburetion was a shambles. False plug readings abounded. Changing megaphones to straight pipes and to reverse cones seemed to make no difference.

On Sunday it was raining, but it seemed that the race would run anyway. But, after practice, a large contingent of riders convinced AMA officials that racing in the rain would be too dangerous because of the gigantic rooster-tails thrown by the 150-mph bikes, and the constantly changing surfaces in the in-field turns. So the race was delayed for one week. Much has been made of how the week-long delay benefited Harley, but the facts were claimed at the time to not bear out such a statement. The claim was made that two-strokes are quite skittish on wet surfaces, and lose traction without warning. The Harleys, it was claimed, as well as the other four-strokes, have heavier flywheels and may be accelerated in the wet with relative impunity.

Several Yamaha riders, including du Hamel and Gould, admitted that they probably would not have finished in the rain, for their clutches already were slipping from the feathering necessary to exit from turns during wet practice. So Harley had time to recover its lost performance, and the Yamahas had time to replace their clutches...and they would run on dry pavement. The Suzuki 500 probably did not suffer from these concerns to the same degree.

The first laps of the 200-miler had all the close-in excitement of a scratchers race at Brands. The lead changed an incredible 17 times in 19 laps. Du Hamel picked up early lap money, followed a few feet back by Rayborn, Gould, and 19-year-old Ron Pierce, on another fast running Yamaha. Both Gould and Rayborn drove to the front and switched places with du Hamel until the 10th lap, when Pierce drove around the whole bunch of them. While attempting to stretch his lead, Pierce went down on an oil slick from Dave Scott's crashed Yamaha and broke his fairing. Du Hamel led again, but was passed by Rayborn. The tiny Canadian's machine began showing signs of ignition failure in the 20th lap, and he pitted. His machine would not restart so he was out for keeps. Back in the pack, several favorites dropped by the wayside with assorted mechanical woes.

Hammer's Kawasaki got no farther than one lap, then seized a piston. Takeshi Araoka's Kawasaki also retired somewhat later. Dick Mann rode with his usual great style after a poor start, then lost a gas cap from his Yamaha and

could not get under way again after a pit stop. Ralph White's Yamaha also died during a gas stop. Don Vesco suffered similar heartbreak after an exciting ride into 4th place. It was theorized that some of these failures may have been due to gasoline spilling onto the cylinders during refill, causing sudden contraction of the barrels and resulting partial seizure, ring damage and loss of compression.

In the Harley camp, Roger Reiman, who had dropped his bike in practice and damaged his clutch casing, retired with a foul smell after his clutch fried. Fred Nix's bike/running too lean in the rear cylinder, melted a piston. Walt Fulton, one of the best road racers Harley has, yet on the slowest H-D, was running steadily at least, in contest with teammate Dan Haaby.

The trio of Suzuki 500s fared half bad, half good. Jimmy Odom ran well until a slack chain mangled the rear wheel sprocket. Art Baumann and Ron Grant linked up and "freight-trained" into the top four, then. Art had to pit with broken expansion chambers. Grant then picked up 2nd spot as Gould, farther and farther behind Rayborn, pitted. Grant placed 2nd at the finish, but only after he met with near-disaster in his scheduled gas stop. His pit attendant failed to tighten the gas cap and, when gasoline sprayed from the tank as he left the pit apron, he fell. Fortunately, he was far enough ahead of 3rd place Mike Duff to push the Suzuki back for more gas, restart, and recapture 2nd place.

Rayborn finished at an average speed of 100.882 mph, slower than last year's winning record. Mert Lawwill, running on the same lap as Yamaha rider Duff, had inherited 4th. Another lap back, Englishman. Gould finished 5th after three pit stops. Bart Markel oblivious to the fact that his rear brake disc had broken off completely-vindicated his unusually conservative tactics by coming in 6th, the first time he has even finished. Most of the Triumphs and BSAs were noncompetitive, as these companies have been well out of the hunt since 1967 when Gary Nixon won Daytona.

Thus it was somewhat amazing that AMA No. 1 Nixon motored to a 9th place finish, his engine sounding very ratty. Best of the BSAs was Eddie Wirth's, and while Eddie is not a road racing specialist by any means, he rode smoothly to finish 20th. Best of the Kawasakis was the 500-cc Three of Dave Simmonds, finishing in 17th. Also on the same lap and placing 19th was Bill Manley's 500. It was not a bad performance, considering that the Three has only been in production a few short months.

In terms of national points, Rayborn's 1st place gives him a great start on the AMA season. Markel's prudence paid off well, giving him a nice bonus as he enters the summer season of half-mile nationals-his strongest card. Both Nixon and Lawwill also will be very much in the fray.

200-MILE EXPERT

1. Cal Rayborn, Spring Valley, Calif. . H-D

2. Ron Grant, Brisbane, Calif. Suz.

3. Mike Duff, Toronto, Canada Yam.

4. Mert Lawwill, San Francisco, Calif...H-D

5. Rod Gould, Oxfordshire, England ... Yam.

6. Bart Markel, Flint, Mich. H-D

7. Tom Rockwood, Gardena, Calif. . . Yam.

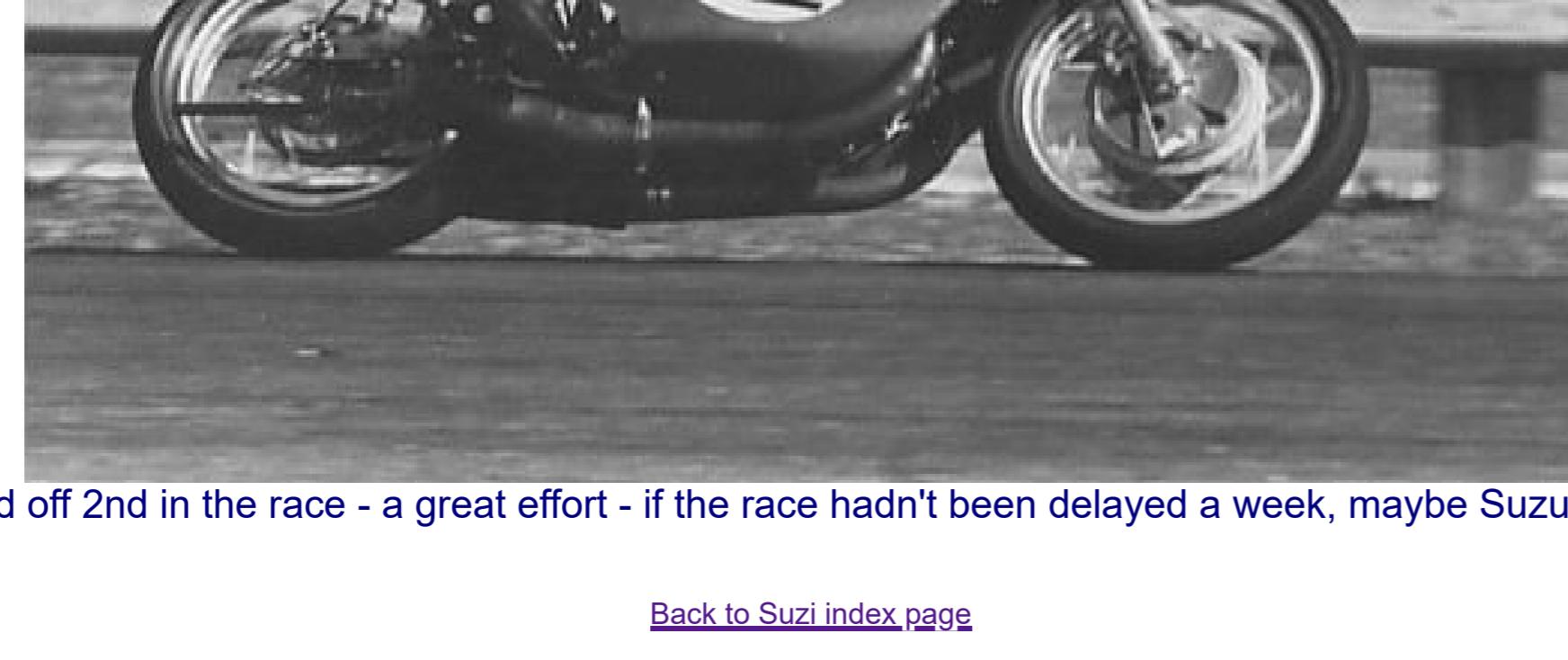
8. Peter Kellond, Vancouver, Canada . Yam.

9. Gary Nixon, Baltimore, Md. Tri.

110. Dan Haaby, Orangevale, Calif. H-D

Time: 1:59:19.18

Average speed: 100.882 mph



Ron Grant pulled off 2nd in the race - a great effort - if the race hadn't been delayed a week, maybe Suzuki would have won.