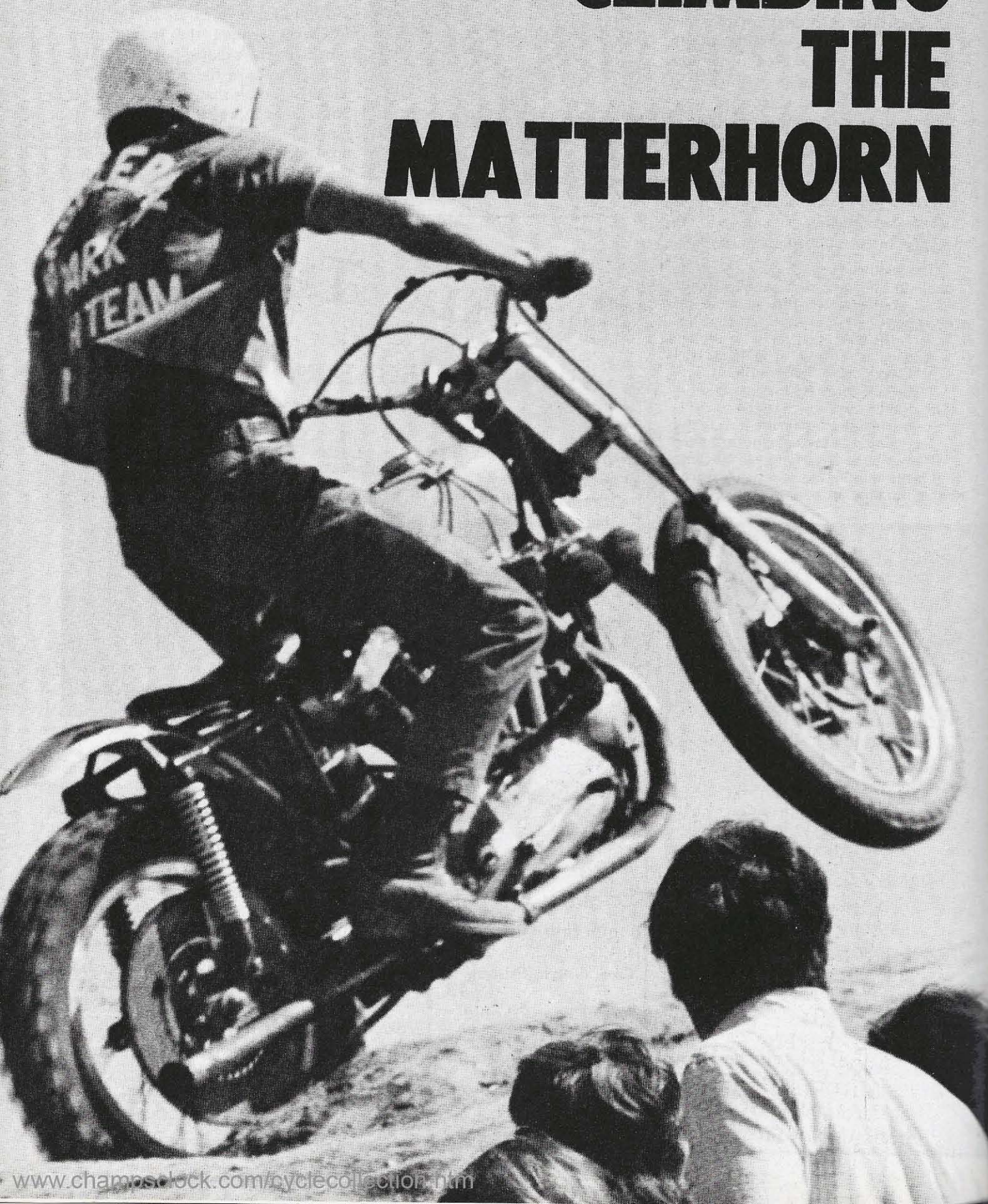


THE FEARSOME HILL HAS BEEN CONQUERED, BUT NEVER TAMED

CLIMBING THE MATTERHORN



■ The fearsome hill has been conquered, but never tamed.

One of the earliest forms of off-road motorcycle competition was hill climbing. Long before the advent of the modern high-performance four-stroke and two-stroke machines with their hydraulic forks and swing arm shocks suspension, motorcyclists were attempting to climb the steepest hills in their local areas. Intrepid riders aboard Harley-Davidsons, Indians, Hendersons and other early brands charged their big, heavy, almost rigidly suspended machines up the rutted, chewed, rocky terrain just to see who could go the highest, or perhaps over the top. As any off-road rider knows, there is a challenge in every hill encountered on any ride. Sometimes the rider knows he just can't make it over the top, so he doesn't try. But he'd like to.

From the spectators' point of view, an organized hillclimb meet is one of the most enjoyable spectacles in motorcycling. The entire run of each contestant can be viewed by everybody, and several hundred bodies unconsciously strain as they try to help will the rider over the top.

Oddly enough, hillclimbing appears quite dangerous to the uninitiated, but the experienced rider knows it's considerably less risky than almost any form of racing. The key work here is experience. The novice rider almost always makes the same mistake when attempting a tough hill. He tries to get up too much speed during his charge at the base of the slope, hoping his momentum will carry him over. The result is usually that he gets out of shape on the slope and has to shut off the throttle, causing the bike to bog down. Up to this point, it's no big deal. But the novice will usually instinctively disengage his clutch when the bike comes to a stop with the transmission in first gear. With the rear wheel thus freed, the machine proceeds swiftly backward down the slope. Nobody, but nobody, can ride downhill backward for long. The climax is usually a nasty crash, often with the machine coming down on top of the rider. And it's all so unnecessary.

The secret is to simply leave the clutch engaged. If the bike is in first gear and you're not going any farther up the hill, what do you need the



The moment of truth in hillclimbing comes when the rider goes over the top, but there's many a slip between the start and the crest. The machinery is almost as varied as the full range of models available for sale on the market today. The more experienced the competitor is, the more exacting he will be in his choice of a machine for climbing. The big-bore four-stroke twins have a decided advantage in this kind of work, but their handling often leaves a lot to be desired. For the casual hillclimber, any dirt bike will do, and sometimes a girl or two will show up to add a little class to the grubby proceedings.

You can almost feel the tension as each rider starts his run, leaning forward and straining as if he could will his machine over the top. Hillclimbing requires not just brute power; considerable riding skill is necessary. One must know how to read the terrain of the climb and plan his attack, how high to rev the engine in first gear, when to shift, where to feather the throttle to compensate for rough going, and where to screw it on again. If the rider gets out of shape, he has to shut off, and he can rarely downshift and get up enough momentum to sustain his drive to the top. It usually means a miss, and perhaps his chances for the overall win. But if it comes to that, it's better to bail off and try again. A controlled get-off is almost always easier on the rider and his bike than an uncontrolled one. It's a long way down.



clutch for? By leaving it engaged, the engine will stall, locking up the rear wheel, which acts as an effective brake. Then the rider can simply step off the machine and lay it on its side on the slope. It's very easy to do because the bike is stationary. Now the rider has plenty of time to figure out the best way to get his mount off the hillside.

Of course, any competitor in an organized hillclimb event has had plenty of experience with failure. The reason, of course, is that hillclimbs are traditionally held on the toughest slopes available. There are many famous, or perhaps infamous, hills in the United States. Perhaps the most awesome is the Widowmaker in Utah, the scene of one of the biggest annual events in the country. But southern California has some tough hills also. One of the toughest is the Matterhorn in Saddleback Park.

Saddleback Park was the original motorcycle park in California, commencing operation in 1966. Some 700 acres of hilly country give literally miles and miles of trails, plus

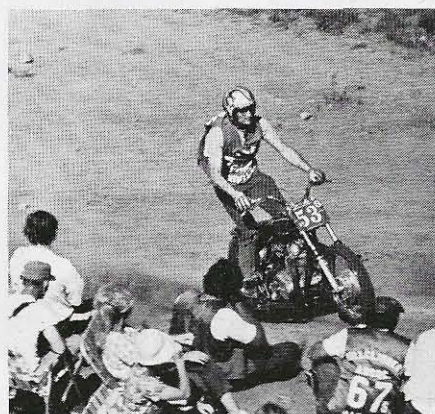
race courses of all kinds, including motocross, scrambles, flat track and TT. When the park first opened, the original Matterhorn was another hill farther back in the property. It was plenty tough, but then a leathery, middle-aged rider named Mel, who rode his stripped-down Triumph 650 as if it were a mountain goat, found the present site.

With Mel's expert guidance, the new Matterhorn was laid out, or more correctly, was laid up. It was a murderous hill for a couple of reasons. In the first place, there just wasn't room enough at the bottom to get up much of a run. The takeoff point was in a short gully that was already an upgrade. And then there was the hill itself. The Matterhorn was well named. It just kept getting steeper and steeper until it was almost vertical. Specifically, the last 40 feet before the top was an incline of 84 degrees, just six degrees less than vertical.

Such a slope required a very precise attack if the rider was to make it over the top. The takeoff was

in first gear with enough throttle dialed on to keep the rear wheel spinning. The idea was to reach maximum acceleration in first gear as soon as possible. Then a quick shift to second and more power. Nobody ever tried shifting to third, and after a certain point on the hill nobody tried shifting back down to first. You made it over the top in second, or else you just didn't make it. When the 84 degree slope was reached, called The Wall, the rider locked his throttle wrist and hung on and prayed. Either he had enough momentum to carry him over, or he didn't. But to open the throttle more on The Wall was suicide. The front wheel would effortlessly lift off the hillside and the machine would proceed to come over and down on top of you, and it was a long way down.

There was a recommended procedure, of course, for the riders who didn't make it over, and there were lots of them. When you stopped, especially on The Wall, you had to twist sideways off the saddle while flinging the bike away from you by



the handlebar on the side you got off. Because the bike weighed more than the rider, it fell faster. It was tough on the machine, but that was still preferable to having it on top of you.

Just how tough was the original Matterhorn? Well, in two years only four riders made it over the top. Mel was one of them, and like him the others were all mounted on either a 650 Triumph or a 650 BSA. Nothing smaller could cope with the brutal demand for tractor torque in getting off the start. A number of hillclimb meets were held on the Matterhorn, but the result was less than satisfactory to both the riders and the spectators. Unless Mel or one of the other three were present, nobody got over the top. The winner was the rider who reached the highest point on the slope before tumbling back down again with his machine. It was like baseball with no home runs, or football with no touchdowns, or boxing with no knockouts. That climactic moment of triumph when the contest is decided was missing.

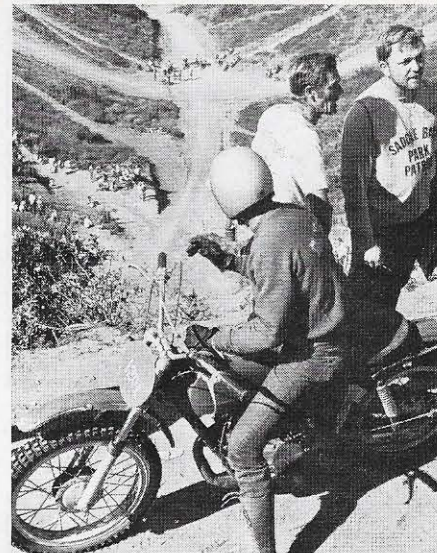
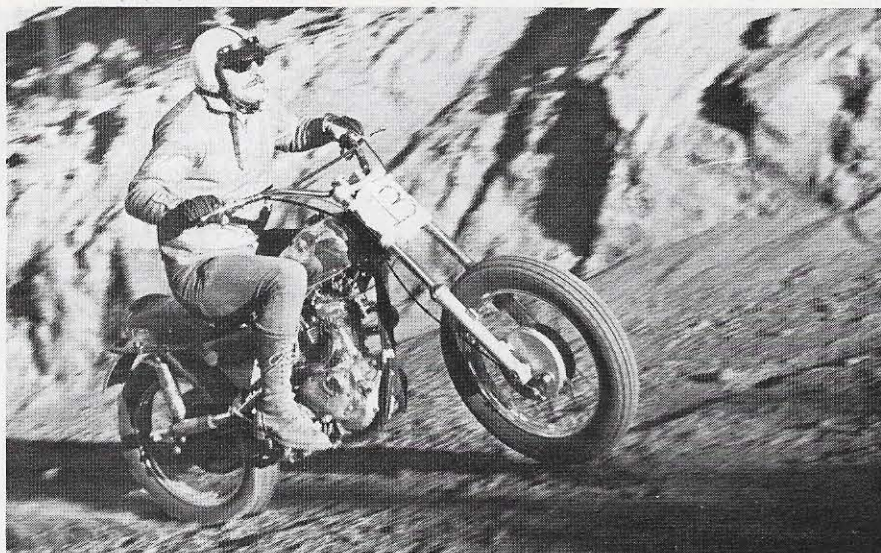
Finally the management of

Saddleback Park bowed to the inevitable demands of the riders and spectators, and the top of the hill, the dreaded Wall, was cut back to a more reasonable incline that could be managed by a good rider on a well tuned 250cc two-stroke bike. The result has been a dramatic increase in the number of entries for every hillclimb meet, and a tremendous increase in spectator turnout. Some purists may argue that something finer and more important has been lost in the bargain, but perhaps that's the price of progress.

At a recent hillclimb meet at Saddleback Park, several hundred spectators paid hard cash to watch the contestants, despite the gale force winds which whipped the adobe dust through the air like buckshot. The rules of the event are simple. Different-size machines compete in different classes, but everybody is also eligible to try for the overall winner. The Matterhorn has three different starting ramps, each one farther up the slope. All contestants begin on the bottom

ramp, which gives them the longest run to get up speed for the steepest part of the hill at the top. Each rider is allowed to remain in competition after one miss. If he misses on another run, he's eliminated. All the riders who survive the first ramp then try their luck at the next and higher starting point, and then the next. The riders who are not eliminated after the third ramp have to try their luck from a starting position higher on the slope itself, with their rear wheel against a log held in place by stakes driven into the ground. And so it goes, until only one rider is left who either has not been eliminated or has not had a single miss, while all other contestants have had at least one.

With the change in the grade of the Matterhorn, a variety of two-stroke and four-stroke machines were entered, with many going over the top on successive attempts, especially from the lower starting ramps where the bikes are able to get up more speed before reaching the steepest part of the hill. As usual, the 650 Triumphs entered were having



The big British vertical twins are among the best of the stock hillclimbing bikes, although they do better with suspension modifications. The veterans will tell you to never look down from the top. It's bad for your confidence. The hill never looks as steep from the bottom. Some riders attempt the impossible on the smallest machines made, and sometimes they have to eat the bike.

considerable success throughout the day, but no other brand of 4-stroke machines was present. Among the two-strokes, several brands did well, and none did better than Kawasaki. A rider on a 350 Kawasaki single cylinder enduro bike easily cleared the summit from all three starting ramps and from the first log brace start on the hill. It was only with the extremely steep starting point of the second log brace higher on the slope that the super-strong Kawasaki was eliminated, and it was the smallest-displacement machine to survive to that point. There were a couple of 400 Husqvarnas that also survived the elimination rounds up to the second log brace start, but they had each had one miss already. One 400 Maico rider stayed with the competition to the bitter end, despite one miss from the third ramp after he got out of shape and had to shut it off. The only 501 Maico entered had so much power that it looked for a time as if the rider might end up the overall winner, but he also missed once due

to getting sideways on the hill. The difference between the strongest two-strokes and the four-strokes seemed to be that the power of the two-strokes comes on harder, with a corresponding increase in the likelihood of the rider getting out of shape due to the rear wheel spinning and breaking loose. With the power strokes of the big twins spaced farther apart and the broader power band delivering more torque at lower rpm's, the four-strokes seemed more manageable on the toughest part of the slope.

The overall winner was a rider on a 650 Triumph engine in a Rickman frame. This bike wasn't much heavier than the two-strokes and handled just about as well, at least for climbing. The combination was so potent that when the finalists reached the second log brace start high on the hill, he was the only rider to go over the top without a miss. All the others were accordingly eliminated, although the Kawasaki won the 350

class and a Husky won the 400 class. At the end of the day, the tired, dirty, wind-battered riders and spectators went home satisfied with the day's events, to be remembered and discussed at their leisure.

We were satisfied, too, sort of. It was a fair contest, with a good rider turnout and a variety of machines straining for the gold. What more could you ask for? Well, maybe nothing, but we couldn't help thinking how much we'd like to see Mel ride his Triumph once more up the old Matterhorn, before they changed it, before they made it easier to conquer; up the ever-steepening slope, onto the face of The Wall, and then the front wheel hanging for a heartbeat in the clear blue sky at the top before the bike and rider went over and disappeared. And we more timid souls watching let out our breath and felt our muscles relax as we rejoiced in his victory. Such a short time ago, and now it will never be again. ●

