



MADNESS OR FUN? Mint 400 was both. Jim Taber's Glitter Bug, front wheels two feet off the ground and rising, plows on . . .



. . . while a fellow driver asks only for a safe landing. and still a third car rips the roughest terrain this side of the Sahara.



IMPRESSIVE, before the Nevada desert bludgeoned it to death, was this Datsun truck.

COMPETITION: THE SPORT THAT ENEMIES BUILT

BY JOE SCALZO, CAR LIFE FEATURE EDITOR

ON ONE OF THE MANY downhill dirt runs in the Mint 400, where the holes were not so deep nor the dust so heavy, a motorcycle, carrying a couple of gallons of gas and one rider, could reach 70 mph. A big V-8 Ford Bronco, such as those driven by Parnelli Jones and the Unser brothers, could easily roar through the same terrain at 90.

But the motorcycle, being more agile, could dodge the rocks, skirt the holes, take shortcuts, give a smoother ride and, generally, make a Bronco or any other kind of off-road car look clumsy. Bike riders laugh at car drivers in the desert.

The car drivers reply in kind. They point out, correctly, that in the desert at night a motorcycle is nearly useless. It lacks proper lighting, can get lost in the dark. And on a hard, flat, straight road, the bigger-engined cars have terrific speed and can leave the fastest bikes in their dust.

Four wheels vs. two. This is a real rivalry, probably the hottest in racing today, and if it sometimes becomes bitter—as it did during the recent two-day Mint 400 race in the Nevada desert outside Las Vegas—then it is too bad. Nothing can be done about it. The rivalry is healthy, and is the most exciting thing organized off-road racing currently has going for itself. "I don't like to see the bikes running

with the cars," says Bronco Builder Bill Stroppe, "but we need them for the competition."

Speaking for myself, I like motorcycles.

Because they are smaller and narrower, they are not nearly so spectacular to watch as the cars and they are not as noisy. Motorcycles do not ride across the desert, they fly. Literally fly. They are light, and can be flung about roughly. The riders clear the worst bumps by leaping high through the air, standing up on the foot pegs all the while.

There is artistry in this, just as there is artistry in the blazing 90-mph thrusts of Parnelli Jones. Basically it is a matter of styles: Maneuverability vs. brute speed. But the two camps do not understand one another. Parnelli Jones is, to the car people, an Indianapolis winner and a superstar. Not to the motorcyclists. Bronco driver Jones (so the story goes) knocked rider John De Soto from his motorcycle during last year's Baja 1000 and nearly ran over him in the dust. Parnelli vigorously denies this, but the motorcyclists will not take his word, and many are scared of him.

The rivalry flared very early in Las Vegas, during the drivers' meeting in the Mint Hotel the night before the start. "You motorcycle riders will get yours," said an official of the sanc-

PHOTOS BY HANK DE LESPINASSE, WARREN ASSOC.



FASTEST things in the open desert were the V-8 Broncos. Bravest men were their drivers.



MINT 400

continued

tioning International Desert Racing Assn. in front of the crowd of car drivers. Jeering laughter and scattered applause followed his statement.

Unperturbed, the motorcycle riders in the crowd sat back and took it. Finally, following more of the same, the meeting broke up.

Afterwards, cycle rider Mike Patrick was standing in the lounge of the gaming room, eyeing the blackjack table.

"Going to try your luck, Mike?"

Patrick glanced at his watch. 8:30. "No," he yawned, "I'm going up to bed."

For a man about to face the full wrath of the Stroppe Bronco team the following morning, Patrick was so loose and relaxed it was ridiculous. The Broncos had the biggest engines in the race, 351 cid. They were immaculately prepared, they were big and high, they were favored to win—providing their hot shot drivers (Parnelli, and the fun-loving Unser boys) did not break them first.

Starting positions were drawn by lot. Every minute, beginning at noon Monday, four vehicles were flagged away into the desert. The "race track" measured roughly 48 miles per lap and was barren, undulating country: Sand washes, gullies, cacti, and rocks. Soon dune buggies, experimental cars, production cars, four-wheel drives and motorcycles were turned loose, averaging 30-40 mph through the great Nevada outback. Monday, the first of

the two days, each entry was required to complete 100 miles, four laps. Tuesday the surviving entries would start off again for the final four laps.

It was a rout. One hour and 19 minutes after the start, J. N. Roberts on his eight-speed Husqvarna cycle hurtled past the pits. Next came Patrick's Yamaha, then Dick Dean's Greeves. Right at home in this terrain, the cycles were flying. No car, not even a Bronco, was close to them.

But the cars were wilder. Parnelli Jones, bounding through the holes and gouging out the bottom of his Bronco against sharp rocks, overrevved and broke a pushrod on the first lap, then blew out a tire at high speed. He re-entered the race, but coasted into the pits on the next lap with the engine sputtering on five cylinders. This, too, was repaired, but it ate up an hour. Still going hard, the fiery Jones then flipped his Bronco off the side of a mountain, hurting the knee and breaking the ribs of his co-driver, Stroppe. The battered car landed on its wheels, bouncing to a stop. Jones punched the starter, the engine roared, and he continued the race.

The Unser brothers—Bobby driving, Al riding shotgun—were having the time of their lives. They, too, had flipped noisily in the dust, landing upside down with the Bronco on top of them. Two passing journalists helped them right the Bronco. They later reported that both Unsers were laughing like fiends.

By the fourth and last lap on Monday, rider Doyle Fields had relieved Roberts on the leading Husqvarna; and Phil Bowers, the racing school teacher, had taken over from Patrick. The two bikes met head-to-head out on the back part of the course.

"We were haulin'," Bowers said later. "Fields and I were off the trail and bouncing and I didn't know if we'd both stay on or not. Then Fields hit a big bump and his engine stalled. I thought 'go!' " Fields never did get his engine started again, and Bowers just kept riding flat out for the finish line, crossing it at dusk—6 o'clock—the first vehicle home.

That was the end of Monday's racing.

On elapsed time the Patrick/Bowers Yamaha was leading the second place motorcycle of Dick Dean/Max Switzer by two minutes and the nearest car by more than an hour. Other motorcycles filled the first 10 spots.

The motorcyclists had it easy. All they had to do was bolt on fresh shock absorbers, tighten up wheel spokes, and wipe off dust. Done, they could leave their bikes in the pits for the night and head for downtown Las Vegas, a cold shower, dinner, and bed.

The car drivers were not so lucky.

WINNING motorcycle spent as much time jumping through the air as on the ground.



Many of them were up well past midnight, working in the dark pits with flashlights attempting to repair broken suspensions, engines, etc., in time for Tuesday's start.

By the end of the first lap on Tuesday, Dean, riding hard, had cut Patrick's two-minute lead to one minute. Both riders halted at the end of the lap for fuel, change of air filters, change of goggles, a gulp of cold water, then reentered the course.

Patrick, hurdling the gullies and ditches, quickly built up his lead to two minutes again and in the process turned the fastest lap of the day—one hour and nine minutes. Meanwhile, Dean pulled into the pits and handed the bike over to riding partner Max Switzer.

Fifteen minutes later Patrick arrived and handed over to Bowers.

Bowers fell—twice. Both times he

picked himself up. Moreover, the clutch had broken on his Yamaha and he rode nearly 60 miles shifting gears without it, waiting for the transmission to explode from the strain. It never did.

The finish was close. But Bowers, riding with no clutch, still was able to beat Switzer and win by 50 seconds.

A motorcycle had won the Mint 400. But this did not bring on congratulations from the car drivers. They, too, were in their own world, interested solely in how their own people were doing. It was two hours after the first motorcycle finished that the first car hove across the line, an experimental Corvaire-powered buggy driven by a young man and his pretty wife, both of them caked with dust and loving it. Their names are Johnny and Linda Johnson.

Both days the desert brutalized and

humiliated the big-name drivers. It was hilarious to watch fuel dragster driver Danny Ongais come past the pits, his swarthy Hawaiian face the color of vanilla from all the dust. He had lost a wheel miles out on the course, and had had to wrestle his VW dune buggy home, complaining loudly about the small engine's lack of power. Grand Prix driver Bob Bondurant did not finish at all. Neither did Mike Snively, another drag racing star. Parnelli Jones flipped his Bronco a second time, but at least he finished.

There was so much drama among the cars that no one had time to notice the motorcycles at all.

Yet not everyone was completely blasé. Afterwards winner Patrick called home (to Pomona, Calif.) to tell about winning. He came away from the phone grinning. "My wife was so excited she could hardly talk." ■

CYCLE victors Phil Bowers (left), and Mike Patrick.



PHOTO BY DARRYL NORENBURG

UNSTOPPABLE Mickey Thompson (rear) says he "loves" desert racing.

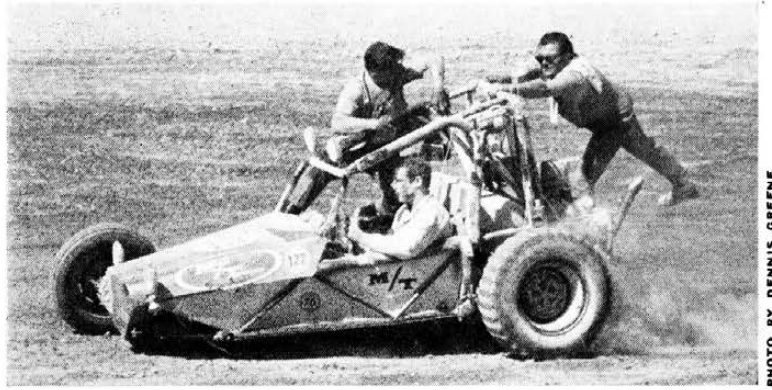


PHOTO BY DENNIS GREENE

CAGED VW dune buggy piloted by Johnny Johnson was car winner. Wife Linda assisted.

MINT 400 RESULTS

MOTORCYCLES—1. Mike Patrick/Phil Bowers, Yamaha, 10:09.12; 2. Dick Dean/Max Switzer, Greeves, 10:10.00; 3. Al Baker/Rich Thorwaldson, Yamaha, 11:19.00; **EXPERIMENTAL**—1. Johnny Johnson/Linda Johnson, Corvaire Buggy, 12:19.07; 2. Dave Williams/Chris Williams, VW Buggy, 14:51.00 (only finishers); **DUNE BUGGIES**—1. Andy de Vercelly/Tom McClelland, VW, 13:04.10; 2. Vic Wilson/Drino Miller, Ford, 13:41.43; 3. Jack Schleman/Eric Moberg, VW, 14:05.22; **FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE**—1. Rodney Hall/Spike Cooper, Jeepster, 13:37.34; 2. Donnie Beyer/Don Richardson, Jeep, 13:41.18; *3. Parnelli Jones/Al Unser, Bronco, 14:01.00; **PRODUCTION**—1. Doug Ellsworth/Sheldon Ellsworth, VW; 2. Dwight Meierhenry/Barry Ford, VW; 3. Bob Swander/John Berden (no production vehicles completed the full 400 miles).

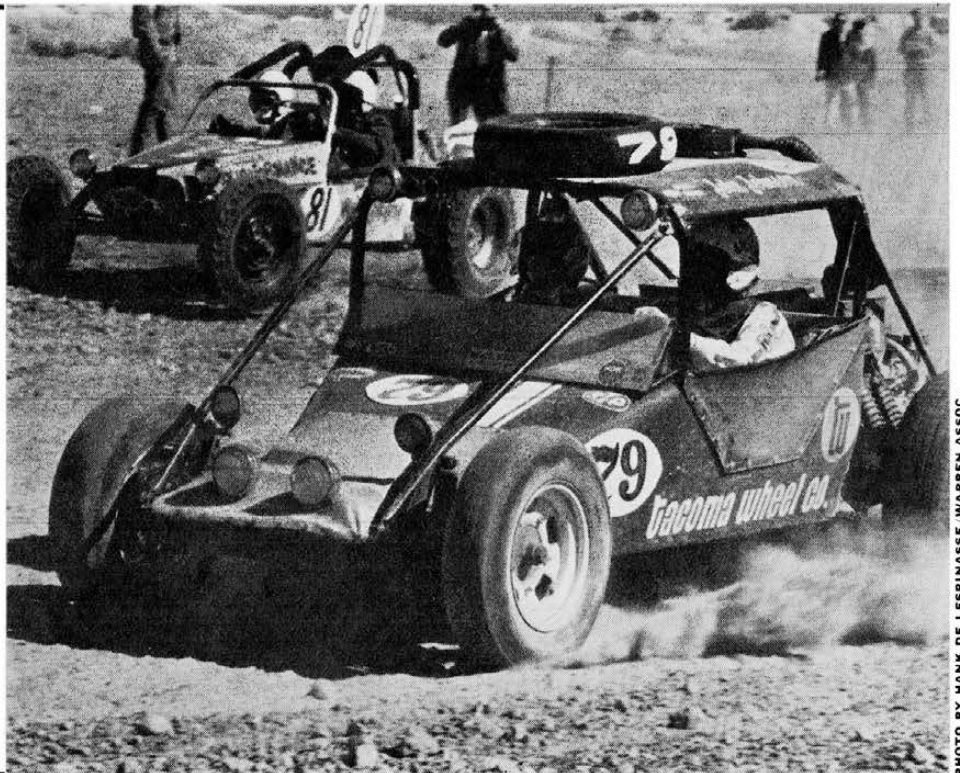


PHOTO BY HANK DE LESPINASSE/WARREN ASSOC.