

# BLUE PLATE



## SPECIAL

Revisiting a popular but short-lived experiment in AMA Supercross and Pro Motocross that came to be known as the Wrangler Super Series, as well as the AMA Grand National Motocross Championship

WORDS: LARRY LAWRENCE  
PHOTOS: MOTO VERTE

NEVER HAS SUCH a short-lived series led to such change, chaos, and controversy. The Wrangler AMA Grand National Motocross Championship lasted two seasons (1983 and '84) and brought big money to the sport for the first time. It also spawned a backlash from motocross purists, led to friction between the AMA and race promoters, and nearly fractured the sport for good. Oh, and it was won both times by Team Honda's David Bailey.





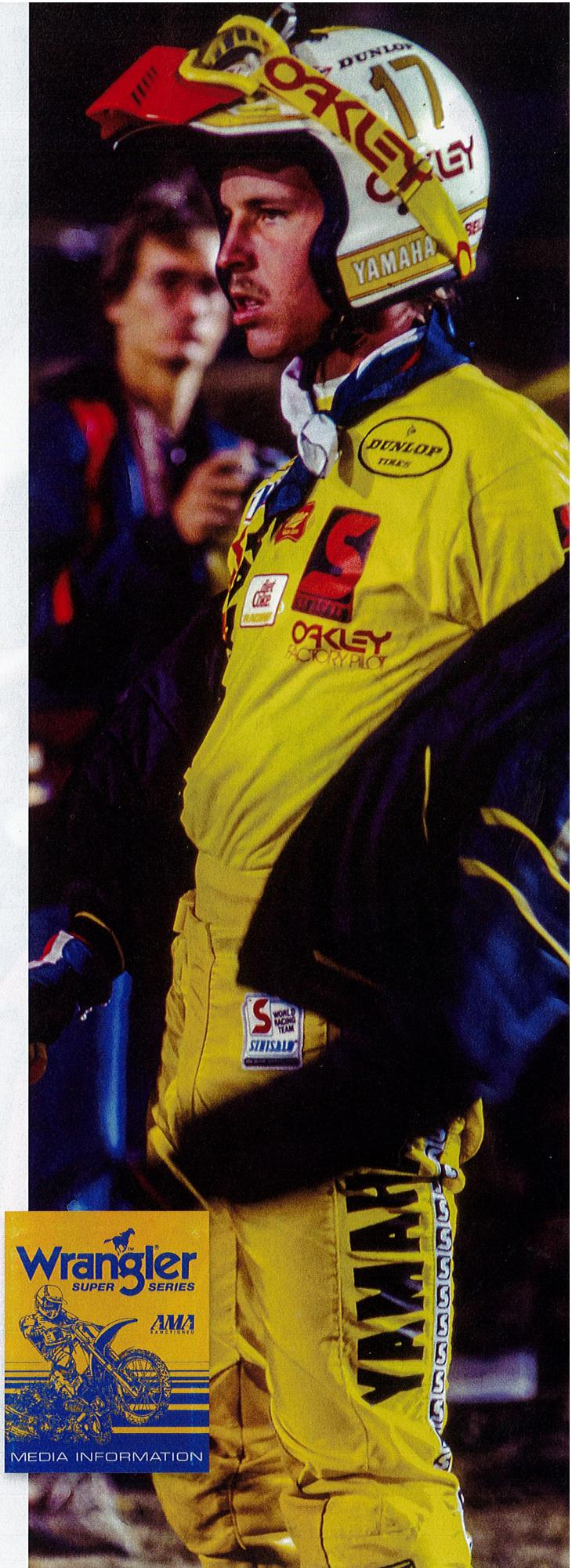
In 1982, Wrangler Jeans sponsored AMA Supercross, posting a \$75,000 points fund (\$212,178.50 in 2021 dollars, adjusted for inflation), \$20,000 of which went to the champ—at that point the largest sponsorship bonus ever paid in supercross. Everything was going gangbusters. Wrangler activated their sponsorship with all kinds of promotions. They bought ads in magazines, billboards, radio, and TV. They gave swag to riders and team members and featured them in some of those ads. The goal for Wrangler was to do in SX/MX what RJ Reynolds had done in NASCAR with its Winston Cup: raise awareness and attendance for the sport while at the same time selling a lot of cigarettes. Er, well, blue jeans.

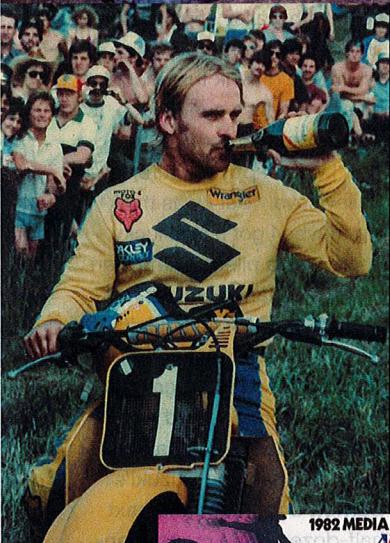
While Wrangler's involvement looked like a winner for all involved, behind the scenes, both Wrangler's sponsorship and the new combined series ruffled feathers. In fact, it likely

served as the last straw for the notorious SX promoter Michael Goodwin, who decided to rebel against the AMA and eventually start a competing series with some of his fellow promoters.

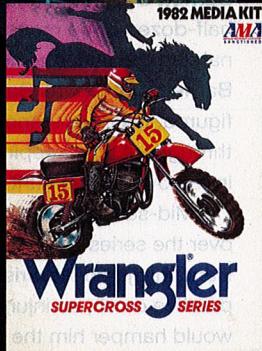
It was just over a decade since the European import of motocross to America, and by the early 1980s the sport had absolutely exploded. Motocross was riding a wave, but some here thought there were simply too many championships, which might confuse new fans. And to be fair, there were a lot of champions: supercross, 125cc motocross, 250cc motocross, 500cc motocross, plus a Trans-USA champion (though that series was about to end).

Supercross was also growing in popularity, while the outdoor nationals seemed to be losing ground. One reason, it was felt, was because SX featured all the stars racing head-to-head. (The 125 class did not become a thing in supercross until 1985.) In motocross, that talent pool was spread across three different class-





(Top) Johnny O'Mara would win his first major title in 1983 in 125 Pro Motocross, then claim the '84 AMA Supercross crown—but not the GNC title. (Middle) Mark Barnett had the '83 GNC #1 plate in his reach, only to suffer several unfortunate breakdowns late in the season. (Bottom) The Los Angeles Coliseum, the cradle of AMA Supercross, did not get to host a Wrangler Super Series event because the Olympics were being held there in 1984.



KELLY  
6AM - 10AM MONDAY - FRIDAY  
KMET

GAMES of the XXIIIrd OLYMPIAD

the Dallas SX, Bailey recovered quickly and got things going with a victory in the 250 outdoor opener at Gatorback, and then another SX victory in Washington, DC.

As for Barnett, he was busy winning four out of the first six 125 nationals, as well as the Pontiac and Kansas City SX races. It was also at Kansas City where Hannah had a rough night, handing all the momentum to the Bomber.

"I have to be consistent in the stadium events, and I have to hold my own outdoors," Barnett said of his strategy. "Hannah just had an eighth-place finish, which amounted to a good points advantage for me. The same thing might happen to me down the road, so it will be whoever gets the best luck."

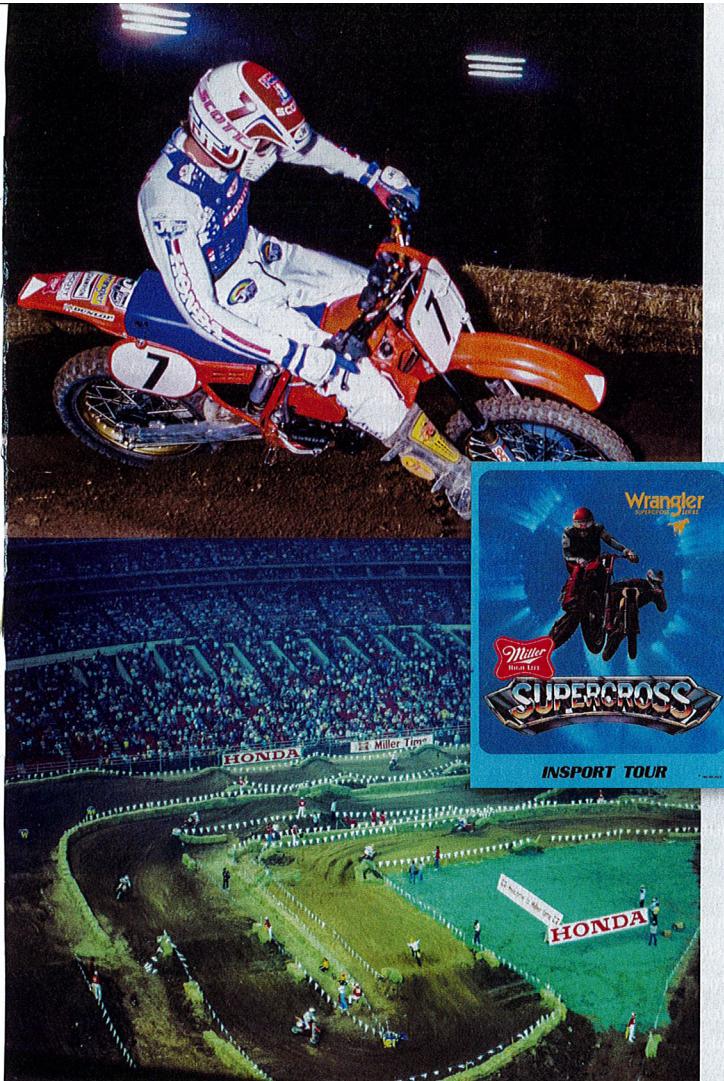
The run gave Bomber a lead of 25 points on Hannah and 51 on Bailey in the Super Series standings. Barnett was

in the driver's seat to sweep all three titles—SX, 125 MX, and the GNC—but luck was about to change for both himself and David Bailey.

It would be nearly two months before Bailey would get another victory, this time at the RedBud 250 National, while Barnett was only seventh overall in the 125 class. After winning the first moto, his crankshaft seized the second time out. It was similar to what happened at the St. Louis 125 National, where Barnett suffered a snapped chain in the second moto.

Then, in late July, Bailey scored another SX win at a rainy Foxboro Stadium in Massachusetts. That was a pivotal point in the AMA Supercross series, as well as the Wrangler Super Series. Bailey's victory, combined with Barnett missing the main event entirely due to a chain problem on his factory Suzuki





(Clockwise, from left) Ricky Johnson would win his first AMA Supercross in 1984 aboard a Yamaha (which was still yellow then); Ron Lechien (7) on the '84 works Honda; the '84 Anaheim race ran in front of more than 70,000 fans, the series' biggest crowd ever; Jeff Ward (4) was Kawasaki's best shot at a Wrangler Super Series title.

es. The prevailing wisdom among the AMA, promoters, and manufacturers was that the sport would be better served by having a single "grand national champion." Getting everyone together to agree on just how to do it, in a fair and equitable way, proved a delicate mission, a walk through a minefield of potential lawsuits.

What finally emerged in 1983 was the Wrangler Super Series (aka AMA Grand National Motocross Championship). There would continue to be individual series and class champions, but the rider with the most total points from SX and whichever MX class he ran would be the Grand National Champion. And with the new series came an even more lucrative points fund from Wrangler: \$100,000, with \$30,000 going to the Grand National Champ. This was incredibly good money in the early 1980s.

The Wrangler Super Series was a grueling schedule of 27 races running from January through August. Sixteen supercross and 11 motocross races, all intermingled and overlapping. Nineteen eighty-three was a special year in racing, in that you had stars of a slightly earlier generation like Bob Hannah, Kent Howerton, Broc Glover, and Warren Reid up against a newer generation of riders like Rick Johnson, Johnny O'Mara, Jeff Ward, David Bailey, and Ron Lechien. Honda's Bailey was intrigued by the concept of an overall champion.

"I wasn't sure I could beat Hannah or Barnett in a shorter series," Bailey recalls. "But if it was about consistency over a bunch of races with SX and MX, I thought I had a better chance in that scenario."

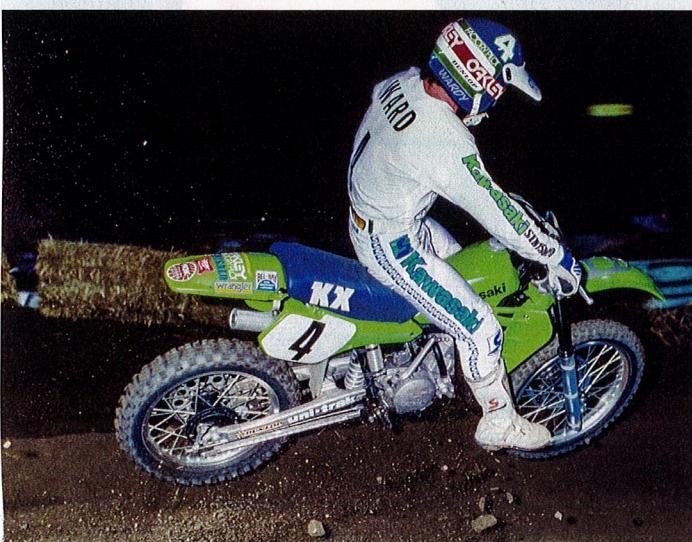
The series opened at Anaheim with Bailey scoring his first career supercross win. While you'd think that would bolster a rider's confidence, it wasn't like that for Bailey.

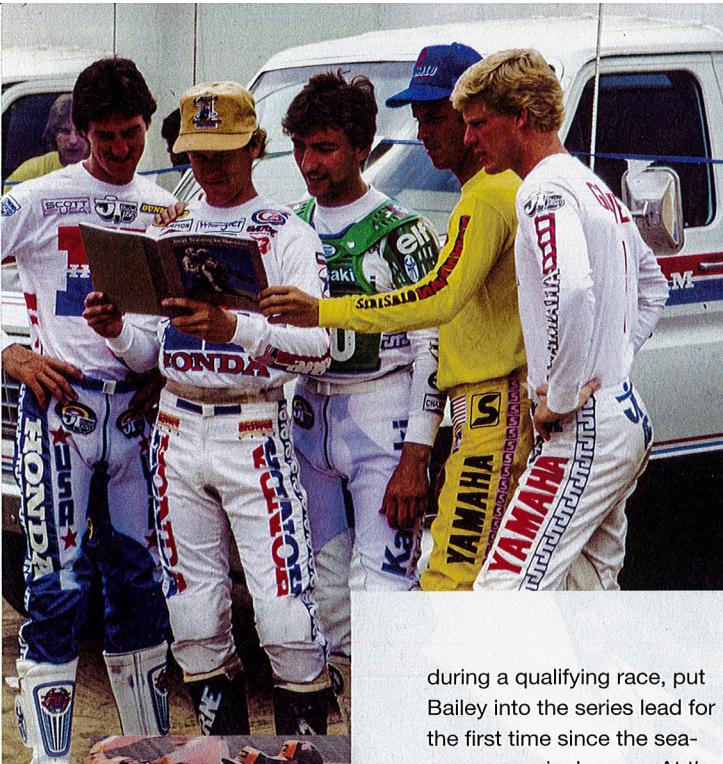
"I was happy for sure," Bailey says. "But I was thinking maybe I got a little lucky. There was a pileup at the start of the race, and Hannah was sick, so in my mind I didn't know how solid that win was."

As the series progressed, Bailey's fears seemed well-founded, as his Honda teammate Hannah and Suzuki's Barnett dominated the next half-dozen or so races. Hannah led the series early over Barnett, but just as Bailey figured, his consistency throughout was keeping him in the overall title hunt.

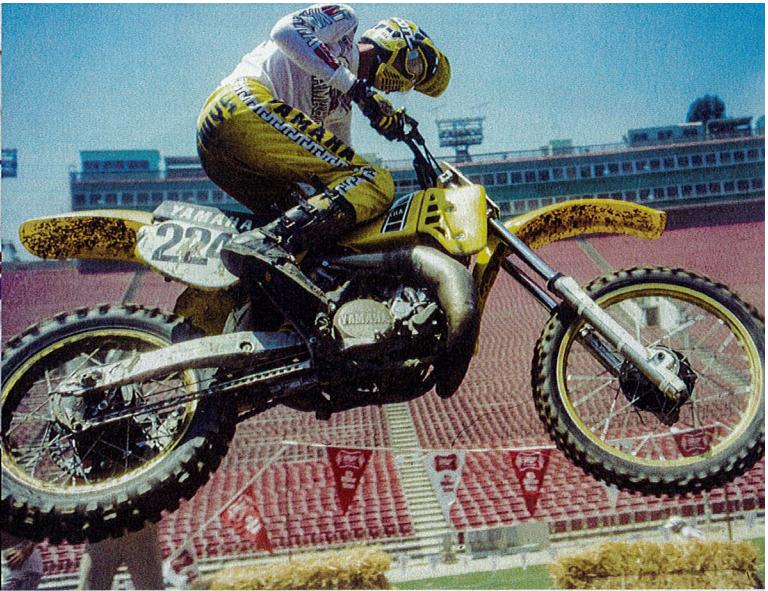
Mid-season, Barnett took over the series lead after Hannah injured his wrist in a practice crash, an injury that would hamper him the rest of the season. Barnett was racing the 125 class outdoors, where he was the three-times-running class champion, which meant he wasn't racing Bailey or Hannah, but he did have to deal with Ward, O'Mara, and Lechien every Sunday. Still, he would hold the overall GNC lead all the way through most of summer.

After breaking his foot during press day and missing





(Clockwise, from above) Title contenders David Bailey, Johnny O'Mara, Rick Johnson, and Broc Glover pose for an advertising photo with visiting GP rider Georges Jobe (center) at the Rose Bowl; in 1983, Ron Lechien (224) was a 16-year-old rookie with team Yamaha, but he managed to win both an AMA Supercross and a couple 125 Nationals; Bob Hannah being interviewed by Larry "Super Mouth" Huffman that same year.



during a qualifying race, put Bailey into the series lead for the first time since the season opener in January. At the final SX round in Pasadena in August, Bailey clinched the title over Barnett with a sixth-place finish.

With supercross over, attention turned to the outdoors for the rest of August. Another Bailey victory in 250 MX at the penultimate round in Colorado would mean he led Barnett by a scant 2 points (817-815) going into the series finale in Millville, Minnesota. Barnett actually pulled back into the lead of the Super Series there by finishing second to Lechien in the first 125 moto, while Bailey finished fourth in his 250 moto.

"I was nervous and preoccupied with winning the 250 title that moto," Bailey says of his first-moto performance, in which he could clinch the 250 MX title with a top-five finish. "So when Hannah, Johnson, and [Scott] Burnworth came ripping past me I was like, 'Whatever.' I'd never won an outdoor title, so I just wanted to get to the finish line and clinch the thing."

This all set up a situation where, in order for Bailey to win the Wrangler Super Series, he would have to not only win the second 250 moto, but also hope that Barnett didn't win the 125 class.

Recalls Bailey: "At that moment, what happened behind the scenes, without me knowing about it, was a whole lot of people from Honda were in the back of Hannah's box truck and were telling him, 'You know, Bob, you ran away with that first moto. If you're leading the second moto and Bailey is in second, you might let him go by, because you'll still win the overall and then Bailey has a good chance to win the Grand National Championship....'

"I was in my box van trying to stay cool because it was stinking hot. And I thought, You know, Bob

might do that for me. He's done it before with the whole 'Let Broc Bye' thing. . . . In my mind I'm thinking, Bob has been really good to me over the years. He didn't have to be, but he was, and if he's winning the second moto—which, the way he was riding, he probably was—he might scoot over and let me go. He'd still win the overall and those bonuses and whatnot. . . ."

The kicker was that Bailey didn't want to win the title like that, so he blasted out of the gate with the holeshot in the second moto and rode like a madman. But Hannah was right behind him.

"I really wanted to earn it," Bailey says. "I didn't want any of this teammate bullcrap. I rode as fast as I could, and maybe a little over



“

*He just stayed there right on my butt, and I was like, ‘Wait, is he going to let me have this or not?’ And then on the last corner he went in hot and crashed. He made it look real.”*

David Bailey

my head, and led for good while, then all of a sudden I started paying for it. Then Bob went by me, just to show me, as if to say, ‘Yeah, maybe ol’ Buckwheat’s not ready to retire after all.’

No matter, the fix was in.

“He was pretty slick about it,” Bailey says of Hannah’s gift. “Towards the end he went wide in a corner in the woods in the back section and I dove in and took it. And then he just stayed there right on my butt, and I was like, ‘Wait, is he going to let me have this or not?’ And then on the last corner he went in hot and crashed. He made it look real. He still got up and got the overall, but I was really grateful to him for doing that for me.”

Attention then focused on the final 125 moto. If Barnett won, he would be the Grand National Champion. Bailey needed the freshly minted Yamaha rookie Lechien to stay on his recent roll and beat Barnett.

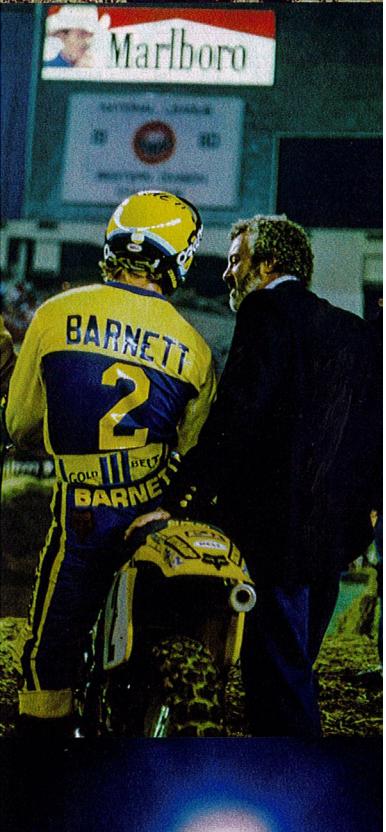
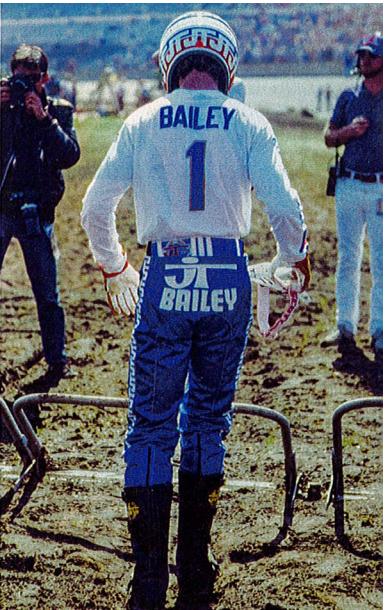
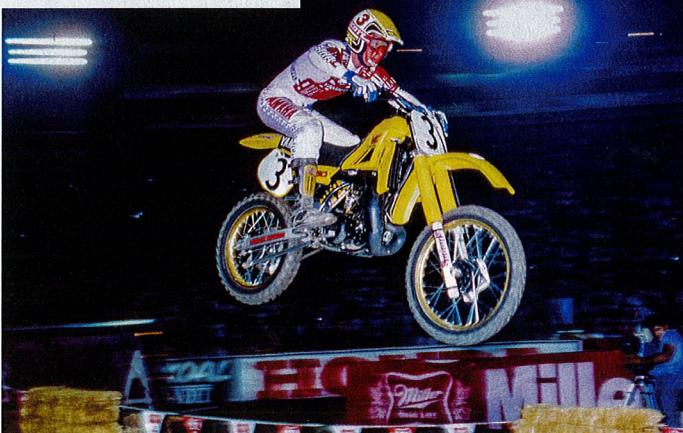
“It was kind of weird and all, but I was thinking, Go, Ronnie!” Bailey recalls. “Lechien was a 16-year-old kid who did not give any shits about this. He just wanted to win.”

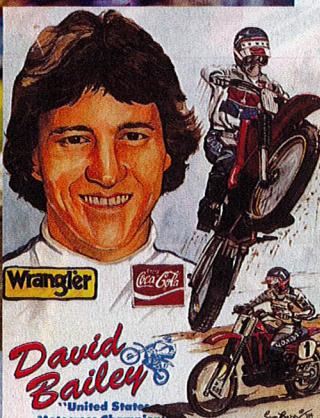
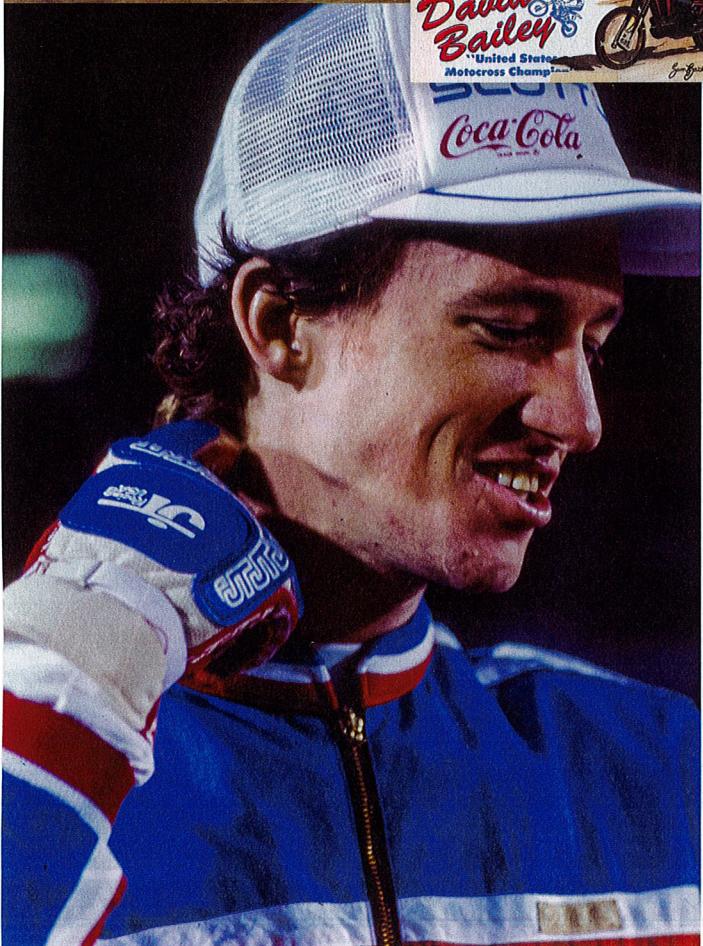
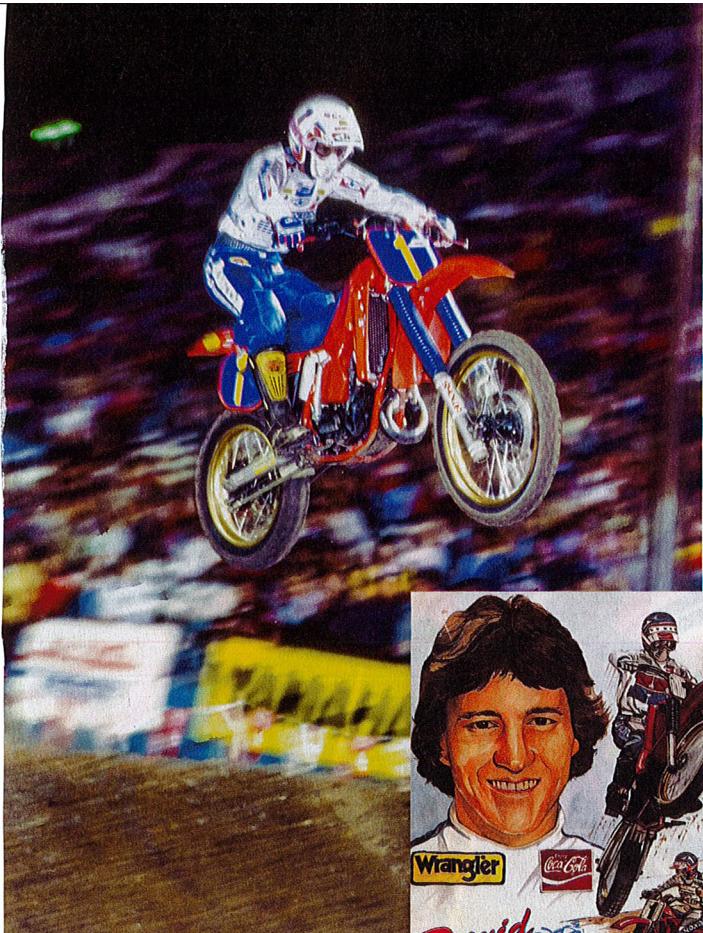
Lechien and Barnett tore away from the rest of the 125 riders as Bailey sat on the sidelines watching, biting his nails, with an extra 30 grand in the balance.

“Johnny O’ won the 125 championship that day, but Lechien and Barnett were going so fast that they lapped him on the last lap,” Bailey remembers. In fact, at the end of the moto, they came up on O’Mara so fast that Lechien actually ran into the back of O’Mara two corners from the finish and Barnett pulled alongside to possibly take over the lead. From where Bailey was watching, he couldn’t see the finish line.

“I could just hear the crowd going nuts,” he says. “The last I saw they were side by side. And Lechien was a rookie, and if he left an

The 1983 Wrangler Super Series went down to the very last moto between David Bailey (1) and Mark “Bomber” Barnett (2), though they weren’t actually racing together outdoors, as Bailey rode the 250 class and Barnett was in the 125 class. To make matters even more confusing, third-place Broc Glover (3) raced a 500 outdoors. The only time they got to race together in ‘83 was in AMA Supercross.





inch open, Barnett was going to take it. My dad, Gary, was standing up on a hill where he could see the finish, and when I saw his arms go up in celebration, I knew."

David Bailey was the new AMA Grand National Motocross Champion. Combined with his Supercross and 250 MX titles, it was one helluva a year.

On the other hand, there was a frustrated and disappointed Barnett, who said at Millville, "I was just the victim of some team racing by Honda, no doubt about it."

While the Wrangler Super Series was a boon to rider pocketbooks and general exposure for the sport, one person was not thrilled with the arrangement, and that was pioneering supercross promoter Mike Goodwin, who felt that only promoters should deal with a series sponsor, not the AMA. With all the friction over the sponsorship, combined with other issues including the chaotic conclusion at the MX finale, Goodwin managed to get the SX promoters to come together and strike out on their own without the AMA. That was the birth of the InSport Supercross Series in 1984. Then Wrangler even took its sponsorship money to the InSport Series, which left the AMA scrambling to keep the Grand National Championship going. The only promoter who did not come together with the rest was Daytona's

Jim France. He would add a race at another superspeedway (Talladega), but that was it for AMA Supercross events that year.

At the start of the '84 season at Anaheim, Bailey saw his new Honda with the blue and gold #1 plate for the first time.

"At first it looked weird and I didn't really like it," Bailey admits. "Everyone seemed pumped about it, and all the photographers were moving in to get photos of it. I always dreamed of having the traditional white with the black #1, but as the season went on, it sort of grew on me."

Ironically, it was Bailey wearing the blue #1 plates that people today most remember about the AMA Grand National Championship. He successfully defended his AMA Grand National Motocross Championship in '84, but without including the main InSport Supercross Series (which Johnny O'Mara won) in the points, the prestige of the Grand National title—already dubious in the minds of many traditionalists—was barely a blip on the radar.

The AMA Grand National Championship was gone, soon to be a footnote in motocross history books. The surviving remnant was the blue #1 plate, worn by Bailey again in 1985, because even though the Super Series was gone, he earned it, and it looked really cool.