

MARK BARNETT: MILLION \$ MAN

The sport's Magic man feels he's worth every hard-earned penny

When you look at Mark Barnett, current AMA National 125cc and Supercross champion, you might think it would be virtually impossible to duplicate his motocross racing successes. But don't say that to Mark. Barnett is one of those people who knows you have to have faith and determination, more than anything, to succeed in motocross.

"Everyone wants to win, but I think I always wanted to more than most people," explains Barnett. "If you really want something, and you stick it out and don't give up, it will come your way. You've got to keep going at it and not lose faith, and that's worked out great for me."

Encouraging words from Barnett since, at the grand old age of 21, he is the hottest, most sought-after motocrosser in the world. Barnett has joined a long string of riders, including Kent Howerton and Bob Hannah, who have occupied the top of the heap in the dirt motorcycle racing world.

Barnett's employers, U.S. Suzuki Motor Corp., have a great deal of faith that he will remain the man to beat for the next few seasons at least. To this end, Barnett will be taking home over a million U.S. dollars for riding Suzukis over the next three years. That puts him among the best-paid bike racers in the world, and certainly one of the two or three highest-paid motocrossers competing in the U.S.

"When you see what guys in other sports are making for a year, I'm not getting all that much," he says. "We train a lot harder than they do, and we take greater



Mark Barnett is charging hard this year in a bid to retain his No. 1 plate.

risks, and I doubt if our bodies will stand up as long as theirs will. We deserve what we get, if not more."

Few people realize just how hard motocrossers must train to have the stamina and energy to charge throughout a CNE-style stadium event. As track designers strive to make their courses more challenging for the riders and more exciting for the crowds, the modern moto-

crosser must be in superior physical condition to endure the punishment these tracks dish out.

"The best way to stay in shape for riding is by riding. I lift weights sometimes, but mostly I just keep riding. I built a couple of tracks that I figured would be as tough as the stadiums, but lately I've been riding in the woods. In the woods, you've got to think and act fast, so that's perfect training for Supercross. You just have to go for it all the time!"

For a while during the '81 season, Barnett rode in Texas with Kent Howerton on Howerton's personal testing facility. He learned a lot riding at Howerton's, and thought about moving out there to practise with Kent all the time.

"I decided not to, because I figured that I'd start riding only fast enough to stay in front of Kent, whereas when I ride by myself I keep pushing faster and faster all the time."

Instead of moving to Texas, Barnett (or Magic or Barney) continues to live on his grandmother's 400-acre farm near Plantersville, in the heart of rural Alabama. This is where he spends most of his time riding on his favorite tracks and trails, preparing for the next big 125 or Supercross race. Mark keeps a variety of bikes there that he maintains for his own practice use, as well as for visiting friends and relatives so they can come out and play with him.

Barnett moved to the farm from his home town of Chicago several years ago to concentrate on his riding with fewer distractions. It seems to have paid off.

After most big races Barnett rushes back to Alabama to feast on his grandmother's cooking and psych himself up for the next

event. He also has a strenuous daily exercise program of at least five miles of running and numerous short sprints.

"If I don't get my run in after a day's riding, I feel really bad. You can't let your conditioning slip at all."

With all the top motocrossers training so hard, Barnett has to devote most of his time staying in shape just to feel like he's keeping up.

"Sometimes I wonder that if I train this hard to win now, will I have to train harder to keep winning?" Barnett has shown at several tracks that he has what it takes to make that late-race charge. Maybe the competition still has some catching up to do in terms of pre-race preparation.

Besides training, Barnett also moved to the farm to get away from some of the problems associated with the lifestyle of the typical urban 21 year old. Drinking and partying don't fit in with the demands placed on the body of a professional racer. Barnett realizes this.

"There's no time for that right now. If you don't keep concentrating on what's important, it will get away from you."

Barnett does have some creature comforts in his chosen training area, however. Besides a constant supply of huge, home-cooked meals, he has a large mobile home complete with deck and hot tub. An old egg house does duty as his "factory" workshop, and three Toyota pickups as well as a Jeep and a van serve his transportation needs. When he has a moment to relax, Barnett listens to heavy-metal music played flat out on his stereo system. Combined with constant practice riding and extensive traveling, it's not what most homemakers would refer to as the quiet life.

Barnett started racing at the age of 10 with the versatile Honda XR70, and by '76 was a mini-cycle champion on a Suzuki. In '77 he rode the AMA 125 Nationals as a privateer, and Suzuki was sufficiently impressed to give him a factory ride the next season. His '78 and '79 seasons saw him get painfully close to the 125 title in the U.S.A., and he finally grabbed it in '80. Last year he repeated as 125 champ and added the ultra-important Supercross title as well. But just reporting that Barnett won two titles does not do his 1981 racing style justice. He slaughtered the opposition in the 125 class, winning 14 of a possible 16 motos. He clinched the Supercross title with an unprecedented six wins, all in front of huge stadium crowds.

With so much emphasis placed on larger machinery, especially here in North America, why does Barnett continue to campaign the smaller machines?

"A 125 teaches you to be a lot more aggressive in the corners. If you can ride a 125 fast, I think you could ride anything fast. I



Magic Mark is in the unfamiliar position of playing follow the leader in this year's Supercross standings, but no one doubts his ability to catch up quickly.

think if you ride the 500s all the time, you start to get lazy and let the motor do most of the work. That can't happen with a 125." Many experts feel that Barnett has stuck with the 125 because of his small, five-foot-seven frame.

"It doesn't really matter how big you are. I find I fit the 125 better than the 250, but not enough to make any difference. I think I generally fit the bikes better than a taller person would. I also think you don't have to worry about knee injuries as much as a bigger person. As long as I stay strong, I think my height is ideal."

Unquestionably, Barnett's strength is a big asset. "The stadium 250s didn't use to be much heavier than the 125s, but the AMA have upped the weight limit so they're

about 20 pounds heavier than last year. This suits me fine, since I figure I can handle the weight better than most guys."

The 1982 season has not gone as well for Barnett, so far, as his early '81 effort. Although he's had Supercross successes, the competition has been a lot closer than last year and now Barnett is in the unfamiliar position of playing follow the leader. But his consistency over the long haul is unprecedented, and many of those ahead of him have not previously been noted for their longevity. By the time you read this, the outdoor 125 season will have started and Mark should be back on track. Regardless, one thing is clear; Barnett has the right attitude, conditioning and machinery to play catch-up very successfully. ●