

DUCATI 2ND IN 24 HR. RACE Captures Endurance Championship

While the rest of the country celebrated New Years Eve an endurance race began in the outskirts of West Palm Beach, Florida at the Palm Beach Raceway. This was the last endurance race of 1977 and it would determine the Endurance Champion of the U.S. Of interest to us DIOC members was the GT Racing Team of Lansing Michigan and the Lester Wheels sponsored Kawasaki. When the fog had lifted on the ragged Palm Beach track Kawasaki had taken first place and Ducati Second. This second place finish was enough to clinch the National Championship of Endurance racing for Ducati.

To assure themselves of a win the GT Racing team went with a 900SS and two riders who know more about this track than anyone else, since they race there every month and win 90% of the time, John Long and Malcom Tunstall. From their own team, GT brought the men who rode the Ducati to the Championship during the 1977 season, Phil Pierson, Fred Kling and Bill Hurst.

The race began on a Saturday the 31st of Dec. and would end around 12 noon on the first of Jan. I had to work the better part of Saturday and didn't arrive on the track until early that evening. When I got to the pits I passed several Moto Guzzies and other Japanese bikes that had crashed or broken down. I located the GT Racing booth. The night was damp and the stillness of the countryside was broken by the sound of motorcycles engines racing around the track, their high intensity quartz lights cutting through the night darkness and the coming fog. The deep exhaust of the Ducati twin could easily be heard over all the other bikes. The sound was absolutely astounding. It would send quivers of excitement down my body and I wished I could be out there racing.

As I chatted with team captain John Hoagland I found out that the Kawasaki had lead most of the race. The Ducati remained in second and third place just taking it easy and riding a careful race.

During the fifth hour of racing Fred Kling crashed. The clip ons and fairing were damaged. The repairs took place and Malcom took over for the injured Kling. Not too long afterwards Malcom pulls in with what he thinks crankshaft big end bearing noise. The repairs begin once again and they find that the washer holding the nut on the crank has fallen off with the nut sheering the teeth on the oil pump. A fresh engine was installed within a half hour. Then disaster struck. The front cylinder on the fresh engine was 180° off time. This had to be repaired and the team loses another hour and goes into the hole 30 laps behind the Lester Wheels Kaw.

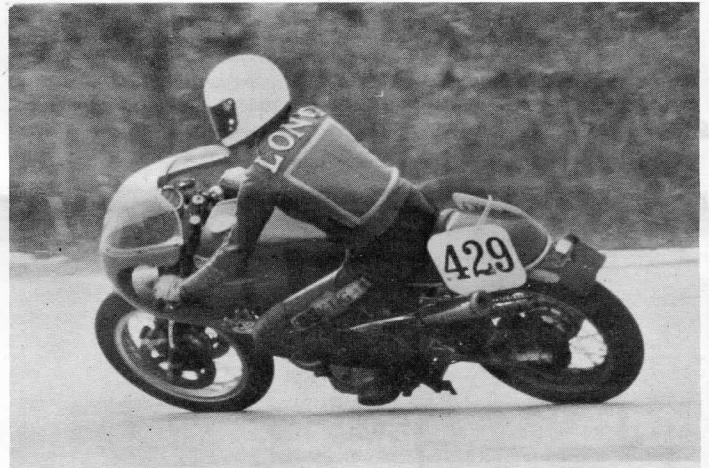
With determination and courage the Ducati team set their skills and abilities on the task of catching the Kawasaki. Their main hopes set on John Long and Malcom Tunstall who knew the track so well, to do most of the catching up. They came through for GT Racing and the rest of the people who wanted to see Ducati show the rest of the world just how strong it is. Their skillful riding through the dense fog brought the team within 5 laps by the time most of us were waking up from a noisy nights sleep. During the night the pace quickened and riders and machines were dropping by the trackside.

Fred Kling could no longer race so he had to retire from the team. The bike continued to run well. The Kawasaki, well prepared and well financed did not miss a beat either. A lot can be said for the riders of this machine. Despite its awesome power and weight they still managed to race well and without any crashes.

Toward the last hour Ducati Racers began to dice with the Kawasaki in the efforts to cause them to make a mistake. During this dicing Malcom Tunstall popped out of gear going around the first turn and crashed. The rider landing in a cold canal, and the bike with its front wheel barely touching the water. The bike was quickly pulled out and cleaned up. John Long climbed on board with a bald front tire and went after the Kawasaki, but it was too late. Not enough time left so the Ducati ended up in Second. The Kawasaki won but with GT Racings second place finish they were denied the Championship.

The reliability and good handling characteristics of the Ducati put the team within 7 laps of first place after starting out 30 laps behind from their repairs. If the spare engine had been tested at the shop, the problem would have been found and corrected. The possibilities of a win would have been very real.

For their National Championship win GT Racing got a Laverda 1000 Jamarama. This bike is for sale. The money will be used to finance GTs Racing efforts for 1978. They are hoping for some kind of help from the distributor or the factory. GT Racing strongly believes that their Championship helped to prove to a lot of people that Ducatis are very well built and despite the almost total lack of racing parts and performance equipment, they can go out on a track and win races with factory stock machinery. ■



John Long knew the West Palm Beach race track very well. His professional racing experience was a great asset in bringing the Ducati which was 30 laps behind into a fantastic 2nd place.



Gary Scott one of the riders on winning Lester Wheels Sponsored Kawasaki rode an uneventful race. Despite wobbling problems, the Lester Team managed to keep the bike from biting the dust.