

taps tubs & tiles



DESERT RACE

When the NT Tourist Commission sponsored a zillion air tickets to help attract riders to the event, and when every Australian motocross and enduro Champion was invited, and when every motorcycle newspaper or magazine gets brought in, and when even Playboy Magazine sends a roving reporter, you know something is happening. Damn right. The tenth race from Alice Springs to Finke and back.

by Geoff Eldridge

This race is a tribute to a town like Alice. It is also a tribute to the Alice Springs Motorcycle Club members, and in particular Damien Ryan, who puts his not inconsiderable weight and organisational talent behind it.

After all, it's not anyone who can turn a trailride to nowhere that has as its main feature a drunken overnight stop, into Australia's fastest desert race – and then find \$10,000 to give to the outright winner. To tell the story of a race like this isn't easy. There's a special magic about being a part of a crazy charge off into the desert at speeds up to 180 km/hr, just like there's a special magic about all the preparation that leads up to it. Where do you start?

Easy.

On a tight corner located about 80 kms due south of Alice Springs. The time: 4.00 pm on the Thursday afternoon before the race. The road is called the Old South Road and it's nothing more than a 4-WD track that used to follow the old railroad between Alice and Adelaide.

It also doubles up as the Taps Tubs and Tiles Desert Race course to Finke.

The sun is getting lower in a typically clear bright blue sky and there are about ten of us at this particular corner at this particular time. All of us are here to practice the course and where we're standing will become the first refuelling stop for many riders.

We're talking about this and that – mostly pre race bullshit and hype that seems to be a part of Finke each year. It's quiet as only a desert can be quiet. The air is still with approaching nightfall.

Then off in the distance a bike can suddenly be heard approaching.

We keep talking. It gets closer. Suddenly someone says,

"Hey, that must be Gall! He's been practising this section all day..."

Just then a white bike appears around the sweeper that leads into the dip that is a dried up creek bed, just fifty metres before the tight corner where we're grouped.

"Yep! That's Gall all right... Geez! He's FLYING!!!!" As we watched Gall entered the dip going far too fast. "He's gonna crash fer sure!" someone yelled. He was only fifty metres from this 90 degree corner and he was still pegged out in top!

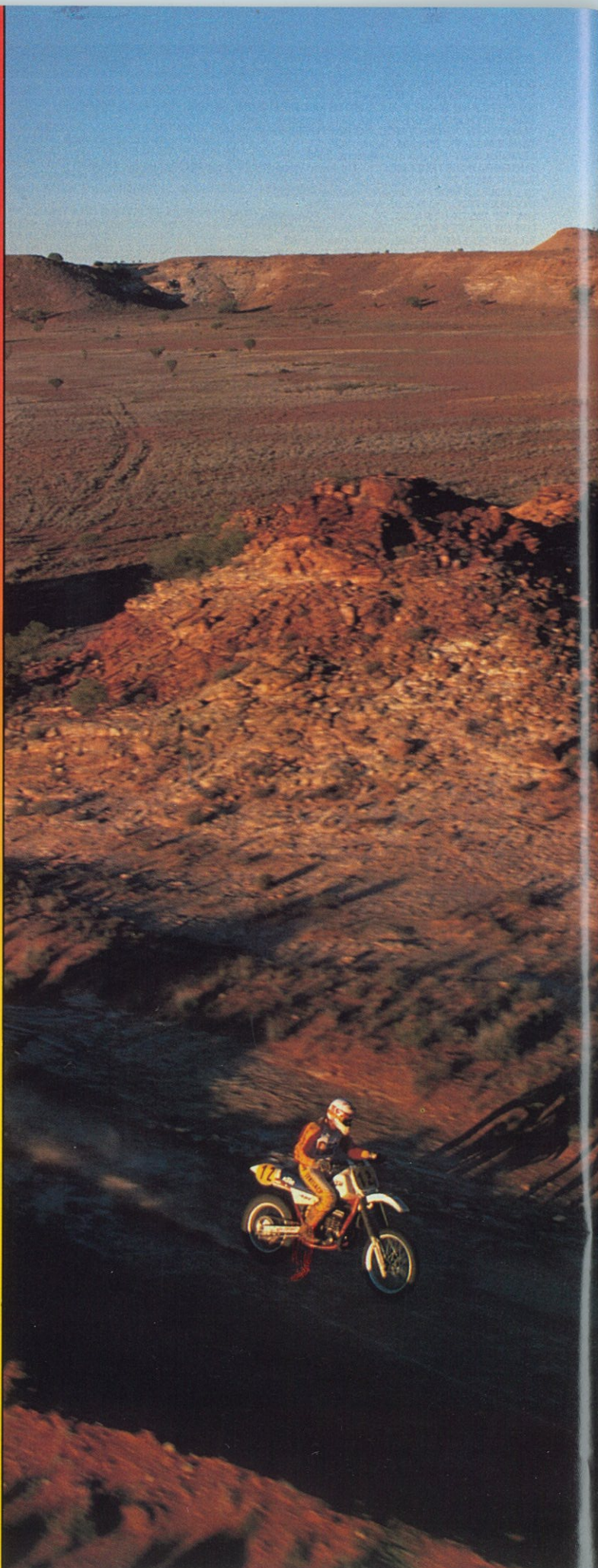
Before he even got near the corner he casually (if you can be casual at 140 km/hr so close to a corner) pitched the whole bike sideways and slid sideways all the way round the corner, hardly losing an ounce of speed.

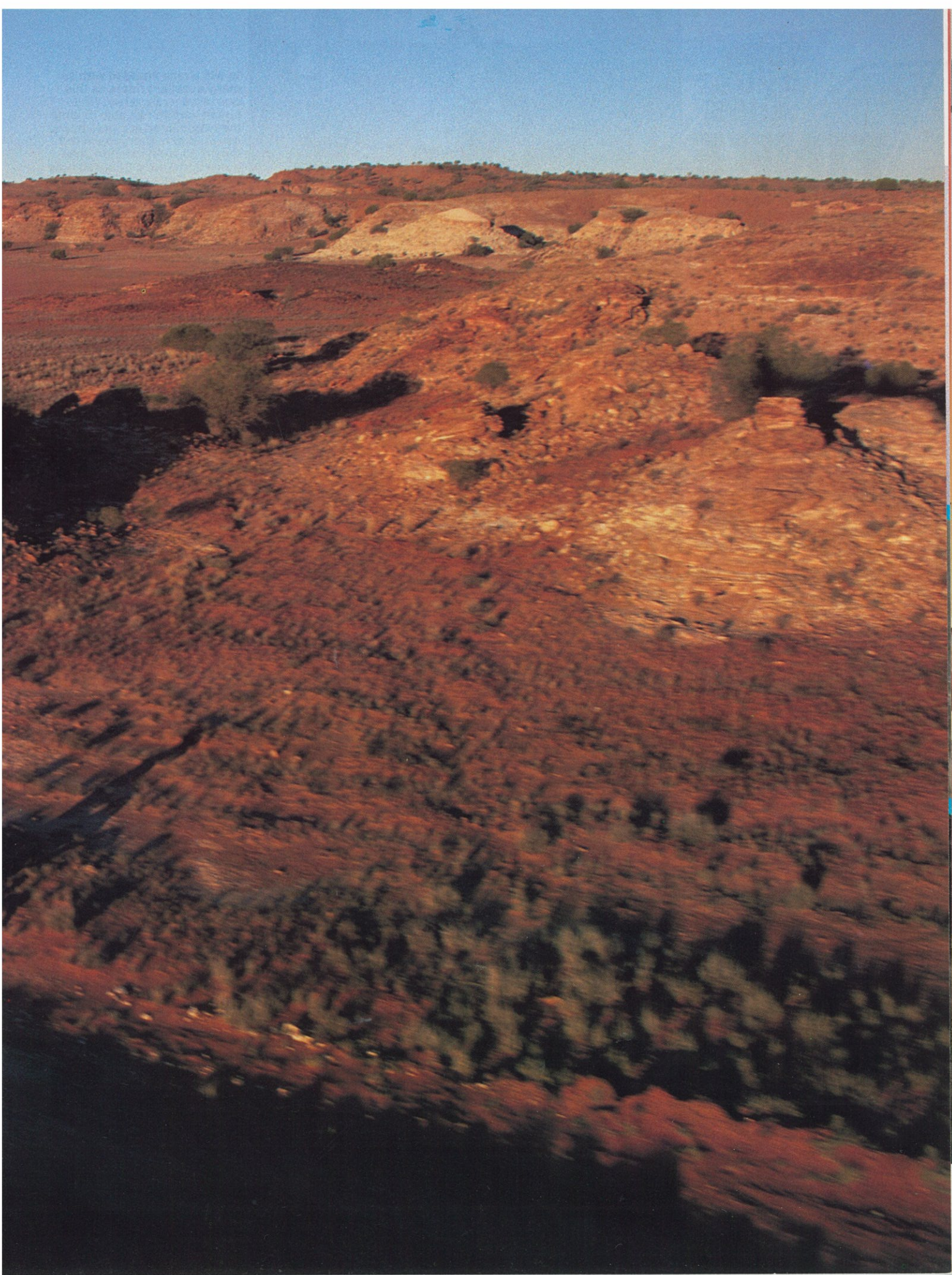
As he powered off he glanced back and waved at us. All he saw was a row of wide eyed disbelievers who were having trouble closing their mouths. Not more than 15 seconds later Glen Bell went and did the same thing.

"That does it. I'm going back to the pub..." muttered one of our group.

"Good idea. Can you believe it?... " said someone else and they began to pack up. I walked over to the corner after they'd all gone. All the way around it were these two perfect blue tyre tracks. Blue rubber on the hard packed dirt surface.

I'd wondered while Gall and Bell did it what the screeching was. Tyres howling in protest on the dirt. I couldn't believe it either, so I sat down next to my bike to wait for the ute that was bringing my fuel and I wondered why the hell I even bothered entering when it was obvious I was way out of my league.





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FINKE DESERT RACE

But if I was out of my league, then how was Peter Stayt, winner of the '84 event? He hadn't ridden a dirt bike since Weipa in September '84. Or Phil Lovett? Or any of the locals?

Because not only had Stephen Gall and Glen Bell been invited, but the decision had been taken to import every Australian motocross star and Enduro champion there was, so that the lineup for this single desert race read like a star-studded Who's Who of Australian dirt bike racing.

To top it off the outright winner would get a \$10,000 cheque and 2nd place would get a mere \$500, so it was win or nothing.

Jeff Leisk, the hottest property in Aussie motocross, turned up with a four man support crew including his brilliant mechanic Gary Benn, and they arrived in the massive Honda truck with four bikes (but who was counting?), a dozen wheels and parts galore, then they hired a rent-a-4WD to help pre-run the course.

Trevor Williams arrived to represent Kawasaki and he spent plenty of time experimenting to make sure his KX500 was one of the fastest things down the initial road section.

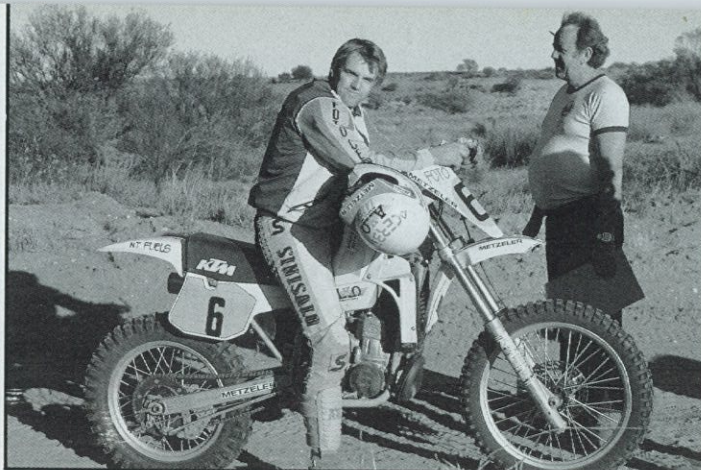
Craig Dack and Vaughan Style were also ticketed to be there, but mishaps the week before put paid to them. Same with Four Day winner Pelle Granquist: he was sick as a dog and couldn't front either.

Australian enduro champs David Rose (125cc) and Stephen Phillips (200cc) also arrived, but their chances at outright weren't rated very highly because of their smaller capacity (and Steve's chances plunged to zero the day before the race when he decided he didn't like desert racing and flew off home).

The whole thing was built up to such a fever pitch that even the — shall it be said? — legendary Geoff Curtiss came out of a four year retirement to announce that he was having a go at it too. I didn't really take him seriously before the race started but in retrospect I takes me hat off to him.

In typical Alice Springs fashion, what everyone talked about all week was who would win. The motocrossers were pretty cagey about it, as they always are when speaking publicly, and their attitude must have worn off on the other riders because all of a sudden here were twenty possible winners, all great hulking macho desert racers, being oh-so-polite and extremely well spoken thankyou very much, and none of

Continued over



To win a race studded with as many excellent riders as this one takes a rare talent. Phil Lovett mightn't be able to jump the quads three at a time but he can sure blitz everyone in the desert. Last off the start, first home and 9 mins 31 secs under Stephen Gall's previous record time, Lovett shattered everyone. Afterwards he modestly said that he was "going about 8/10s..."



FAR LEFT

Geoff Curtiss won the very first Finke "There And Back" Race in 1976, taking six hours exactly. He won another two (1978 and 1980), then retired with back problems. He emerged cheerfully from retirement for the 10th Anniversary and led the whole field all the way to the Finke River, some 218 kms. I didn't think it was possible, but Geoff must be one of the best desert riders in the world. Still.

RIGHT

This desert race is funny: you don't have to ride and train all year to do well. Proof is Peter Stayt who had spent the last eight months without even riding: he ran 2nd until a rock smashed his eye, and even then he pressed on to finish 6th outright. Where there's no sense there's no pain, they say. We expect a letter from Peter soon to explain how he does it.



Bad luck for Jeff Leisk, and yet more proof that it's not easy to beat the desert. Running in 2nd spot on the way back, his chain guide wore the ends of the connecting link down so that the clip flicked off and the master link broke — a problem caused by the smaller rear sprocket. He repaired it to finish 82nd outright.



After practising his brains out for a week beforehand Stephen Gall went and crashed his brains out on the very section he should have known best. Like everyone aboard an Eddie Baldissera prepared Yamaha, Stephen didn't ride his until the actual race and practised on another bike. Ah, to be heavily sponsored, eh? 5th outright was the best he could do after his two forced stops (the other to clean his goggles).

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FINKE DESERT RACE

RIGHT

Glen Bell: Rookie Of The Year and 3rd Outright. A far better effort than his 12 Hour debut. Actually there's not a lot of mind boggling things to say about Glen because he had no problems, rode safe, didn't get drunk and cause any pub brawls and he generally kept a low profile. Pre running the course soothed him though: "At least this time I know where I'm going!"

Continued

them really saying a damn thing. Nevertheless, the talk was Leisk. Leisk's bike this, Leisk's bike that, Leisk's bike has been clocked a 220 km/hr, Leisk is from West Australia and all they have over there is sand blah blah blah. Far as I was concerned, if Leisk can beat Stephen Gall at motocross then it was logical he might stand a show of beating him in the desert. I'd have given anything to have been on that tight corner to watch Leisk go past.

SURPRISE SURPRISE!

When the shotgun blast started the Open Class on their desert charge, it was surprises all the way. Forget all the other classes – the action was with the Open machines.

For starters, Lovett was dead last off the line and disappeared into a cloud of dust so thick you could carve it with a knife. The crowd of 5,000 reached for their pencils to cross him off.

Peter Stayt romped straight into the lead, so his chances went through the roof. Gall, Leisk, Williams and Bell were off well, and so was... nah! Couldn't be! Geoff Curtiss? Lucky, that's all. Just lucky.

At Deep Well it was Curtiss in the lead – end of the fast road section. Big deal – so he's got a fast bike – the others will all pass him before the next checkpoint.

Rumbalara – Curtiss first.

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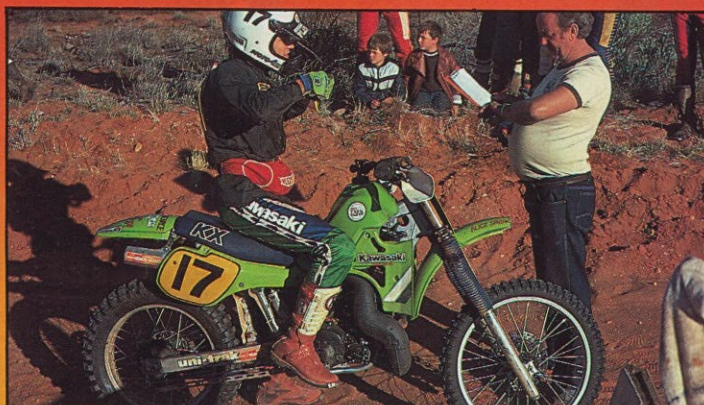
RIGHT

Top 250 was local Darren Griffiths, a crazy bastard by any stretch of the imagination. Two days before the race Darren was sitting by the side of the road, big grin on his face. "Well, this is where I run out of petrol, so this is where my first fuel stop is going to be!" he chortled. It was ; he had four stops each way to everyone else's two, and still won. Crazy bastard. Not so good at the Four Day, but excellent in the desert.



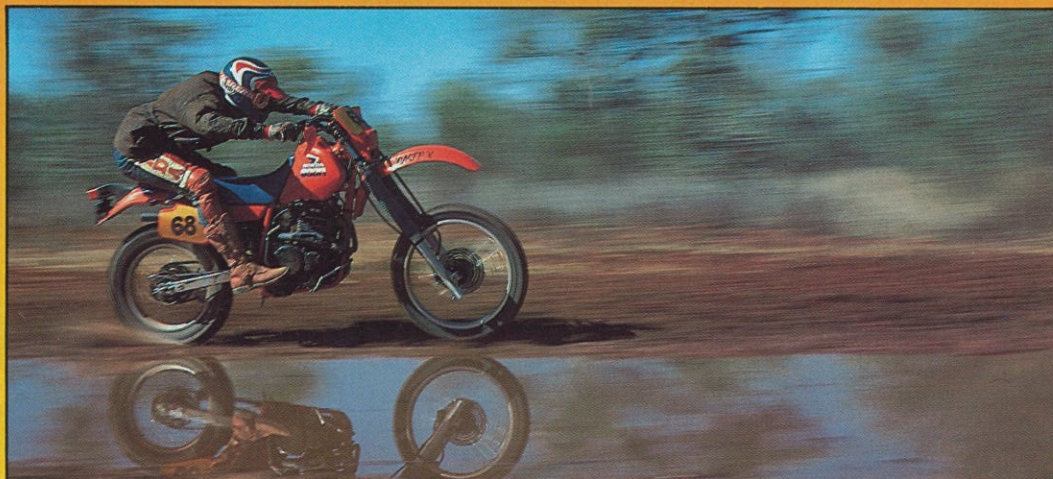
LEFT

It was up to local hotshot Mark Winter to hold up the Kawasaki Open Class effort after Trevor's withdrawal. Mark's dad heard he needed a new tyre for day two so he chartered an aircraft and flew one down to Finke. You're either serious or you forget it. Mark finished 4th and earned everyone's respect.



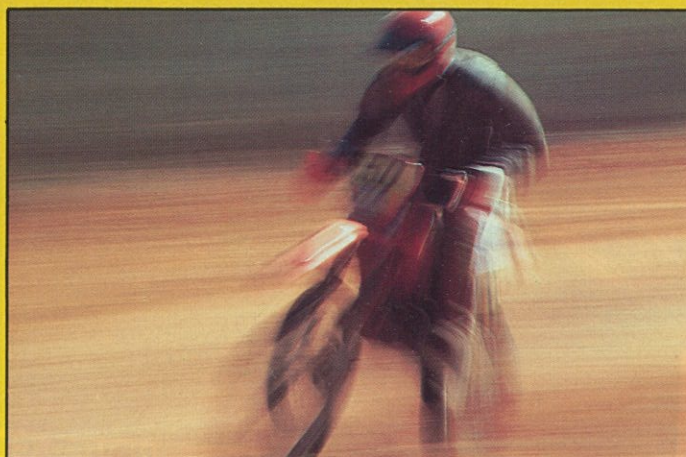
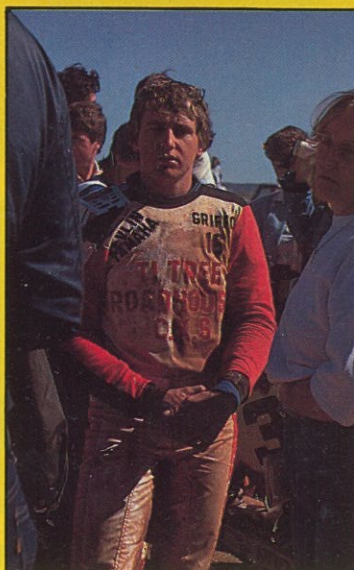
BELOW

One of SA's best enduro riders is Kevin Long, who was lucky enough to be the first Australian rider to compete on the new XR600 Honda. He won the Open Four-Stroke Class easily.



BELOW

Taps, Tubs and Tiles Desert Racing is FAST! Stephen Paech in action.



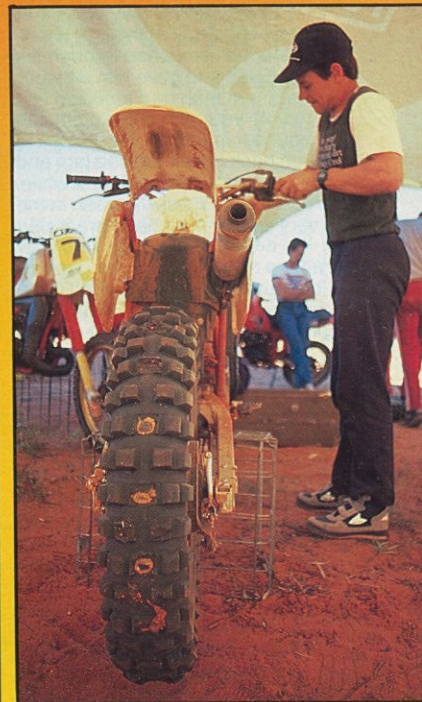
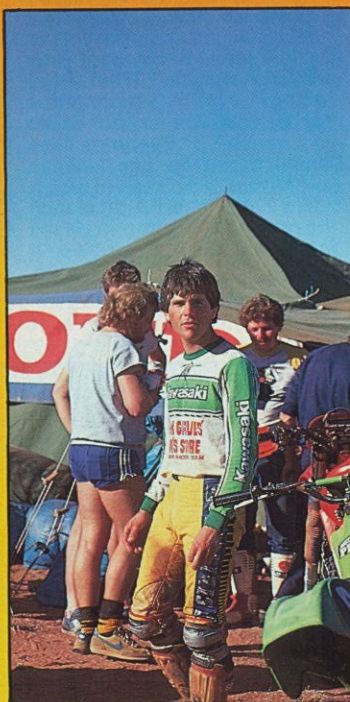


ABOVE

The overnight Finke stop is a great place for a boozy rage – or it used to be until the prizemoney went up and the riders became serious. I wanted to party on into the wee hours as usual, but I didn't want to be the odd one out so I didn't.

RIGHT

After having led the 250cc Class easily until within halfway back on day two, Mike Farrell's KX250 went off song and he dropped to 3rd. He was happy with that, though, because it was his first ever finish in the Finke race.



RIGHT

If this looks like a desert to you, then so be it. Typical countryside with Nigel Frost in the starring role.



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FINKE DESERT RACE

TOP RIGHT

For the second year in a row John Fidler's bike had a mechanical failure – this time the big end collapsed on the way home when he was running 2nd in the 200cc class. Fid is one of the few riders to have competed in all ten Finke races and his effort is all the more amazing because he's old and balding and should have retired to a health farm years ago.

Continued

Bundooma – Curtiss. Mt. Squires – Curtiss. The Ruins – Curtiss! Hell's teeth – the boy can RIDE!

Somewhere in his dust Peter Stayt copped a shower of rocks, one of which smashed through his goggles and gave him a bigger black eye than he'd received in a whole year of being a nightclub bouncer in Cairns. He started to drop back. Leisk passed him and sat in 2nd spot for a while.

Gall had a massive crash in the very section he'd been practising to death, then had to stop later after a refuel to clean his goggles because his fuel cap hadn't been put back on properly. He dropped places severely and didn't want to risk another crash in the heavy dust. Glen Bell bowled along merrily in about 4th spot.

But what of Lovett?

For the first time ever, Lovett must have had the fastest bike. He not only got mobile after his bad start, but in the first 60 kms he passed 26 riders and blasted through Deep Well in 4th spot! Then he passed Stayt, then Leisk ("Crazy...") and as he reached the Finke River he passed Curtiss. Just amazing.

As for the rest of the thing it was a bit of an anti climax. Lovett reckoned he was cruising at about 8/10ths on the first day and that if anyone posed a threat he could pour it on and get mobile again. He led all the way back to Alice with Curtiss hot on his heels. The big one-two.

Lovett always said Curtiss was the best rider he'd ever seen in the desert. Except for himself.

BOTTOM RIGHT

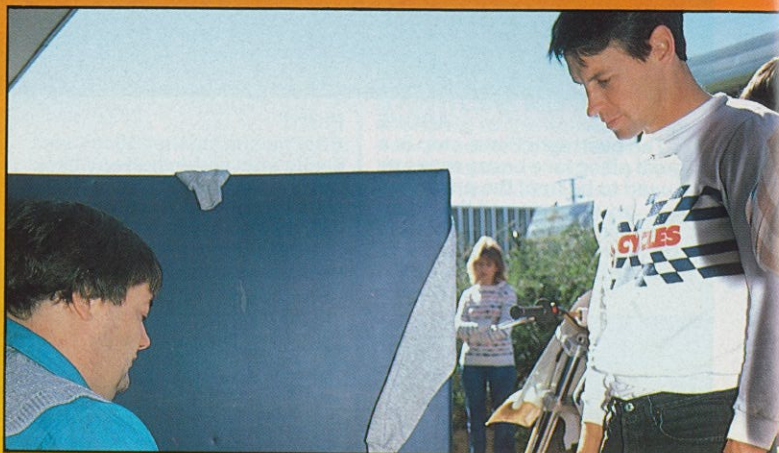
To maintain a high public profile and reassure people that pains are taken to ensure rider safety, machine examination is held in the main street of Alice Springs on a Saturday morning.



RIGHT

For the last few years the main driving force behind this race has been Damien Ryan, seen here hassling Stephen Gall.

"Steve, are you sure you've signed? What about your licence number? What about autographing this programme for my little woman back at the ranch?... " Everyone likes Damien to run the race because no-one else is so keen to watch riders in the desert and it means he puts a 120% effort in on the job. Well done, Damien. Keep it up.

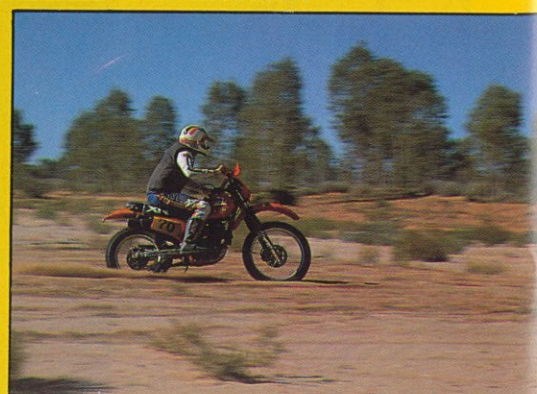
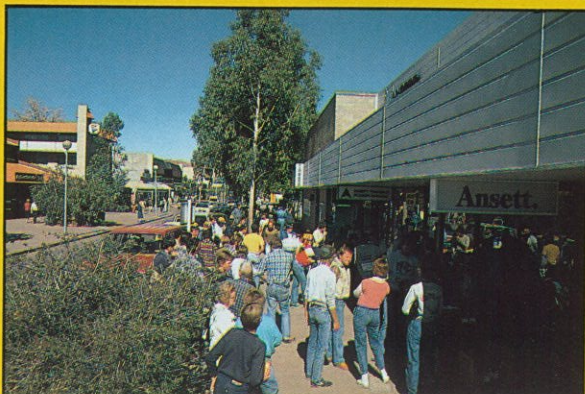


LEFT

Team ADB didn't do any damn good at all. A lousy run on the way down, learning the hard way that no-one else had a stock standard engine (my excuse and I'm sticking to it), then a seizure about 6 kms from Finke on the second day, for no explicable reason. I retired to the top of a sand dune and imitated the Abbos: didn't do or think a thing, and wished I was at the pub.

BELOW

Playboy's Rob Luck got a bit further before he blew the engine of his loan XR250 to bits, and on the long haul back to Alice we shared warm flat beer and told tall stories about how fast we were riding before our bikes let us down.



FINKE: NO MORE FOOLING AROUND

At 10.00 pm on the Sunday night there are about 250 people clustered around several campfires just outside the Aboriginal town of Finke. It's cold. The first day of the race is finished but there's still the trip home. And this year the atmosphere is a lot quieter.

Geoff Curtiss remembers the first Finke:

"Hey, mon. That was a real blast, eh. We all stayed up till 4.00am and got drunk and fell over where we were. Then we all rode back next morning with headaches. Great fun, mon!" He laughs.

Tonight it's quiet as a grave. In the NT Fuels tent are the riders with the best chance at winning the race: Lovett, Curtiss, Gall, Bell, Stayt, Leisk. They're all talking quietly as they sip on cups of coffee and soup. No booze. No nothing. This is the meusli brigade in action and even Lovett toes the line.

He wants that \$10,000 next day, and the \$2,000 bonus for having won the Radio Alice 12 Hour two months earlier.

Even I can remember wilder times. We all disperse politely at around 10.30pm and go off to sleep. Bugged if I can get to sleep. I move out of the Team Honda tent to escape one snorer, only to find there's someone else even louder on the outside.

I wander off into the darkness an hour later, unable to sleep and with my swag clutched under my arm. I find a Toyota ute fifty yards away and set myself up under the tailgate. It's the most fun I've had all night.

PRESENTATION NIGHT

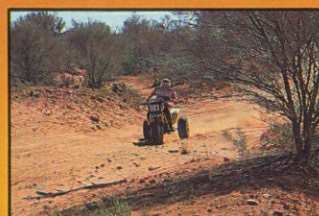
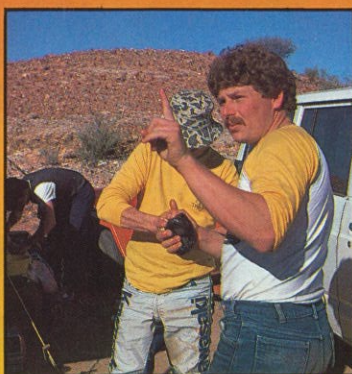
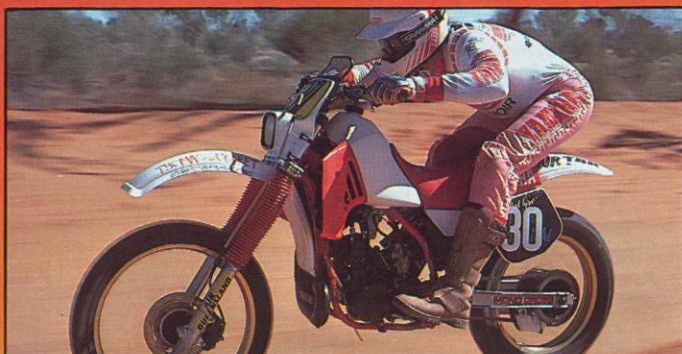
I'm talking to Rob Luck from Playboy magazine after everyone has been up to collect their prizes.

"I've been to a lot of car race presentation nights," he's saying, "and I reckon these blokes do a better job of it all round. They speak better, remember to thank all the right people and you feel they really mean it when they say they enjoyed the race and wished the competition all the best." I nod in agreement. Dirt bike riders have matured a lot lately. But I'm not sure if it wasn't better before.

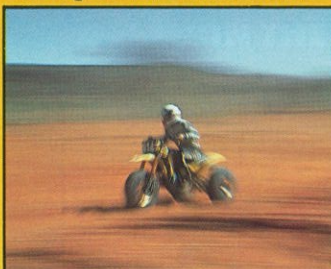
All the same they achieved their goal. They turned the Taps, Tubs and Tiles Finke Desert Race into the fastest, biggest, richest most glamorous desert race in the country. You can't knock that for an achievement.

RIGHT

Trevor Williams' effort came to a halt when his rear tyre went flat on the first day. You don't stop and repair flats and still stay in contention in the Finke, so he wisely pulled out and spent a relaxing weekend helping his fuel crew. After a lot of tuning he'd finally got his KX up to a competitive speed down the road: "I was overgeared for a while, that's all."



ABOVE BELOW
We were threatened with bodily harm if we failed to mention the trikes. Here are a couple - James Clee (603) and Steven de Kruijff (614). Actually, these things do quite well, considering they're always looking for three good lines and not one.



LEFT

As soon as he finished Phil Lovett dropped his KTM on the ground (to Bert Flood's grief) and almost wept for joy. "At last I'll be able to repay those nice ADB boys for all the free lunches they've shouted me over the years!" Wife Desley calms him down and gently reminds him that his first obligation is that nice new car he's been promising her. ADB duds out again.

LEFT

Paul Moir wrapped up a deal with TAA and managed to escape from Weipa for a week to ride Finke. He commented later that he became lulled into a steady pace and that he actually missed the Weipa Swamp.

RESULTS

| | | |
|---------------------|--------|---------|
| 1. Phil Lovett | KTM500 | 3.41.30 |
| 2. Geoff Curtiss | YZ490 | 3.42.26 |
| 3. Glen Bell | YZ500 | 3.48.00 |
| 4. Mark Winter | KX500 | 3.50.00 |
| 5. Stephen Gall | YZ500 | 3.51.00 |
| 6. Peter Stayt | YZ500 | 3.51.59 |
| 7. Kurt Johannsen | KTM500 | 3.56.40 |
| 8. Darren Griffiths | YZ250 | 4.01.30 |
| 9. Graeme Baldwin | YZ500 | 4.03.00 |
| 10. Paul Wright | YZ250 | 4.07.22 |

251cc AND OVER

| | |
|------------------|--------|
| 1. Phil Lovett | KTM500 |
| 2. Geoff Curtiss | YZ490 |
| 3. Glen Bell | YZ500 |

250cc

| | |
|---------------------|-------|
| 1. Darren Griffiths | YZ250 |
| 2. Paul Wright | YZ250 |
| 3. Mike Farrell | KX250 |

200cc

| | |
|-------------------|--------|
| 1. Rick James | KDX200 |
| 2. Steven Pratley | YZ125 |
| 3. David Smith | IT175 |

250cc FOUR-STROKE

| | |
|----------------------|-------|
| 1. Doug Adamson | XR250 |
| 2. Bryan Cartwright | XR250 |
| 3. Laughlin McKerrow | XR250 |

201cc AND OVER FOUR-STROKE

| | |
|------------------|-------|
| 1. Kevin Long | XR600 |
| 2. Rick Schembri | TT600 |
| 3. Des Woodberry | TT600 |

VETERANS

| | |
|--------------------|--------|
| 1. Colin Woodberry | TT600 |
| 2. Geoff Udy | KTM600 |
| 3. Deane Boston | IT200 |

TRIKES

| | |
|----------------------|--------|
| 1. Dean Sundahl | Hon250 |
| 2. Paul Huett | Yam250 |
| 3. Steven de Kruijff | Yam250 |