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CYCLE RIDER

JUNE 1973 75 CENTS

Special Test: HONDA TL-125—Japan's first trials bike

Tests: Yamaha RD-350 / Triumph Trophy / Bultaco 125 Pursang

Competition: Houston National / Madison Square Garden

Hop-Up: 750 Honda Project Bike / Interview: Merle Shank





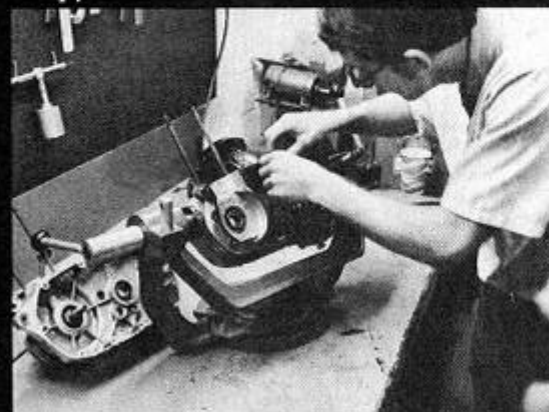
ON THE COVER: This is Honda's year for getting serious about off-road riding. Two-stroke racers and enduro mounts and this four-stroke single that should introduce the growing new sport of observed trials to many Americans.—Photography by Len Weed.



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How to lose forty pounds, decimate a gun collection, dodge ground hogs, pick out flares in the fog, fulfill a twenty year dream and cover 2,000 miles (almost) in 24 hours.

INTERVIEW:

Merle Shank

At 9:06 a.m. on August 18, 1972 Merle Shank, a 33-year-old experimental mechanic from Des Moines, Iowa, put his 750 Honda in motion, beginning a marathon that would end some 24 hours later with a new world record for motorcycle riding endurance. 1,945 miles later (his average was 81 mph) he had easily surpassed a record which, strangely enough, had endured since 1937 when Fred Ham, a California motorcycle policeman, had logged 1,825 miles on his 61-inch Harley. During that 35 year span probably no more than a dozen riders had even challenged the endurance mark, a feat that had captured the imagination of Shank before he even entered his teenage years.

Shank began preparing for the marathon some 18 months earlier, adhering to a disciplined physical training program and early morning rides before going to work. He contacted Pocono Raceway and Bill Marvel gave him the green light to make his at-



tempt around the 2.5 mile tri-oval. Sponsorless, Merle financed the project out of his own pocket and traveled to Pennsylvania ready to have a go at his cherished goal. He pulled into town in his dad's travel trailer with no more than his bike and a fifty gallon drum of gasoline. He didn't even have replacement rubber or a spare chain. At the last minute Bill Krause (of Krause Honda) heard of Shank's planned attempt and offered to put together a pit crew to provide the services necessary to keep bike and rider in motion for twenty-four consecutive hours.

We questioned the new record holder about his preparation and his twenty-four hour day. In this age of the big bucks, first cabin factory efforts it is indeed refreshing to hear about the little guy, the everyday bike rider, who can get the job done with nothing more than the determination to climb a particular "mountain" just because it is there and he chooses to tackle it. As long as that kind of spirit survives, in whatever form of endeavor, there's still hope that the creeping restraints designed to curb the imagination can be headed off at the pass. The fact that a man circled a race track for a full day doesn't in itself seem to affect the daily routine of life. But what does affect that routine of life are the collective efforts of men who, like Merle Shank, dream and dare. Our hats are off to you, Merle.

Q—What is your background?

A—I was born May 27, 1939, so that

makes me 33 years old. I'm 6 feet tall at 165 pounds right now, married and a daughter 8 years old. I am an experimental mechanic at AMF Western Tool. We make lawn mowers, and yes when I returned to work they asked me why I didn't use a Harley. Because I didn't tell anybody at work what I was up to, very few people knew about what I was doing.

Q—When did you first learn of the 24-hour marathon record?

A—In 1952 when I first started riding solo, my bike was a 150cc Jawa that my dad bought me one month before my 13th birthday (April 1952). My dad has been a motorcycle rider since 1928. Anyway, I bought a book called "The Motorcycle Book," a Fawcett publication, and on page 135 I ran across the 24 hour endurance record. I talked to my dad about it, and he told me about how Fred Ham had prepared himself physically for that long ride. A year later I bought another Fawcett book, "Motorcycles In Competition," and on page 11 there was a picture of Fred and a short article. It was then that I decided I was going to make an attempt on that record, and it has been a dream ever since. Last August it became a dream come true.

Q—What finally motivated you to really start preparing?

A—Well, back in 1960 just after I got married, I told my wife I was going to make an attempt on the 24 hours record before my 35th birthday. No comment. One morning in January of 1971 (I was then 31) I realized 35 was

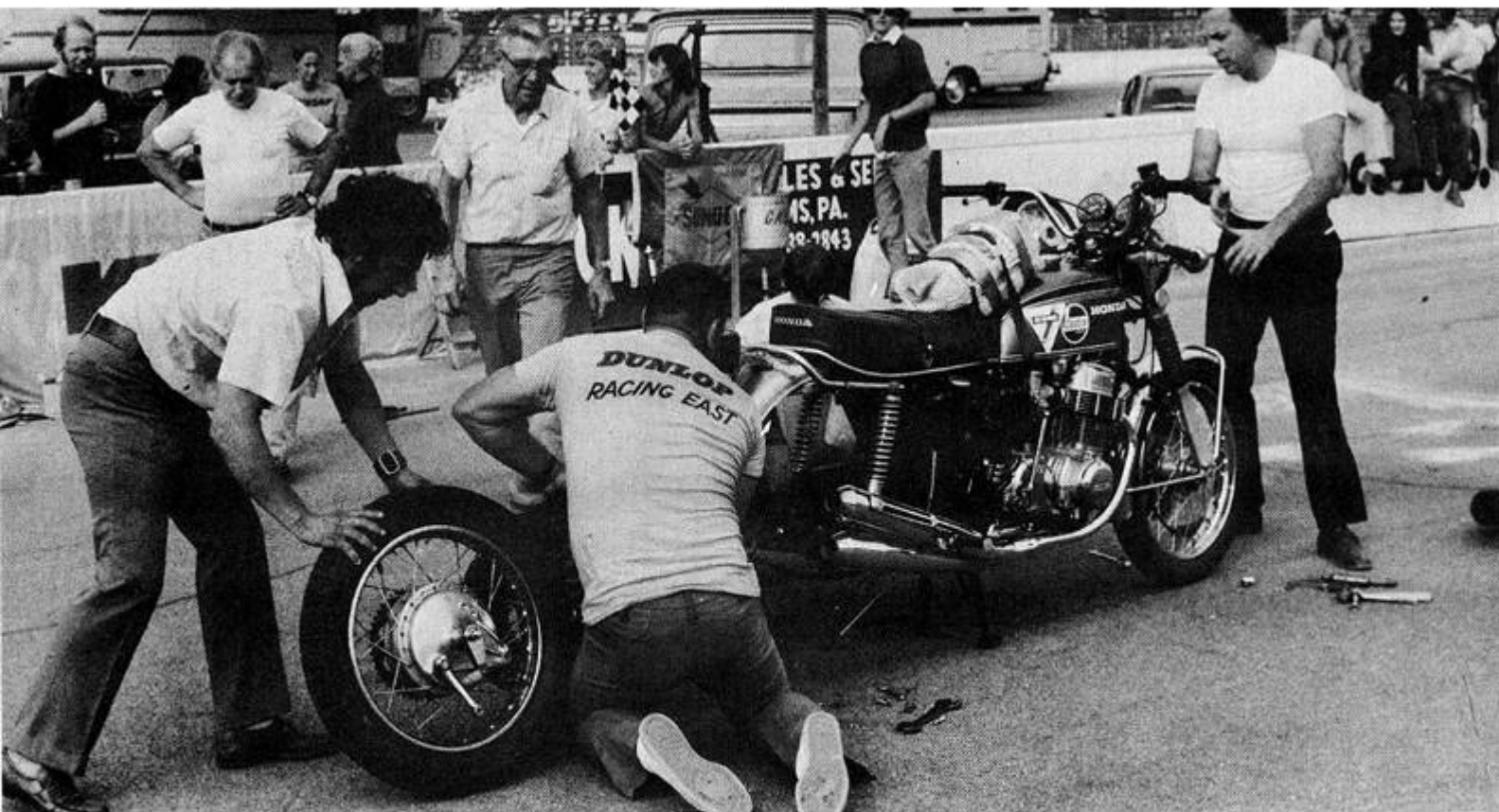
sneaking up on me, so either I had to get down to serious business or forget the whole idea. I talked it over with my wife. First she just laughed; then she threatened to leave me. I talked her out of it, and then I started to get ready. Item one—quit smoking.

Q—Exactly what did you do to prepare physically and mentally?

A—In February, 1971 I quit smoking two packs a day to nothing overnight (no pills, just willpower). By August of 1971 I weighed 210 pounds, so I started running every night and went to a high protein, low starch, low fat diet. At first it was only a half mile, but I kept it up. By the first of November I was running five miles every night and weighed 170 pounds (yes, 40 pounds in three months). Then it got too cold to go out running so I started doing calisthenics—push ups, leg lifts, knee bends, a grip squeezer and tension exercises for about 30-45 minutes every night. On January 20, 1972 I enrolled in night yoga classes at the Area College north of Des Moines to limber up and improve my concentration. The classes lasted ten weeks. Then in April I started running again, just two miles every evening with four pound (each) lace boots and carrying a 2 pound weight in each hand. I cut my calisthenics down to 15 minutes each night and devoted 25 minutes to the yoga exercises until the first of June, when I got the bike. I weighed 162 pounds then.

Q—Did you work out and ride early every morning?

A—After I got the bike I dropped



the running and just kept up the yoga and the calisthenics for 30 minutes every other night. All of my break-in riding was done in the early morning hours. At first it was 50 mile rides, so I was up at five a.m. As the rides got longer I kept getting up earlier. Finally I was making 175-200 mile rides, getting up at 3 a.m. By July 28th I had almost 2,000 miles on the odometer. The reason it took so long was because I just rode on weekdays when it wasn't raining. It seems like we had a wet summer.

Q—Did you feel it was necessary to train for a year and a half before attempting the record?

A—To ride a motorcycle for 24 hours straight just as hard as you can, with no help from pep pills or drugs of any kind, you have to be in almost perfect condition and so does the motorcycle, and I feel neither can be done overnight.

Q—Do you feel you could have done it without the extended physical training? Did the yoga help avoid cramping?

A—No, I was too far out of shape to attempt the ride a year and a half ago. The yoga was a great help. I am 6 feet tall and to ride laying down flat out for 24 hours would have otherwise have been impossible without getting cramps in my arms, legs, neck and back.

Q—Why did you pick the Honda for the attempt?

A—I needed a bike that would run



115 plus mph, be fairly quiet, get reasonable gas mileage, be vibration free, handle well at high speeds, and be strong enough to run wide open for 24 consecutive hours. So I asked a close friend of mine, who is a Honda mechanic by the name of Jerry Allen, if the Honda 750 would fill the bill. He said it would, and he would stake his right arm on it, so I bought one. He helped me in his spare time checking it over, making sure everything was in perfect tune while I carefully broke it in, and Jerry was right. It did fill the bill.

Q—Did you buy the bike yourself?

A—Yes, I bought the bike myself. I sold my 1970 Yamaha 360 RT1 and three fourths of a gun collection that I have been working on for 14 years, all old Winchesters and Colts. This paid for the bike, the sanction, the referee and his expenses and the timekeeper and other expenses. Since I couldn't find a sponsor I had to sponsor myself.

Q—Who helped you with your effort?

A—Bill Marvel of Pocono International Raceway, Inc. gave me the Pocono track rent free, plus a garage, a place to stay, maintenance men for the full 24 hours to work the tower lights and he stayed all day and night. I worked with the pit crew and arranged with Sun Oil Company to have the gas furnished. Walter von Schonfeld gave me a pair of Koni shocks and Castrol Oil. Ron Krause of Krause Honda formed a pit crew and gave me Dunlop tires, a headlight, NGK spark

plugs, his services for 24 hours plus two mechanics, John Sartorius and Terry Girone. Ron's wife Mary, and daughters Colleen, Darlene, Doreen and his dad drove a total of 200 miles getting more tires, chain lube, head-lights, etc.

Q—Did the engine have to remain stock for the record to count? Just what were the AMA regulations concerning recognition of the record?

A—The bike had to remain completely box stock, no alterations to frame, forks, gas tank, or engine. I was allowed a short bug screen or wind shield. I made and fit an 8" screen on top of the headlight, an extra pair of short handlebars and a pad on top of the gas tank. I fit a pair of Koni shocks. The AMA required standard pump gas, one rider only and one bike only, no changing of bike or rider. I took off the license plate, left on the taillight, took off the rear turn signal lights and removed the tips off the mufflers, that's all. The bike has to cross the finish line under its own power at the end of 24 hours. If the motor shells out before 24 hours is up—too bad, no record. That's why I rode real easy after I broke the old record and even took a 31 minute pit stop just to make sure my bike and I would finish and set a new record after 35 years.

Q—Did you ride the bike or truck it to Mt. Pocono?

A—My dad took me and my Honda in his Airstream travel trailer to Mt. Pocono.

Q—How did you come to pick Pocono?

A—Mt. Pocono was the biggest and closest track to Des Moines, Iowa that I could get rent free, since I was my own sponsor on a small budget.

Q—Does Pocono have lights? Were they satisfactory?

A—The only lights I had were a blue light on corner number one and a kerosene flare on corner number two and corners number three, plus red reflectors on all three corners. That's all I wanted. They had the pit lit up and the tower lit up, giving me the number of laps, the lap speed average and the number of hours. The tower was lit for the full 24 hours and was a great help to me during the night-time hours.

Q—Who was present to officially witness the attempt?

A—The officials were Al Walters, Sr., District Referee; Al Walters, Jr., Asst. District Referee; Paul Shattuck, Timer; Dave Welsh, A.M.A.; and Bill Marvel, Pocono International Raceways, Inc.

Q—Who did you have on your pit crew?

A—My dad Bert Shank, brother-in-law Bill Kochheiser, his son Kent Kochheiser, a friend of theirs from Des Moines, Mike Moore, Ron Krause, Mary Krause, Doreen Krause, Darlene Krause Colleen Krause, Bill Confer, Willard Krause (Ron's dad), Tom Mosher, Bruce Rubenstein, Jack Sartorius, Terry Girone, David Witt, Jim Coleman, Paul Dow, Walter von Schonfeld, John Bolton, Shaw Siglin, Clair Whitt, Bill Marvel and Brad Marvel. Everybody did everything—put in gas, checked oil, oiled the rear chain, checked tires front and rear, cleaned my face shield and small windshield, and I don't know what else. It was like a beehive. I would get a slap on the back, and I was off and running again.

Q—Just how did you make arrangements for the track at Pocono?

A—I wrote to Mt. Pocono in February, 1972, and I got a phone call from Bill Marvel. He wanted to know the whole story. I told him about the 35-year-old record and how I was doing this all alone with no sponsors. So Bill Marvel told me I could have the track rent free for 24 hours if I would start at 9:00 a.m., Friday, August 18,

and run to 9:00 a.m. Saturday, August 19. They were going to have a road race that Saturday with practice laps starting at 9:30 a.m. I said that would be fine. I'd be there.

Q—How many pit stops did you make? What was the fastest and the slowest?

A—I made a total of 22 pit stops. The fastest gas stop was 9 seconds. The slowest gas stop was 17 seconds. It took 7 minutes, 19 seconds to put in a new headlight, mount new front and rear wheels, add gas, and oil the rear chain on one stop. I took a 31 minute pit stop but that was in the 23rd hour after I already had the old record broken. I broke it in 21 hours, 49 minutes.

Q—How many tire changes did you make, front and rear?

A—I wore out three rear tires and two front. First rear tire lasted three hours, second rear lasted five hours, third lasted 12 hours (Dunlop K87) and a Dunlop K70 finished up the final four hours and was still looking good. The first front tire lasted eight hours, the second is still on (Dunlop) but it's worn out. (All tires wore out on left side.)

Q—Did you have to replace the chain. Were any other replacements necessary?

A—I started and finished on the original rear chain that came with the bike. A headlight and tires were only parts replaced for the entire run.

Q—What was your fuel and oil consumption?

A—I don't know exactly how much gas I used, but they told me I was getting about 25 mpg and not one drop of oil was added. The oil level did drop about a pint but that's all.

Q—Why did you pick a morning starting time? Did you consider starting at night to get it out of the way while you were still fresh?

A—The reason for the 9:06 start (rather than the scheduled 9:00 a.m.) was because at 8:35 a.m. we found a nail in my back tire, and it went flat. So I was a little late getting started. I would rather have started at 6:00 p.m. but my agreement with Bill Marvel called for a 9:00 a.m. start.

Q—Did you have a definite pace in mind? Did you keep it?

A—Yes, run just as hard as I could because it looked like rain, and I did keep it up all day long.

Q—Did you ever come close to falling asleep? How did you fight drowsiness?

A—I never got sleepy. My pit crew was always clowning around, so we had a comedy going all night long. Besides, it was too windy and too cold, below 50°

Q—Weatherwise what did you encounter?

A—Daytime temperature was in mid 60's, cloudy and low overcast. It looked like a bad rainstorm was due. There were 25 to 35 mph winds all day and part of the night. Nighttime temperature got below 50°. I did get some rain and fog late at night.

Q—Did you have any "hairy" moments on the track?

A—Late in the afternoon a ground hog ran out right in front of me as I was banking for corner number 3. I just missed him. I got lost in the fog in corner number 1 and ran clean off the track. The front end got squirrely on the turns in the rain. I almost hit the outside wall a number of times in the gusty winds, especially late in the evening. Otherwise, it was a good ride.

Q—You mentioned after the ride that you continually kept having flashbacks of your past 20 years riding bikes. Could you describe some of the things you thought about?

A—My first bike, a 150cc Jawa. My first enduro when I was 13. My first spills. My first new bike, a 1955 BSA 650 Road Rocket and how I set pins in a bowling alley to pay for it. My six years hillclimbing on my "Bucket O' Bolts," a 61-inch Vincent and when I was out riding on the ice one winter with an old 500 BSA ZB34 Gold Star and the rides I took breaking in the bike.

Q—Did the riding get monotonous?

A—It never once got monotonous. My pit crew saw to that with their clowning around along with the weather and the flashbacks. I completely enjoyed the entire ride.

Q—Did you have a goal of a round figure in mind like 2000 miles at the beginning? Do you regret coming so close to that 2000 figure and not making it?

A—Yes, my goal was 2400 miles, but the corners were slower than I thought and tire wear was ouch! I do wish I could have gotten 2,000 miles. However, under the circumstances, weather and all, I am somewhat pleased with 1,945 miles.

Q—Do you expect anyone else to try to break your record?

A—Yes I do, now that more people know such a record exists.

Q—Will you ride again if your rec-

ord is bettered?

A—Absolutely, I will! On a moment's notice.

Q—Did you ever have doubts that you could do it?

A—None whatsoever. Only two things could have stopped me, shelling the engine or spilling and hitting the wall.

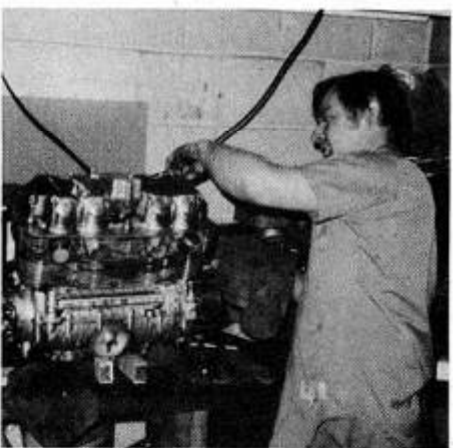
Q—How does it feel to hold the record?

A—It's a 20-year dream come true, just wonderful.

Q—Do you have any other endurance runs in mind?

A—Yes, New York to San Francisco, Mexico City to Anchorage, Alaska, and a 24 hours run on a 350 of some kind. I sure would like to be a member of the 200 mph club. I don't know how many, if any of these, I will make, but I'm going to try anyway.

Q—Will you try to improve your





mark if no one else beats it?

A—Absolutely. I still think I can get 2400 plus miles in 24 hours.

Q—How did the bike run? Were there any problems during the ride?

A—The bike ran beautifully, never missed a beat. Once after a gas stop I forgot to shift into top gear, the motor was turning 9500 and still climbing and it had already been running for over 10 hours by then. So I made a shift and 14 hours later it was still running like a Swiss watch. The exhaust pipes are still chrome, not gold or blue but chrome. No problems at all.

Q—How did the bike look after the run? What wore out if anything? How is the engine?

A—The bike looked real good, not one drop of oil was visible outside the engine, and as I said before, exhaust pipes were and are still chrome—all four of them. No leaky gaskets. Nothing loose from vibration. The only thing that got worn out besides me was the original rear chain (4077) miles and tires. The inside of the engine is still perfect, less than

.002 ring wear on the cylinders.

Q—Will Honda be referring to your record in any future advertising?

A—I don't know.

Q—How did the Honda rate comfortwise after 24 hours in the saddle?

A—Real decent. No complaints at all.

Q—Would a conventional oval have been easier?

A—A Conventional oval would have been much faster, such as the course that Fred Ham used. It was a lot more work on the tri-oval because I had to ride the bike hard to get 99 mph lap speeds out of a stocker. I was told I covered 96.3 miles the first hour. At the end of 12 hours I still had an overall average over 90 (93, I think). Then the weather started to take its toll.

Q—How did you feel at the end, physically and mentally? Were you really beat or just tired? Did you celebrate or sleep? How long did you sleep?

A—Physically I was tired, but not beat. Mentally my spirits were good,

and I was hungry. I hadn't had anything to eat except liquid instant breakfast, about nine of them I believe, at gas stops during the 24 hours. We celebrated with a bottle of champagne donated by "Bill Walker's Motel" and given to me by Walter von Schonfeld of Koni Shocks. I took the first taste, then my dad, then the whole pit crew. My dad and I went to Bill Marvel's house for a shower and a steak dinner. Boy, was that ever good. Then back to the track to witness the engine teardown and the 250cc road races. Then the five of us from Des Moines went out for supper and a bottle of champagne donated by Bill Marvel. Then I finally returned to my dad's Airstream and went to bed at 9:30 p.m., after being up for 38 hours. I got up at 7:30 a.m. the next day.

Q—What do you feel is the limit one man can do in 24 hours?

A—You won't believe me, but if you had the right course, good weather, and the right bike, I believe a 115 mph (2750 miles) average for 24 hours is completely conceivable on an unstreamlined motorcycle. ■