

A HISTORY OF HUSQVARNA

by Richard C. Renstrom

A modern legend in the dirt; a historic legend in road racing



Tucked away in the northern Swedish woods, the tiny Husqvarna company has won more motocross championships than any other make. Totally involved in competitive off-road racing, it is one of the most respected names in motorcycling. But few people are aware of the fascinating legend of road racing virtuosity Husqvarna created right in the middle of the most classic era the sport has ever known.

Husqvarna is actually a very old com-

pany, yet for most of its existence its name was hardly recognized outside of Scandinavia. In the beginning, Husqvarna was only interested in producing some reliable motorbikes for the local populace, but they have since come to be known for their fire-breathing motocross bikes.

Husqvarna's parent firm, the Royal Arms Company, was founded in 1689, but the current name—Husqvarna Vapenfabrics AB—was not used until 1867. In 1903 the company decided to aid Sweden's

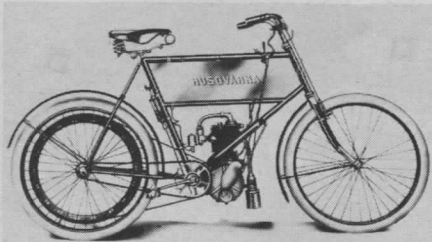
In 1974 Heikki Mikkola won the 500cc World Championship on this six-speed 360cc model that features radial cylinder head finning and lay-down rear gas shocks.

industrial revolution by producing a motorized bicycle with a one-and-a-quarter-horsepower Belgian FN engine. Later models used a Swiss-made Moto-Reve 500cc V-twin with two-and-a-half or four horsepower.

In 1916 Husqvarna got around to pro-

ducing their own 550cc side-valve V-twin engine that churned out 11 horsepower through a three-speed, hand-shifted gearbox. A hand clutch and chain drive were standard, but only one caliper brake was fitted and it was on the rear wheel.

During the 1920s the Husky was refined by adopting internal expanding brakes, improved lubrication, more power, and a better electrical system. By 1930, overhead valve engines had become more desirable



The 1904 Husqvarna featured a Belgian FN engine, belt drive, and a total-loss lubrication system. Primitive, but reliable for its day.

than the side-valve type in Europe, so Husqvarna responded by producing five new OHV singles, ranging from 250 to 500cc. A specially-tuned 500cc sport model was among these, and it churned out 30 horsepower at 5800 rpm and could run 85 miles per hour. The bikes used girder front fork assemblies and rigid frames (still accepted practice then), and the hand shift was also retained.

The final page of the 1930 Husqvarna sales brochure listed one more very special model. It was a milestone machine, significant because it ushered in a new era at the company—an era of placing heavy emphasis on competition. The new competition motorcycle was also one of the very first cross-country machines offered for sale anywhere in the world, which was pretty remarkable for such a small, relatively unheralded company.

Today's motocross and cross-country riders would hardly recognize the world's first "dirt" racer as being for off-road use, since motorcycles then were rather primitive. Cross-country or scrambles racing was virtually unknown outside of England at that time, but in Sweden, the locals had become somewhat interested in bounding through the boonies during the summer months. This model was also used in local road racing events by the "works" team.

The new "Specialracer Motorcykel," as it was called, had a lightweight, rigid frame and girder front fork. That rather unsophisticated suspension must have provided a ride so rough as to be nothing short of brutal punishment for the rider. The new racer used a 500cc OHV JAP single-cylinder engine from England, which was tuned to produce 31-33 horsepower at 6000 rpm with an 8-to-1 compression ratio.

The gearbox was still a three-speeder,

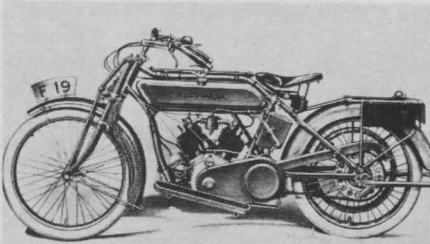
with an unusual shift lever that could be operated with either the hand or foot. The bike weighed 308 pounds, used a Bosch magneto ignition, a small, two-gallon fuel tank, and a short, straight-pipe exhaust.

The Specialracer Motorcykel racked up many victories in Sweden, and it helped make the Husqvarna name better known in the other Scandinavian countries. Husqvarna sales thus continued to expand, despite the effects of the Depression.

In 1934, a new 990cc side-valve "Model 120" was introduced as a luxury touring bike. It had a bore and stroke of 79 by 101mm, and produced 26 horsepower at only 3500 rpm. With a three-speed gearbox and a weight of 429 pounds, the new twin became famous for its reliability over long distances.

The following year Husqvarna introduced a much-improved 500cc single that also had a bore and stroke of 79 by 101mm. This overhead-valve model was intended for the "sportsman," and with 22 horsepower at 4800 rpm, the bike was good for a 75-mph top speed. The new four-speed gearbox at last had a foot shift, and weighed 341 pounds. Husqvarna finally had a bike that looked as modern as the best in Europe at that time. The new single remained in production only a few years, however, since the rapidly-expanding economy soon had the Swedish people inside warm and dry automobiles.

The emphasis then switched to producing light and inexpensive two-stroke motorbikes that young people could afford. The first was a 98cc model with a two-speed, hand-shifted gearbox. This motorized bicycle was joined by a 118cc genuine lightweight motorcycle in 1939.



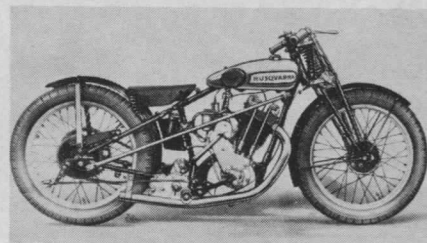
The 1917 550cc V-twin featured a reliable side-valve engine and chain drive. A caliper brake was used on the rear wheel.

The new two-stroke had a telescopic front fork, a three-speed, hand-shift gearbox, and a very clean design. When production of this model ended in 1945, over 100,000 had been produced—a remarkable figure for the still-small Swedish company.

There was to be another chapter to the pre-war story of Husqvarna—a road-racing chapter written during an era when the Huskies were as fast as anything being raced in Europe. It began in 1928 when Folke Mannerstedt returned from the Belgian FN factory to head up a new road

racing program at Husqvarna. At first, Mannerstedt contented himself with tuning JAP singles for his racers, but in 1930 a brand-new Husqvarna 500cc V-twin made its presence known in the Swedish Grand Prix at Saxtorp. With a top speed of 102 mph, Yngve Eriksson gained a creditable third place on the new 500 behind the invincible works Norton singles, which encouraged Husqvarna to go all out in producing their own TT racer. The Husqvarna TT V-twin made its debut in 1931 and put on a great display of speed in the Isle of Man and Swedish classics—but exhaust valve failures put it out of both races.

In 1932, redesigned V-twins made their first showings in the hands of Ragnar Sunnqvist and Gunnar Kalen, who took first and second in the Swedish Grand Prix, in addition to scoring many wins in local races. The news spread across Europe like wildfire—the upstart Huskies had trounced the invincible Nortons.



In 1930 Husqvarna produced the world's first motocross model, the 491cc "Specialracer Motorcykel." The 31-33 HP JAP-powered racer won many cross-country races as well as road races.

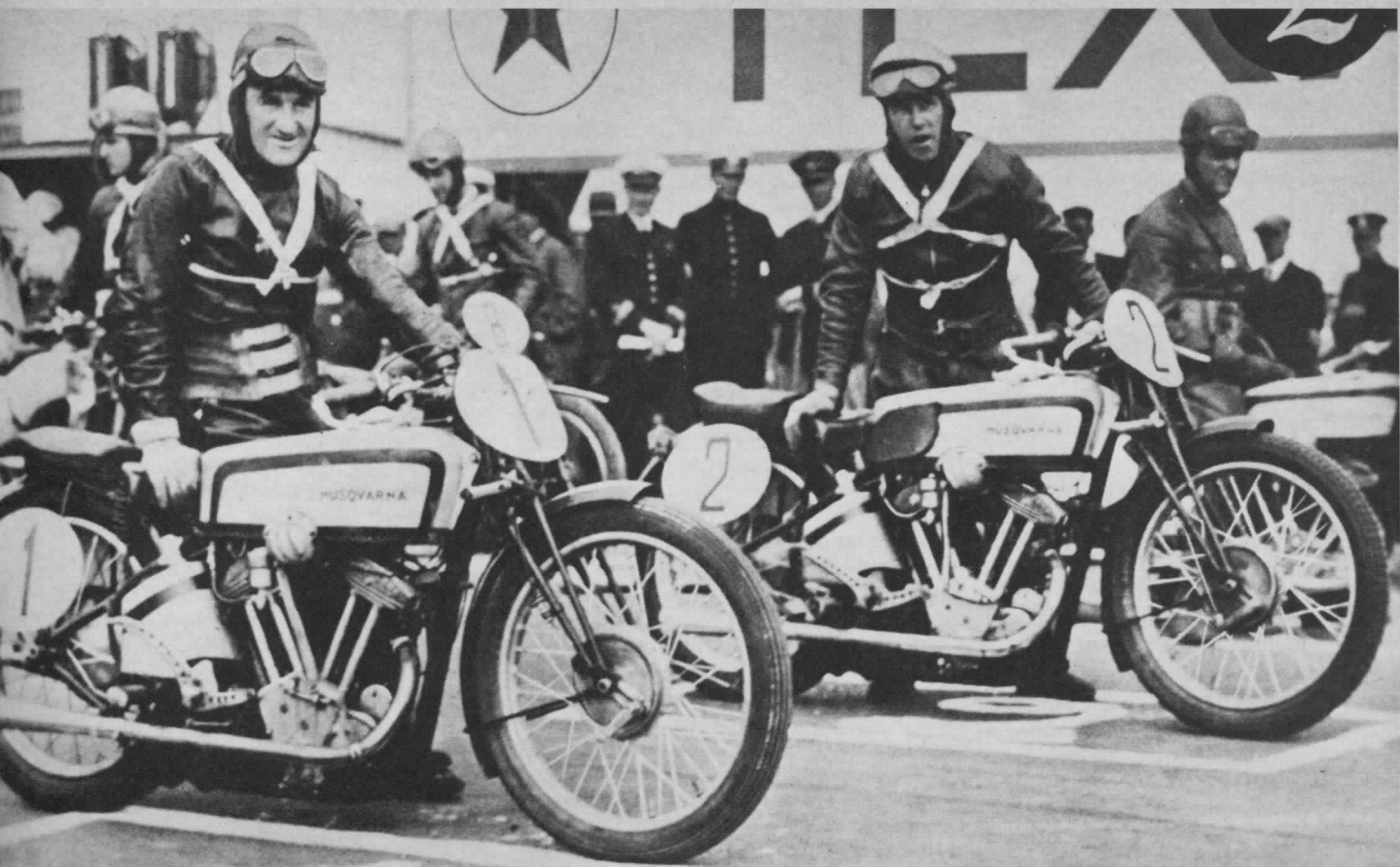
Mannerstedt then went quietly back to his shop for more development work, since he knew Norton would be out for blood in 1933.

The following year the Swedish GP was given the title "Grand Prix d' Europe" to signify that it was the premier event in the European season. Naturally, all the big names were there, so a great race was in store.

And it proved to be a real thriller. Stanley Woods and Tim Hunt kept their Norton singles just ahead of Sunnqvist and Kalen. Towards the end of the race, Woods' engine blew and Hunt crashed. Ragnar's Husky followed by throwing a chain, so Kalen romped home the winner. This great victory made Husqvarna famous all over Europe.

After such a splendid showing, the factory decided to make a bid for the European Championship in 1934. Woods and Ernie Nott joined the team, and Mannerstedt even designed a 350cc version to contest the classics.

By then, the overhead-valve Husky was developing 44 horsepower at 6800 rpm, good enough for 118 mph. The bore and stroke were 65 by 75 mm, and the engine breathed through a pair of one-inch Amal



Stanley Woods and Ragnar Sunnqvist before the start of the 1935 Swedish Grand Prix (won by Woods). The OHV V-twin developed 44 hp and ran 112 mph.

TT-type carburetors.

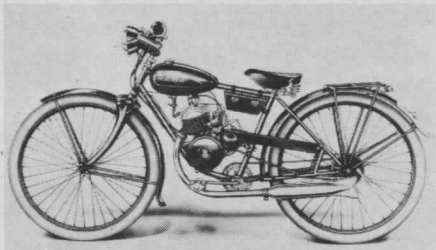
The original "iron" engine had given way to alloy heads and cylinders, which helped drop the weight to 297 pounds. The fuel tank and oil tank were also both aluminum, and the wheelbase was a short 52 inches.

The season began well for the team at the Isle of Man, with Nott taking a third in the Junior TT and Woods retiring in the Senior after turning the fastest lap at 80.49 mph, then running out of fuel. Ragnar again won the Swedish Grand Prix, but the deaths of Kalen and Van der Pluym then put a damper on the season.

Husqvarna prepared 10 bikes for the 1935 season, and the use of megaphone exhausts instead of straight pipes made the twins even faster. Another great win was racked up in the Swedish Grand Prix by Stanley Woods, plus second places in the Dutch and German events by Sunnqvist; but Norton was still the champion at season's end. Husqvarna then lost interest in chasing the Nortons, and one more colorful road racer passed into the history books.

After the war, Husqvarna came out with a new 175cc two-stroke that produced nine horsepower at 6000 rpm. Called the "Drombagen," it featured a three-speed, foot shift and was produced in 1953 and

'54. A more sporting "cafe racer" version, called the Silverpil, was introduced in 1955. This model was soon increased to 250cc, generating 15 horsepower at 6000 revs. The works riders used this bike for motocross and enduro events, and Rolf Tibblin even succeeded in winning the 1959 European Motocross title on one—still with a three-speed gearbox.

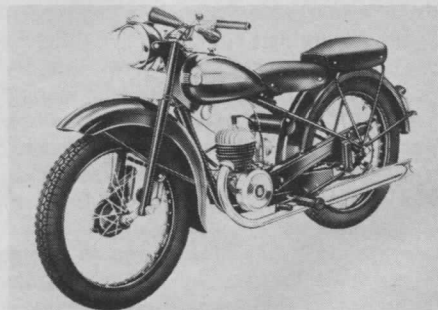


In 1937, Husqvarna built this 98cc two-speed motorbike. It was their first two-stroke and the grandfather of the current world motocross championship machines.

This win so encouraged the factory's directors they decided to go after the 500cc World Motocross Championship. Husqvarna had not produced a 500cc engine since 1936, so they used their old engine and modified it for more power.

In the spring of 1960 the new Husqvarnas were unveiled—and what beautiful machines they were. The frame was a double-loop cradle type with an Italian Ceriani front fork. The gearbox and rear

wheel were from the British AJS 7R road racer, and Girling shocks were fitted to the rear swingarm. The choice of a powerplant was the really surprising item, though, as the factory had decided on the old 1934 pushrod single! The ancient thumper had been updated by fitting a Lucas racing magneto, casting the cylinder and head in alloy, using different cams, valves, and piston, and shortening the stroke to 99mm from the original 101mm. The engine



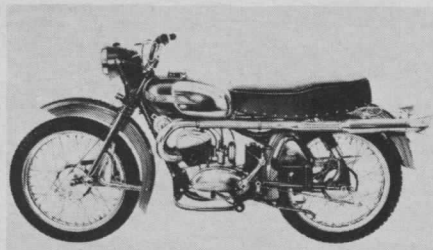
This 1939 Husky was a clean-looking, 118cc, three-speed model with a hand shift. When production ended in 1945, over 100,000 had been sold.

produced 35 horsepower, with great gobs of torque in the middle-rpm range. With this bike, the pride of Sweden hoped to capture the world title—even if the engine was 26 years old!

The works team consisted of Bill Nilsson, Sten Lundin, and Rolf Tibblin; and the smiles on the faces of critics regarding



the antiquity of those engines was wiped off—fast! By season's end, the team had literally clobbered the competition, with Nilsson crowned champion, Lundin in second, and Tibblin in fourth. Apart from the superb handling of these big singles, the "experts" attributed their success to



In 1953, the 175cc "Drombagen" model made its debut, using an engine somewhat similar to those on modern Husqvarnas. The three-speeder was later used in 250cc form by Rolf Tibblin when he captured the 1959 European motocross championship.

the light, 312-pound weight, which was in pleasant contrast to the cumbersome 370-pound BSA Gold Stars.

In 1961 the big single battled all season long with ex-teammate Sten Lundin and his Swedish-built Lito; and in the end the Lito won, with Nilsson in second and Tibblin in fifth position. The 250 two-stroke fared even worse, with Torsten Hallman taking a fourth place in the title chase. The little Huskies had taken fourth and sixth places in 1960, so the emphasis on the larger class had definitely hurt the marque's chances in the Coupe d' Europe.

The great Rolf Tibblin in action on the magnificent 500cc OHV single. Tibblin won two world titles on this bike, which used a modified 1935 Albin (Swedish) engine.

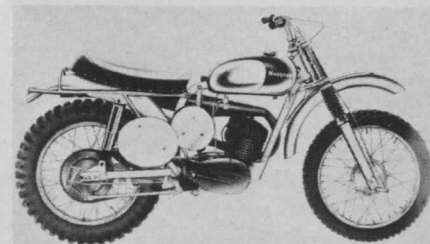
In 1962, the factory made a determined effort in both classes. Their main riders that year were the experienced Rolf Tibblin in the Open class and the young-but-promising Torsten Hallman in the 250 class. During the summer season these two Vikings literally flew through the air, and in the end, were both crowned Champions of the World. To prove the 1962 season was no fluke, these same two riders won the two World Motocross titles again in 1963. That record was truly remarkable, for it was the first time a make had won both classes in the same year—let alone two years in a row!

After those two magnificent years, the factory lost interest in the Open class and concentrated only on the 250s. However, the Czechoslovakian-built CZs had a fabulous string of successes during 1964 and 1965, and the Husqvarna was generally pushed out of the limelight.

During 1966 the marque made a fabulous comeback, with Hallman dominating the 250cc motocross events all season long. In capturing the 1966 title, he achieved what no other rider had ever accomplished—he had won three 250 World Motocross Championships. But then, this sort of record is nothing new at Husqvarna, for Rolf Tibblin is the only man to ever win both the 250 and 500cc titles.

In 1967 Hallman again trounced the CZs, but in 1968 slipped to second behind Joel Robert. Other Husqvarna riders took

fifth and sixth places in the championship, plus a goodly share of the lesser places. The company also made a bid for 500cc class honors that year with a new 360cc

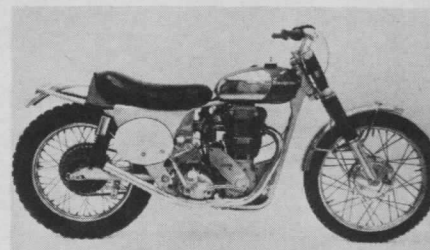


During the early and middle 1960s, Torsten Hallman used this 250cc four-speed model to win four World Championships. The Husqvarnas became famous during that period for their speed and stamina.

single, but Ake Jonsson could do no better than third, with Bengt Aberg in fourth.

In 1969 Aberg came on strong to win the 500cc title, with Arne Kring finishing fourth and other Husky riders well-placed. Hallman's lingering back injury finally got the best of him, and Husqvarna did not place well in the 250cc class that year. In 1970, Aberg won the 500cc class again (compensating for Husky's fourth- and sixth-place finishes in the 250 class), but this time Arne Kring and Chris Hammargren took second and fifth places.

For a few years, Husqvarna gave way to the Suzuki team of Joel Robert (250) and Roger DeCoster (500). But they re-



This 1960-63 500cc single was considered by some the most beautiful motocrosser of all time. The 312-pound thumper put out 35 horsepower and used a Ceriani front fork and AJS "7R" gearbox and rear wheel.

gained the Open class title in 1974, when Heikki Mikkola of Finland rode his fast 400cc Husky to a resounding World Championship win. However, they failed to hold the title during the 1975 season as Mikkola was displaced as Open Class World Champion by the incredible DeCoster.

Whether they will recapture the title in 1976 is, of course, unknown. What is certain is that from the intriguing V-twin Grand Prix bikes of the 1930s to the post-war motocross singles, Husqvarna has added a lot of color to the history of motorcycling. **CG**