Sports Illustrated

AUGUST 13, 1973 60 CENTS

PUBLIC LIBRARY

TOO FAST TOO SOON?

AUG 10 1973
SUPERIOR, WIS.

®

DOWN WILL COME BABY, CYCLE AND ALL

Among the lessons learned at mother's knee these days are drink your milk, watch your revs and come home with that trophy

by ERNEST HAVEMANN

The most coveted sports trophy is not the elegant $4,000 silver creation that goes to the winner of horse racing's Triple Crown. It is not the $40 gold medal that symbolizes an Olympic triumph. Nor is it the $10,000 jeweled gold Hickok belt that goes to the professional athlete of the year.

The most fought-over trophy just has to be a little mass-produced plastic and base metal statue, worth about $5 at most, that goes to a new American breed, the more than 10,000 children who race undersized motorcycles at some 1,500 to 2,000 tracks around the country. The kids spend their waking hours thinking about the trophies, and their parents will do almost anything—including spending thousands of dollars and in some cases flouting the rules—to get the trophies into the house.

In the modest Downey, Calif. home of a machine-shop worker there is a bedroom that in many ways seems typical of a 15-year-old daughter. The bed is canopied and covered with stuffed animals; there are nail polish and other cosmetics on the dressing table. But the girl is a minicycle racer. Her trophies fill every inch of table and shelf space in her bedroom and spill over onto the floor, indeed spill over into the adjoining hall, the den and the living room.

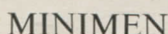
The girl and her family are up to their ears in trophies, and the proud father can tell how each was won. "This was our first," he will say. "This one's just for third; we didn't do so good that time. But this one we got in the Winter Nationals in Florida. My daughter's pretty famous, you know. We've gotten a lot of fan mail for her."

A father, mother and two boys who live in a nearby neighborhood have almost 200 trophies and have run out of room for them. Every time they win a new one, the boys send an old one to their grandparents in Colorado. Eventually even the grandparents will probably have to call a halt and send some of the trophies to casual friends.

Kids may shoot marbles for fun, may play catch for fun, may shoot baskets for fun—but in bike racing it's the trophies that matter. One racing father recalls: "We got our son his first bike when he was six, but he just didn't get anywhere. He was never even close to the leaders. Then we heard about a track where they gave 100% trophies, a trophy for every kid who entered. So we drove up there one night—80 miles through rotten traffic—to get us a trophy.

"Of course, that was just breaking the ice," the father says. "Now my son is nine and he's got 72 trophies. My daughter, who is 12, got into it, too, and she's got 16. She could have a lot more, but

continued

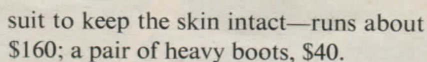


you know how girls are. They get spells. She quit it for a while after she dumped her bike and then she got dumped again when she was hit from behind, and quit some more. But I think she's coming along all right now." The little girl tends to agree. "I've been thinking that maybe I'd like to be a pro racer when I get old enough," she says. Her father beams.

The children's racing circuit is a form of Little League for rugged individualists. There are tracks from one end of the nation to the other, and any kid on a motor-driven pair of wheels can enter any race anywhere for a fee of from \$2 to \$10. At most tracks there are races for babies, ages 2½ to 6. There are other races limited to 7- and 8-year-olds, others for 9- to 11-year-olds, others for children 12 through 16. (At 17 a child is considered too old for the miniature machines and has to graduate to the big motorcycles if he wants to keep racing, which most of them say they plan to do.) The winner in every class gets a trophy. So, usually, do the second- and third- and even up to fifth-place finishers. In the 100%-trophy races a youngster takes home a prize just for showing up at the starting line—even if, as often happens, he falls off at the first turn or the bike quits running long before the checkered flag.

How many little bike racers are there in the country? Nobody really knows, but there are enough to make the manufacture, sale and servicing of minicycles a big business and to justify a thriving magazine named *MiniCycle*, which now appears every month fat with ads for manufacturing companies like Attex, Chaparral, Gemini, Hodaka, Honda, Indian, Kami, Kawasaki, Yamaha, Rupp, Simplex and Steen. The magazine descriptions of the new bikes tell a lot about the fiercely competitive world of miniracing: "Hell on wheels." "This one's deadly." "Goes straight for the jugular."

The quest for minitrophies is no minigame, financially speaking. Even a peewee bike for the 2½- to 6-year-olds costs around \$250. Protection against the inevitable falls costs the racing family almost as much. A crash helmet and a set of leathers—a rugged, form-fitting



suit to keep the skin intact—runs about $160; a pair of heavy boots, $40.

Even with this $450 investment, the child is almost sure to be a consistent loser. The bike bought off a dealer's floor is seldom good enough to win a race; it needs a lot of fine tuning to make it hot enough to reach a top speed of around 45 mph, sometimes even 60 or 70, and get a trophy. Count on another $400 in mechanic's bills to put machine and child in the running.

To most parents who get a kick out of watching their youngsters bring home trophies, the first peewee bike is like the first peanut. The child gets older and graduates to 4½- to 6-hp minicycles, then to 7- to 13-hp models, then to the minicycles that run in three classes with a maximum displacement of 60, 80 or 100 cc. He also graduates to bigger helmets, bigger sets of leathers, bigger boots.

In events for youngsters age seven and up, moreover, the stock-bike races soon lose their charm. The real competition is for "modified" bikes—pepped up by substituting a bigger carburetor, an expansion chamber instead of an exhaust pipe, a finely altered camshaft for better valve action, a cylinder rebored for extra displacement. There are all kinds of ways to make a bike take off faster and hit a higher top speed, and all of them cost money.

Adding to the financial pressure is the fact that a bike that wins in July may be obsolete by January. The manufacturers compete just as grimly as the parents and youngsters, and new and hotter models come out all the time. One father says, with mingled admiration and regret, "Bikes change from year to year and you have to keep up with them or you don't win."

If one asks a racing family how much they have spent over the years to gather all those trophies on the mantelpiece and end tables, the answer is never a straight one. Like so many other avid sporting types, they refuse to reckon the costs. But one Irvine, Calif. family with a 9-year-old boy and a 12-year-old girl currently has eight racing bikes; another in Downey with two sons, 11 and 13, has a dozen. On the average the tiny bikes proba-

continued

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES A. SUGAR

bly cost about $1,000 each to buy and modify. And when you own that many bikes you also have to own some kind of vehicle, usually a van or a camper, to haul the bikes, the fuel and the spare parts to the track.

The bikes are temperamental, especially after being hopped up, and require constant upkeep—which would add to the expense, except that most racing dads are professional or amateur mechanics who do their own tinkering. You have to be a mechanic of sorts, able to make spot repairs. "Out there on the track almost anything can happen to a machine," one father says, "and you'd better know a little something or you're going to miss a lot of races. Me, I'm a dry cleaner and I didn't know anything about machinery at first, but I took a night course at Orange Coast College for nine weeks and got pretty good." Sometimes the boys, and even the girls as they get older, learn how to work on their own bikes. Aside from winning a first-place trophy, nothing pleases a racing father more than to be able to say, "My son's turned into a real wrench."

When pressed on the matter of finances, racing families like to talk in spiritual rather than economic terms. Says the father of one of the nation's top girl riders, "O.K., so it's cost me a few bucks. But I've got a daughter who spends her time at home; she's not out bumming around. I'm not worried about her getting into trouble. This is a family affair and we have good clean fun—a lot of togetherness. I think that's a wonderful thing."

Ted Moorewood, a Norwalk, Calif. bike dealer whose 13-year-old son is a top racer, says, "Everything costs money. People will go out and spend $100 on a Schwinn bicycle for a kid. It costs a little more to get into minicycle racing but it's a cheap investment for what the family gets out of it." Says the mother in a racing family, "Sure, it's a big expense for a poor family like us. And I admit I worry a lot about my boys being hurt. But you've got to have *something* nowadays to keep the kids' minds occupied."

Both parents and youngsters seem to view the injury question with mixed emotions. "A lot of people think racing is dangerous, but I don't," a father says firmly. Then a little later he adds, "I don't mind too much when the boys fall where I can see them; as long as I can see them I'm all right. But sometimes they go off over an embankment, and when I can't see them it bugs me; my heart goes right up in my throat."

To an outsider the game certainly looks dangerous; it is scary to watch a pre-school youngster traveling 45 miles an hour. And the kids do fall—occasionally hard. A fuel tank can rupture and a bike burn up—though apparently none has yet burned with a youngster pinned under it. A parent thirsting for a trophy may do something like overmodifying the pistons and the motor will explode in the middle of a race. Yet major injuries are rare. The youngsters themselves never admit to being afraid out on the track. As one proudly reports, "I was thrown over the handlebars once and landed 30 feet away and all I did was worry about my bike instead of about me, which was pretty silly, I guess, because the bike could be repaired and I couldn't."

The game may be more dangerous for fathers than for their children, thanks to the annual institution of the Father's Day races for adults. Being mostly frustrated heroes of the track themselves, few parents can resist the chance to get on the kids' bikes and try for a trophy of their own. Since balance is everything, and since the bikes are not built for 6-footers, the results can be upsetting. One father, pulling up after finishing a dismal fifth, looked around to see whether his wife was sympathizing or laughing and let the bike run out from under him. Result: a broken collarbone. Another, determined to prove he was just as good as his two sons, took a curve too fast, went down, remounted, and in a desperate effort to make up lost ground ran smack into one of the half-sunken tires marking the inner rail of the course. He tore his shoulder muscles and his arm was out of action for two months.

As a community spectator sport, miniracing ranks right up there with Little League ball—and the size and behavior of the audiences show it. There may be fair crowds at the national events, but hardly anyone watches the routine races except the kids, their parents and sometimes brothers and sisters. Even the parents generally keep an eye on the track only when their own youngsters are racing; the rest of the time they disappear to do more work on the bikes or mill around to drink beer or soda pop and chat with friends.

On a recent day at Indian Dunes Speedway near Los Angeles—the site of some of the photographs on these pages—one tall, lean father could be seen with his 5-year-old son at the starting line before the race for peewees, busily giving the boy instructions. Alas, the little fellow was hopelessly outclassed—dead last, lapped by the winner. After the race the father fiddled for a long time with the bike, trying to see if it was running properly. Apparently it was; the boy just wasn't handling the throttle properly. They walked off together, the father earnestly demonstrating with his right hand how to move the throttle, and were not seen again until the next heat for peewees. The boy ran last again. This time they walked away, with the father leading the little fellow by the hand; both looked rather discouraged.

The winning fathers are an entirely different breed; they whoop and holler and root their kids home like the bettors at a horse race. There is one California father, prominent in his cowboy hat, who is all over the track when his sons are racing, urging them on with hand signals that mean, "Pour it on now," or "Pass that guy in front of you; you've got to beat him to move up in the point standings." He is not sure his instructions help the boys, but at least they make *him* feel better. "I don't mind telling you," he says, "when the boys are out there I get wound up higher than a kite."

By watching only their own youngsters, the parents miss some tense racing. The kids want to win. As one official says admiringly, "They're tigers out there." Many of them are fantastically good, and sometimes two of the best hook up in a neck-and-neck battle, with the second placer doing his very best to pass the leader by going faster on the straightaway or taking a turn a little better. But many of the races resemble a 13–0 Little League game. On the night when the tall father and his 5-year-old son reached the depths of despondency, there was one event with only three entries. By the time they had gone a lap, the leader was 50 yards in front of the second-place rider, who in turn was 50 yards ahead of the boy running third. And that was the

continued

way they finished, except that the distance from one bike to another had widened. It was no contest.

One important difference between the Little League and miniracing is equipment. The riders can be no better than the bikes their fathers buy or manufacture for them. Thus racing is a sort of two-way competition. The kids, if really interested, try to get better and better at leaping off the starting line, taking the turns and pouring it on through the straightaways. The dads compete with other dads on the matter of providing the hottest bike.

The competition among the dads, unfortunately, is not always as aboveboard as it might be. If a son is entered in a race for minicycles with a maximum displacement of 100 cc. and dad can put him on a bike with 110 cc., there is a chance of taking home a trophy even if the boy is just an average rider—or even what racing people call a "turkey." So fathers, to put it bluntly, sometimes cheat.

Everybody acknowledges the cheating. Says one official, "There's no question in my mind that there are cheaters out there every time we race." Says another, "I'd guess that 25% to 30% of all the bikes on some tracks are cheating." An ambitious father, shrugging his shoulders, says, "Well, as the old saying goes, it isn't really cheating unless you get caught, now is it?"

A parent who thinks his youngster has been done in by an illegal bike can protest the race if he is willing to put up a fee, usually $10 to $25. The suspect bike is then torn down. If it meets the specifications for its class, the race result stands and the protest fee is forfeited. If not, the rider of the bike loses his trophy and, if this is a second violation, is suspended for six months. The fee discourages protests, but they do get made, and sometimes rather fancy shenanigans are exposed.

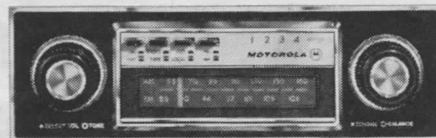
The protest procedure sounds like a saliva test, and there are other similarities to the wilder days of horse racing in the world of minicycles. Families have been known to run ringers—that is, to have two bikes that look just alike to the casual eye but are vastly different on the inside. And sometimes an experienced rider is taken to a different track and dropped into an event for beginners, like a stakes horse entered in a maiden race. As one official puts it, "A new family comes in and says their boy is just starting—but he walks off and leaves everybody and you know he's been racing somewhere. So you jump him up a class—and sometimes the parents raise a fuss."

The parents, indeed, are a mixed blessing. Without their willingness to invest thousands of dollars, there would be no racing. And they also help, as in the Little League, by serving as assistant officials, keeping track of the entries and getting the races started. But some do cause trouble. The term for it around the tracks is "pit racing." Says one official, "If we were just dealing with the kids, everything would be fine. Lots of times we feel like saying to a youngster, 'Boy, we sure wish you had left your father at home today.' " Which is hardly unfamiliar in all kinds of children's sport.

One has to wonder whether the kids would show up at all unless father loved the game so much. But no parent seems ready to admit he has pushed his youngsters into racing. All the parents swear, "We leave it up to the kids"; or "They're the ones that love racing"; or "The one thing we never do is force them." There have been some unhappy incidents. After one race, a father who thought his son had lost through a stupid mistake—after all those long hours dad put in getting the bike in shape—was seen to vent his frustration by hitting the boy with a wrench.

What probably happens in miniracing is a lot of attrition. A family gets into it because dad always dreamed of winning a Grand Prix himself or because a youngster is consumed by envy for a friend who has a bike. Once the bike is in the garage, a lot of things can go wrong. Dad may find the bills too steep or the mechanical work too difficult. Mother may get the shakes the first time she sees her youngster on the track. ("There have been some couples," says one track promoter, "who really got in trouble because the wife didn't like it.") The youngster may get bored or scared. The game may bring the family not togetherness but a lot of arguments between an eager father and a kid without much talent. These families drop out. They show up at the track for a while, win no trophies and disappear. Those left are the chosen few who really share a liking for the game. A California airline pilot with two racing sons says, "All my colleagues think I'm weird—but I want to tell you, our family really loves this sport." **END**

No matter how much car radio you want...



Motorola Car Entertainment Center

AM/FM Stereo Car Radio with an exciting extra. Flip up the dial scale and it's a 2-channel car stereo tape player. Model TF852AX gives you the whole works in one compact solid-state instrument that fits in the dash of many cars.

or how little...

The smallest Motorola Car Radio

Model TM573A is a solid-state AM radio just 6.3″ wide, 2.0″ high, and 3.3″ in depth. Check these dimensions if you have a problem with in-dash installation in tight spaces.

Motorola has it with something in between

FM Stereo Radio and Stereo Tape Player

Model TF752S. Gives you a fine FM stereo radio with automatic frequency control and a 2-channel, 8-track tape player all in one package.

MOTOROLA®

SOMETHING ELSE in sound on wheels