Joe Scalzo's
city of Speed and elsewhere

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Buck

One clear, sunny afternoon in November 1979, I found myself deep in the Mojave desert standing outside a house trailer, at the end of a dead-end dirt road, listening to Bob Hannah daring bird, beast – and perhaps even human beings - to appear so that he might blast them into eternity with the pellet gun he clenched in his right fist. I had never before seen him in so terrible a mood. But it was understandable because his right foot, ankle, knee and thigh were trapped inside a blindingly white plaster of Paris prison.

Glancing down suddenly, Hannah swore loudly upon discovering he was standing on top of a hill of red ants. Some were even making their ways inside the cast. "Go on get that little bastard, hurry!" Hannah implored as I got down on all fours trying to crush as many as I could. Afterward, he gimped off down the dirt road, still brandishing his gun and, finding nothing to fire on, randomly took aim at a distant mailbox. Ka-wang! Bulls eye. It appeared to make him feel no better.

Disaster not in the motocross Superbowl, but on the water, had overtaken Hannah. ust two months earlier, on the Arizona side of the Colorado river near Blythe, while water-skiing the exact same way he raced a motocross – showing off to the hilt – he had gotten careless and crashed headlong into the rocky shoreline, absorbing a maiming.

He resumed racing, but now he was as injury-prone as everybody else. Over time, the toll climbed: by 1986, it read, three broken wrists, six broken ribs , four broken ankles, one broken leg, one broken collarbone, one pelvis twice. "While I'm fastest, I'm going to prove I'm fastest," had been his vow. Now that he no longer was, he apparently saw no point to continue motocross. So he stopped, becoming, among other things, a color commentator for TV, cuttingly evaluating motocross's pretenders to his old throne. Today, most recent reports have him drifting off to a strange new career as a broker of all sizes of aircraft.

Bob Hannah ,only five-eight and weighing in at 150 pounds, all muscle and gristle, was the most dangerous champion motocross ever knew. Certainly he was not one his factory sponsors at Yamaha felt comfortable with. He said exactly what he thought, often abrasively, and did exactly what he felt like at all times. Before Hannah, motocross had been a beggars sport, with its various racers panhandling and shilling for Yamaha, Honda, Suzuki, and Kawasaki, as well as tire, suspension, and apparel manufacturers. And those lucky enough to have sponsorship reacted with unctuous gratitude. But Hannah reversed this process by forcing his Yamaha sponsor to feel grateful it had him.

Aged 22, he was already making more money in a year than he'd expected to make in a lifetime. Terrifyingly self-confident, he made Yamaha pay for his loyalty. Hannah, according to one story, flung into the fireplace a contract whose financial terms he considered an insult. Trying to woo him back, Yamaha presented him a picture book filled with exotic and expensive sports cars and told him to pick the one he liked best; Hannah selected Ferrari's luscious model 308. All the money he was making notwithstanding, he was a typically frugal motocross racer, living by himself in a house trailer without a telephone.

And how was Bob Hannah able to get away with such behavior? It was because his racing made all the difference. During those magic seasons of 1977, 1978, and 1979, he had motocross under his thumb. And he lit up its skies, because, when racing, he seemed ecstatic, almost out of control. He appeared to be one frightening inch away from a really wicked crash. Yet he

wasn't a kamikaze. He catapulted over high hummocks and gracefully touched earth as graceful as a gazelle, or like somebody landing on eggshells without breaking any. He barely raised dust. And he made his victories runaways or cliff-hangers; the choice was his own.

The era wasn't one of soft competition, and the likes of Marty Tripes, Ken Howerton and Mike Bell all made vain runs at Hannah, yet couldn't prevent him from amassing a record number of wins, and from turning the 1978 American Motorcylist Association awards banquet into a farce. Five different times he appeared, on stage accepting trinkets. including the prestigious Pro Athlete of the Year. And unless anybody missed Hannah's low opinion of something so pompous and artificial as an awards banquet, he was dressed to kill in white tails, black top hat, and formal trousers tucked inside lipstick red motocross boots.

Hannah was 22 years old, and was only months away from having his career conclude with that violent water-skiing spill on the Colorado river. Astonishingly, along with his motocross,

Hannah still had surplus energy to burn. He got rid of it driving his 308 Ferrari; taking lessons on how to pilot airplanes; discharging firearms, going dune-buggying, go-karting, snow,water- and jet-skiing; and even traveling to the Kern river in California's San Joaquin Valley and jumping 65 feet into that body of water from the limb of a tree.

Hannah preferred engaging in such pursuits solo – that way he didn't have to wait for others to keep up. But should he take someone with him, they had to play at his pitch. So, anybody crazy enough to accompany him on a motorcvcle trip across the Mojave and into the Tehachapi mountains, the rocky wasteland where Hannah was born and learned how to ride motorcycles with trademark abandon, was expected to burn up three tankloads of high-test and not complain that Hannah was going too fast.

Or, say you laced up running shoes and joined him for a friendly jog; it tuned into a life-or-death assault of hills and even mountains without once pausing for breath for ten miles. And If Hannah took you out onto the inhospitable high desert for a day of shooting chukar – a maddeningly elusive Mojave game bird – you

were in for a painful day of rending yourself on boulders, lava ridges, and Joshua trees.

Furthermore, if you discovered yourself belted down inside the passenger cockpit of Hannah's 308, hurtling across the Mojave at 150 mph, you weren't expected to remind Hannah, as the winds and speeds rose, that a sharp bend in the roadway loomed ahead.

Hannah had three close friends, and they were great ones: Keith McCarty, Hannah's inexhaustible mechanic from the Yamaha distributors; John Savitski, Yamaha privateer and training partner of Hannah; and Savitski's mechanic Bevo Forti. So much did Hannah enjoy the company of the trio that he gave them nicknames "the Buckeroos," and he gave himself his own nonsensical nickname "Buck." Hence: "Buck and the Buckeroos."

I never was a member of the Buckeroos or anything like that, but I spent considerable time with Hannah in the summer of 1979 when I was writing up a series of Bob Hannah stories. My only difficulty was maintaining Hannah's impossible, seven days a week, pace. Go,go,go! Once we made a non-stop motor trip together – but not In Hannah's 308 – beginning from his trailer then streaking over the High Sierras into Lake Tahoe, followed by a hammer-down journey back to Los Angeles --often with the headlights off in pitch darkness-- with Hannah demonstrating the superior vision of his uncanny green eyes.

Just before dawn we rolled into my driveway and Hannah sprang from the car to take a long leak on my lawn. Then, bidding me farewell, he rocketed away, bound for San Diego, I think he said.

A few hours afterward the rattle of my telephone shook me. It was Hannah. "Wake up!" he demanded. "We're going jet-skiing at Lake Castaic!!"