

# RAMP



A look back at some of the more unique and unusual motocross obstacles we've seen track builders come up with, both indoors and out

WORDS: **DAVEY COOMBS**

# IT UP!



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EVER SINCE MIKE GOODWIN sketched out the first track design for the Superbowl of Motocross in 1972—supposedly on a cocktail napkin at a Los Angeles restaurant called Julie’s—promoters and track builders have been trying to add some razzle-dazzle to racetracks. But after decades of races, sometimes as many as 35 each season, how do track designers still grab the attention of motocross fans? What are some of the ways to keep the “super” in supercross?



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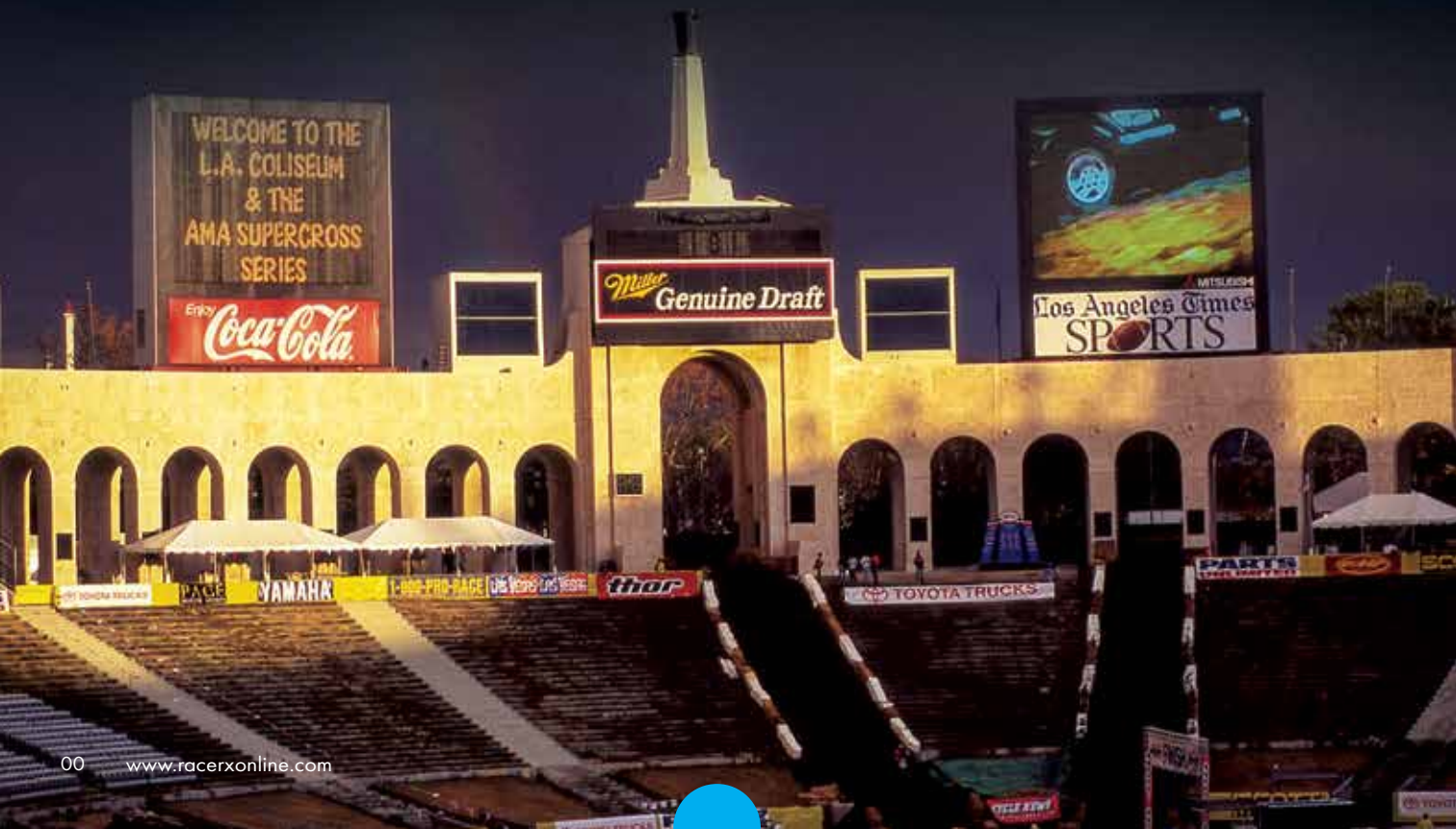
**T**he press release for the 2016 Monster Energy Cup in Las Vegas hinted at one way to do it: “For the first time in history, the starting gate will be placed atop Sam Boyd Stadium. Once the gate drops, riders will race 165 feet to the stadium floor and an additional 150 feet to the first turn—making this start the biggest in Supercross history!”

## Ground Zero

The cradle of supercross is the Los Angeles Coliseum, where the aforementioned Goodwin held the first downtown, nighttime stadium motocross race. For the first generation of supercross riders, the Superbowl of Motocross was the biggest race of all. It also included the most iconic SX obstacle of all: the Peristyle Jump. The Coliseum, which was built for the 1932 Summer

Olympics, is actually a big hole that was dug down from street level near the University of Southern California campus. The facade of arches that line the east end of the stadium, each opening to long aisles down to the stadium’s floor, made for the perfect set of moto elements—an uphill and a downhill—but the promoter Goodwin didn’t think of adding it until 1973, for the second Superbowl of Motocross.

By that time, Daytona International Speedway was a few years in on its motocross events, where track designer Gary Bailey’s canvas was limited to the flat, sandy infield. Jumps built from beach sand don’t last long, so Bailey would truck in limestone for jump faces and even lay telephone polls to bolster his whoop-de-dooos, which needed something to hold their shape. He also began digging





(Opposite) The most iconic obstacle in AMA Supercross history was the Peristyle at the Los Angeles Coliseum, where riders rode up out of the stadium between the pillars, turned outside, and then leapt back down to the stadium floor. (Left) Jeff Ward launches off a drop-off jump at the old Sears Point track in Sonoma, California.

down, introducing “gator pits” to his Daytona designs, which started out as shallow but sharp-edged trenches but soon became rough, fluid game-changers due to the shifting silica. But those gator pits began losing their mystique in 1984, when, on the very last lap of the main event, Team Honda’s Johnny O’Mara hit the one at the finish line wide open in a bid to pass Yamaha’s Ricky Johnson for second. O’Mara didn’t make the pass, but he did clear the 80-foot pit with ease, opening everyone’s eyes immediately to the high line over the rough stuff. It was the Bubba Scrub of the eighties.

### Fathers Of Invention

Unable to dig down into the playing surface of football and baseball stadiums, Goodwin and other promoters ran up into the stands at places like San Diego’s Jack Murphy Stadium, the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, and of course the Pontiac Silverdome in Michigan. The Silverdome is long gone, replaced by Ford Field in downtown Detroit, though at one point a section running up into the stands was added as an homage to the once-grand Silverdome.

When cost and/or building regulations meant they couldn’t go up into the stands at places like the New

Orleans Superdome or Fulton County Stadium in Atlanta, Goodwin might reach into his bag of tricks and bring in “weather” elements with artificial water crossings. The track crews would construct boxes out of four 2’x10’ pieces of wood, lay a plastic tarp down, and fill the boxes with water, then splash through each time around. Needless to say, the riders hated it. When Goodwin expanded the water crossing at the ’78 Superbowl of Motocross, it went from being a water-crossing to a full-on mud hole.

“The mud was getting splashed over in the [next lane of the] track next to it,

and people were crashing because it was so slippery,” Bob Hannah explained in an episode of *The Motocross Files*. “I got tangled up with a couple of guys who went down there.” Hannah ended up narrowly losing the race to his young Yamaha teammate Mike Bell. It was a beautiful evening, yet both were completely covered with mud (along with everyone else in the race) after 20 passes through the water hazard.

### Brand SX

Goodwin was a master marketer, and when he realized that naming obstacles after event sponsors would bring

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in more dollars, he went into overdrive. The layout of the 1980 San Diego SX at Jack Murphy Stadium included, in order, the Go For It start line, Mad Jack's Hump Thumpers, the Coca-Cola Catapult, the Honda Himalayas, the Scott USA Sand Pit, the XETV Rock Crunchers, the Toyota Tornado, the KGB FM Goal Post Jump, and the Beau Gentry Whoop-de-doos.

"Goodwin was a whore!" laughs Bill West, who partnered with Goodwin on several East Coast rounds of

in 1988. (Goodwin was finally convicted of ordering the murders in 2007 and has been in a California prison ever since.) It was at one of those rounds West took over—Tampa—that he admits he may have gone too far in coming up with an attention-grabbing gimmick.

"We decided to build a gator pit between these two jumps, fill it with loose sand and a little bit of water," West explains. So how would that be different from the gator pits that Bailey was building across the state at Daytona?

sport's first real alligator pit?

"The guy who owned the gator," West laughs. "If someone had hit that thing and hurt it, or hurt himself, we would have been in a lot of trouble. But we sure had everyone going for a while there!"

If you think that's extreme, longtime track builder Rich Winkler of Dirt Wurx once got a bizarre request from Goodwin that would have taken the Coliseum race back to the gladiator days.

"One time he had me researching what kind of per-

Coca-Cola Catapult or whatever, and one year in Orlando we had 7-Eleven involved. We named the biggest jump on the track the 7-Eleven Jump, and whoever flew the furthest off of it on Lap 7 and then Lap 11 got a \$500 bonus for each lap." (The winner both times was Jim Holley, future host of *Supercross Live*.)

"One year in Atlanta we had this radio station called 96 Rock involved, and the DJs there didn't think much of supercross," West says of another marketing gimmick. "He said, 'Oh, this is all bullshit, this ain't hard, anybody can jump those jumps and do this and that,' just really ragging on racing, but it was all set up, because the guy was a pretty heavyset guy.

"So Goodwin went on the air and challenged him to make this big 96 Rock Goal Post Jump on a motorcycle," West continues. "Turns out that that poor guy couldn't even ride a motorcycle, and he crashed big-time. It was awful, but the crowd went wild."

Those were the seventies, which were the pre-insurance-liability days for supercross promoting, back before dangerous obstacles and promotions might get a promoter or track builder into hot water. When *Dirt Bike* magazine's Rick "Super Hunky" Sieman tried to jump Goodwin's Gorge on press day at the bottom of the Peristyle, he came up short and nearly killed himself. That was the end of challenging media members and non-riders to clear track obstacles.



A rider drops into a gator pit during the first motocross race held on the infield at Daytona International Speedway back in 1971. Obstacles like this lost their luster in 1984 when Johnny O'Mara launched his factory Honda off the face of one and cleared an 80-foot pit at the finish line. (Check it out on YouTube.)

AMA Supercross. "He was really good at coming up with that stuff, but he was also an absolute whore for sponsors." West inherited full ownership after Goodwin left the country following the notorious murders of another SX partner, Mickey Thompson, and Thompson's wife, Trudy,

"We added a real alligator! If you didn't jump far enough, there was going to be a real alligator in there—about six, maybe eight feet long, but we did tape his mouth shut. The alligator was there right up until practice, and then we had to pull it out of there."

So who shut down the

mits and fencing we needed in order to have live lions wandering around the infield of the track," Winkler says. "He wanted guys racing while the lions ran around! Goodwin was a showman for sure."

"I learned from Goodwin that you should always try to incorporate sponsors like the

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## Outsiders

Supercross doesn't have a lock on coming up with unique content. Outdoor national tracks have long thrown peculiar challenges at the riders, from the sheer verticality of Banzai Hill and the three-tiered Suicide Mountain at California's Saddleback Park to the manmade drop-away jumps at Sears Point. A few

tracks tried to bring the drop-aways back in recent years, but folks like John Ayers and Josh Grant and even Dr. John Bodnar kept forgetting about them and would end up rolling and destroying utility vehicles, which got that genie back in the bottle in a hurry.

Ironically, some of the best-known obstacles in motocross were initially

inspired by supercross but then amplified, given the added space and speed. LaRocco's Leap is basically a triple jump, though if you put one that big inside a stadium, you'd be peeling riders off the ceiling. Same goes for Hangtown's Fly 150 Jump, though the newest addition to the tour's oldest event—the unique and tricky Half-Pipe—

came straight out of a skate park. But it's natural elements like Southwick's sand, Unadilla's Gravity Cavity, and epic climbs like Washougal's Horsepower Hill and Mount St. Helen's at Glen Helen (with a nod to the iconic Talladega first turn) that really give an outdoor motocross track its own specific character.

The Ten Command-



CURDAY

(Above) The original Anaheim Supercross track in 1976 included a King Kong Jump, which was held up by scaffolding. (Upper right) The 2015 Monster Energy Cup incorporated an elevated start. (Main) Heath Voss navigates a metal freestyle ramp while racing in Jeremy McGrath's 2006 Invitational race at the Home Depot Center in Carson, California.



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ments at Loretta Lynn Ranch are probably the best-known obstacles in all of amateur motocross, though they're really just 10 wide whoops that have been there for more than three decades. MX Sports' Tim Cotter came up with the catchy nickname right away, but just a few years ago, he almost saw them

lose their identity.

"We hired Marc Peters to come in and give the track a makeover, and he decided to move the Ten Commandments further apart, which was no problem," Cotter explains. "The problem was, the day before practice, we're out doing the final track walk and someone points over to the whoops and says, 'So it's

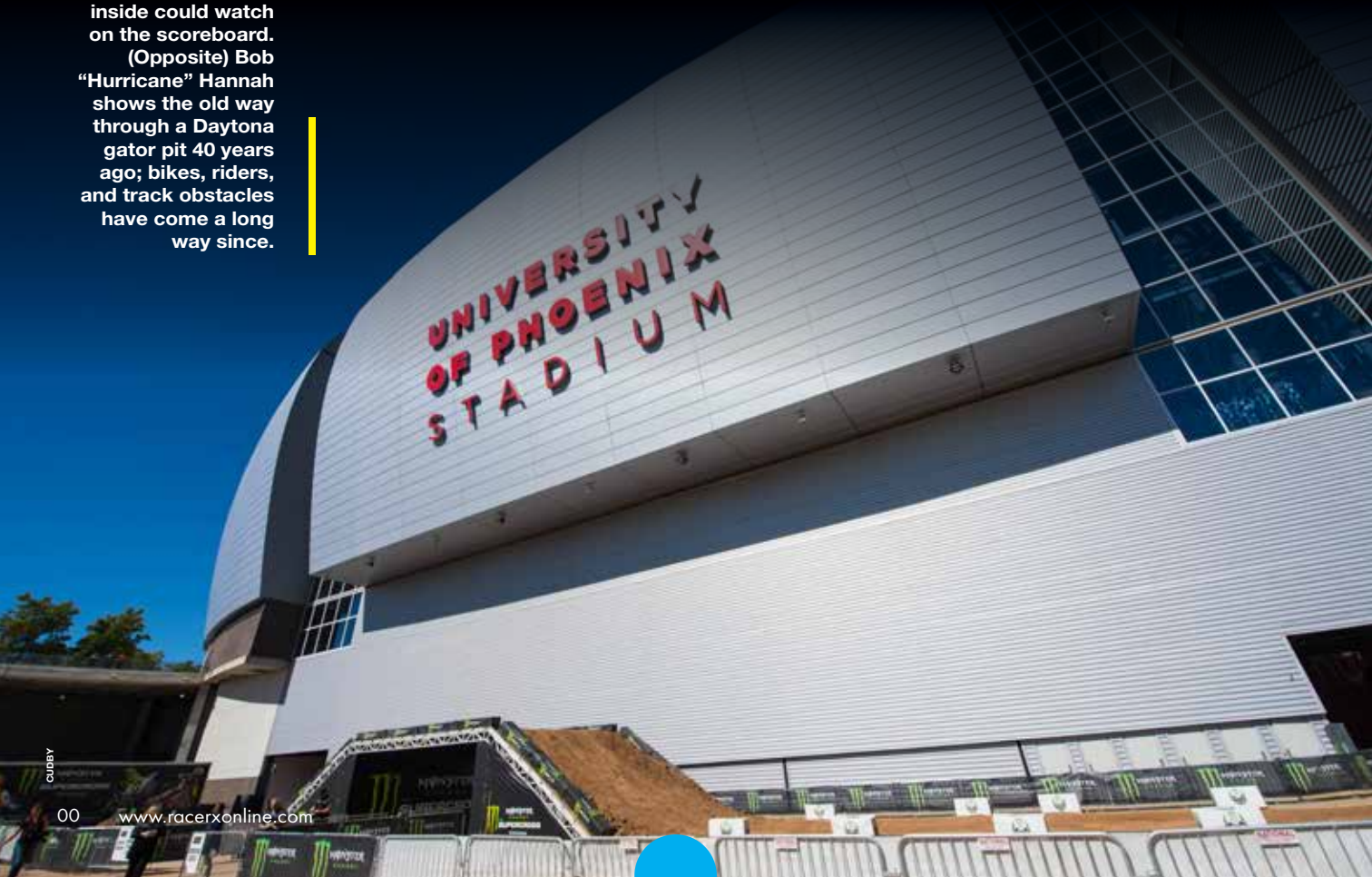
only Nine Commandments now?' Turns out Peters didn't know the history or even the name of the Ten Commandments—he hadn't been there since the middle of the eighties—and he decided to just take one out!" Fortunately, there was still enough daylight for Marc to hop on a dozer and return the missing Commandment.

## The Vegas Lab

In more recent years, we have seen some occasional way-way-outside-the-box thinking, like the metal ramps at the Jeremy McGrath Supercross at Carson's Home Depot Center 10 years ago, or even running outside the stadium like they did at Glendale in Arizona just last year. Other events—Red

(This page) Marty Smith splashes through a water crossing in the New Orleans Superdome in 1980, which left many covered in mud by the time the race ended. Last year's Glendale SX included a jump outside the building, which fans inside could watch on the scoreboard.

(Opposite) Bob "Hurricane" Hannah shows the old way through a Daytona gator pit 40 years ago; bikes, riders, and track obstacles have come a long way since.



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Bull Straight Rhythm, the X Games' Speed & Style, the Red Bull Knockout Beach Races—are practically gimmicks unto themselves.

The biggest laboratory for supercross obstacle reinvention has been Sam Boyd Stadium in Las Vegas, a place built on taking risks. The venue hosts not only the final round of Monster Energy AMA Supercross, but also the Monster Energy Cup off-season event. It's at Sam Boyd where Feld Motor

Sports and Dirt Wurx like to try out new things to challenge riders and entertain fans. Split starting gates, Joker Lanes, and this year's up-top starting gate are just a few of the things that have been race-tested there in hopes of figuring out new ways to build racetracks, because what worked 30 years ago would never work now.

"If you watch that famous Anaheim race from 1986, you can really get an idea of how things have changed,"

Winkler says of the general evolution of tracks and the challenge of coming up with unique obstacles. "With a track like that, well, today our guys would just jump whole lanes. Back then, it was really a different riding style. It was more like a cut-and-thrust riding style, and that the two-strokes helped to promote. But now, the four-strokes carry so much corner speed, cutting under and cutting back out of turns actually makes you go slower."

Going back a little further to Daytona '84 and that gator pit that O'Mara famously launched, just imagine if a Team Honda rider of today like Ken Roczen were confronted with that obstacle. Given the evolution of motorcycles, athletes, and jumping technique, K-Roc could probably jump farther than the O'Show did—on a CRF150 minicycle. Armed with a 2017 CRF450R, Roczen might have landed out on Daytona Beach! 