

Winners & Losers

Mark Blackwell

Change not for the sake of change.

• In 1971, at the age of 18, Mark Blackwell became the first-ever AMA 500cc National motocross champion, winning the title by one point over another California youngster, Brad Lackey. Since then, by anyone's measure, Blackwell has been at the leading edge of American motocross—as a rider, instructor, U.S. Suzuki team manager and now, just this month, as Motorcycle Product Manager for Husqvarna Motorcycle Company, Inc.

The list of Blackwell's contemporaries reads like a *Who's Who* of the sport: riders like Lackey, Weinert, DeSoto, Jones, Lamppu, Pomeroy and Priddy in the U.S.; and De Coster, Robert, Geboers, Mikkola, Weil and Smith in Europe, among others, competed against Blackwell during his peripatetic five-year professional career. Besides his national title, Blackwell also won the 500cc class in the Florida Series in 1972,

and the 250cc class at the '72 Mint 400 (teamed with Malcolm Smith), before an eye injury—suffered at a GP in Europe, and never fully recovered from—two broken legs, and repeated torn knee and ankle ligaments forced him to hang up his leathers in 1975.

That year was a watershed for Blackwell. "Physically and psychologically," he says, "I perceived a need to leave racing. But I wanted to stay in motorcycling in some way, and my long-term interest was learning as much as I could about business management so I could develop a new career."

Blackwell had helped Rolf Tibblin with the Husqvarna motocross school at the Carlsbad Raceway from 1973-75, and when the program was discontinued U.S. Suzuki became interested in the facility and contacted Blackwell to run it. He re-designed the curriculum and acted as chief instructor



Blackwell at Anaheim '81

The pot was being Swedened already.

for three years, but early in 1977 Suzuki's plans for Blackwell changed, and his career took another turn.

"The motocross team hadn't been doing too well, so they sent me to a few nationals and then made me team manager for the '77 Trans-AMA series," he says. "I didn't really want to become the manager," Blackwell confesses, "but when they offered I figured if I refused it would mean the end of my career growth with Suzuki, and I wasn't ready for that yet. So I swallowed hard and took it."

Suzuki was glad he did. In three full years as race team manager, Blackwell brought in three Trans-AMA titles, national Championships in the 500cc (LaPorte), 250cc (Howerton) and 125cc (Barnett) classes, plus victories at two 250cc USGPs and one win each at the 500 and 125cc USGPs. The only title that has so far eluded a Blackwell-coached rider is the Supercross crown, and this year Suzuki has not one, not two, but *three* riders locked together in a tight points race for that championship.

"With Suzuki," he says, "I've accomplished almost more than I hoped to. I made a promise to myself my first year with them, to expand and learn as much as I could. But when I felt I'd done what I set out to do, I also promised that I'd look for a way to make another move, take the next career step."

That step, as it turned out, was a midseason change to Husqvarna's U.S. headquarters in San Diego, California, and a return to the company whose bikes he rode as a young pro. Only this time his responsibilities will range far afield from his race-track expertise, though they will include overseeing the racing budget and activities.

"Essentially, I'll be involved with sales promotion, product needs and evaluation, and magazine relations," explains Blackwell. "I'll be responsible for the Husky motocross product—like Dick Burleson with enduro product and Bob Popiel with the off-road machinery. It's a chance for me to expand my knowledge of marketing, and continue my involvement with the motorcycle business. I'll also have the opportunity to input information to the factory in Sweden, and that's an important change for me."

Important enough to leave Suzuki in the lurch, as it were, just as the MX program he sweated three years for is beginning to bear fruit. It was a decision Blackwell didn't take lightly; it was planned and considered, and he is convinced it is happening at the right time for all concerned.

"I felt I wanted to leave the Suzuki team on an 'up' note," he says, "when I could make the smoothest transition. If I waited until the end of the season it wouldn't have worked out, the last few races might have been an anticlimax. Like if I had left at the

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end of last season, what would have happened? Kent (Howerton) would have gone to Honda, Darrell (Shultz) would probably still be crashing all over the place, Marty (Smith) wouldn't have regained his confidence—and I'm really sure he's going to be a winner again—and Mark (Barnett) would've lost the edge he built. I'm not trying to say I was responsible for all of that *not* happening, just that the team would have suffered if I had left then. Now it's different: Suzuki is doing really well, and I know I can leave and the riders will continue to do what they're doing—they have a real shot at winning everything this year.

"For me," he continues, "the more I stayed with racing the more I knew that's all people would think I was capable of. And that really scared me. There's more I think I can do in this business, so when it looked like there was no place for me in marketing at Suzuki, and when Husqvarna expressed an interest, it just came down to a question of timing."

Timing, it's said, is everything, and it's certainly difficult to minimize the importance of timing on Blackwell's life. He was discovered as a SoCal local in the late Sixties by Dick Miller, current editor of *Motocross Action*. He was influenced early on by Edison Dye, the famous—some say infamous—motocross promoter.

"Edison told me," says Blackwell, "in 1970 that the six-race Inter-AM series would blossom into a weekly circus with all of us traveling all over the U.S., racing in front of big crowds. I didn't believe him then, but you know what?—he was right. I think without him, and Mike Goodwin (who promoted the first stadium race), none of us would be where we are today."

Blackwell also credits the AMA for the continued growth of motocross in America. "I remember 10 years ago," he says, "when we used to go out real early in the morning and string flags around the bushes in Beaumont, then race our brains out that afternoon—just for a trophy. Since then...well, look at the salaries, the crowds, the venues—the AMA, I really believe, has been a force in bringing us where we are.

"I also think," he says, "that motocross has brought new people into the sport. And by that I mean the sport of motorcycling. Today's athletes present themselves well, especially on TV, and they're helping change the image. Motocross doesn't just sell dirt bikes, I really believe it helps the whole spectrum of the sport."

Blackwell hopes that the manufacturers will stay involved in motocross, at least in the immediate future. But he does not discount the criers of MX's doom, and foresees changes the sport must undertake in the event of a factory fallout.

"If traditional companies get less involved," he says, "we'll just have to attract outside sponsors in order to survive. Like

NASCAR. Like Formula One. I think it can be done.

"But for right now," he continues, "a full stadium can make all the difference. At Anaheim, Seattle and Atlanta this year we played to packed houses, so I really am not convinced that Supercross is dead. I think the manufacturers have to do more with their wins, though, more than just advertising in *Cycle News*. The message has to be transported to the general public for motocross—and motorcycling—to benefit."

At 27, Blackwell has seen a lot of changes already in the sport, not the least of which are the astronomical salaries earned by today's moto-stars, dollar figures unheard of when he was a SoCal sensation.

"Do I miss the Big Bucks?," he says, "sure I do, but not in a bad way. And even had the money been around I wish I would have known then what I know now. I was so



De Coster was a Blackwell mentor

Old pros never die, they change teams.

young, had no guidance—I might just have Turbo Carrera-and-surfed it all away, like some kids today have the temptation to do.

"No," he says, "money's not the measure. I would have liked it, sure, but I know so much more now because of the way it was for me. I've learned so much, met so many people, been all over the United States, seen the world—all of my experiences are the reason why I'm in my present position. I wouldn't change it, or go back.

"You know what, though?," Blackwell concludes, "I've sat in contract negotiations with Suzuki riders—guys who are racing right now—and they say 'So you used to ride?' Like it was ancient history or something. And I tell them: 'Yeah—10 years too early.'"

—Jeff Burt