

THE CHAMP THEY LOVE TO HATE

Ten years. Ten long years. Ten years of a little bit of bad luck, and a little bit of good. Ten years of changing bikes and changing mechanics and changing tracks and changing clothes. And changing hats. Ten years of maybe the bike doesn't work so well this season, of maybe my body doesn't work so well. Ten years of rumors—Lackey's going to quit riding GPs, Lackey doesn't like the bike, Lackey doesn't like the Europeans, and they don't like him . . . maybe Lackey doesn't like anybody. Ten years of ups and downs and sideways, but after keeping his eyes riveted on one goal through all the turmoil, Brad Lackey finally realized what was once a lifelong dream: He is the first American World Motocross Champion.

Getting to talk with the World Champ was going to be a problem, but we finally cornered him at the World Speedway Finals at the L.A. Coliseum. After smuggling ourselves into a dark corner of the press box, we whipped out our collection of ten years' worth of Bad Brad photos and took him on a romp down memory lane. And, while Bruce Penhall clinched his second World Championship, we talked to the motocross Champ about his not-too-distant past.

DB:—Okay. Starting at the top, what is all this stuff about "Bad" Brad Lackey, and why are all those people saying such bad things about him?

Lackey:—I'm not a real smiler, I guess; I just stand around looking ugly all the time. Especially at the races—the only time they take pictures is when I'm getting serious—I'm not thinking about being hyped, I'm thinking about winning. Hey, a lot of the people don't realize that! I'd like to get down in front of this crowd and tell



1982 color photo by Luc Verbeke

BRAD LACKEY

Looking back over ten difficult years

By Paul Clipper and Tom Webb

them Brad Lackey isn't a jerk, he just forgets to smile at the right time. I can't say I'm *too* serious, because this year it finally paid off.

DB:—All the Bad Brad look, right? What about the beard—or beards, we should say—they always made you look sinister, in a way. We figure there must be more to them than just hair, because in one of the cycle papers they show a shot of Lackey at Luxembourg with a full beard, yet the shot of you at the airport shows a clean-shaven, smiley kind of guy.

Lackey:—We shaved them off right after the second moto in Luxembourg—the whole team had a beard. We were Team Beard. Really, nobody else had them so we went with the beards—Stiggy had one, Steve had one, Dino had one, I had one. I've kind of been using them off and on, but really full-time except for last year. Last year we had such a crappy year that we just figured we'd better get back into our old routine, and it seemed to work. We



shaved them off at the last race because we told everybody that was the first chance we had to shave.

DB:—*But the beard is a necessary part of racing, don't you think?*

Lackey:—It is, that's true; because you can see right here (*indicates photos of himself clean-shaven*) I'm not scaring anybody in those pictures. A clean face doesn't do me any good.

DB:—*Do you think your bike this year was the best, the most deluxe and one of the reasons you won?*

Lackey:—Well, every year it's different. Sometimes the factory does a much better job one year than it does the next year. I wouldn't say I had a really big advantage with my bike the way it came from the factory, but we spent the time in the States getting it to where I felt comfortable on it, which is important.

DB:—*Your bike seemed pretty radical with the Simons forks and such.*

Lackey:—And as usual, everyone

thought we were making a mistake. But I've been doing GPs long enough to know you can't make any changes, can't make any mistakes during the season. We tested everything very thoroughly, probably a heck of a lot more than the guys at the factory.

DB:—*What's the plan for this year? The rumors are spreading quickly. Europe or the States?*

Lackey:—Well, I'd love to tell you everything you want to know, but I don't know myself. I personally feel that for me to go back to Europe and win the World Championship twice would be less of an accomplishment than if I'd stay here and win with the new format. I've won in the States (*with the old format*), I've won in Europe, and now with the AMA's setup of only one champ here, I want to be the top dog. Winning the World Championship twice, I feel, wouldn't be as important as being the new American Champion. As far as my sponsors go, I don't know how

they feel, whether they agree with me or not.

Businesswise and goalwise, I think it's important. I need a new goal for myself and to prove to all these people who have never been to Europe, haven't seen what that's like, what I'm really capable of; it's a new area to prove myself. You need this, a drive to perform at 100 percent. Hopefully, my sponsors will agree.

DB:—*What happened with the rock throwing, when Graham Noyce had his arm broken while leading the GP by a fan who hit him with a stake?*

Lackey:—It started in Belgium. I got the holeshot, Noyce second and Vromans was third. Noyce passed me, then so did Vromans. After a couple laps Vromans got by Noyce, then Noyce let me by easier than the spectators thought he should have. We were on a pavement section of the course, which leads to a wide open blind jump that lands in between trees and onto some cobblestone stuff—you know, really touchy, gnarly stuff. I was right alongside Graham, doing some serious racing. The thing is, he didn't need to die at that point, he wasn't in the points race. No need for things to get ugly, so Noyce let me by because he knew that we (*Vromans and Brad*) were in a championship battle.

The thing you've got to remember is the spectators are highly localized. Going from one race to another is like you guys driving from Saddleback to Indian Dunes. They get the same group of people from one race to the next. The press there is the same. The bottom line is that the people didn't like what Noyce did.

The announcer was really making a big deal out of it at the final GP in Luxembourg. Pumping Vromans, the local boy, and putting me down. So at the first moto at Luxembourg, Noyce got the holeshot, I was second and Vromans was third. We went for a while, then Vromans got by me and caught Noyce, but couldn't get by. I was hanging out back there knowing Vromans wasn't going to wheely away or anything. Those two were battling and the crowd thought it was like the week before, that Noyce was holding up Vromans so I could catch up. So one of the spectators smacked Noyce. I heard later that Johnny, Vromans' main guy, said they should have broken both his legs.

DB:—*Aren't you popular in Europe?*

Lackey:—When it doesn't come down to a Belgian rider and myself at the last race, which it always does because they put out such good riders, I do have a good following. But, with a Belgian rider coming down to the wire, all it takes is one group of people for him and against me to get things going.

DB:—*So in the last race you actually*

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kept yourself behind Vromans until the last lap when you passed him?

Lackey:—That was a combination of strategy and knowing exactly how good and how fast he is. You guys probably only saw the Carlsbad GP, but he's a real fast starter. I'm a real slow starter—that's one of my problems. I can't just charge out on the course, I sort everything out. I like to get good starts, but guys always get by me on the first few laps. So I knew I was in much better shape than Vromans. I knew he gets real tired at the end, that's why he charges so hard at the beginning. Also, I knew if I was in front of him, I'd catch all the crap; if he's in front of me, the crowd is happy, he's winning, he's beating me. So I dropped down about 12 seconds behind Vromans. All year long we've had a plan at the end of the race. Dino, my trainer, shows me a five-lap board, and I know that I can pin it from that point and finish strong. Usually my last five laps are faster than my first five of the race. That's part of the way I train. So, at that point I know how much time I can make up. If I don't let whoever's in front of me get away, I know in the last five I can make up the time.

I knew the spectators were for him. So, staying behind kept them happy. I knew that all it would take is one guy to hit me with a rock or something and I'd lose the Championship. At that point I wasn't into losing the Championship. So I let him by and just stayed there. No violence during the race, a few people flipping me off, an occasional beer can, nothing really bad. At the final five-lap point they were all pumped, they thought Vromans had it. They didn't think I had enough time to catch up and pass him, but on the last lap I swooped him. It stunned the crowd and they didn't have the time to throw stuff at me, it was too late.

What's funny is that Vromans knew it was going to happen. It happened a lot



"This is at the Italian Grand Prix in '74, when the ignition on my Husky blew up. I got a third in one heat, and at the time that was my best ride. Then in the second moto my ignition blew and I'm here showing somebody which wire broke. It was a Femsa ignition. I wasn't real happy about it."



David Maltais

"This is at the Motocross des Nations in 1974, where the team consisted of Jim Weinert, Jim Pomeroy, Tony DiStefano and myself. The race was in Sweden. We came in second overall but the Swedes won easily. Bengt Aberg and the rest of them were really riding well."



"Trans-Am '76 in St. Louis. This was the beginning of the American flag-type jerseys that I started, and Husky sold a ton of them. Of course, I went broke."



"This must be 1975—Husky time again. That's one of the later versions of the American flag jersey. That's a black leather Team Husky beanie I'm wearing, and this is the kind of look that gave me the 'Bad Brad' reputation."



Jim Gianatsis

"This is the '77 or '78 Trans-Am at Unadilla. If it was '77, it was the year I fell off and Roger DeCoster won; if it was '78, I don't remember what happened. That's my Heikki hat, straight out of Finland. I saw it and had to have it, but nobody was really ready for it in the States. I guess this is what they need over there to survive the winter. It really kept my ears warm."



Jim Russell

"Another hat—I think it's Jimmy's—I stole it off his head. That's Steve Stackable, Weinert, me, and I think Stackable's girlfriend, and that could possibly be my wife. I think it's from a Trans-Am, between '76 and '78."

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Jim Gianatris

"This is at the Southwick, Massachusetts 250 National. There's Tony D., Hannah, Croft and me. Let's see... I don't remember what happened in '76... I went back there in '77 on a Honda and was winning the race when I was knocked off by my teammate, Tommy Croft. I was lapping him and I wound up losing to Pierre Karsmakers."



David Maltz

"I guess this is Europe... Mikkola, Roger... yeah. This is 1974, and it's a start at the Italian Grand Prix."



"This is the USGP again, right before the first moto. I mean, that's it, look at that thing, Nice, huh? It worked well—Steve did a heckuva job. There's the helmet from Arai, with the '57 Chevy flame job. I always wanted a '57 Chevy with a flame job and I never got one, so I figured I could at least make my helmet like that. Nobody could handle it, but you look at it with the beard and everything and it looked neat—it looked bad!"

during the year. He was doing everything in his power to stay in front. It was driving him crazy. It's not like he had mirrors on his bike and could see. Then his mechanic gave him the news on the pit board. Bad idea. So the strategy paid off for me.

DB:—Your game plan during the year paid off?

Lackey:—We annoyed a lot of people and a lot of press, but we made a plan at the beginning of the year and we stuck to it, regardless of complications. If I—this is a terrible thing to say—but if I was going to get a divorce or killed in an airplane, or Steve was, or Stiggy was, we were still going to stick to the plan.

DB:—Last year was dismal for you, getting a sixth.

Lackey:—I went backwards because I was hurt; we had a new bike that we thought was set up. We weren't ready. We thought we had the right plan, but we went in there unprepared. This year we looked at all our mistakes over the last nine years, losing by getting rammed or losing some other way. We'd seen just about every way to lose a championship. If nothing else, we were going to lose a new way this year. We had good luck; Stig did a great job with the bike, Steve engineered it to where I could ride it and be happy with it, and besides breaking the shock in Canada, I finished in the top ten in every moto.

We looked at the points it took to win the championship over the last ten years. How many points would it take? There was an average amount, except for '78 when Heikki smoked with 299 points, which is unheard of. There was an average of 240 points to win; 20 points a race. Without that one moto DNF we would have finished exactly where we wanted to, dead-on.

All I did was ride the bike. I had the right people around me—Steve, Stiggy, my
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Jack Burnicle

"Yeah, this is the second moto of the Holland race, when Vromans and I were dicing back and forth. I'd pass him, he'd pass me, I'd pass him... until the soft shock springs got to me."



"This is '77 or '78, Trans-Am time again. There's Al Baker, Mark Blackwell, Roger and LaPorte. Just a rider's meeting at one of the Trans-Ams early on."



"There's Jammer and I, and I think the guy on my right is a South American motocross racer. We're in somebody's office... that could be down at DIRT BIKE, couldn't it? The pants are radical, they're straight out of Berserkley, for sure. You guys have to realize I was born and raised in Berkeley!"



"This is Carlsbad when they used to have dirt. Look at that, can you believe it? That's my Buffalo Breath jersey, straight out of New Zealand. Now they sell them in I. Magnin's for sixty dollars each, and we screwed up again... what can I say?"



Jim Gianatsis
Dick Miller

"Kawasaki times at the USGP, '79, with Steve Stacheifski working on the bike. We didn't finish one moto but we won the other and stayed in the points hunt. About this time everybody started getting into cowboy hats, so we had to swing on the cowboy hat routine. We took 12,000 cowboy hats to Europe and gave them all away to the press. They loved it."



Larry Morales

"DeCoster and myself in Husqvarna times, no idea where it is or what's going on. That hat is a sport fisherman's hat—definitely not in vogue at the time but I was happy with it. I like it!"



"This is '73, and it could be the USGP. Weinert and I are just checking out John Dasoto's CZ—looking at what we used to ride and remembering how terrible it was."



"That was the year there were five Nationals. I won the first one and was winning the second one when I broke a front wheel with a flat tire. I was winning the last one and I broke a piston pin. Weinert won, and Pierre hated life."



"This is Carlsbad, must be about '75... getting a little bit out of control coming up the ledge. It used to be a ledge, it's nothing anymore. I don't remember how I finished... I'm sure I broke down or something happened."

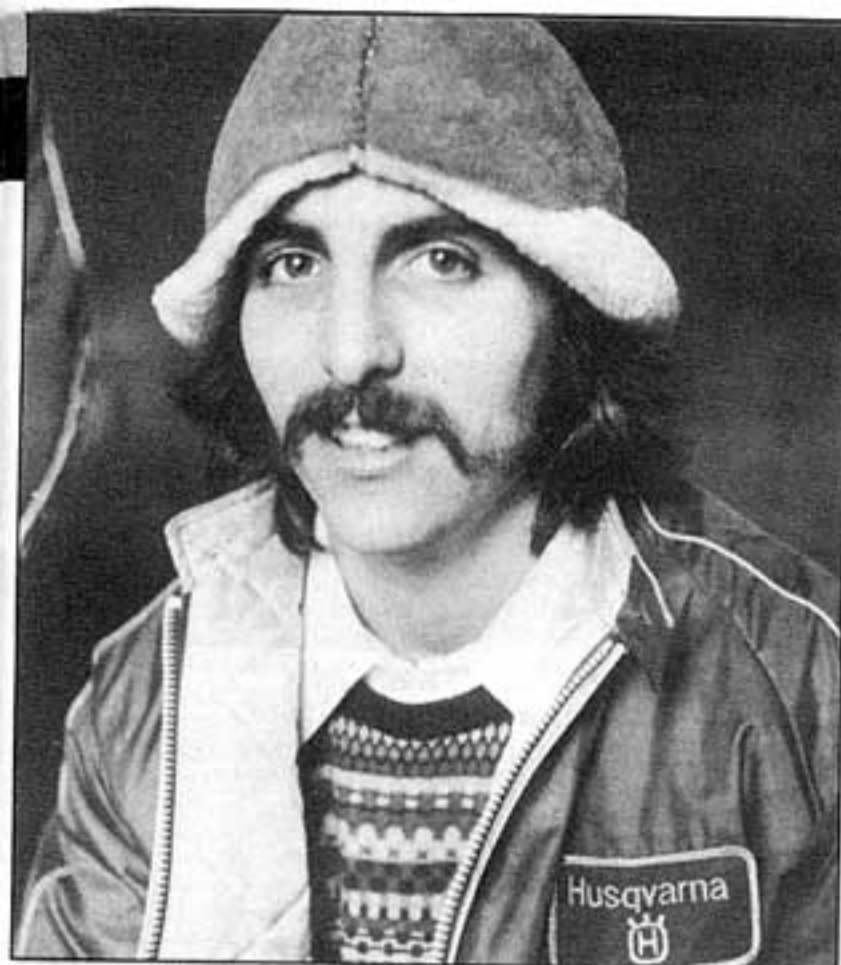


Jack Burnicle

"This is Europe... kinda sandy, it could be Holland. Yeah. I was winning the first moto with a couple laps to go and I seized a piston. The shock springs were too soft in the second moto and I wound up getting second."



"This has got to be the Austrian GP in '78. I think I won."



"This is a handmade, custom hat that a friend of mine made—it must be '74. It's sheepskin, with a conehead effect not everybody was into. Once again, a little ahead of the times with headgear."



"This is the USGP in '72, when I was National Champion. I was leading the field until I fell off—one of the first fall-offs at Carlsbad. I had the good bike (Kawasaki); the bike outclassed everything else in the field at the time. It doesn't look that great now, but at the time... It was real light—197 pounds, had a 450 engine and the biggest thing at that time was a 360, so I had a weight and horsepower advantage that helped develop my riding style to this day."



David Maltz

"Grand Prix action at Luxembourg in '73. Those are Koni shocks with oil-cooler bodies, Betor forks with a Bultaco front wheel, British aluminum tank; it was a 450, and we were semisupported, with Steve Johnson working on the bike."



"Mike Runyard and myself, '73, Kawasaki. There are stands in the background, so I'd say we were here... at the Superbowl."



"This was at the Italian Grand Prix in 1975, when they claimed I didn't make enough laps in practice and so I didn't get to ride the race. Obviously, this was taken before I was depressed... so that was my first non-start in the GPs for... some reason."



David Maltz

"Obviously this is my first 500 season in Europe, at the Dutch Grand Prix. Again the flag and whole bib routine, standing at the presentation before the start, with the American team color helmet and all that good stuff. Yup, 1973."

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wife, and Dino. They were thinking of stuff I could never worry about, yet was important to winning the Championship. Everyone pulled together and it worked. We had other seasons that were fulfilling, where we'd end up second, and that felt good. But I'll tell you, after being World Champ for two weeks, second ain't squat.

DB:—Okay, one last question. It has been reported that after the first moto in Luxembourg you went back to your motor home and cranked up some "good old American rock 'n roll" on the stereo to get wired for the second moto. What were you listening to?

Lackey:—It was "Eye of the Tiger," by Survivor, Rocky's theme song. It fits me perfectly because Rocky, he's been there, up at the top, like I've been, being American Champion before. Maybe I was losing my drive, that's what it's all about. I had to just get my head together in the motor home and then go out and whip 'em.

I can relate to everything that happened in the movie, if you've seen the movie. You know, everything gets real nice, real easy, the money is coming in and the family life is great; but it's so easy you lose that *hunger*, and you've got to get that back. "Eye of the Tiger" reminded me about that, about being hungry again, about wanting to win. About *needing* to win. □