

Brad Lackey

At Long Last

Victory

America's 1972 500cc National Champion, Brad Lackey, went to Europe nearly a decade ago, bound to become World Champion. He's been climbing that mountain ever since. By Don Phillipson

I'd like to be able to tell you about how close the 1982 Grand Prix motocross series is. About how heroic all the competitors are. About how, since it's not over yet, several riders still have a chance to become World Champion. I'd like to be objective and tell you how it's not Europeans versus Americans at all—how it's really just a matter of good clean sport, to the victor goes the spoils and all that jazz.

But I can't.

Because *this* is Brad Lackey's year. This is America's year. Most of us grew up hearing about how the Europeans were *made* for motocross. Americans were amateurs—always would be. I went to Corriganville and all the other tracks to watch Aberg and Robert and DeCoster blow the Americans in the weeds.

Times change.

Bad Brad is about to do it. No, he's not champion yet. As of this writing there are two races to go, four motos, in Belgium (Vromans' country) and Luxembourg. But he's close, oh my, he's *sooo* close. Close enough for us to bet the farm, or at least the title of this article, on the outcome. We're going to go ahead and figure he's got it in the bag.

World Championship motocross racing is a grand version of American National racing. The Nationals comprise eight events, 16 motos, and they take place at tracks across the country. The Grands Prix comprise 12 events, 24 motos, and they're held in 12 different countries on two continents.

The 500cc class is the premiere spectacle. The best riders flock to it to battle for the most prestigious title in motocross. That's why it's doubtful any rider will ever dominate the series as completely as some American riders do the Nationals.



PHOTOGRAPHY: CHRIS HATOUNIAN

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But take a look at the 1982 Grand Prix circuit. In the 500 class 20 motos have been run so far this year. A total of 10 riders have won those motos. André Malherbe: five. Brad Lackey and André Vromans: three each. Graham Noyce and David Thorpe: two apiece. And Jean-Jacques Bruno, Neil Hudson, Hakan Carlqvist, Danny Chandler and Mike Bell have each won one. There is, to put it mildly, a bit of talent in that group.

For that reason, and a couple of others, it's crucial that a rider—even a good one like Lackey—be consistent. If you never know who's going to win a moto, you can never be sure when an apparent mid-packer is going to vault to the lead.

The FIM points system and the GP schedule of events encourage this tight racing. First place in a moto awards 15 points. Second place 12, third 10, fourth eight, and fifth through 10th are worth 6–1 points. Figure it out from there. At least eight of the regulars on the circuit are proven winners. You bobble once and you're likely to find yourself in 11th place, battling to pass into a position to earn *one* point and looking to pass guys who are capable of dusting everybody.

Then figure that there are 24 motos in the series. Twenty-four chances (as long as we're looking at the pessimistic side of things) to DNF. It's no wonder that in the last five years every rider who's become World Champion has finished out of the points in at least one race. It's hard enough just to finish 24 motos, much less 10th or better. Last year André Malherbe either DNF'ed or finished worse than 10th in four motos—and still became champion.

This year Lackey didn't win a moto until Austria, the fifth race on the circuit. Yet, he was leading the points standings after the third event in Sweden. Consistency pays.

Early-season action went like this. On April 25, in France, the first event of the year, two-time World Champion Malherbe came out of the gate flying; he won both motos. Lackey looked good in the first heat and finished second, ahead of André Vromans and Neil Hudson—the 1981 250cc World Champion who switched classes this year.

The following week in Holland fortune frowned on Malherbe. He crashed in practice and dislocated his shoulder. André Vromans—who's sort of a Belgian version of Lackey, always at or near the front of the points standings but never quite in the number one spot at the end of the season—looked over as terror of the day. Vromans absolutely embarrassed everybody and redefined the term "sand specialist." In the first moto he was caught in a pileup and resumed the race mid-pack, only to pass all the front runners for the win. In the second moto, he pulled out a 13-second lead—*on the first lap*. Lackey, meanwhile, caught in the same moto-one pileup, worked his way up to seventh. In the second heat he was the class of the field—except for Vromans—and he finished second. Vromans went from fifth in the standings to first.

Merely seven days later, in Sweden, Malherbe was back, playing the role of human with magical and mystical powers of recuperation. He scored 5–2 on the day. Vromans, on the other hand, picked up where Malherbe left off. The "other André" crashed in the first moto and began blacking out periodically, which is hardly anything to put a guy out of something as important as a GP. Vromans, despite the periodic unscheduled naps, finished the first moto fourth, the second moto 10th. So far so good, and we haven't even gotten to the man of the hour—England's Graham

Graham Noyce (2) is currently fourth in the standings. André Malherbe (1) was Lackey's toughest competition until Carlsbad, where he broke his leg. If—and we're not saying there's much of a chance he won't, mind you—but if Lackey doesn't win the title, it will surely go to Vromans (4).



The Americans Are Coming

□ What started as a trickle is now a flow. At first, Americans traveled individually to Europe, just to see how fast the world class riders really were on their own terrain. Jim Pomeroy and Brad Lackey were among the pioneers.

In the last 10 years others have joined the originals. Chuck Sun traveled to the continent in 1978 and '79 for a few races each year and broke into the top three. Mike Guerra has made a serious effort, contesting the entire 250cc series last year and finishing sixth in the overall points standings. Johnny O'Mara hit a couple of key GPs and swept the moto wins in the 125 class. But by far the most impressive effort is that of Danny LaPorte, 1979 500cc National Champion.

The season began dismally for LaPorte. In the opening round in Switzerland he DNF'ed in the first moto with a flat, while former champion Georges Jobé won. In the second moto the Belgian rider won again with LaPorte in second. Danny remained lighthearted: "I can spot Jobé a few points and still beat him."

In Spain Mike Guerra was on the gas, finishing 4-1 and taking the overall win—the first time an American had won a 250 GP since Pomeroy in 1973.

At his home track in Belgium, Jobé scored 1-2, while LaPorte finished barely a bike length behind in the first moto then DNF'ed the second with ignition trouble. At this point Jobé had 75 points, 36 more than Kees van der Ven in second with 39. Jobé was practically making a laughing matter of the series and Danny's optimism seemed like empty bragging.

At the fourth round, Czechoslovakia, Danny crashed in the first moto and ended up seventh—while Jobé won. Then some of LaPorte's bad luck began rubbing off. Danny won the second moto—the first GP moto win of his career—and Jobé crashed his way into a DNF.

That crash was more important than it seemed. Even though Jobé went on to score 3-4 finishes the following week in Italy, his elbow was bothering him. Between the Italian and French rounds Jobé underwent surgery to remove bone chips.

Jobé missed the French round and LaPorte took advantage of the situation, posting 1-3 moto finishes and pulling in the overall victory. Georges, for his part, considered Danny the real threat. "LaPorte is hard enough to beat without this injury. The three weeks between England and Holland should give me time to mend, however."

The fight for the time being was clearly between the Dutchman and the American. In England LaPorte diced with van der Ven and each won a moto while the other took second, even though Hawkstone Park is sandy and van der Ven is considered a soft-track specialist. "LaPorte surprised me," Kees said. "He's really very good in the sand."

LaPorte went on to stick it to van der Ven in the latter's home country. Danny went 1-1 in Holland, Jobé came back for 2-2 finishes, and van der Ven scored 5-3. LaPorte took the points lead.

In Russia LaPorte and Jobé were again the super powers, Danny chalking up 1-2 scores and Georges a 2-1 day. Three rounds remain as of this writing—USA, Finland and Sweden.

By the numbers, LaPorte has about the same lead and the same chance to become World Champion as Lackey does in the 500 class. But we'd say he's even more likely actually to accomplish that feat. There's not the same kind of pressure on LaPorte. No one really expected Danny to bag a world title his first year out. Rookie years are for learning. It's great to be the *wunderkid*, but if you're not, no big deal. Anyway, he has many more chances coming. Danny's 25 years old. ■



PHOTOGRAPHY: WARREN PRICE

Brad Lackey

Noyce, 1979 500 World Champion—who, you guessed it, won both motos. Three events—three different double-moto winners. Which leaves us only to account for Hudson and Lackey, who were both busy playing Mr. Consistency. Hudson scored 2-4, Lackey 3-3, and for his effort Brad took over the points lead.

In Finland there was no double-moto winner. Instead, a few experienced riders made a blazing reappearance. Jean-Jacques Bruno won moto one after passing Hakan Carlqvist, who finished second. Jean-Jacques is annually in the running, and Carla (former 250 World Champion), given a few lucky breaks, is world champion material. Unfortunately, Carlqvist broke his wrist early in the season and was still building up his stamina. While these guys entertained the crowd, Malherbe chalked up a fourth, Lackey floundered in eighth and Vromans was busy breaking his motorcycle (seizure).

Neil Hudson stepped right up in moto two and prevented Bruno, who finished second, from sweeping the day's event. Without going into every place in every moto, we'd still like to point out that Gary Semics, *our* Gary Semics, finished fifth in moto two in Finland, the same as he had done in Sweden. He wasn't in the winner's circle, but he was piling up points; leaving Finland he was 10th in the standings. And Lackey? Well, Brad was right behind Semics in sixth. His 8-6 day was nothing to call home about Sunday night, though, and in fact, it allowed Hudson to tie him in points overall.

Austria was Brad's country. David Thorpe won the first moto (the sixth winner in nine motos, if you're keeping track) with Noyce and Lackey right behind. Lackey did his thing in moto two (make it seven in 10), with Vromans sandwiched between him and Thorpe. Brad scored the same points as Thorpe for the day, but he got the added prestige of winning the event by completing the motos in a shorter amount of elapsed time (FIM rules). Lackey's showing earned him sole possession of the points lead.

Apparently the cycle had been completed: the winner of the first GP was again at the forefront. After a two-week break the riders came to Italy, and Malherbe repeated his French performance, scoring 1-1. It wasn't that easy, though, and Malherbe benefitted from Lackey sailing the doldrums. Lackey led moto two until two laps from the finish and built up a 15-second lead in the process. Then he crashed, after being hit by a rider whom he was passing. It wasn't a bad enough break to lose his points lead, but it was a pretty impressive bit of bad luck, as far as misfortune goes, especially since he had had to settle for sixth in the

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first heat (behind Semics, by the way) after his rear tire virtually came apart.

Carlqvist was feeling better by June 13 for the West German round. He won moto one. But good things don't last long. In moto two he crashed and broke his middle finger. Chalk it up as a DNF. Lackey, though, was fast man of the day, never mind the results. He was chasing Carla in moto one when he crashed, dropping to 15th. He put a charge on and smoked almost everyone, finishing third, just behind Malherbe.

At long last Lackey came home to Carlsbad, California, for the U.S. round of the series. He was out in front of Malherbe by five points, and the American crowd was behind Brad all the way. The battle between Lackey and André never quite shaped up, though, for a couple of reasons. Lackey, for one thing, was up with the front-running Americans—Darrell Shultz, Jeff Ward, Danny Chandler, Goat Breker and Alan King—while Malherbe bounced around in 10th. Then, around the halfway mark of the moto, Malherbe crashed and broke his leg. Adios championship, André.

With Malherbe out of the chase, Lackey was free to protect his lead. He had a 22-point advantage over Vromans, which might tend to make anyone play it

safe if not exactly relax, even though, as we've been saying all along, 22 points doesn't mean doodly-squat when you're talking about 24 motos. Anyway, in the last stages of the second heat, with Mike Bell in first place (after Chandler had crashed himself out of the lead back to fifth), Lackey hung onto third and wasn't taking any silly chances to get into second, even though his new arch rival, André Vromans, was the man in front of him.

They finished that way—Bell, Vromans, Lackey, King and Chandler—and good ol' Magoo got the overall win with his 1-5 scoring.

On to Canada and, all kidding aside, folks, by day's end it became apparent that a 22-point lead is really a fragile thing. It didn't appear to be at first. Indeed, Lackey looked just terrific in the first moto. He passed Vromans on the last lap to take the win (which made it a 25-point lead) and Semics nailed down third after leading (you got it—*leading*) for the first 10 minutes. The point lead looked indestructible, and Lackey again looked terrific in the second moto when he and Vromans pulled away from the field. Then Lackey's shock broke and screwed up his airbox intake. Uh oh, DNF time, and Vromans (who went on to win the moto) was suddenly only 10 points back, which is equal to exactly one third-place finish. The fortress had a crack in it. Last year's taunts ("Why do you think

they call him 'Bad Lucky'?") were too close to the truth to be funny.

The next race was in England on the Fourth of July (c'mon, if there's any such thing as poetic justice, let's get on with it) and Lackey came out blazing. Hometown boy Thorpe won the first moto, with Vromans and Lackey right behind. Lackey came back to win the second moto, which gave him the overall. Lackey picked up one lone point on Vromans and set himself up for the last two events of the year.

Those final GPs, you ought to know, are held in Belgium and Luxembourg. Vromans is from Belgium, and Luxembourg is sort of a suburb of Brussels, so the last races are sure to be (what's an appropriate euphemism?) . . . are sure to be—*exciting*. You see, the national fervor among the natives of *Belgique* rises to a somewhat frenzied level during sporting events—among the spectators *and* the participants—so some, ahem . . . *rough play* may be coming.

But we figure Brad is up to it. Two years ago he had his best shot at the title, and he let it get away from him in exactly those two races. But that experience was surely to the good. Like they say in football, there's a lot to be said for intangibles—and experience. On top of all that, he *does* have an 11-point lead, and, what the heck, there must be *some* reason they call him *Bad*. ●