

DANNY LAPORTE

America's First Motocross World Champ?



Danny LaPorte is a real-life American hero. Last year, he led a team of compatriots to victories in both the Motocross and Trophee des Nations in Europe; it is the first time an American team has won either event. Those victories shook the motocross world right down to its roots and brought international respect to American motocross riders.

This year, rather than remain in the more lucrative circle of American racing, LaPorte returned to Europe to contest the 250cc world championship. Armed with a factory Yamaha contract, LaPorte dove headlong into the 250 battle and surfaced with remarkable results.

LaPorte, a resident of Torrance, California, received his professional license in 1974 at the age of 16. In '76, his first full season, he finished third in the 125 nationals, and was second the following

year. During LaPorte's tenure with Suzuki, Roger DeCoster took a keen interest in him and guided him through the transition to the 500 class. In '79, he became the 500cc national champion. But repeated injuries and perhaps a lack of desire kept LaPorte from the limelight until he placed second at the 1980 Carlsbad 500 GP behind Marty Moates. Then the Motocross and Trophee events rekindled the fire that had brought LaPorte his national title.

"Ever since I won the national title in '79, I've wanted to race in Europe," says LaPorte. "Being selected for the Trophee and Motocross des Nations team gave me that opportunity." His second-place finishes in each event brought Danny worldwide recognition and attracted the attention of Yamaha International representatives. "Fortunately, I rode well, and Yamaha signed me up to





Belgian Georges Jobe was dominating the 250 class until injuries slowed him down.

ride the 250 GPs in '82. Now it is up to me to make the best of the opportunity. My goal, of course, is to be the first American to win a motocross world championship."

The odds against LaPorte realizing his goal are tremendous. In addition to his inexperience on the European tracks, Danny is facing unfamiliar surroundings, seasoned opposition, and a new FIM rule. The FIM now requires that all riders but the previous season's top 10 finishers qualify through heat races for each GP. This increases wear and tear on riders and machines. It also increases the already high risk of injury. But Danny seems undaunted by the odds. "I can't get too upset by the rule," says LaPorte. "If I realistically expect to win the championship, then I can certainly qualify."

LaPorte, strong, soft-spoken, and confident in his abilities, demonstrated his intention to win at the opening round in Switzerland. Though he dropped out of the first moto with a flat tire, in the final round he finished second to reigning champ Georges Jobe. In Spain LaPorte barely made the top 10 (fellow American Mike Guerra took overall honors), but he rebounded to win the first moto in Belgium. And though he dropped out of the

second moto, he moved into seventh in the world standings. The next round in Czechoslovakia saw LaPorte finish sixth in the first moto and come back to win the second. He picked up a few more places in the standings, and after Italy, where he took third overall, he was locked into third in the point chase behind Jobe and Kees Van Der Ven. LaPorte's impressive finishes culminated in an overall victory in France, where he won the first moto and finished third in the second. He now trails Van Der Ven by only two points and lags 19 points behind Jobe.

After six rounds, LaPorte is recognized as the man who has the best chance to beat Jobe out of his second consecutive 250cc title. Indeed, the LaPorte story is becoming the stuff of which legends are made.

Georges Jobe is not taking LaPorte lightly. He recently transformed 6000 cubic yards of dirt into a personalized motocross practice track at his Belgian home.

"Of course Jobe is the favorite," says LaPorte, "but you have to beat everyone to win the world championship. There are plenty of races left.

"I'll catch him."

—Warren Price