



1978 Trans-AMA Series

Bob Hannah Wins It For America

by Jim Gianatsis

In one sense, 1978 ended the Trans-AMA Series, a confrontation which began back in 1970, when motocross was still at its infancy. That was before anyone even dreamed of putting motocross into stadiums, away from the original natural-terrain courses of Europe. The Trans-AMA Series was conceived as a series of match races held across the United States, between the European masters who dominated the sport and the young Americans who could only hope to someday match the ability of the Continental stars on an exotic motocross machine.

Bob Hannah used his 425cc Yamaha OW-39B works racer to become the first American ever to win the Trans-AMA Series. Americans had fought nine years for the title; something Hannah himself had sought for some three years.

But in winning the Trans-AMA Series, Hannah also heralded the series' death as a confrontation between the best Europeans and Americans. Over the years the Americans have steadily increased in skill, and with the States becoming the home of major factory teams, it wasn't long before the majority of American riders were faster than the majority of Europeans. By 1974 the better foreign riders found it was almost impossible—due to larger fields of better Americans—to earn money to make a trip Stateside worthwhile.

Only three foreign riders entered the 1978 Series, not because they wanted to, but because they were forced to by factory

contracts. The fact that it took an American like Bob Hannah so long to finally beat the Europeans for the Trans-AMA title had something to do with the fact that one of the lingering old world masters was Roger DeCoster.

Five-time 500cc World Champion and winner of the Trans-AMA Series for the previous four years, DeCoster did not want to return to America to race in 1978. It had been a difficult year for him. A practice accident at the first part of the season ruptured DeCoster's spleen and nearly cost him his life. His return to racing was made possible by hard work and training. The time needed for recovery would normally have been spent developing the coming season's machine. As a result, DeCoster went into the World Championships with a bike that he felt wasn't as good as his competition's. Troubles plagued DeCoster all year and he finished a distant third overall in the 500cc standings behind Heikki Mikkola and America's Brad Lackey.

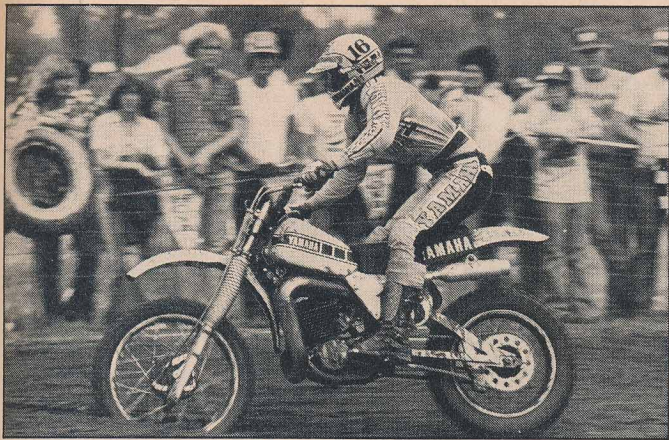
DeCoster planned to use the fall of 1978 to test new bike designs and prepare himself for 1979. Suzuki though, wanted Roger to return to defend his title in the Trans-AMA Series and left him without a choice in the matter.

It wasn't a surprise when the seven-race Trans-AMA Series kicked off and DeCoster—racing against his will—wasn't leading the pack to the checkered flag every moto. Instead, the leader was Bob Hannah,

America's fastest resident motocrosser, winner of everything from National Championships to Supercross Series. In 1977 Hannah had actually posted more moto wins than DeCoster, but two breakdowns along the way for Hannah allowed DeCoster to accumulate more total points and retain his title.

The only time Hannah was beaten in 1978 was when he did something wrong. The first time that happened was at Unadilla, DeCoster's favorite course in America because of its tough natural terrain and steep hills. Hannah beat DeCoster in the first moto and attempted to pass him again in the second moto for the overall win, going in wide and squaring off the turn in front of DeCoster. The two collided and went down, but while Hannah was left with a damaged bike, DeCoster was able to remount quickly enough to save his overall win. Unadilla seemed to be DeCoster's only good ride in the Series and afterwards he settled down to testing prototype equipment on his Suzuki RN420 works bike.

Hannah's only other real defeat in the Series came at Cycle World in Missouri where he found himself engaged in an opening moto battle with Honda's Marty Tripes. Throughout the year Tripes had proven himself to be as quick as Hannah at times, but usually lacked the incentive to show his potential. After trading the lead with Tripes a number of times the clash finally ended in the closing laps when Hannah's front brake cable adjuster came



Rex Staten won overall in Texas. His Trans-AMA performances earned him a ride with Team Yamaha for 1979.



Besides DeCoster, Marty Tripes (27) proved to be the only other rider capable of beating Hannah on a good day. Those days were few and far between.



When Chuck Sun's Husqvarna's throttle stuck open in Texas, he sailed out of control and hit a massive oak tree. Leg injuries suffered in the crash put Sun out of action for the rest of the year.



loose, Hannah tired of trying to keep up with Tripes without a working front brake, but came back in the second moto to win easily and claim another overall victory as Tripes coasted around back in the pack.

Going into the sixth race of the Series at Lake Whitney, Texas, Hannah had the Series nearly in the bag with a huge points lead over DeCoster, who held down a distant second place. When Roger injured

his leg in a first moto crash and retired from the race, any theoretical chance of catching Hannah was gone. The kid had clinched the championship.

Ironically, Hannah also suffered a first moto crash in Texas that left him finishing in seventh place. He came back to win the second moto of the day, but the overall win went to his new teammate, "Rocket" Rex Staten. Then in the final race of the Series

at Sears Point, California, Hannah was injured when his bike fell on him while negotiating a tricky off-camber turn just after the start of the opening moto. He retired for the remainder of the day, the Trans-AMA Championship already sewn up.

The Sears Point overall winner was Maico rider Darrell Shultz from nearby
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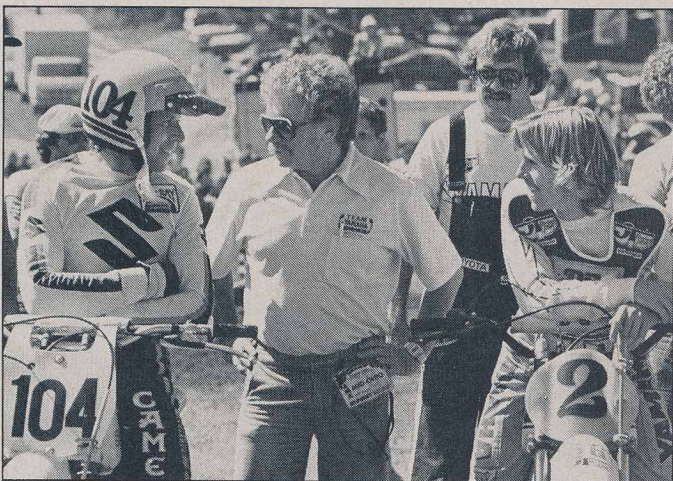
Based on sheer numbers of entries, Team Honda should have swept the series. But in spite of entering six factory riders, Honda failed to score a single Open class overall win.



European Team Honda stars Brad Lackey (711) and Graham Noyce couldn't beat Hannah. Lackey only raced the first two events, then dropped out of the series. Lackey joined Team Kawasaki for 1979.



Darrell Shultz, 20 years old, developed into American motocross' hottest new prospect. He won overall at Sears Point.



DeCoster (104) and Hannah share a few humorous words on the starting line at the first race of the series, Mid-Ohio. Yamaha Racing Manager Ken Clark (center) referees.



Hurricane on the line, waiting. Hannah is serious about winning.

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Sacramento, California. 1978 was Shultz's first year on the National circuit—he turned in sensational performances throughout the Trans-AMA Series and earlier, during the 500cc Nationals. His win of the final Trans-AMA race of the Series marked his emergence as one of the top riders of American motocross and put him at the top of the "want list" for several major Japanese teams for 1979. Just two years earlier, a young Bob Hannah won the final race of the Trans-AMA Series in his first year on the circuit, an omen of what was to come.

What of the future?

Bob Hannah is certainly fast enough to go to Europe in 1979 and be a top contender in the 500cc World Championship. But Yamaha has no reason to send Hannah to Europe when their other star, Heikki Mikkola, is already reigning Champion. Instead, Hannah plans to wait another year, until 1980, when Mikkola is expected to retire. For the time being there's a lot more money for Hannah to earn right here in America.

As for the Trans-AMA Series, it is now dead as the classic "European versus American" confrontation. Only three riders came over in 1978 and none are likely to return next year, now that there is an American champion backed up by an armada of quick young stars like him. But despite the lack of European entries the 1978 Trans-AMA Series drew huge crowds of spectators, more than at any other outdoor Series, including the AMA Nationals.

The Trans-AMA Series, with its traditional outdoor setting, remains popular among the true motocross enthusiasts. It is now the only outdoor Series where all the top American riders can compete together on the same tracks at the same time, riding monster 500cc class bikes, the fastest the sport has to offer. Only on outdoor tracks can a rider show his real skill at manhandling such a beast of a machine while racing 39 of the best riders in the country. The Trans-AMA Series is not dead. The names may have changed, but the racing remains the same.

FINAL RESULTS 1978 TRANS-AMA MOTOCROSS SERIES 500cc INTERNATIONAL CLASS

RIDER	BIKE	POINTS
Bob Hannah	Yam	283
Rex Staten	Yam	219
Graham Noyce	Hon	205
Marty Tripes	Hon	175
Tommy Croft	Hon	164
Roger DeCoster	Suz	161
Kent Howerton	Suz	153
Gary Semics	C-A	152
Gaylon Mosier	Kaw	143
Denny Swartz	Mai	142
Chuck Sun	Hus	141
Danny LaPorte	Suz	127
Darrell Shultz	Mai	126
Micky Kessler	Yam	108
Marty Smith	Hon	107
Steve Stackable	Kaw	90
Jim Pomeroy	Hon	77
Brad Lackey	Hon	70
Ken Adams	Mai	65
Jim Weinert	Kaw	64