

DRAMA IN THE DESERT

On the way to Dakar, anything can happen

By the DIRT BIKE Staff



There's a fine line between bravery and recklessness. The problem is, no one really knows *where* that fine line is. For supercross riders, it might be just on the other side of a double jump. For flattrackers, it might be on the outside line around a mile track. For desert racers, it might be in top gear in the Mojave.

A special group of men who ride European rallies push their line far past the point where other riders have the nerve to venture. For them, the line is somewhere past the city of Dakar in Senegal, in northern Africa. Ask any professional motorcycle racer and he'll tell you the bravest riders are the men who ride in the Paris-Dakar Rally. The Rally spans 5700 miles and 21 days and is, without a doubt, the most demanding and dangerous race in the world. The only American to finish the Rally on a motorcycle was the late Chuck Stearns, who finished seventh overall in 1984. Malcolm Smith himself has finished the Rally in a car, but says he would never even attempt it on a bike.

Why is the Paris-Dakar Rally so intimidating? The primary reason is because of the long hours of high-speed riding. It pushes the limits of human endurance to unheard-of levels. The riding itself isn't even that difficult—there are no Blackwater bogs, Michigan logs or California hills—just hours, distance and speed.

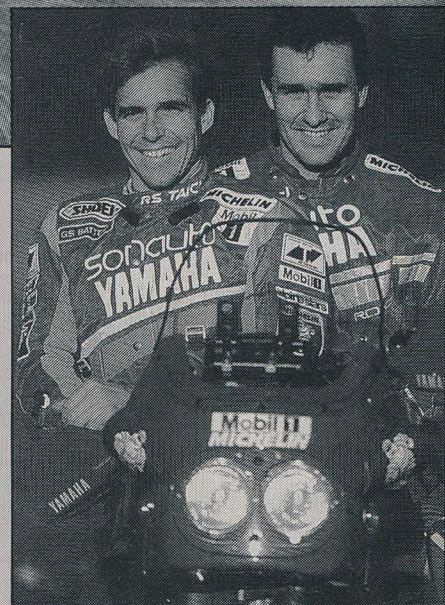
This year, former World Motocross Champion Danny LaPorte was the only American who entered the Rally. He put together a rare sponsorship from the French Yamaha importer, Sonauto, and rode the 800cc twin-cylinder OW. Yamaha had been competing

ETAPE : NEMA - KIFFA		Page 12A/54
Km Total	Km Partiels	NOTES
		km 378.20 - P+V CAP 280/280
		km 378.70 - P-V CAP 320 VERS
		km 380.60 - HC POINTE ROCHERS A G.
		ET... CAP 270
380.80	3.90	PIERRE DEBOUT PETIT CAEN LIGNE DE PETITS ROCHERS
		km 382.50 - CAP 260
		km 388 - CAP 250
		km 390 - CAP 340
		km 391 - CAP 290
		km 392 - CAP 340

Imagine being 1000 miles from the nearest English-speaking person and having nothing but these directions to show you where to go.

in the Rally until recently with single-cylinder machines and, aside from one victory in the early days of the Rally, had been suffering from terrible luck year after year. World Enduro Champion Stephane Peterhansel would lead the team again this year, but with new motorcycles and an American teammate.

LaPorte showed promise, too. After the



Former 250 World Champion Danny LaPorte was running as high as fourth place, but mechanical trouble and an eventual crash took him out of the Rally.

first few days of the Rally, he was in a solid fourth place, just minutes behind leader Peterhansel. On the eighth day, though, LaPorte's Bib Mousse foam-filled tires suffered a meltdown—he had to ride halfway across the country of Niger at very low speed. He dropped from fourth to ninth in the standings. Gearbox problems compounded his troubles, and in the next few days LaPorte dropped to 13th place.

It all came to an end on the 12th day of the Rally. In a section of Niger between Agadez and Tilla, he crashed hard, knocking himself out. He was helicoptered to a hospital where he recovered quickly, but he was out of the race.

1991

PIONEER
PARIS-TRIPOLI-DAKAR



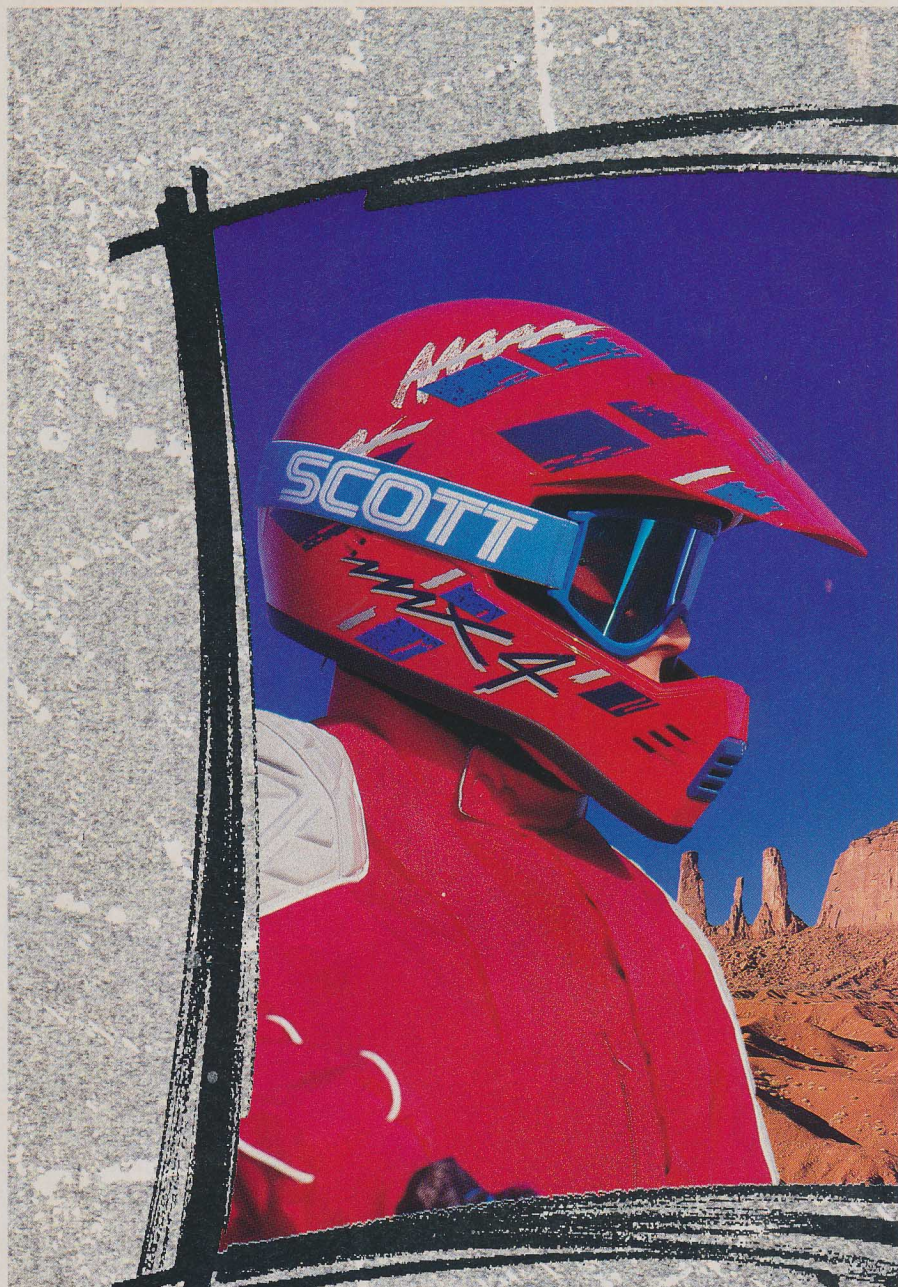
This year, the Paris-Dakar Rally spanned 21 days and 20 different cities. It still is the ultimate test of man and machine.

That was a crazy period in the Rally, anyway. Paris-Dakar has a history of being dragged into international politics—back in 1988 no American was allowed to enter or even follow the Rally because it went through Libya. At the time, Americans were denied Libyan visas. This year, as the Rally entered southern Mali, there was a sniper attack, where one of the support people was killed. The incident was blamed on Tuaregs, a tribe in revolt against the government of Mali.

At the same time, it became evident that war was soon to break out in the nearby Persian Gulf. That caused concern because the riders and drivers were about to cross from Mali into Mauritania, an Islamic country aligned with Iraq. The Rally was stopped and a conference held. The Mauritanian government assured the Rally organization and participants that they were in no danger. The Rally continued.

On January 18th, the 21st day of the Rally, the riders reached Dakar. Peterhansel was the winner, after an ordeal that strained even his almost superhuman abilities. Yamaha broke out of its Paris-Dakar slump in a big way, with the Sonauto team taking the top three positions—Frenchmen Gilles Lalay and Thierry Magnaldi were second and third. As for LaPorte, he's reportedly fine and doing quite well in Paris. Word has it that he's already planning for next year's event.

Some riders have an unquenchable appetite for adventure. □



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