

## When the European riders ruled the world of motocross

By Rick Sieman

Hey, guess what? One of those foreign devils won the U.S. Grand Prix. Surprised the hell out of everyone at the track . . . most of all the guy who won. You see, those fellas with all the funny names and the odd-looking riding gear haven't been doing much winning in the United States in the last 15 years or so. In fact, they've been coming over here pretty much expecting to lose.

It wasn't always like that.

Let me take you back to the early days. Then we'll bring you up to speed with a history lesson.

### THE EARLY DAZE

In the late '60s, promoter Edison Dye brought the first European stars to the U.S. to run in a series after their regular motocross season was over. At first they didn't want to do it, but Dye paid them attractive appearance money and promised them a good time. It would be more of an exhibition than a race, Dye said with a wink. After all, the American riders were such a piece of cake that even third-level Euro riders could wax their cookies.

So those early stars arrived in America, astride their CZs, Husqvarnas, Greeves, Bultacos, Montesas, Rickmans and Maicos. Two things happened. First, the Euros had a field day and utterly decimated our best riders. Second, the sport of motocross boomed and people ran (not walked) to their local dealers and demanded to buy European bikes!

### GUYS WITH FUNNY NAMES

The Invaders of Motocross had odd names. Roger (pronounced Ro-Jay) DeCoster, Joel Robert (pronounced Ro-bear), Nils and Arne and Gunnar and Heikki and Torlief and Sylvain and Uno and Adolph and Torsten and Ake and Hakkan.

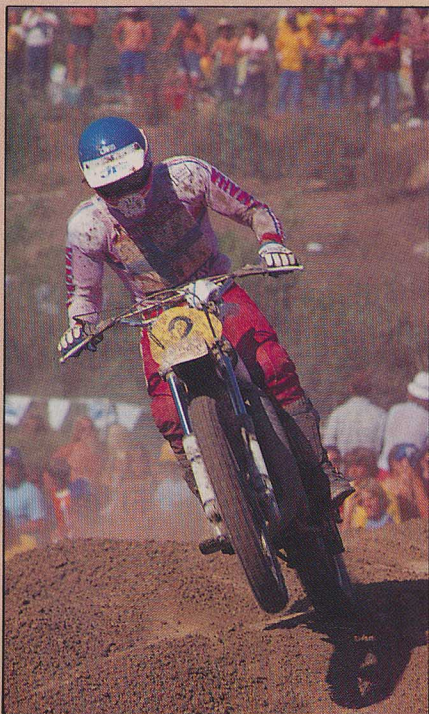
The first races were called the Inter-Ams, then re-named the Trans-AMA series. When those supermen first came over here, not one single American could even stay on the same lap with them, but by the time the Trans-AMA series started to get into full swing, we had a new generation of steely-eyed Americans: John DeSoto, Brad Lackey, Gary Jones, Jim West, Bryan Kenney, Billy Clements, Barry Higgins, Mark Blackwell and numerous others.

These early American ironmen rode their hearts out for the dubious distinction of being First American. First American! Incredible! Rumors abounded in the American press that the Europeans trained like mad monks, rode for hours with their saddles removed to toughen their legs, ran through deep sand with safes on their backs and lived

in empty caves after physically kicking the bears out.

This was not even close to the truth. When the Euros came over here, they drank, smoked, chased women, stayed up late and ate American fast food almost exclusively.

The stories about odd behavior are rampant and many of them cannot be repeated in a family magazine. However, a few can be shared.



• Joel Robert loved huge American cars and was fascinated with all the gadgetry. Once, when a group of riders stopped to eat while driving cross-country, Joel decided to stay in the car and chain-smoke cigarettes. While the group was eating, Joel started playing with the power windows. Up-down-up-down. He was fascinated. So much so that when the group came back out of the restaurant, Joel had completely wasted the battery.

• Those devilish furriners loved to rent American cars and then attempt to drive them at full speed everywhere, which often turned gentle rolling roads into spark-spitting jumps that ripped the undercarriage to shreds. When the rental car was often near total destruction, they would simply report it stolen and get a new one.

• Many times they cornered so fiercely

that tires were peeled off the rims. No problem. They'd simply keep driving on the bare rims and park it. There are reports of cars sunk in the ocean, as driving on the beach was a lot of fun, and surfing the incoming waves with a massive Pontiac was joy to the nth degree.

• Whenever they were stopped by the police, invariably the crafty Euro stars would pretend not to speak any English at all, even though most of them got along just fine with our language. They would smile, babble a few words, give the cop a riding jersey and, invariably, be on their way with a warning or two.

◀ Heikki Mikkola grabbed the win at the '78 USGP after Wolsink ran into a crashed Roger DeCoster and Brad Lackey broke his chain. Carlsbad was a jinx for DeCoster and Lackey alike.

Roger DeCoster sails his works Suzuki to his fourth straight Trans-AMA title, circa 1977. The very next year a young lion named Bob Hannah beat DeCoster for the last-ever Trans-AMA title. ▶

• Torleif Hansen once hopped on a street bike at the Husky offices near San Diego and proceeded to ride it at a steady 120 mph all the way to Los Angeles, leaving a trail of red lights and squad cars the entire length of the 100-mile stretch. When he arrived for his meeting in L.A., he simply hopped off the bike and strode into a building, figuring he'd just enjoyed a brisk ride. Moments later, zillions of squad cars converged on the bike and, finding no owner, impounded it.

• A Swedish rider who must remain unnamed saw a golf course while driving his van cross-country and, unable to resist the temptation, unloaded his factory bike and did a few hot laps from the tee of the fourth hole to the green of the par-three seventh hole.

• Several rowdy English riders, who also must remain unnamed, were fond of taking attractive American girls out to dinner, a cost-is-no-object dinner, and billing it to the hotel room key.

Gigantic bills were rung up on hotel rooms, as they would order food and booze late into the night. Many a race promoter would think he'd made a nifty profit on the event, only to receive staggering bills after the tour had left town.





*Pierre Karsmakers moved from Holland to Mission Viejo, California, and proceeded to cherry-pick factory rides and National wins from our American heroes.*

*Gerrit Wolsink is the king of the USGP, with Carlsbad wins in '74-'77 and '79. The Dutch dentist was the epitome of smoothness at speed, with only one USGP moto DNF in the '70s. ►*



• Heikki Mikkola was a strange sort. He'd race two 40-minute motos, go back to the hotel and change into sweats, then run ten miles or so. Later that evening you could see him chain-smoking American cigarettes and drinking fiery Aquavit liquor, a vodka-like drink with paint-stripping qualities.

• Many of the riders, especially the Germans and the Belgians, loved to hang around cowboy/honky-tonk bars, drink beer, shoot pool very badly and get into fistfights over somebody else's girlfriend. The Germans used to complain loudly about how watery the American beer was, but they'd still swill down kegs of the stuff.

• Once a group of Spanish riders stopped in a Mexican restaurant and ordered some murderously hot food on a bet. Spanish food is mild compared to Mexican food, and it almost blew their tonsils out into the street. To cool down their fried tonsils, they gulped down several pitchers of high-test margaritas. By the end of the evening, they were so wasted that they sold the spare bike to the restaurant owner for \$200 and a case of tequila.

We could go on, but good taste and lack of space are paramount. Actually, the space, mostly.

#### WHAT MADE THEM SO GOOD?

Sure, the Europeans did some training. They ran, did gymnastics and, in the winter time, most of them did something tough, like cross-country skiing or hockey.

Before the motocross season began in Europe, they would start riding a great deal, under adverse conditions. Sloppy, chilly terrain was the norm, and muddy conditions were to be expected. By the time the season openers rolled around, the weather was usu-

## GP HISTORY

ally tolerable and the moto-stars were happy to get away from practicing in half-frozen farmers' fields to the comparative smoothness of the actual tracks.

Invariably, the tracks were laid out on natural terrain. For maximum spectator viewing, most courses were usually located in a valley. This meant that the folks could simply pick out a comfortable spot on a hill, lay out the picnic basket and see most of the course from any place.

This also meant that the course would have lots of hills, with dry hard-packed terrain near the top and loamy soft stuff in the valleys. Because of the typical soggy soil, deep ruts, bad braking bumps and shaking acceleration bumps would be part of every corner.

Also, the motos were long: 45 minutes worth of bar-to-bar competition. Talent ran deep. There were not simply a few stars and a bunch of cannon fodder, no-sir-ee. Any one of a dozen riders could take the win, and there were specialists in different countries. The sand riders were from Holland and Belgium; the mud riders from England and Germany; the hard-packed stars from Spain and Italy; the woods/rock riders from the Nordic countries—and the desperate riders from behind the Iron Curtain.

When these tough and wiry riders first came to the States, they were greeted with smooth, graded and well-prepped tracks that were little more than scrambles courses

to them. They could ride at full speed and not get tired. Meanwhile, the Americans would be sucking wind at the 20-minute mark. The only battles on the track were between the Euro stars who felt froggy that day.

#### THEIR EQUIPMENT vs. OURS

Oh, we all had CZs, Maicos, Huskys, Bul-tacos and other hybrid machines . . . but they were not much more than stock machines. Sure, the local shops would go inside and make big ports, bump up the compression ratio and slap on a big carb, but the Euros had carefully prepped machines that had the emphasis on good suspension.

They would take apart shocks, play with the damping, use good oil, experiment with spring rates and finesse the pre-load. Forks were carefully dialed in, with pre-sacked springs, precision oil level and damping that actually worked.

We rode bikes that were basic hot rods, with a pair of Koni or Betor shocks on the rear end. Balanced packages? Hardly. In a typical race of the late '60s and early '70s, nearly half of the American bikes would suffer some sort of mechanical woes, while almost all of the European bikes would finish.

The early '70s also saw the emergence of the true factory works bikes, and the Japanese factories as superpowers. Robert, De-Coster and a few others parked their ax-simple CZs and made the move to the lightning-quick and ultra-light Suzukis.

Yamaha brought out YZs with scads of horsepower and bought numerous Nordic Aces contracts. By the mid-'70s Kawasaki and Honda entered the battle, and the European factories were suddenly on the defensive.

# GP HISTORY

## CONTRACTS, MONEY & STARDOM

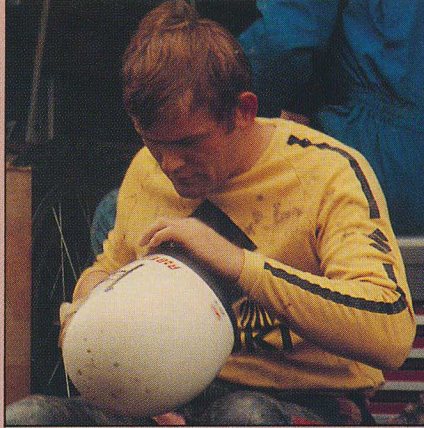
Roger DeCoster became a household name, Joel Robert acted like a temperamental rock star and the golden-haired Swedes started making more money than movie personalities.

Some of our own riders improved dramatically. John DeSoto rode like a man possessed and started running in the top five overall. Brad Lackey showed flashes of brilliance. Gary Jones started getting holeshots.

## CONTINENTAL SWAPS & TRANSPLANTED RACERS

Some top-level European riders saw the racing action in the United States and realized that they could make a good living here instead of pounding their brains out on the Continent. Peter Lamppu became the first of the New Wave, coming here from Finland. Peter was an excellent Grand Prix racer, but when he moved to the East Coast he utterly decimated the competition on his speedy Montesa.

Werner Schutz spent nearly a year here, converting thousands of racers to the Maico mystique, followed by Pierre Karsmakers. Strange things started happening: in the mid-'70s, Pierre was listed at numerous races as "Top American," which drove a lot of people nuts, especially home-grown boys who finished behind the fierce-riding Dutch-



Joel Robert, circa 1971. Robert's training consisted of scarfing eclairs, chain-smoking cigarettes, swilling champagne and chasing women. His regimen earned him six World 250 titles.

man, and went home without that attractive bonus.

Oddly, as all this was happening, a few American riders were making the trek to Europe. Marty Tripes and Brad Lackey received some hardcore training on the real tracks of the world, and when they returned to Burger Land they were dramatically better riders. **SUPER SURPRISES AT SUPERCROSS**

At this time we had just unveiled a new kind of racing, billed as "supercross." Young Marty Tripes showed that negotiating breathtaking jumps under the lights was *our sport!* Many of the world's top riders bitterly complained that this wasn't *real motocross*, but rather circus acrobatics and daredevil jump-

ing. Even polished pros like DeCoster grumbled: "This is not motocross . . . this is stunt riding!" All of a sudden we found a variation of the sport that suited the crazy Americans just fine.

## REAL MOTOCROSS

Still, on the outdoor tracks, we continued to get our butts kicked—but not as bad as in the early days. Ake Jonsson decimated the fall series on a Maico and the first of the U.S. Grand Prix races proved to still be the property of the Continental pros. Adolph Weil, Willi Bauer, Heikki Mikkola and Gerrit Wolsink proved capable of continuing the European domination.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Marty Moates changed all that when he became the first American to win the U.S. Grand Prix at Carlsbad, California, in 1980. He rode a blatantly illegal LOP Yamaha YZ to the overall victory and set the new wheels in motion.

Since that first big win, the Americans seemed to come alive. Chuck Sun proved that Moates was not a fluke, and he did it on a legal bike. The rest is history . . . or is it?

After all, this year another one of those guys from the Continent with a funny name won the whole enchilada.

You see, history is repeating itself. More and more European riders are coming over here, where we race all year 'round, and are trying to learn why we're as good as we are.

Guess what? They're learning.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Weird! ☐

## ITALIAN NEO-REALISM

REAL PLASTIC FOR  
REAL LIFE



YAMAHA YZ/PINK, WHITE

KAWASAKI KX/BLUE, GREEN, FLUORESCENT GREEN

HONDA CR/WHITE, ORANGE, FLUORESCENT RED

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