



BATTLE IN THE MUD

Malherbe masters Northeim

By Rick Sieman



Andre Malherbe pulled two clean holeshots on his way to a pair of moto wins at the German Grand Prix.

Andre Malherbe wants to be World 500cc Motocross Champion again. But not just for this year. He has a burning desire to eclipse Roger DeCoster's record of five Number One plates. Andre knows what it feels like to win; he's been the top rider in the world twice. He also knows what it feels like to see a championship flit away from him because of a momentary lapse of concentration. He is intimately familiar with the sound and feel of breaking bones—especially those that have taken him out of the hunt in his quest for titles.

Last year, Malherbe dropped his bike at the USGP at Carlsbad and snapped his leg like a dry stick and lay on the ground, writhing in pain as he watched Brad Lackey cruise by to pick up valuable points. And then he spent the rest of the year reading magazines about Brad Lackey, the new all-conquering World Champion, and how he went about snaring the plate that *should* have been his.

As the plaster turned dirty and the maddening itching of healing took place, he steeled himself mentally for next year. Always next year.

Andre Malherbe has the utterly amazing

ability to recover from frightening injuries with speed and—seemingly—no ill effects. He approached the first part of 1983 with the heaviest training of his life—and was rewarded with a nasty arm and shoulder injury early in the season for his efforts.

Rather than wait for proper healing, Andre took that most dreaded of paths: riding half-healed and in pain. As he suited up to do battle in Northeim, Germany, his entire left arm and shoulder was sporting a flexible supportive bandage. The rest of the body looked strong and fit, scars and battle wear aside. But the eyes and face looked different this year. Andre appeared to have aged considerably, with his features taking on a harder, hawklike appearance. The hands looked abused, with ridges of calluses on the palms and thumbs.

Hard eyes. Harder hands. A requirement in these days to even consider riding at International level. And to win, a certain internal hardness is also required.

* * *

Northeim, Germany. May 8. A steady drizzle that irritated spectators and riders on Saturday for practice and qualifying, turned into a steady, splattering downpour

by midday. Luckily, the 500cc class riders were able to practice in relatively good conditions before the serious rain started.

What had started out as an ideal track quickly deteriorated into a quagmire. The track, located only one mile outside of the beautiful north German town of Northeim (population around 20,000), is laid out on the side of a huge, grassy hill. Spectatorwise, it's close to perfect, with much of the roomy track visible from many choice viewing spots.

It's wide and technically demanding, despite the absence of any really long uphill or downhills. Long straights are capped off with tricky off-camber corners, and the few jumps on the circuit are safe enough to allow passing via the aerial approach.

On Saturday, the surface was hard, flat and appeared solid and unforgiving. However, after practice and qualifying, it was chewed up quite nicely and became a suspension tester. Short, smooth straights turned into choppy and rutted double-vision sections. Turns developed gnarly grooves but still retained multiple lines. Whoever laid out the track certainly had a working knowledge of motocross.

But, whoever laid out the track had no

WORLD 500cc GRAND PRIX



The saturated track made for massive first-turn pileups on every start.

way of knowing what would happen to the superb grassy track when serious rains hit. Like many MX tracks on the Grand Prix tour, Norheim is only raced once a year. With moderate rains, the soil has the ability to allow reasonable runoff and to hold water. This was proved Saturday with the track holding up well under the intermittent drizzles.

* * *

When the skies opened up, they did so with a vengeance. The light misty drizzles and lead-gray clouds turned dull black and released their contents with *sheets* of rain. As luck would have it, the first National 250cc race was just two laps old when the downpour started. This quickly turned the race into a survival run.

The second 250 race was even worse, with the competitors *starting* in a pouring rain. By three laps, almost all of the riders were close to unrecognizable! Riders had difficulty getting up small hills and mired down in axle-deep mud on many previously simple turns. By the end of the moto, the 250 National race had turned into a survival contest, with only the grimly determined pressing on.

While the 250 riders were on the course slogging through the ever-worsening mud, the 500 class riders and team managers were standing around the track at various points, under the protection of umbrellas, trying to analyze the situation.

Rain hammered the track for a solid hour after the final 250 Semi. Spectators huddled in miserable clusters under the few available shelters. Many gave up and simply went home—if they were lucky enough to extract their transportation from the sodden parking areas.

Then, as suddenly as the rain had started, it stopped. Skies remained leaden and sullen looking, but the rain quit falling. Off in the distance, spots of blue sky could be seen. Far off in the distance. As the time for the start of the first 500 moto arrived, the hard-core race fans lined the fences and



Looking more like the Blackwater 100 than a Grand Prix, the track deteriorated into a swamp in short order.

waited for the racers to appear.

And waited. And waited some more.

A mild breeze kicked up, and with it the hope that the track might dry out a bit. Not a chance. The rich earth of Norheim had reached the maximum saturation point and pools of water stood slick and menacing in many of the turns.

An hour went by. Then another. The spectators started to get restless. After several hours, the announcer started calling the riders to the starting line. None showed up. After several appeals, the starter than *demand*ed that the riders show up. The absence of the sound of one single engine underscored the inactivity.

Riders' rep Jaak Van Velthoven was summonsed by the officials and a classic "discussion" ensued. For nearly an hour, angry words and threats were exchanged. The riders simply did not want to ride. The course was unfit, they claimed.

After another hour of bickering, the spectators started getting genuinely upset about the delays. A light drizzle started again, setting off yet another round of bickering. Then, when the rain stopped, large groups of race watchers started a loud whistling. Some even started clapping hands in unison and booing.

The announcer then stated that the International riders would get an "observation" lap, something almost unheard of in World GP racing.

Yet another delay, then the bikes started snarling to life and the riders trickled in to the starting grid. Startled spectators, expecting to see a practice lap, noticed that instead the 30-second sign was raised and all of the racers were lined up in the gate. People scrambled for good viewing positions, especially near the first turn, where the mud was covered with a good six to ten inches of water.

When the 30-second sign was replaced with the five-second card, everyone knew that a race was on, no matter what the condition of the track. Engines raised to a feverish pitch and 40 riders prayed for a

good start.

They were off! The pack roared over the red and white starting gate of Norheim and slithered down the grassy, slightly off-camber starting straight, fighting for control. As the pack approached the zigzag right/left first turns, one rider left it on a fraction longer than the rest of the field. It was Malherbe in the lead! He charged so deep into the first turn, he almost lost his big water-cooled Honda. A blast of the throttle straightened out the bike enough to save him and showered the riders behind him with a veritable wall of mud. Perhaps a dozen riders made it cleanly through the start turns, then, blinded by the mud and flying water, another dozen went down in a slithering heap.

It must have been frightening for Malherbe to run in first place, in spite of the obvious advantage of clear vision. The track was completely changed from when he had ridden it in practice. At the end of the first lap, the flying Swede, Hakan Carlqvist, came around in the lead aboard his factory Yamaha, with Malherbe in fifth place. Andre seemed content to sit there and let the other riders experiment with lines. Already, all of the riders were covered with mud, and the front numberplates were unreadable.

By lap three, all riders had their goggles off, and it was nearly impossible to tell one bike from another.

Quickly, the race settled in, with Carlqvist riding aggressively. "Carla" Carlqvist is spectacular in the mud, seemingly ignoring the deep ruts and bottomless slush. He ran in the higher gears and worked the edges of the track. Malherbe, on the other hand, rode in a lower gear through the dangerous sections and seemed content to ride safely. He also rode where no other riders were going and appeared to spend his laps experimenting and learning new lines and possible routes around the developing bottlenecks.

For half of the race, Carlqvist held the lead, riding wilder and wilder on the short,



Almost unrecognizable, Hakan Carlqvist pilots his works Yamaha to a second-place finish in moto one.



Even the powerful 500cc Husky works bikes bogged down in some of the chewed-up straights.

slippery uphill and trying to "rail" the deep mud grooves in the turns. Malherbe moved up, held a conservative second place and waited for Carlqvist to make a mistake. It came just past the halfway point, when Carlqvist, committed to one of the many deep grooves, became tangled with a floundering rider and went down. Malherbe slipped by on an unused portion of the track and took over the lead.

While Malherbe was out in front and putting distance on the balance of the pack, most of the field of top-class riders were having a truly miserable time. In rather short order, the course had turned into utter chaos. Riders were having to make two, three or even more attempts to get up a gentle 70-foot grade. Approaches to even the simplest hills turned into a nightmare of deep cementlike mud. Throttles stuck wide open and chains became drum tight, refusing to let rear wheels move.

It was pitiful to watch world-class riders try to catch slithering machines halfway up a slope, only to have them careen around

and drag them backwards down the hill, under the bikes. At one point, at least 15 riders were seen stuck in a bottleneck turn before an uphill. Yet when Malherbe came to that same crowded corner, he swung wide out in the slop where no one else was riding, hesitated a moment to evaluate the scene, then somehow slipped through the mass of bikes and bodies.

Behind him, Carlqvist, Pikkarainen, Noyce and Thorpe battled for positions, with none of them getting close enough to be a threat. Carlqvist rode well for the last half of the moto, but Andre seemed to gain speed and confidence as the moto wore on.

Eventually, the grueling, miserable moto wound down and Malherbe coasted across the finish line with a clear victory. There was a momentary bit of confusion when one of the scorers said that Andre had not won and instead finished third, but a quick check of several other lap sheets verified his strong win. Gary Semics, the lone U.S. entry, had ridden quite well in that first moto and finished a very respectable ninth

on what appeared to be a basically stock 480 Honda.

* * *

Between the motos, mechanics frantically tried to clean off the unbelievably muddy machines. Those lucky enough to have high-pressure washers took almost half an hour to get their bikes clean enough to work on them for the next race. Those unfortunate souls without spray equipment went through the disheartening ritual of sponging off the filthy equipment with water buckets.

It was decided that the 250 National event would not run the Final. It was hard enough for a 500cc bike to make it around the track. On a 250, in the hands of a less-than-world-class rider, it would have been a near-hopeless task. The 250 riders rather thankfully loaded up their horribly thrashed machines and changed into dry clothing. All over the pits, muddied piles of jerseys, pants and boots could be seen.

It was several hours before the Interna-

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500cc GRAND PRIX



Riders had to be helped off the track in order to circle around and take second and third attempts at even simple hills.

tional riders were called to the line again. They were a long time in responding to the frantic pleas of the track announcer. But, wonder of wonders, the skies cleared completely and brilliant sunshine flooded the sodden track and pits. Clear blue skies were directly over the track and it hurt the eyes to even look up. Eventually, the riders started slowly reporting to the starting area for yet another round of pure muddy hell.

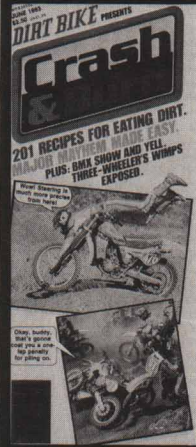
Thirty seconds to go, then five, then the unmistakable roar of 40 500cc bikes going off the line, with, yes, Andre Malherbe once again in the lead. Another pileup bogged the first turns badly, and the top 15 riders quickly pulled away from the unfortunates. At the end of the first lap, Malherbe was in second place, with Honda rider Thorpe in the lead, riding like a madman and clearly over his head.

By the fifth lap, Thorpe ran out of luck and fell victim to a loop-out near the top of a particularly sloppy uphill. Malherbe slipped by and proceeded to stretch out a lead over the rest of the field. Using the same tactics he had used in the first moto, Andre rode where other riders never even looked and went fast when and where he could, clearly demonstrating to the crowd that he was the most intelligent racer there that day.

Behind the smooth Malherbe, Graham Noyce was putting in the ride of his life, coming from way back all the way up to second place. Even though he rode like a maniac, he never could get to within a minute of Malherbe. Jean-Jacques Bruno and Andre Vromans rode respectable races on their works Suzukis to follow Noyce to the finish line.

For most of the rest of the field, the second moto was a disastrous repeat of the first, in spite of the slight rerouting of the

(continued on page 73)



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FROM THE SADDLE
(continued from page 7)

Mr. Flognart. He's in charge of P.R. and advertising.

"Pleased to meet you, sir."

"Just call me Manny. What do they call you?"

"Sam. Just plain Sam, mostly."

"You see, that's our problem, Jones. We have to have a nickname for you. All of the riders in the business have some sort of trick name. We need a gimmick name for you. Any ideas?"

"Well, what about just calling me Sam? That would be different, because then I'd be the only rider without a nickname."

"Saul, whaddaya think? Could it work?"

"You know, Manny, it's just wild and crazy enough to where it might do the trick. Handled right, the press could eat it up. Let's go with it."

"Saul, sounds like we've got our gimmick. Jones, sign here and welcome to the team. You just may be the first racer to ever make it to the top without some sort of nickname."

"Well, there was *one* other guy who didn't seem to need a funny name to win. In fact, he didn't get his nickname until the end of his career."

"Yeah? Who was this *big* star, anyway, kid?"

"They call him The Man. Roger DeCoster. And don't call me kid." □

500cc GRAND PRIX
(continued from page 44)

course around some of the more gruesome areas. Riders crossed the finish line with reddened eyes, bodies caked with mud, their bikes looking more like river banks than works motorcycles, and headed for their sodden pits.

And then, as if it were planned, the sun went quietly away, the gray clouds gathered in and the rain started once again. There were only two happy people in the pits: One was Andre Malherbe, who had just taken the points lead in the title chase, and the other was an old gentleman who sold umbrellas from the back of his ancient Citroen. □

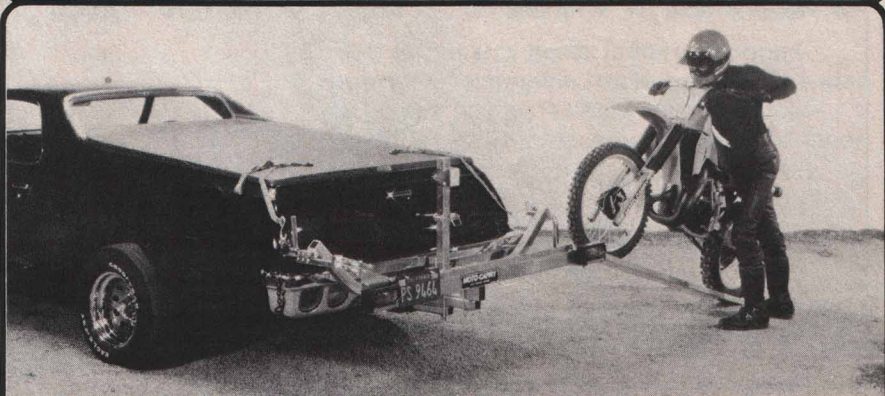
RESULTS:
500cc GERMAN GRAND PRIX
MOTO ONE

1. Andre Malherbe (Belgium)	Hon
2. Hakan Carlqvist (Sweden)	Yam
3. Tapani Pikkarainen (Finland)	Hon
4. Graham Noyce (England)	Hon
5. David Thorpe (England)	Hon
6. Neil Hudson (England)	Yam
7. Andre Vromans (Belgium)	Suz
8. Kurt Nicoll (England)	Kaw
9. Gary Semics (USA)	Hon
10. Jan Kristoffersen (Norway)	Yam

MOTO TWO

1. Andre Malherbe (Belgium)	Hon
2. Graham Noyce (England)	Hon
3. Jean-Jacques Bruno (France)	Suz
4. Andre Vromans (Belgium)	Suz
5. David Thorpe (England)	Hon
6. Hakan Carlqvist (Sweden)	Yam
7. Jaak Van Velthoven (Luxembourg)	KTM
8. Yvan Van den Broeck (Belgium)	Suz
9. Georg Reiter (Austria)	KTM
10. Jukka Sintonen (Finland)	Yam

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