

THREE IN A ROW FOR THE WOUNDED LION?

Two-time World 500cc Motocross Champion

By the Staff of DIRT BIKE

Andre Malherbe, 25, twice World 500cc Motocross Champion, is a very intense man. He never seems to completely relax and appears to have way too much energy locked up inside. We had a chance to spend an evening with the Champ and asked him more than a few questions.

What makes the man push so hard? Many have touted him as the only man around who could eclipse DeCoster's record in the 500cc class. Sit back with us now, and try to find out what makes Malherbe run harder and faster than any other motocross racer at this point in history.

DB: — You're two times World Champion now. Everybody has dreams of being great. Now that you are World Champion, is it much different from what you thought it would be?

AM: — It's different, for sure. I feel very happy because that's the project I pictured, and I realized it. That's the first thing. The second thing is that it's more easy to do many things when you are World Champion. Business and things like that are more easy — you can advertise Number One.

DB: — When you are trying to become a champion, if you fail . . . well, there is always next year. Now that you're on top, Number One, do you feel more pressure to do it again?

AM: — No, because you know it is the same every year. I think I still want it like the first time. It's another year, another season; I start like I have nothing.

DB: — When did you start to think you could make it to the top?

AM: — In 1977, I was third in the 250 class, and had a very good season. Then I had a small problem, because I didn't want to change class. I wanted to stay on 250s and nobody wanted me to stay there. I was running KTM at that time and they said, 'If you want to ride with us, you'll go 500.' I didn't have a choice. I went 500.

DB: — Was that a hard change to make, 250 to 500?

AM: — At that time I was worried about the 500 bike. I was thinking I wasn't good or strong enough. I had a very good feeling about the season but then got a brand-new prototype from the factory and they didn't make enough parts. So, in the middle of the season,

everything was used. We had many, many DNFs. The second half of the season I was fourth, one point behind DeCoster. But I always DNFed. I cannot drive the bike any more. It cost me.

DB: — What was the turning point?

AM: — In '79, I rode Honda. After half a season, I was not too good, but I became better, finished third, one point behind Wolsink. I had a very, very good end of season. I won two GPs, I made four good finishes, and then won one more — the German GP.

DB: — Are you a slow starter each year? Does it take you a while to get into the rhythm of things?

AM: — No. In '79 I had problems with the bike. The bike was good but was not for my riding style. I like to ride safely all the time. I must control my bike. If the bike drives me, I cannot drive.

DB: — You need a very stable bike?

AM: — Yes, and with that bike, I was not comfortable. So, I was driving always . . .

DB: — Nervous?

AM: — Not nervous, but not relaxed. Then they decided to change the suspen-



"Superbikers? I love it!"



"I know where I can go faster."



"I don't touch a bike for six months."



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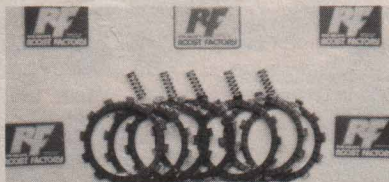
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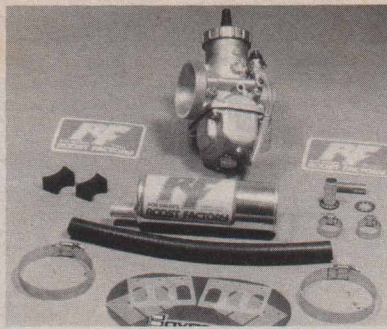
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sion and it changed the bike. It was very stable. And good.

DB: — Now you're riding the best equipment and everybody wants to take your picture. Okay, think back to your first motorcycle.

AM: — All the way back? That's ten years ago! My first real bike was a four-stroke 50cc Honda. My father was a Honda dealer, you see.

DB: — That's how you got interested in motorcycles, on street Hondas?

AM: — Yes. We'd take off the lights, put on a straight pipe and I would race with this bike.

DB: — Did you start winning right away?

AM: — When I was riding the 50cc class, I raced something like 30 races a year and I won maybe 27 or 28 races. Something like that. I won my first international championship in the junior class and I won the 125s in '73 and '74. Then in '75 I had a bad year and broke my wrist. In '76 I had no help anymore, so I just raced a small KTM they gave me.

DB: — We see you are recovering from a hand injury. How did you come by it?

AM: — I made a crazy crash in the last GP of the year — the last moto, maybe ten minutes before the end. I was already World Champion, you know, before the second moto. In the second moto I had a really bad start. I was sixth, Graham Noyce was fourth. I was taking so much care about everything; I was driving very tight and I hit a small tree with my shoulder and I crashed. Very slowly, about ten miles an hour, and I just flopped to the ground. My hand was broken. I felt it right away. I continued to race...

DB: — You continued with the break?!

AM: — Yes, I didn't have much pain then, but I went to the hospital the next week... after I won the moto.

DB: — You're healing well now. When do you think you will be able to start riding again?

AM: — The National Championship is starting the sixth of next month.

DB: — That's only three weeks!

AM: — Yes, only three weeks. I'm going to the doctor on the 23rd of this month and the injury is finished.

DB: — During the time you were healing, did you do anything to stay in good condition?

AM: — Yes, I worked much more this winter than any winter.

DB: — So all you have to do now is get your mind back.

AM: — My mind is already back. No problem.

DB: — Do you think this will affect your performance any in 1982?

AM: — No.

DB: — You've been injured before and apparently you come back quickly.

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DB7-2



"I made a crazy crash in the last GP of the year . . . and I was already World Champion."

AM: — Yes, I heal quickly. For example, last year I had plaster for five weeks on the right hand — no, six weeks — and I took it off a week before the race in Belgium. I went training on Thursday afternoon and I won the GP on Sunday. I won both heats. So I kidded everybody on that day.

DB: — When you worked with Honda all last year, did they listen to you when you suggested changes?

AM: — Yes, very much.

DB: — How much are you into working with your motorcycle? Some riders don't touch them. Other riders, like DeCoster, are always playing with their bikes.

AM: — I always play with my bike. For example, it is very rare for me to race with

same shocks. I always want to make my shocks for the track that I am racing. Every race — sometimes every moto — I have different shocks. I always want to have the bike fitted 100 percent to the race track.

DB: — What kind of a bike do you like? We're talking about 500cc motorcycles. Do you like a bike with a lot of low-end power; do you like one that revs a lot; do you like a slow turning bike, quick turning bike?

AM: — I like to have progressive power. This means I like to have it soft on the bottom and smooth all the way to the top. I don't like an engine with a big rush and everything coming on at one time. I don't like that. I only like one Japanese bike and that's Honda.



"My favorite track is a high-speed one . . . like in Italy."

DB: — You've been in this sport now for a while. Where are motocross bikes going in the next few years? Right now, we have 12 to 13 inches of travel and tremendous horsepower. What next?

AM: — I don't think we are going to get more inches of travel. I think the bikes are high enough. Maybe one or two more inches, but no more.

DB: — Where is the improvement going to come on the new bikes?

AM: — Everywhere. I think they're going to find a new system for the front and are going to find some other system for making the engine stronger, faster, smoother and easy to ride.

DB: — Here's a good one — Superbikers. Impressions?

AM: — I love it! It was the first time I ever rode a bike on the pavement, so I didn't know how to drive it. But I always expect to win, so I'm always unhappy when I'm second — and I was really unhappy at Superbikers to be second. So close.

DB: — Let's say that somebody asked you to design the Superbikers' track. How would you design it?

AM: — Probably the dirt part of the track close to the same as it is now. You need to have fast corners to make it fair for the flattrackers. I'd probably make the track more wide and not so long. Just corners and then more corners.

DB: — Who would you invite to compete in this race?

AM: — I think the way they do now is a good way. They invite the U.S. champion and the European champion in each class; also road racers, dirttrackers and half-mile racers.

DB: — What if everyone ran the same

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kind of bike — to find a real rider, not so much a motorcycle? It is obvious that Hondas have tremendous horsepower, and very, very sophisticated and very excellent motorcycles. What if everybody who rode that race was on a stock XR500?

AM: — Impossible!

DB: — Because of contracts?

AM: — Not because of contracts, because of factory. Why do you have Yamaha, why do you have Suzuki, if everyone must drive on the same bike? That's why they race, because they want to win. If everyone is racing on the same bike there's no more reason to win. The bike is going to win.

DB: — What kinds of tracks do you like?

AM: — I like everything, but my favorite track is a high-speed track. I like very much to drive on the fast tracks, especially in Italy. I love the Italian track and I love the hard run, like in Carlsbad it is very slippery and you have to work to find traction.

DB: — When you race in bad weather — very cold, rainy, difficult, muddy, sloppy — how do you do under those conditions?

AM: — Okay. I like to drive in the mud. For example, I like it much better when it's just raining and the track is very slippery. What I don't like so much is when you have mud ruts and when you must follow with the bike.

DB: — Are you a natural rider, or do you think and plan your way around the track, picking lines carefully; or do you just take it as it comes?

AM: — I think I'm quite natural, but I like to think about my lines. I like to be quiet. And after a training session I like to be alone, just thinking of the race.

DB: — How do you prepare when the season comes up? What do you do?

AM: — I like to have a long rest after the old season. I don't touch a bike for six months. I do nothing — no training, nothing.

DB: — Just the opposite of our riders, who compete nearly year round.

AM: — I need that, you know. I need that because if I don't do that, in the middle of the season I am not tired but . . . no enthusiasm.

DB: — Burned out?

AM: — Burned out, not pushing anymore; so rest is important during off season.

DB: — What kind of special training do you do physically?

AM: — I try to keep my body in good condition with things I like to do. For example, I hate to go jogging, but I must go. Sometimes I go bicycle riding instead of jogging.

DB: — So, when preparing for the year, you start your riding. Do you find you get faster as the year goes on?

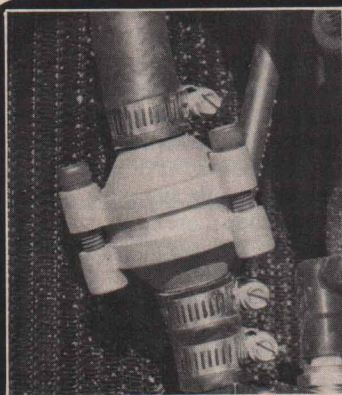
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"I won the second moto with a broken hand."

AM: — Yes, I do. I think so. Because I know where I can go faster if I think back to my old season. I know where I made my mistakes; where I went too slow; why; and I know how to change that, too.

DB: — One thing that you have to think about: Let's say that ten years from now you are no longer racing motorcycles. Have you considered car racing?

AM: — I like Formula 1s. The thing that I would like to do in my life is one day to put my butt in a Formula 1 car, just for driving. You have a long way to go, though, before arriving to a Formula 1 car.

DB: — But a lot of good motorcycle racers have made it in one year after the transition, no problem.

AM: — But I don't want to change now. I want to stay in motorcycles. Maybe when I'm not good anymore.

DB: — What would you like to do, then, when you are done motorcycle racing?

AM: — Maybe work to develop new bikes; that seems nice. Or maybe have a business. It's hard to say right now — maybe a clothes business, something like that for motocross. But what I like the best, I think is racing on the bike.

DB: — Everybody wants to be a champion. Local races, youth races, whatever. If you see ten riders and they are all very good riders, what's the difference, the secret, the key to becoming number one? Is there anything that you could pass on to some young kid out there who wants to know what he has to do?

AM: — All he has to do is to be dedicated. Very persistent, and never be content, understand?

DB: — Never be satisfied?

AM: — Never be satisfied, that's one thing. You know . . . never stop. Always more, always more! All the time, from the beginning to the end, you must always want and need to do something to better yourself. □

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