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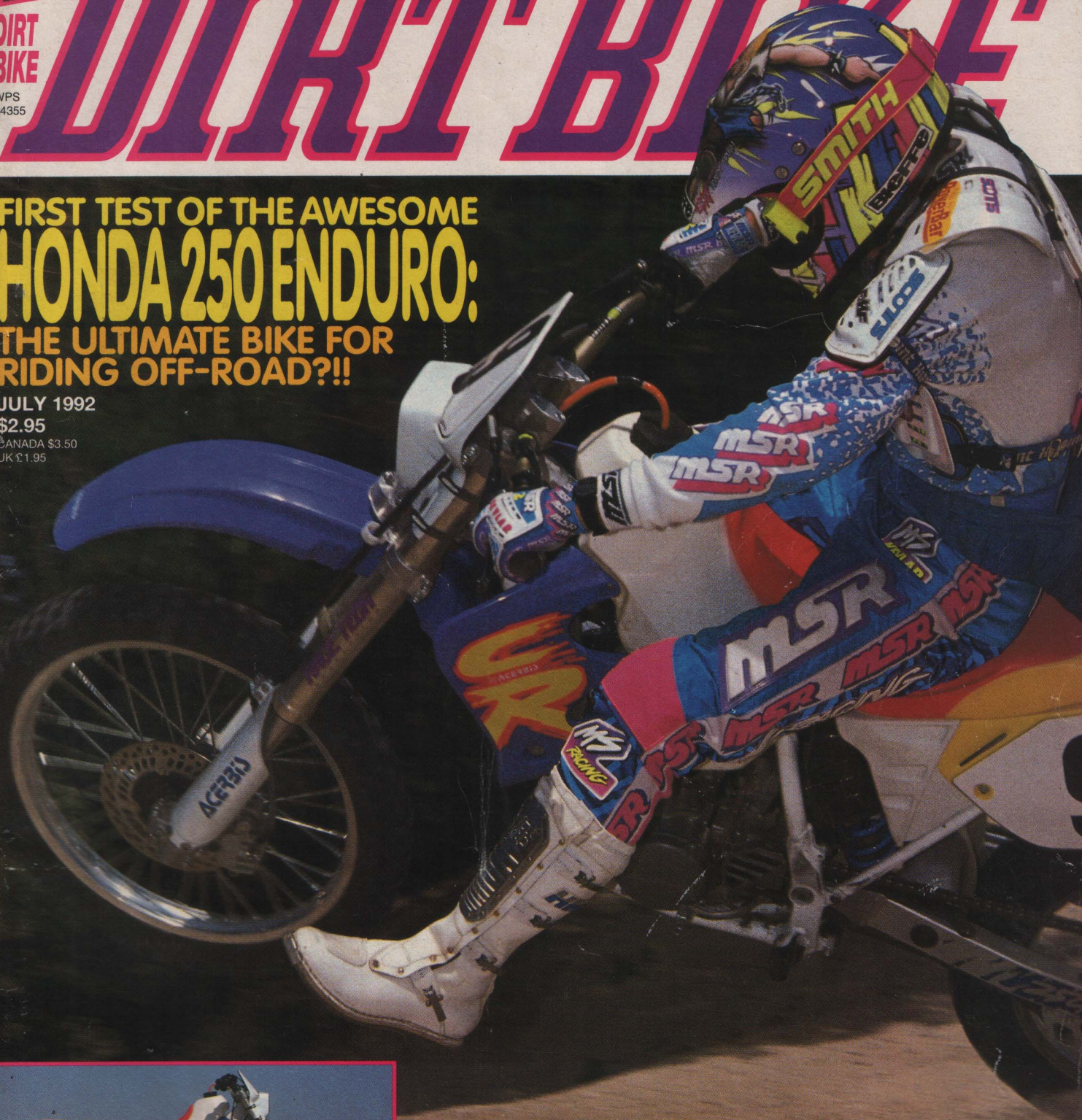
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CATCH 22

American supercross invades the 500 GPs

By Tim Tolleson

In the past, the 500cc USGP of motocross was America's most important single race. It was our chance to see the Euro heroes chasing the gold, and it was a learning experience for our best racers. The Euros hated the weather and Carlsbad's adobe track surface, but they loved laying waste to our best riders and gaining points on Roger DeCoster, who never rolled anything but snake-eyes at Carlsbad. The fans loved it because the USGP promised spectacle, close racing and surprise winners.

Twenty years later, the USGP is still America's most attended outdoor race

◀ *They're off!: Placing the 500 USGP at the start of the season was supposed to make for better racing. Somebody forgot to tell that to Jean-Michel Bayle.*

and is still the most colorful and prestigious, but there is only surprise if a Euro wins. The track at Glen Helen is as Euro as Southern California gets, and the USGP was the first race of this season so the weather wouldn't be so hot, but there's little suspense. American transplant Jean-Michel Bayle won the USGP last year, earning enough points in one race to be ranked 22nd in the world on a 500.

Jeff Ward and Damon Bradshaw would both miss the USGP because of injuries (Damon hurt his wrist and Wardy was recovering from surgery), so Bayle would be the one to beat in the season opener. Not one Euro had illusions of beating Bayle, with the possible exception of Georgian-turned-Belgian

While Bayle provided a clear winner for the confusing three-moto format, Matiasевич, Jobe (behind Chicken) and Liles provided the fans with close racing.

Billy Liles, who nipped Bayle by a fraction of a second in timed qualifying for first pick on the gate.

When that gate dropped for each of the three 25-minute-plus-two-lap motos, Bayle's #22 was long gone within two laps. He even won the second moto with a rear flat. Bayle had no one to race with because there was no one there to race with (Jeff Stanton prefers Unadilla's 250 USGP), and the Euros had no hope of catching 22. They just wanted to survive the USGP with as many points as possible, in hopes of being 500cc World Champ.



**A LOOK AT THE TRACK
DOUBLES? WE DON'T HAVE
NO STINKIN' DOUBLES!**

● Normally, the Glen Helen track is scary, with lots of off-camber turns, rutted jumps, harsh landings, and the uphill dou-

ble that the 500 World Champ wasn't doing last year. For the USGP, Roger DeCoster lengthened the track, built up the tabletops to skyscraper proportions, and added a bunch of jumps, upping the total to 30! Many were doubles. That's a lot for an FIM race that isn't supposed to have any doubles.

DeCoster skirted the no double rule with some crafty legalese. According to the FIM, a jump that is shorter than three-and-a-half feet isn't a jump, it's a whoop. So, DeCoster placed a bunch of three-footers at intervals where fast guys could double them, making for the most oddly placed whoop sections in FIM history. ●

Outdoor supercross: Looking more like Daytona with hills than a normal GP circuit, the Glen Helen USGP course had so many jumps and tight turns that the average speed was only 30 mph. ►



USGP redemption: Chicken Matiasevich (94) was second on his first 500 ride since breaking his leg. Here he reels in Billy Liles, who has just taken a faceful of roost from Marcus Hansson (68).

◀ **Not Chicken of 500s:** Jeff Matiasevich put on his best 500 ride ever at the USGP. He battled with World Champ Jobe and Liles in all three motos and finished second overall.

Pain man: Dave Thorpe, riding with 9-1/2 fingers, hung on to top-ten finishes in the first two motos but had to retire when a rock smashed his bad hand in the third race. ►



SEASON PREVIEW TALKING WITH THE CONTENDERS TO THE CROWN

• Who'll be the 1992 500cc World Champion, maybe the last person to hold that title? Georges Jobe, current champ at 31 years old, plans to repeat. Billy Liles, Dave Thorpe, Kurt Nicoll, Jacky Martens, Dirk Geukens, and newcomer Warren Edwards will do anything they can to keep that from happening, though. With a three-moto format, there's 36 races where anything can and will happen. Let's get the top guns to talk about their outlooks for the new season. (Note, we talked to everyone except Georges Jobe before the USGP, so his perspective is a little different).

BILLY LILES

"Bullet" Billy Liles led the 1990 500 GPs until he broke his leg on a drop-away jump in Italy, ending his season. Billy struggled throughout 1991, trying to get back up to speed, only to finish fifth in the series. Then he lost his works KX500 ride for 1992. Liles still rides for Johnson/Action Workshop, but he now rides a CR500 with works parts leased from former champ Eric Geboers.

DIRT BIKE: After so many years on Kawasakis, how do you feel on the CR500?

Liles: The bikes are really good. We've only had the good parts for a couple of weeks now, but I feel good on the bike. The CR is a lot different from the KX - it does different things - so its sort of hard to figure out what to change. I did a few British Championship races and International races to get used to the bikes, before we got the trick parts from Geboers. We've put a good effort together, and I'm out to win, to run hard. The only thing that matters is to win races; I'm out to win GPs...and the World Championship.

DB: What was the controversy with you at the British Championships?

Liles: It was politics, really. I'm riding with a Belgian license, but my sponsors are based in Britain, so they wanted me to compete in the British Championships. Kurt Nicoll and Dave Thorpe didn't want me there, so they made a fuss about it.

DB: Who are your main threats for the title?

Liles: Georges Jobe will definitely be in the hunt again, along with Thorpe and Nicoll.

DAVE THORPE

The three-time 500cc World Champ had a horrible 1991 season. Dave didn't score any points in the first two GPs, then failed to score in seven more motos throughout the year. He fought gamely, though, and won the overall in Germany

and Luxembourg, finishing the season in seventh overall. Like Liles, David lost his works Kawasaki for 1992 (Kawasaki switched to the 250 class), so Thorpe finds himself back on Hondas. Thorpe doesn't have works parts, though; he's riding production bikes for Honda U.K. and Cinti.

DIRT BIKE: So, how is it to be back on Hondas?

Thorpe: It's like coming home, really. The bikes are much like my '89 works bikes, but there is a much more relaxed atmosphere than we [Dave and his dad/mechanic] had at Kawasaki. The bike is running quite well, and we have a good set-up. We had a bit of a setback three weeks ago, though. I was out training and had a small crash—I just slid out—but the clutch lever scissored against the grip and cut off the end of my [ring] finger. I took off my glove, and the finger stayed in it! I took it to a surgeon, but putting it back on would've meant missing the first GP. I just want to survive this race and get as many points as I can, then I'll be completely healed for the next GP.

DB: How do you like the USGP track...and having this race at the beginning of the season?

Thorpe: Preparation is really good. Roger did a good job as always but went a bit overboard on the supercross jumps. I just have to get out there and do the best job I can. The weather is much better here than having this race in the summer. With a little rain, it would be just like home.

KURT NICOLL

KTM's main man, Kurt Nicoll, looked like he had the 1991 championship in the bag. He scored two firsts and two seconds in the first four rounds to take a commanding points lead. Then he broke his leg in Holland and missed the remainder of the series, much like Liles had in 1990. His early-season success was good enough for ninth overall for the year, though. Nicoll retained his works KTM ride for 1992, and looks like he's back up to speed.

DIRT BIKE: How has the pre-season gone for you?

Nicoll: Everything has gone really well. I won six out of six motos at the last British Championship races and won three International races, so it's the best start to a season that I've ever had. We had no big changes to the bike, just little changes. The bike was competitive in '91, so this year will be easy. I've got an Ohlin shock now, and we made some cylinder and exhaust changes.

DB: Who'll be your main competition?

Nicoll: The fastest guy so far has been Billy Liles. Other than he and I, only Georges Jobe and Dave Thorpe have a chance at the championship; they are both past champions, but both are having trouble at the moment.

DB: Do you think the three 25-minute moto format is harder than two 45s, and is it better to have the USGP at the start of the season?

Nicoll: There is a little change because there are 36 motos this season. You have to be pretty consistent and make good starts every week. Physically, it's harder to run the longer motos, but you'll see who's in condition on 500s with three shorter motos.

It's much better to have this race at the beginning. If we were in Austria or Switzerland, it would be very cold. It's better for the spectators, too. With the USGP last, only the riders who have to protect their position come to race, and it's more like a holiday. Now, everyone is here and hungry for points.

DIRK GEUKENS

Belgian Dirk Geukens burst on the 500 GP scene in 1990, and he was third in the world for the past two years. Geukens has won a GP in each of the last two seasons, also. Riding for a private sponsor out of Belgium, Geukens will run production Hondas again in '92.

DIRT BIKE: What is your game plan for 1992?

Geukens: I want to do better this year. I was third the last two years, so I want to improve on that. We'll just have to wait and see how the new format goes; I could catch a lot of guys in the last 10 minutes last year, and the new format puts more of a premium on good starts. Normally, I start pretty well, but it's more important now.

DB: How has pre-season gone for you?

Geukens: I did a few International races in Belgium and did pretty well but broke three ribs and missed the last three races. No big deal, though.

DB: How do you like having the USGP first on the schedule?

Geukens: It's better for the riders and better for the USGP. The weather is better for us, and the riders come here to race, not to party. The racing will be better, which is better for the USGP.

JACKY MARTENS

KTM's Number Two man turned a lot of heads last year. Jacky Martens won in Finland, Holland and Belgium in 1991. The rider from Luxembourg only failed to score points in two motos last year, until he crashed out in his home country and missed the USGP. Still, he finished a strong second ahead of Geukens. During the KTM shake-up over the winter, Jacky lost his ride, so he signed with Husqvarna to ride four-strokes in 1992.

DIRT BIKE: Why ride a four-stroke in GPs?

Martens: The future is four-strokes, so I like being in on the development for racing and providing publicity. At pre-season races, people were coming and looking at the bike, which is good. It has



been a gamble for me, but I think I did a good thing. The bike feels really good. I had two years to make the bike competitive for GPs, but the Italians worked really hard, and we did it in four months. I did pretty well in pre-season races, had good results, so things are looking good. It's too early to talk about the GPs, though.

DB: Was it hard to adapt to a four-stroke after riding two-strokes?

Martens: It is easier to ride a four-stroke. With a two-stroke 500, power is always too strong. A four-stroke can be strong like a 500, but you can ride it like a 250 when you get tired. There is much more traction with a four-stroke, so it's not so difficult to find a good tire. We worked really hard to get the weight down, and you can run much stiffer suspension for jumps but still have it hook up, unlike a two-stroke. I had to get used to the braking, though. It stops really quick when you let off the throttle. It turns almost as good as a two-stroke, and you can get back on the gas sooner in the turn.

DB: Is the new format better or worse for you?

Martens: It's harder. You have to psych up for more races and get good starts. Also, there is much more practice and qualifying on Saturday, so the weekend is longer.

WARREN EDWARDS

A YZ pilot in 125 GPs for the past three years, Brit Warren Edwards moves to the 500 GPs for '92. He showed speed in pre-season races and was fourth overall in the 500cc British Championships. The 21-year-old joins Billy Liles and Jeremy Whatley on the Johnson/Action Workshop CR500s, but Edwards doesn't receive works parts like his teammates. His bike is production.

DIRT BIKE: You have an American style of riding. How is that?

Edwards: I really enjoy supercross, and I've watched Broc Glover and Jean-Michel Bayle. I've learned some of their tricks and prefer the American style of riding to the European style. I love jumps, too. This is my first trip to the States, and I like the track.

DB: How did you land the Johnson ride?

Edwards: I've known the team manager for a long time, and we talked some last year. I've never seen myself on a 500, but it's a really good team. If you need anything, they'll do what it takes to get it for you.

DB: Do you prefer the old format or the new three-moto one?

Edwards: I like the three-moto format better; it suits me better. Two 45-minute races seem too drawn out, so you have to pace yourself or you'll fade late in the race. The new format makes for better racing.

Reaction time: Swede Jorgen Nilsson (67) holeshot one moto and got top-five starts in the other two. He faded back to tenth overall, though.

GEORGES JOBE

Twice 500 and twice 250 World Champion, Belgian Georges Jobe is looking to land his fifth title this year, at the ripe old age of 31. Last year, Jobe won the title as a privateer, which is quite a feat in itself, and boosted his GP win record to 29 (11 500cc, 18 250cc). Georges will receive outside sponsorship again this year, and his bikes will be production based with left-over works parts in the motor of his CR500R.

DIRT BIKE: Will the three-moto format help or hurt you in your bid for a fifth title?

Jobe: I think it will help. You have to be in top form for many more races and get good starts.

DB: Are you on top form?

Jobe: No, I'm at about 80 percent right now, so I have 20 percent to go. My plan is to be on top form by June. I'm ready to fight again. I was too nervous in the first moto and got a bad start in the second moto, but it was a good fight in the third moto, with Liles. That gave me confidence. I'm only losing four points today, and I plan on being stronger for every race. ●