

DIRT BIKE RIDER

80cc COMPARO!
CR v KX v
RM v YZ

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**Whatley's
Wiles**



TESTS

- Cagiva WRX 125
- Honda CR 250 & 500
- Yamaha IT 250 • Suzuki TS 125

GETTING STARTED: Advice For Beginners

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THE DBR ORGANISATION: Dave Calderwood **Managing Editor**, Peter Donaldson **Editor**, Tony Smith **Production Editor**, Jane Leech **Editorial Assistant**, Dave Campling **Ad Manager**, Terry Homan **Ad Sales**. **Contributors:** Jack Burnicle, Brian Crichton, Roger Willis, Colin Taylor. **Editorial Office:** Dirt Bike Rider, EMAP, Bushfield House, Orton Centre, Peterborough PE2 0UW (tel: 0733 237111). **Ad Office:** Durrant House, 8 Herbal Hill, London EC1R 5JB (tel: 01 837 3699). **Subscription:** UK & Eire £10.20 for 12 issues (post free). Overseas surface mail £14, airmail Europe £20. Payment by cheque, postal order, international money order, sterling draft, credit card, payable to Dirt Bike Rider. Send to Dirt Bike Rider, Competition House, Farnold Road, Market Harborough, Leicestershire. **US subs** \$33 for 12 issues from Lee Cowie, Motorsport, 6115 Gravois, St Louis, Missouri 63116. **Printed by** EMLP, Oundle Road, Peterborough. **Typeset and composed by** Arty Type, Whittlesey, Cambs. **Colour separations by** David Bruce Graphics, Sewell St, London E7. ©EMAP 1984.

'I'm As Good As Anyone'

Cocky and confident, Jem Whatley believes he's got what it takes to hit the top. In this frank interview with Jack Burnicle the Suzuki grand prix star reveals his ambitions – and obsessions . . .





A tremendous rivalry mushroomed on the British motocross scene during 1983. The protagonists were Honda's David Thorpe and Suzuki's Jeremy Whatley, both just 20 years old and brimming with ambition, confidence and determination.

But while the child prodigy Thorpe had been seen ripping imperiously through the schoolboy ranks for 10 years or more, Whatley was something of an enigma. Their 1983 confrontation peaked at Hawkstone Park's final round of the national 25 championship last October where, after a day of drama, Whatley took the title and Thorpe vowed to get even. It was far from being the conclusion to a deep-seated personal battle between the only two riders ever to have won all three major schoolboy national title in one season.

Whatley last year was in his second season of racing in the Top 35. He'd already established a reputation as a joker – mischievous, jaunty and rebellious. But he is also a very talented, stylish motocrosser and that impish exterior hides a shrewd and artful racing brain. On the eve of his second assault on the world 250cc motocross championship it also masks some fairly radical ambitions.

"I'd like to win the 250 world championship – get a crown – and move on to the 500s in a couple of years," explains Jem. "But ideally, in the back of my mind and heart, I'd like to be the first guy to win all *three*. I'm small enough to ride 125s but its a weird class, WFO everywhere. Watching Erik Geboers (125 world champion) in the Trophee and Motocross he was flying off place you wouldn't believe.

"I'd go 250, 125 and then 500. If I did the 500 first I'd be too big for the 125s because I'd need to get more weight on."

This lively kid from Parkstone in Dorset spent the first two weeks of his life – appropriately – in East London before his parents moved west. And he shares his birthday – November 30 – with the late Sir Winston Churchill. Obviously a taste for battle instantly inherited . . .

He started out life on four wheels when his Dad, an engineer, built him a go-kart. "I promptly knocked down a cast iron drainpipe with it," grins the irrepressible Jem. "Damn near killed me . Then I got more adventurous and went up the heath, but four wheels wouldn't go over bumps so well. A guy I knew had a bike and I tried that. 'Um, Dad?', 'Okay son.'

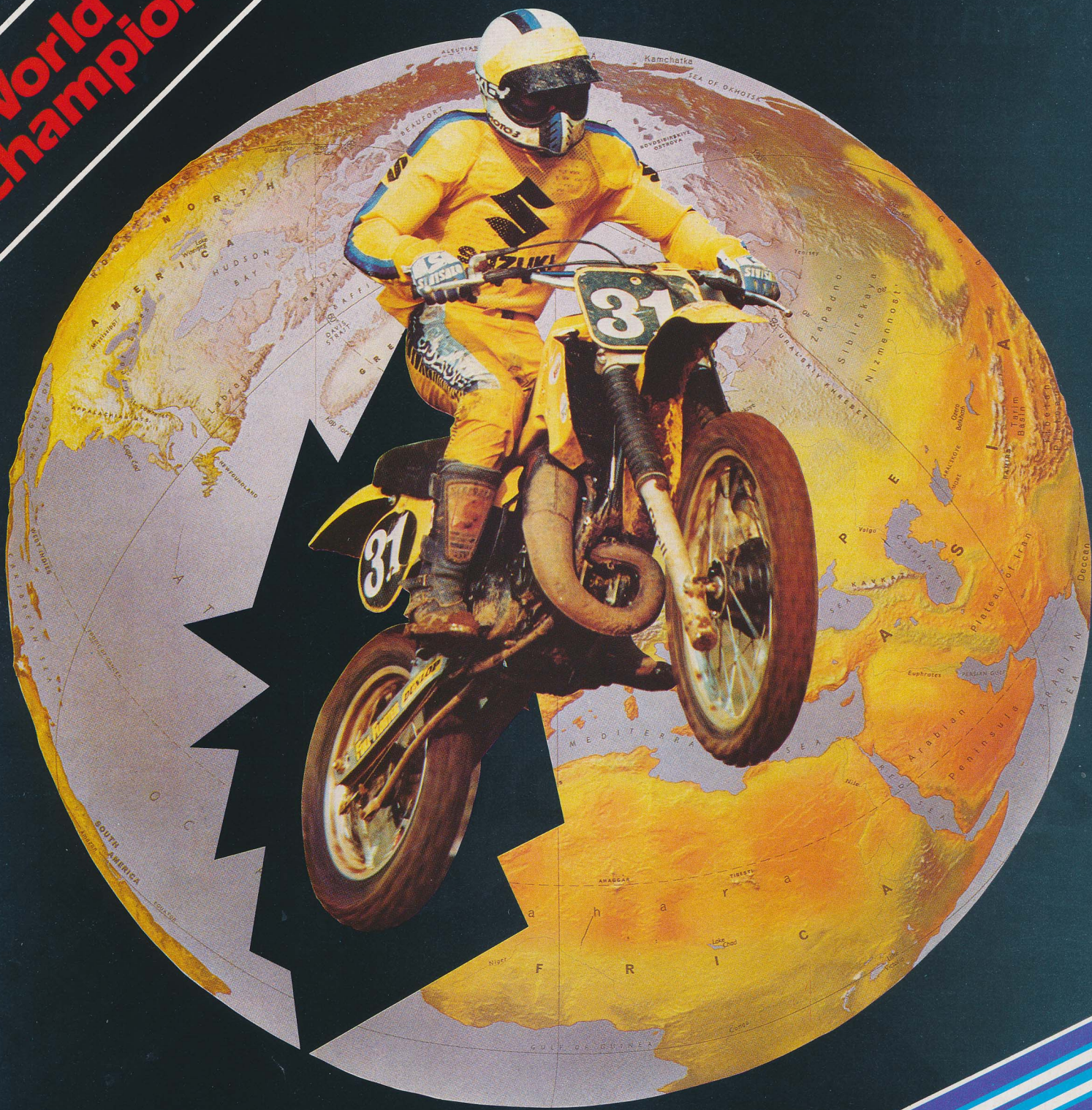
"I got an AP50 moped with knobblies on and a stocking for an air filter. Then Dad bought me a Rickman Suzuki. I nearly hung myself when my anorak caught in a tree. Fortunately the branch broke!"

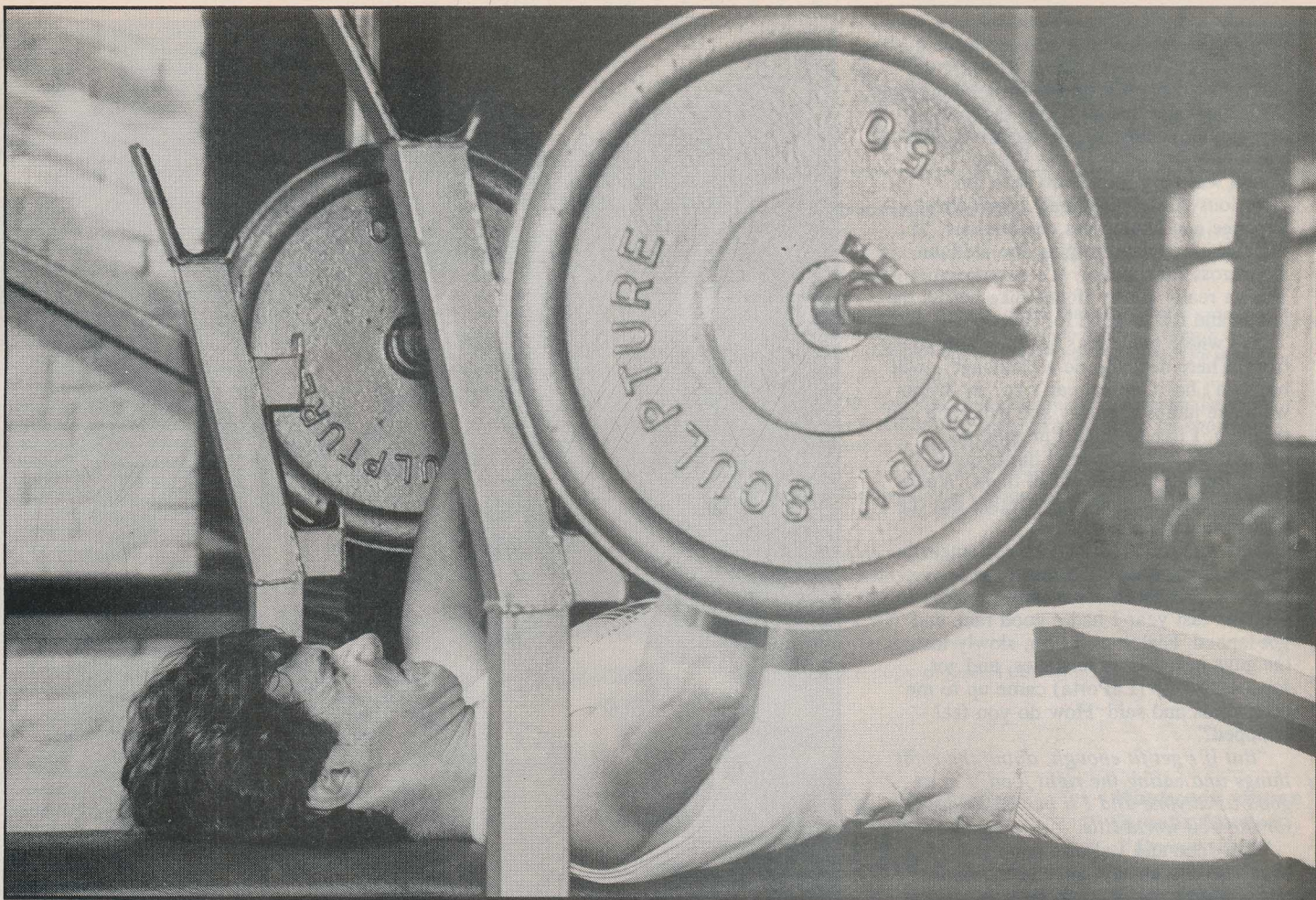
Surviving such adolescent mishaps Jem started racing when he was 11 – some five years later than Thorpe. "I did most of my riding in the pits. Rode everywhere. Never took my helmet off all day long!"

When he was 14 he got his first new bike, a Kawasaki. Coincidentally, Kawasaki phoned asking if he would be interested in

**World
Champions 21**

MOTO-CROSS





Whatley the grafter. Jem's will to succeed comes across during punishing weight training sessions at Shapes gym.

●from page 33

a Kawasaki? "Er, no thanks, we've just bought one." Kawasaki said we could have it. The next year Alec Wright sponsored me and I won all the schoolboy titles. But I always had to ride second string to Howard Lucas. Everyone thought he was better than me. Then I found Alec was squeezing me out so at Hawkstone Park I stuffed Howard. He was still there kicking the bike a lap later. It was the sweetest thing I ever did!"

Jem didn't rush himself and took a year to move on. "When I first went into the mens' I always followed Pete Mathia. We used to call him 'Muffin Mathia'. He only had that old Mont with an inch of travel front and back but he was the boy on lines." By 1981 Jem felt ready to do the Support championship. "I thought I was a dead cert and Alec dumped me. So I won it for Suzuki after getting bike and spares from Tony Barnard."

Halfway through the following year, with a similar contract from Suzuki, he picked up works bikes and mechanic Chris Scriven after injuries had sidelined Bill Aldridge and Jonathan Wright. "At the Newbury British championship round I was told I had them just for the day. I led both races for 20 minutes and Suzuki was impress and let me keep them.

"In the Top 35 I got tired. I'd never done 40 minute races before. So I set my own pace and didn't try to hang on to

anybody. When I got the works bike and the weather dried I got quicker every week and only lost third place to Dave Watson at the final round. Getting the works tackle does a lot for your confidence," says Jem.

Despite a resurgence in interest from Kawasaki's Alec Wright, who rates Whatley very highly, Suzuki hung on to its young star for 1983.

The year started badly. A heavy crash down at Beaucaire, in the south of France, damaged his face and his confidence. "I was worried about getting hurt again up till half-way through the season. I'd aimed for fourth or fifth in the world and flunked terribly. Usually my starts are great but except for the British Grand Prix at Hawkstone I never started higher than tenth. I think it must have been nerves."

Nerves were also probably responsible for a lot of early season uncertainty on the set-up of his factory Suzukis. Mechanic Scriven almost reached the end of his considerable tether changing this and altering that. Then in Switzerland, where team-mate Georges Jobe clinched his second world title, Whatley scored his first grand prix victory. "In the first race I put up good, consistent lap times from the back into the points. I was mad for the second race. So fed up, I thought 'I'm going to do it properly, now, I saw the guy move the lever and went. I rode like I do in Britain for the first time, won, got rid of the nerves and *knew* I was as good as the rest."

The British Open Championship saw Whatley move from fourth to third. "Just! I'd hoped for third, but not the way it happened. I didn't see Neil Hudson in there. At the end of '82 he didn't look impressive. He was there but not winning races. I'd anticipated Thorpe and Noyce one and two, me third."

Jem had, however, figured he could win the 250 Nationals. "It was harder than I expected. I thought I could beat Thorpey now and then. I'm a better tactician and better on riding skills than he is but he'll take a lot of my lines when we're racing and then just outpace me. *He doesn't really make time, he just doesn't make mistakes.* You may be the fastest bloke in the world but if you make mistakes you lose time.

"He sits bolt upright and gets away with things smaller guys wouldn't. I'm only 172cm and 66kg. *That's the trouble.* Washing on a line. I'm too light for 65bhp. To keep the front down I've got to be *on* the front, moving the old bod to manoeuvre the bike. DT's not trick on stadium jumps and getting distance. At Nantwich I *knew* where I could take him over a particular jump.

"It's likely he'll be on top of the Open championship again this year. But I was getting it together again at the end of '83. If I do get a watercooled bike I should be on a par with him. I know I can beat DT on the 250, and probably a 125 (Whatley

is likely to have Geboers' old bike for this year's 125 nationals). You need to be a better rider. The 500 is just a setting up and riding bike. My trackcraft is better and I'm better at technical things like pre-jumping up a short, steep-lipped hill. But I'm no way as good as the Yanks."

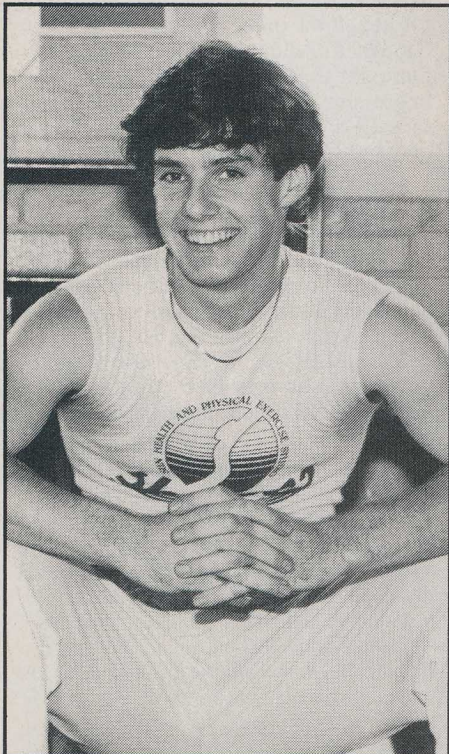
Jem was very impressed with the victorious American squad at last year's Trophee and Motocross des Nations. "I really think there's nothing like stadium supercross for training. It's very tiring. You've really got to lift the bike across the jumps and it's so good for reactions. That's where the Yanks get their sharpness from. There needs to be a challenge - will he, won't he? Can he, can't he? In Britain we make jumps too easy and everyone can do them. I like to think I'm good on corners but I just couldn't hang on to Mark Barnett coming out of them. We've got to beat them this year. Britain has the best chance on paper."

And what of Whatley's own chances in the coming season? "I want to go to Lommel and get in some sand training. In Holland last year I had a good race and got lapped. Eighth to fourth, slowly losing the guys in front, no mistakes, and got lapped! Danny (LaPorte) came up to me afterwards and said 'How do you feel - whipped?'"

"But if I get fit enough, doing the right things and eating the right food, I'm as good as anyone and I'll be challenging for the 250 world title."

With Jobe and LaPorte gone and Jo Martens on a Husky, guys in the know reckon either me or Arno Drechsel. Arno got stronger all last year.

"I didn't see LaPorte the year he won.



Time to relax at the gym. Getting fit, eating the right food and getting in the right frame of mind, feels Jem, could be the key to world success in '84.



En route to victory in the 250 National championship round at Nymphsfield, Gloucestershire.

"Last year he didn't look very good. I'd love to see Jobe move in on the 500 guys and shock them. I don't think he'll just be in there now and then like Carla says. *You can only go to the 500 GPs if you think you can win. Thinking you are a third or fourth place man is suicide. There are so many fast strong people in there.*"

Which brings us back to Jeremy's abiding obsession, Dave Thorpe. "Yes, DT is annoying at the moment. Hawkstone Park was the first time I'd ever know him be unfriendly. Normally we're the best of buddies, trying to psyche one another out. But at Hawkstone he knew he wasn't going to win. He's said he's going to win the title back. That's got my back up. It took me a long time to accept losing. In my final schoolboy year I lost only nine races! Then when you get beaten by a minute - lapped - you can't see

yourself getting any better. David always has some excuse if I beat him. He'll just have to get used to it."

If there is one area of potential weakness in Whatley's make-up, it could also prove conversely to be one of his greatest assets. His wit and sly humour - almost a match for that of Graham Noyce - sometimes makes him seem over-casual. Should he perhaps be taking his elevated status in the motocross world a touch more seriously? "At the beginning of 1983 I wasn't too good," confesses Jem. "But later on I thought I was quite prim and proper. This year?" The Whatley grin... "I'll be very well behaved."

However he behaves, he has to match the enormous will-to-win of that man Thorpe. If he can do that, Jem Whatley could yet become the force he envisages in World and British motocross.