



**LEFT:** An apprehensive Dave Thorpe ponders the possibilities as he awaits the start of the French 500 grand prix and the beginning of his full scale world championship career.

**ABOVE:** The waiting over and the race under way, the talented teenager from Berkshire, who's Kawasaki's sole representative in the GPs this year, made a fairy-tale start to the season and left the track at Colombier-Vilars holding joint second place in the world championship.



# Dave Thorpe:

talking to Paul Fowler

**I**n grand prix moto cross circles the name is on everyone's lips. Simply everybody, from spectators to factory bosses from trade barons to journalists and from mechanics to their riders, is talking about Dave Thorpe.

No one can remember such a spectacular arrival on the scene for many years past. In other classes it may happen but for a mere teenager to put together a debut season like this in the 500 category is unheard of.

Perhaps the last time anything like it happened was when a 19-year-old Graham Noyce won a race at his home GP at Dodington Park in 1976.

But even that was a one-off and Graham had to wait a while for his path to success to lead him in the direction of the world championship honours his prowess had signalled so young.

Though he contested a handful of grand prix events last season, 1982 is Thorpe's first full year of life with the big boys. And at the halfway stage he has proved that without doubt he is one of the brightest prospects in world moto cross.

The only people who seem unsurprised by his phenomenal success are those closest to him in the Kawasaki team and Dave himself.

"At the start of the grand prix season I set myself a target of ten points a round and I've managed to keep ahead of that," said Dave matter-of-factly as we talked at the Italian Grand Prix.

"And considering that I was totally out of things in Holland and scored nothing I'm pretty pleased."

Thorpe has never been one to be overawed by success. At just 19 years of age he's been used to it in moto cross for most of his life. He won his first British championship at the age of seven and but for the broken leg which put him out for most of 1980 and '81 his natural ability has kept him in the public eye from his schoolboy days onwards.

Now, with the injury fading fast from his memory the six-footer from Bracknall, Berkshire, has embarked on the phase which is certainly the biggest challenge of his young life and should provide him with the biggest rewards.

The buzz on the international scene started when he put together a pair of useful rides at the final GP last year in Luxembourg and at the Moto Cross des Nations when he helped Britain to within a point of taking the world team title.

But it wasn't until the opening round of this year's 500cc title tussle that the Kawasaki-mounted ace impressed even the most jaded observers with a performance which culminated in him holding equal

second placing in the world championship standings.

A solid sixth in the opening moto was impressive enough but his second race result astounded all. Runner-up spot to reigning champion Andre Malherbe after leading the race for half its distance brought cheers of admiration from the usually ungracious French crowd.

"I was very nervous before I went to France but when I actually arrived there and saw the track I started to feel a lot better – just my sort of course – and once training started I was putting in good times so felt I might have a couple of decent rides," he recalled.

But when it came to qualifying for the races proper things didn't run quite according to plan. And there were a few nail-biting moments in the Kawasaki camp before Dave learned that he had just scraped into the races by the skin of his teeth.

"The qualifying session I was in was wet but the track began to dry out towards the end of the hour," explained Dave. "Just as the others were starting to set the faster times on the drying track I got a puncture and though we changed the tyre the session was over before I could get any more laps in.

"It was tough and go for a while but I made it. That was my bad luck for the day and it's better to have it in practice than the race."

In the opening French moto Thorpe would have been even further up the leaderboard but for a fall on the last

corner of the track at the half way stage of the race. "But I was still pretty pleased with my result. And after the second race I was thrilled to bits. I had a good start and was second behind Jean-Jacques Bruno but I didn't know whether or not to pass him really early. The crowd were going wild for their man but I gambled I was faster and went by him. After that I was able to ride my own race. I knew Malherbe was pulling through and he reeled me in steadily. Once he was past I let him go and just concentrated on staying in second and not falling off."

But after the euphoria of the French result the Thorpe fortunes took one of those sickening plunges that are part and parcel of grand prix moto cross.

"I knew the deep sand of Holland would provide a different story but I never realised it would be quite so bad. When I got to the track in France I liked what I saw straight away and couldn't wait to get out there. But Holland was the exact opposite. I couldn't wait for the weekend to end."

There's little doubt that racing in the deep Dutch sand is something that he'll have to work on in the future but in a way this season's all about learning the ins and outs of the GP game: Pinpointing strengths and weaknesses and identifying problem areas.

This year's Dutch GP ended for Dave when he hit a tree and was then hit by Jukka Sintonen as he was getting to his feet. "After that I just wasn't with it at all."

Next year the Dutch is the last of the 12 world championship races so there'll be plenty of time to concentrate on getting the sand technique sorted out.

Sweden and Austria brought nine points apiece – one below the self-imposed target Dave had set himself before the series began – but though his points tally from each was the same his feelings about his pair of performances were very different.

"I was very disappointed with the Swedish result but I felt fairly happy to come away from Finland with nine points," he said and went on to explain.

"In Sweden I liked the track but somehow I didn't feel I rode well on the day. I'm sure that another time at that course I'd have come away with more points but it's something I can't explain – just one of those things. Funnily enough I was happier with my seventh place in the first race than I had been to get sixth in the first. In race two I fluffed the start but fought right through the field to seventh. If I'd ridden the same way in the previous race I'd have been much further up the field.

**'Top  
rivals  
don't  
see me  
as a  
threat  
... YET'**



# Dave...

"The following week it was back to the sand though the track in Finland is very different to Dutch sand tracks. Considering my previous sand experiences I was pleased with the way things went even though the actual results were the same and Sweden. Next year I'll know what to expect. The track itself is very well laid out, safe and nicely prepared and fair for everyone and there were a lot of people – they say the biggest crowd they've ever had there."

If Holland had been the low point of his career so far there's no doubt at all about the high spot.

On the same track that had given Graham Noyce his first overall grand prix victory back in 1979, Dave Thorpe won his first GP race and followed it up with third

place in the second moto to share overall honours with new series leader Brad Lackey.

"It was a terrific feeling to see everything come together just right but as soon as I got to the Austrian track of Sittendorf I knew I could do well. I instantly liked the track and as soon as I walked round I wanted to leap on the bike and have a go straight away.

"Even as I walked round I was seeing good lines and later I discovered I was the only guy using certain lines – it seemed I was using parts of the track that no one else bothered with.

"During the race that worried me a bit. For example I was behind George Reiter and I knew I was two or three seconds a lap faster than him because of my trick lines but I thought if I went past he might tag onto my lines and I'd lose that advantage. In the end I just had to pass him then go as fast as I possibly could for

one lap to shake him off – luckily it worked."

And it worked too when he passed Graham Noyce to lead on the third lap. Later when Noyce and Lackey were closing on the white-clad Kawasaki runner the trio were lapping at around 2 minutes 13 seconds. "In practice the fastest anyone could do was 2.17 – that just shows how much quicker you can go when GP points depend on it."

Austria provided the breakthrough that all potential grand prix stars have to make to be regarded as being on the same level as the established stars. "I've never been afraid of the top guys, only respected them but now I know that I'm slowly getting on their terms. Last year the likes of Graham, Neil Hudson and the others were still a bit ahead. Now at least we're on the same straight. Next year, who knows?"

"Everyone is always asking about winning the world championship but I don't even think about it. I just concentrate on keeping to my ten points a round schedule.

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**"I don't think any of the top guys really see me as a threat now but next year they may think differently. All I know about next year is that I don't want to have to qualify on Saturdays. That means I have to try to finish in the top ten."**

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There has been talk that Dave plans to switch to the 250 class for the 1983 grands prix but no decision has been taken, he says. "Last year I rode 500s all the time and never considered the 250s," he says. "This year I've had the opportunity to ride one and I've discovered I can still ride 250s well. But whether that means anything as far as the world championships are concerned remains to be seen. Let's face it I'm lucky to have the choice.

"It's good for me to change about between the 250s and 500s. It makes me much sharper when I switch from one to the other. At the moment there's a slight problem because the 250 is a different height to the 500 but we are working on that. As for the different power characteristics it only takes a very little while to adjust from one to the other."

What about riding the Kawasaki 125 in the British series? "Oh that's just a real bit of fun. I look upon riding the 125s as a good day out to enjoy myself – it's something I don't have to work at."

Lessons learned at every grand prix are carefully filed away in the Thorpe memory and there's something new every week. But what's the biggest lesson so far?

"Without doubt it's that a good start is essential. If you miss the gate you can fight through to around sixth but by the time you've done that the top guys have already gone."

You get the feeling as time goes on that more and more often this 19-year-old works star with the winning ways is more likely to be one of those top six.



French GP action from Thorpe  
recalls Dave's tremendous second place performance this year.