

DAVE THORPE: The World Champ's Column! ^{WATTS}

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**Supercross
Hits Town!**



HURRICANE ALERT
Hannah Eyes Europe!

TRIALS TESTS: Montesa 304, Yamaha 330

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Kickstart trickery

COVER: It all happened at Belle Vue Stadium in Manchester; Supercross made its biggest impact in Britain to date

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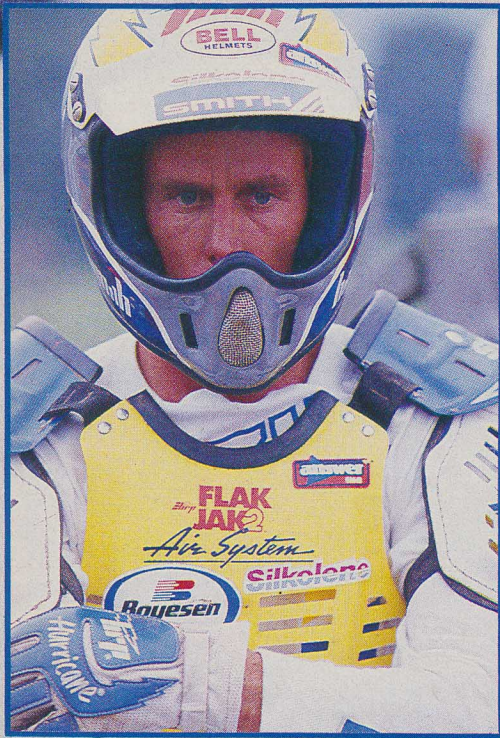
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HURRICANE WARNING!

Bob Hannah has ruled the hearts and minds of American motocross fans for the last 10 years. On the eve of a famous US 250 Grand Prix victory JACK BURNICLE found a surprisingly thoughtful and private man behind the wild public legend

HE'S Buckwheat, America's first home-grown motocross legend. A skinny youth who emerged from the Californian desert a complete racing greenhorn, took the local scene by storm and is still the "winningest" rider in United States motocross history.

Bob "Hurricane" Hannah raps out his catalogue of successes swiftly and succinctly, like a man who knows that immortality is assured. "76 I won the 125 Nationals, Florida, a 250 and a 500 National and the Trans-Am (America's late-lamented end-of-season contest between the top European visitors and their own national stars). '77 I won the Supercross. '78 I won the Supercross, 250 Nationals and 500 Trans-Am. '79 I won the Supercross and 250 Nationals, then broke my right leg water-skiing one week after the 250s finished. 1980 I

never rode. '81 and '82 I still rode for Yamaha. Won no championships. '83, '84 and '85 I rode for Honda. '86 for Suzuki. And the only thing I'll win in '86 is Unadilla!"

Twelve years on, his huge popularity undiminished despite voluntary semi-retirement, 29-year-old Hannah arrived at the Unadilla Valley Raceway, traditional home of the US 250 World Championship round, still seeking his first grand prix win. For almost a decade it had eluded him. He desperately wanted this time to be different.

Hannah had almost clinched it in 1985 with a fabulous first race win. "I caught Johnny O'Mara (then his Honda team-mate), passed him and won the first race convincingly," recalled Bob the evening before what would probably be his last chance. "But the first lap here is always a bit crazy. I got

A vivid first moto charge laid the foundation of Bob Hannah's historical US 250 Grand Prix triumph aboard the Boyesen Suzuki in July of this year. INSET PICS: A tense Hannah awaits the start of the second race, knowing that he has to win to fulfill that lifelong ambition of grand prix success. Plus a Unadilla trackside banner which sets new standards of fantasy and finish! Right: "I figured I was ready for a change of luck..." Immediately after his second moto win, an elated Hannah can hardly credit that his grand prix dream has come true.



HURRICANE WARNING!

tangled up with some European riders and that was that ...

"I've been trying to win here for 10 years, but have always had bad luck," continued the man whose presence moves the pretty excitable fans at Unadilla to deafening heights of adulation. "Two times I've broken the front brake. I've had bike failures. Been knocked down. I've twice won motos. Winning the GP would be a great way to top off my career."

For Hannah, the wheel had come full circle. "In '78, there was a kind of turnaround. At the Trans-Am here Roger de Coster was the old man of 30. I was a kid. I thought it was funny. I played with him for a while. Then he put me down!"

Bob knows Unadilla better than most. "You can't make a mistake. There are lots of holes. Lines change. And a lot of rocks. A big one put me out in '77. Rocks, ruts, ditches; a lapper gets in your way, you move and you crash!"

What about the climb full of whoops out of the far side of the valley which constantly causes the European visitors nightmares? "I try to go at them a bit faster than everyone else and find the smoother line. A couple of little bumps at the bottom I'm double jumping. There are lots of rocks, it's real slippery and the wheels are biting or sliding. You've got to keep the power on and the front wheel in the air.

"I think the start is dangerous. The first corner is 90 degrees. I'll go off hard then make my mind up going into the turn. I'm a slow starter. I think about what everyone else is doing. If I'm a wheel behind off the line I slack up and turn early. I don't wanna crash!

"The toughest competition will be Johnny O. He won last year, he's strong and he wants to win it again. And he's on a good bike."

Last year the Hurricane rode the same bike as O'Mara. This year he campaigned a Suzuki fitted with Eyvind Boyesen's rear suspension linkage. "Was Johnny O good today?" he enquires anxiously. "I hope he pukes tomorrow. His bike sounds good. I remember I always loved that sound on a cool,

crisp morning..." So why had he left the classy confines of the Honda US squad? Hannah's reply is typical of the man. Fortright.

"One guy came into Honda management I didn't like. He had been fired from Kawasaki. Obviously a worthless bastard. He didn't care for me. I didn't want to ride a full season. They said no. Suzuki rang. What did they want? A race and development rider. Fifteen races, do some PR and promotions work. That suited me."

But the season had turned out even shorter than intended. He broke a collarbone practising in March. "We were testing gearboxes. They didn't work too well! Result was I rode only three 250 Nationals. One well, one when I was sick and one fair.

"If this was five years ago, I wouldn't be worried about the jokers I was worried about out there today. I came from 24th to beat Johnny O last year. Mind you, I had a really good bike. I'm in good shape. I just haven't been on a bike enough, so I'm using more energy than I should. I don't have the condition and stamina of Johnny. He's tough right now. If he's off, not having a good day, I can ween him out, annoy him and out-think him, and push him into making a mistake.

"The only thing to rely on is my desire to win. O'Show is a perfect physical specimen. He can win both motos, run 25 miles and still be in good shape for dinner. I'm not outta shape, I'm just not as good as him. I run a lot, cycle a lot, but haven't been on a bike enough this year. That's where I lose out. *I've never been the fastest rider but 90 per cent of the time I've been the most determined.*"

This is one of several intriguing parallels with his Trans-Atlantic contemporary Graham Noyce. Both surfaced in 1975, rocking their respective establishments and rocketing to a string of national titles. Then both missed 1980 with severe leg injuries and were never quite the same outrageous super-talents again. Sure, they'd occasionally spring superb victories which recalled the flowering of their carefree youth, but the sheer bravado had diminished. Neither, however, lost that intensity, that will-to-win; what Hannah refers to as "the desire." Standing just five feet nine inches tall and weighing in at a lean 10 stone 10 pounds, Bob

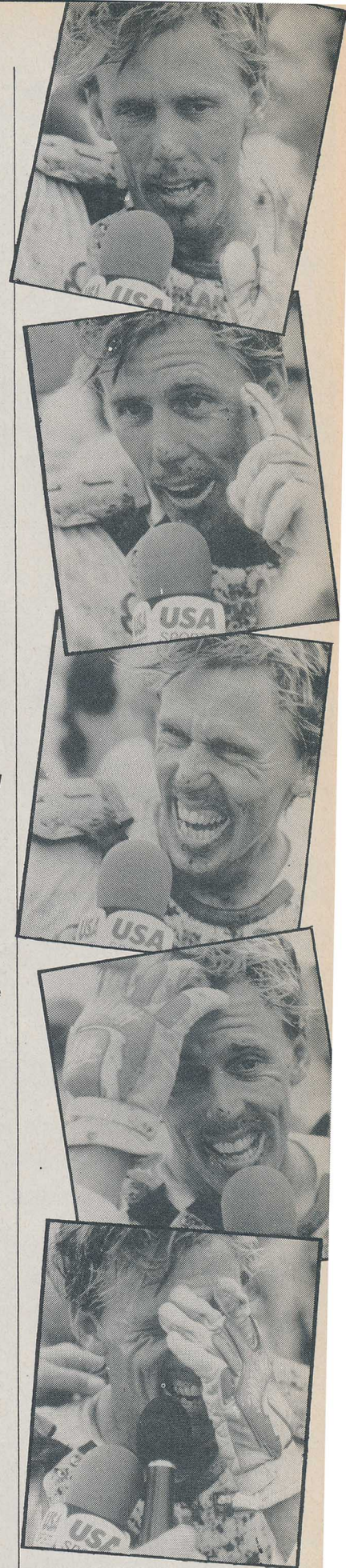
believes determination can offset lack of physical shape in this most physically demanding of sports.

"I love overcoming great odds. That's a real kick. I don't have anything to prove right now. I'm racing for a few close friends and myself. To give me some encouragement. Not for the fans. I get along with them. I like them. But it's for me and those close friends. They may not all work for Suzuki — in fact, none of them do — but they're rooting for me. They're even working for the company I'll be riding hard against! I've never minded having to ride over my head when the occasion demanded it..." Neither did Noyce. That's what made them such exceptional, exciting fighting men. Riders who addicted race fans to their unorthodox, unpredictable, off-the-wall riding styles.

Bob was born in Lancaster, in the Californian desert, on the 26th of September, 1956. "You could ride out of your yard. My Dad used to ride. He still rides 100 miles a day on the dirt, and he's 71! I started riding when I was seven. I had my own motorcycle, a Honda 50. *But I never raced till I was outta high school and almost 18.* Can't you tell? I was never on a motocross track. I just rode a lot. I had a million hours on a bike, really learning how to ride. The fundamentals. All I had to do for the race track was learn how to hit a berm and go fast. And mud I didn't know. I felt today I didn't know how to ride mud either! I was terrible."

In those formative years the young Hurricane never even knew the sport of motocross existed! Then a friend asked him if he wanted to race a 250 CZ he owned. "So I did one day. At Indian Dunes, South California. I raced it for three months. First day, amateur. Won it. Then expert. Top 10 all the time. Couple of months, top five. But couldn't win. There were a lot of good experts in Southern California.

"I bought a GP 1975 Husqvarna 250. Laid down shocks. Remember them? I won a few local 250 experts. I got a ride with DG, local people there, on a Yamaha 125/250. Then I rode factory Suzukis for local events. This was still 1975. I was around Southern California for five months. I won every race but one. If the national guys came they couldn't beat me. I told Suzuki I wanted to ride nationals. The same Suzuki boss who is here today told



Hannah's reactions range from the almost apologetic to delighted disbelief after his US 250 GP win.

HURRICANE WARNING!

me no. 'Tony di Stefano, Billy Grossi, Steve Stackable — can you beat *them*' — I said no, not yet. 'Well, we'll keep you local ...'

Hannah, his own boss then as now, said no thanks and accepted Yamaha's offer of a ride in the nationals for 1976. A legend was born; and endures to this day.

Why is he still riding? "Cos I need the stinking money, why do you think? No, I could quit and live comfortably, but I can't stand seeing someone else win the races. I've got a big ego. Factory riders in general; we think we're just too great. Now, I'm giving more to the fans. I didn't have as many fans 10 years ago. You meet 10 spectators. Nine like you, and one who thinks you're an idiot. I like that part of the job. It feels good having everyone yelling for me. I'll miss that. But it won't go on for more than a year from today.

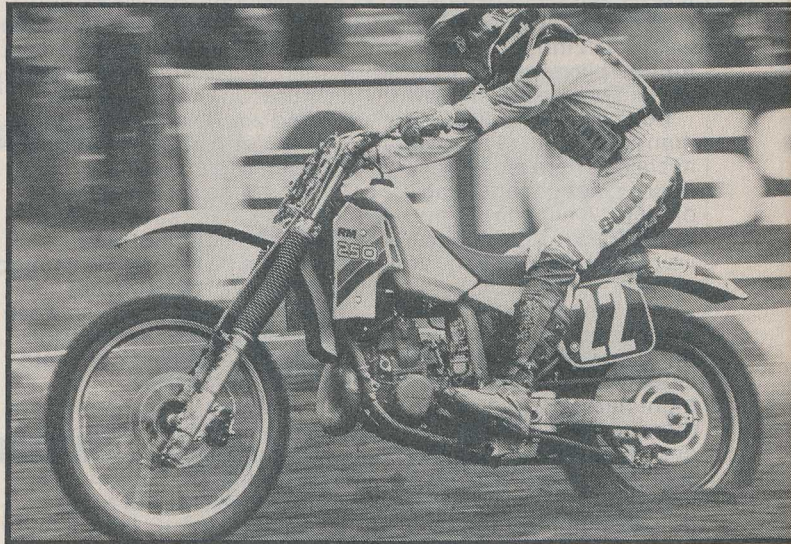
"I'm tired of doing a whole season. Basically, I'm tired of getting hurt and I'm tired of riding stinking, dusty, flat, bullcrap tracks. Not lovely tracks like this one at Unadilla. I could ride *this* track 20 times a year. But supercrosses have got too dangerous now. I am sick of being hurt."

The supercross circuits have changed in the States over the past few years. Even one of the established younger stars, Honda's David Bailey, confesses to being unnerved by two of this year's tracks. "I don't know if they've changed, but I have," concedes Hannah. "Daytona and Seattle I like, but generally I find they're getting too dangerous. This is safe. The difference between then and now? I rode more then and I was real brave. If I have a year off getting hurt I forget about it. If I get hurt every three months I get pissed off and don't wanna race. Tomorrow will be heaven for me. I'll have a blast on a good track. But 35 weekends on the nationals I'd hate. I didn't mind five years ago as long as I won.

"I'm 29 now. I wanna do car racing. I drove off-road cars during my year off. A couple of months ago I went to the Jim Russell Racing School. I shaped up well in cars. For sure I'll be racing open wheel



Above: Hannah's blistering ride to 3rd behind Roger de Coster in the 1978 Trophee des Nations. Right: Hannah leads Steve Wise (Honda) during their tremendous duel at Unadilla in 1981. Below right: "You've got to keep the power on and the front wheel in the air." Hannah demonstrates the Unadilla art during his 1986 win. Below: Classic rangy style as Hurricane hurls his Yamaha out of Gravity Cavity in 1981.



formula cars later this year. I'm only riding five or so more small motocross races. AMA regionals. Show up and sign autographs. ..."

What did he rate as the best part of his mercurial career? Bob didn't hesitate. "Yamaha was the most enjoyable. I loved Honda's bikes and my mechanic, but Honda was seven days a week work, not a fun time. Those early days at Yamaha were fun all week, racing every weekend.

"Winning is the most important thing to me. It's not fun unless I can run with the leaders. In fact, it's miserable. A lot of people just go out to ride round and race with somebody. That's not fun. Fun is going out there in contention to win."

Which brought us back to the next day's crucial grand prix. "I just tested the Boyesen last week and wanted to ride it," says Hannah. "I felt happy with it testing in Pennsylvania.

We had chain problems, but sorted them out. Five days ago was the first time I saw the bike." Bob was looking tense and tired. Besides the mere need to practice for a grand prix he had recorded a live commercial (for Boyesen Reeds), an interview for American television with Larry Maiers and a French TV interview with an almost incomprehensible Froggie cameraman. All were enacted against a torrent of amused and unhelpful heckling from his ever-present army of fans. The showman's facade, so resiliently paraded for those same fans, had understandably slipped by the end of a hectic afternoon. Surely a man of his massive experience was not worrying about Sunday's race?

He was. "I'm nervous. I needed more testing and to be in better shape. I care a lot. It means a lot to me. *I really want to win it.* If I ride round, beat

Jacky Vimond and everyone else, look good, but Johnny O is 10 seconds ahead, it's gonna piss me off.

"What's the weather tomorrow, do you know? Cloudy, I hope. Cool and cloudy. Sunny and warm? Shit." It was coming up to 7 p.m. on a gentle, muggy Saturday evening. "I wish I'd had 10 hours of sleep and we were back here for the race. I'd like to go right now."

Hannah was hungry right enough. The Hurricane is the only survivor from his generation of US motocross stars. O'Mara, Bailey, Ricky Johnson, Jeff Ward — all are upwards of five years younger. How does he rate them?

"There used to be a lot of good guys in the States. De Coster, Jimmy Weinert, Tony D. Incredible in their day. RJ (Johnson) is the best for sure right now. Nobody in the world to beat him, anyway.

Not unless they're lucky. RJ, Ward and Bailey. Johnny O is fourth at the highest. He's a space case, you know. He could be number one. So could Ronnie Lechien. He has stinking raw talent, but he just wastes it. He's an asshole. Last year he was able to beat anybody. He and Johnny are not too smart; not mentally convincing." Lacking that burning desire, perhaps? Noyce would know what Hannah means.

"I don't care to socialise with riders much anymore. Just race with them. As a kid I used to have a lot of people I looked up to. De Coster, Stackable, Grossi. Now I'm up against a 16 or 17-year-old brat kid who rides a motorcycle fast. That doesn't impress me. I like people. Motorcycle riders in general are a bunch of egotistical morons. I'm one of them.

"It used to be Roger D and Heikki Mikkola. 'Gee, I wanna ride fast with them!' But dope-smoking, immature Ron Lechien? Why should I want to race him? I don't come here to see riders. I come here to race round a nice track, for me and my friends, against guys I don't like!"

There is one thing which could alter Hannah's attitude. It's a big thing. It's a serious thing. And Bob relishes the idea...

Of Europe.

"I might change my mind if I came over. I like that Suzuki guy, Rinaldi. They're older, not 17 and 18-year-olds. I've got a severe generation gap! I don't know any of the Europeans. I never read the magazines. If Vimond didn't ride good he wouldn't be a world champion. But I don't know him. I'd watch how he rode if I rode against him every week."

But Europe?

Hannah holds up his hands. "I know I wouldn't like it. Not being able to talk to anybody. The food sucks. I don't even particularly like Europeans. They haven't been too pleasant to me, though I guess I'm kinda ignorant of things. I'd only go over to ride 24 good tracks, and long motos. It's hard to do 40 minutes when you only ride two a year. But I like your kind of tracks. My problem is keeping my ankles in shape. They're kinda junk. If they hold together, I could be in contention over there..."

Of course Hannah did ride in Europe back in the late '70s. "Yeah, I rode the Trophee and Motocross des Nations in '76 and '78. Really enjoyed them. If I had a good place to stay

and five or six good people around me I'd probably enjoy it now. I'd have to sell one of my houses, mind!"

Did he harbour any regrets about not making such a trip earlier in his racing career? Bob paused reflectively. "No. If I went, next year would be the year to do it. With the right deal. If Boyesen and Suzuki would back me — and they would listen to him — I'd go. Two-fifty, of course. We ain't got a 500!"

"The GPs are the only thing that interests me right now. But I don't know that I want to give up everything to go over there. I need a really good bike and a good deal."

The next day, really good bike or not, Hannah rode his heart out in contention with his predicted stumbling block, Johnny O'Mara. O'Show cakewalked the first race with Hannah, after an exuberant first 15 minutes seeing off everyone else in the top 10, a distant second. Then he attacked O'Mara in race two and we witnessed a truly gripping duel to the death until, at two-thirds distance, even Bob's unquenchable will-to-win began to fade. Superior machinery and superior fitness towed Johnny O clear. Until the final fantastic lap, when his Honda, driven into the ground during that epic duel, ran out of petrol. After 10 years, Hannah's luck had turned.

The crowd went berserk. "The Banana won. I can't believe it. I'm outta my mind!" The target of their rapture remained resolutely, typically fair in his moment of victory. "I got squeezed out in the first moto and the O'Show was gone. In the second race I said I was going to ride the son-of-a-bitch into the ground, but he did that to me. He's a little bit faster than I thought he was. When you sit at home watching TV and drinking beer you forget. The bike worked good. I just ran out of oxygen at 30 minutes. Unfortunately, he ran out of gas.

"I don't like winning this way. It's happened to me before. I've won first races here and lost second ones through a load of bullcrap. I figured I was ready for a change of luck."

Bob Hannah got his change of luck. At 29, he's also seeking a change of scene. Europe beckons. And what he wouldn't give to see the Hurricane blowing on Continental shores in 1987.



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