

SUPERBIKE



DIGGING THE DIRT

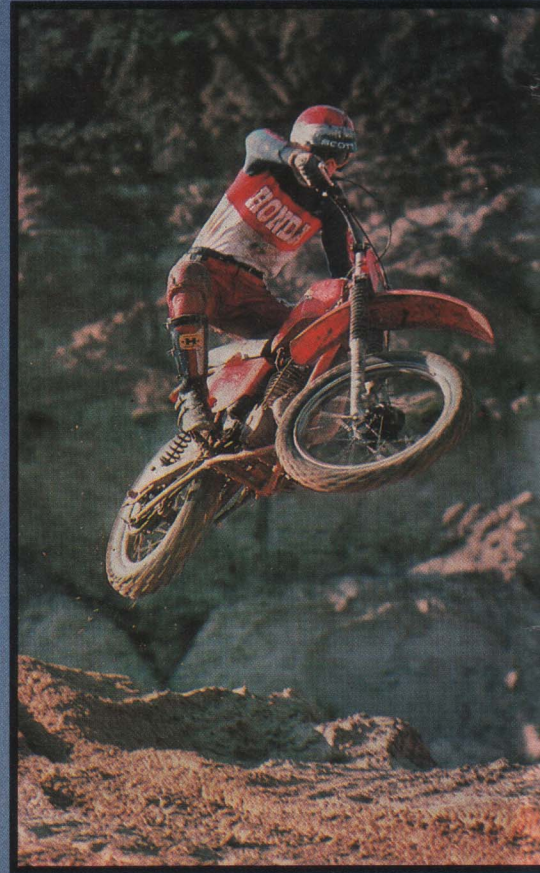
LUST IN THE DUST AND LOONIES IN THE BOONIES

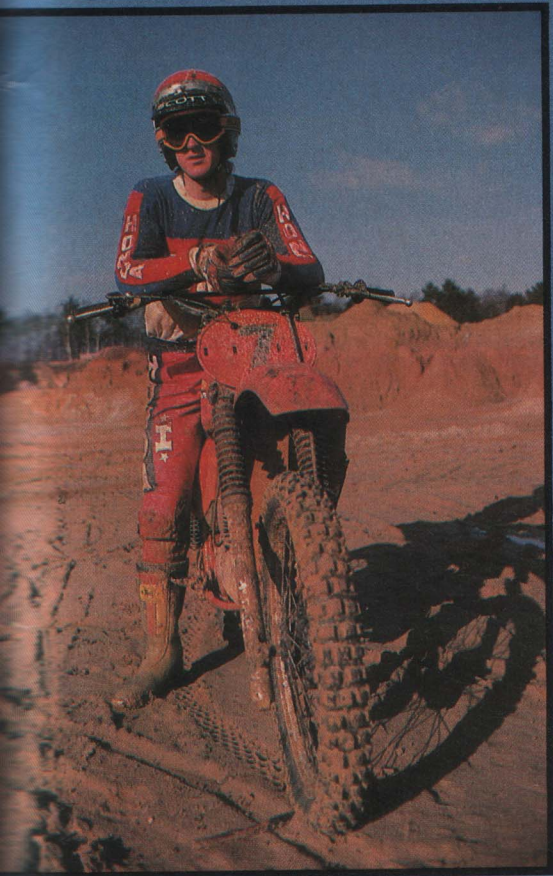
LONG DISTANCE INFORMATION

DUBROVNIK (AND BACK!) ON HARLEY'S 1300

BLACKMAIL CORNER

FAMOUS RACER GETS 'EM OFF SCOOP





NOYCE TO SEE YOU TO SEE YOU....

**BRITAIN'S CHAMPION MOTOCROSSER
LIVES AND WORKS IN EXILE. WHY?**

At 21, Graham Noyce is the bright hope to become Britain's first world motocross champion since 1965. But he's had to leave Britain to do it, and he's playing virtually a lone hand in a sport once dominated by Britons. Chris Myers looks at the man, and studies the facts behind his lonely battle.

Imagine racing an 80mph, screaming, bucking, sliding, banshee of a motorcycle flat out over the kind of course you wouldn't dare attempt on your trail bike pride and joy. You're hitting jumps at 50mph and touching down 30 feet later. You tear into each bend on the limit, sliding, cornering so hard that your elbows are dragging in the dirt and you've got to work bloody hard to make your bike do what you want it to. Now your lungs are bursting, your muscles are stretched to the limit and your head feels like its cooking in sweat inside your crash hat. But you know you can't stop now, you're in a race and you've got to keep going full-bore for 45 muscle-straining, gut wrenching, gear grinding minutes.

The sport is motocross, far and away the toughest and most physically demanding form of motorcycle competition. It demands the reflexes of a grand prix road racer, the strength of a weight lifter and the endurance of a marathon runner. For British motocross champion Graham Noyce, it's a way of life.

Noyce is just 21 years old yet he's been British champion for the past three years and has been racing since he was 11.

Noyce is tall - 5ft 11in - good looking and besides being Britain's top motocross rider, he's also far and away the highest-paid. As a works rider for Honda his contract is worth in the region of £70 000 this year and he gets bonus money for each grand prix point he scores. He was able to nip out and buy an eight berth luxury American camper for £12 000 late last year almost without a second thought.

Yet despite the money, the kudos, and the girls, Noyce still remains very much a country boy. He is a very physical person and doesn't care much for reading books or watching intellectual French films. Sure he has the sophisticated manner when he needs it and he takes the trans-Atlantic flights and continental travelling all in his stride, but he still can't cope well with the sort of PR nonsense like the Honda reception last year to announce his contract signing. He was obviously ill at ease.

During the season Noyce's whole life is motocross. When he's not actually racing, 99 per cent of his time is spent either training or working with the Honda technicians on his bikes at the Frankfurt workshops.

He doesn't have a lot of leisure time, though the evenings are usually his own. But grand prix motocross racing means early nights and early mornings.

Monday to Saturday Noyce spends his time training, practising; working to keep his already lithe body super-fit. He works out in the gym with weights, runs every single day and rides his practice bike whenever he can. It's a gruelling schedule, but Noyce sticks at it because he knows that in the desperately competitive world championship it's results that count.

"I work hard to keep myself fit," Noyce told me recently, "most winters I go up to the Champion motocross training camp at Alfta in Sweden for a hard week's training. We do special weightlifting to strengthen the arm and leg muscles we use most in competition and interval training to train our bodies to work at their peak for a 45 minute grand prix motocross."

Noyce started riding almost before he could walk. Before he even got to his teens he was winning schoolboy races, so no one was surprised when he won the British Schoolboy Championship. When the new-style British Championship started in 1975, Noyce at 18 years old, was picked by the ACU as one of Britain's top 35 riders who would battle it out for the championship. He was close to winning it and would have, but for a crash at the last round when he broke his collar bone. Still, third place behind veteran Vic Eastwood on a British CCM four stroke machine and the new champion Scot Vic Allan on a two stroke Bultaco, was bloody good going for a first attempt.

That same year - 1975 - also saw Noyce start riding in the world championships. With only an average size contract from the British importer of the West German Maico scramblers, Noyce was determined to be a grand prix rider - do or die. He cadged lifts, turned up at meetings without an entry to ride and

brow-beat organisers into letting him start. Early in the year he was smuggled across borders in the back of friend's vans without even a passport. But it all paid dividends: he was learning the trade of a grand prix rider; places to stay, getting to know influential organisers and managers, learning unfamiliar tracks, and improving his own highly individual riding style.

OK, at the end of the year he hadn't exactly set the world alight, but he'd filled a lot of British hearts with pride with his fairytale grand prix victory at Doddington near Bristol and he'd done some of the world championships. He'd done enough for the Maico factory too, who through the British importer, Brian Goss himself an ex-British champion, offered him factory support for '76.

It was 1976 when it all happened for Noyce. He put his grand prix experience to good use and scored consistently in the world championships. At the end of the year he was British champion for the first time and fourth in the world - a fabulous achievement for a 19 year old. Noyce was chuffed; he began telling people that he'd have a serious crack at the world title in '77. "After all I'd be a fool if I didn't think I had a good chance of winning," he told me.

Noyce re-signed for Maico that year and launched out from his Belgian base into the grand prix. But right from the start it began to go wrong. It seemed almost as if luck had run out for the golden boy of British motocross.

He crashed very, very heavily at a prestigious pre-GP season international at St Anthonis, Holland, in March. He'd opened up to lift the front wheel over a bump and the motor just died on him. The wheel dropped, hit the bump and spat him up into the air and across into the crowd. Miraculously nothing was broken, but the severe spraining that the crash caused cost him lost training in the vital pre-season build up to the GPs.

That was the first stroke of bad luck; he crashed again later in the year and again it was in a non-vital international meeting . . . this time in Stegeken, Belgium. His leg was in plaster and he missed five grands prix. When the year was over, the final reckoning saw that he'd slipped to eighth in the world, but he could gain some comfort from knowing that he'd cakewalked his second British title.

But the jinx stuck with Noyce this year too. His shiny new works Honda locked up its gearbox in the first moto of the opening round of the British Championship, and his rear Fox air shock absorbers burst in the second - a desperately disappointing start to the year.

Worse was to come: his 450cc Honda persistently shed its drive chain in grand prix after grand prix. It cost him dearly in self-confidence and worst of all in grand prix points. Why, he kept asking, does this keep happening when team mate Brad Lackey's chain stays put?

It worried Noyce and it worried Honda too.

But they couldn't believe there was anything basically wrong with the bike - what they failed to realise was the difference in riding styles between their two works riders. Noyce works his bike very, very hard. He tends to jump down hills many riders would ride down, he jumps hard and he lands hard and expects the bike to take the punishment. Not only that but he's bigger and heavier than Lackey.

Finally Honda agreed to fit a chain guide at their workshops in Frankfurt, West Germany and at a stroke cured the problem. But Noyce hadn't been finishing 45 minute races and he was out of condition with a lot of ground to make up. But at the end of the season he was seventh in the world and retained his British title after a terrific tussle with a much improved Neil Hudson.

Noyce's huge earning power has forced him, reluctantly, to become Britain's first motocross tax exile. His business adviser suggested that he move overseas at the end of 1976 when his Maico factory contract, his separate agreement with the British Maico importer Brian Goss, plus his own personal sponsorship deals with clothing manufacturers, took his earnings into the five figure bracket for the first time.

When ex-Belgian rider Geoff Goffens, an old friend, offered to let Noyce share his home with his beautiful wife Janet, Noyce jumped at the chance and moved into their house in the village of Genk.

But there's more to Noyce's removal from Britain than just money. OK, there's a big tax advantage, but almost as important is the opportunity for Noyce to race against riders of his own calibre . . . and better.

Noyce knows that in Belgium within an hour or two he can get to and ride in a big, competitive international motocross almost every Sunday throughout the year. There he'll be able to race against many of the riders he meets in the grands prix from all over the world . . . it's the only way he can seriously keep himself in practice.

Back in '76 and '77 - the first two British championship victories for Noyce - he had no equal in Britain - he was out in front in every championship race with no incentive to go faster or to push his skill further. Frankly he was stagnating. Like it or not, we're cut off from mainstream motocross in Britain and the only way for Noyce to grow was to move.

This year only one British rider has shown himself capable of beating Noyce and of giving him a run for his money - 21 year old Neil Hudson from Pensford, Bristol. Hudson finished this season runner-up to Noyce in the British championship and, in his second grand prix season, finished fifth in the 250cc class.

These two men apart, there are no serious world class challengers in Britain today. It's impossible to point to one reason and say: "That's why we're falling behind in world championship motocross", but being stuck on an island doesn't exactly help. It's difficult to attract continentals here for internationals because of the time and money it takes to cross the Channel, and our riders don't compete abroad much for the same reason.

Over the years though we've not done so badly: in 1955 John Draper (BSA) took the European 500cc title easily and Les Archer (Norton) did it again in '56. In 1961 Dave Bickers (Greeves) took the 250cc European title and in '64 and '65 the legendary Jeff Smith (BSA) won the world 500cc title.

Then, big British four stroke singles ruled the roost - you had to ride one to win in the 500cc class and it was an important psychological boost for British riders to win on a British machine. Sadly BSA and Norton died years ago.

So look at it logically: of all the top motocross competing nations Britain has had a fair share of title holders over the years - now we're just going through a lean patch. We can take some heart in reminding ourselves that when Roger De Coster won the 500cc World Championship in 1971 he was the first Belgian to do it since the late Rene Baeten (FN) 13 years earlier. It's been 13 years since Jeff Smith's 1965 success, so we're due for a win real soon. And Noyce is just the man to give it to us.

Chris Myers

PLAYING DIRTY

