

# U.S. 500cc MOTOCROSS GRAND PRIX





# Mikkola Shows Why He's World Champion, Lackey Breaks And Bell Is First American

By John Ulrich and Fred Caldwell

**L**ackey, Lackey, Lackey!" screams a sunburned girl with a too-small halter top, flinging both her arms into the air and shaking uncontrollably. All around her people yell, shake fists, wail, press hard against the chain link fence, stick out their upraised thumbs, wave and work themselves into frenzies.

They cheer on Bad Brad Lackey, the great American hope in 500cc World Championship Motocross, the wild California kid who mellowed through five years of Grand Prix competition to emerge as the first American with a real shot at the title. Lackey chases reigning Champion Heikki Mikkola of Finland, closes the gap, now 15 ft. behind, now 10 ft. behind, now almost touching.

The crowd roars, the hands wave, the bodies contort. Sand and rocks fly, hurled not only from the spinning knobblies on the hard, dry track, but also from the fists of overzealous fans aiming for Mikkola. They want to see Lackey win, are caught up in the moment, actually *go crazy*.

The scene takes place at the U.S. Grand Prix at Carlsbad, California, sponsored by Bel Ray. The battle between Mikkola (Yamaha) and Lackey (Honda) is their 14th of the season, the second points-paying moto in the seventh World Championship round, with five rounds and 10 motos to go.

Mikkola led the standings before ever setting foot in America: eight moto wins, a second, a third, a sixth and one pointless moto, all worth 147 points. Lackey, the only rider able to stay near Mikkola consistently in 1978, had 126 points from two wins, six seconds, two thirds, a fifth and one DNF. The plan was for Lackey to win on his home track and start making up the 21 points separating him from the Champ.

It looked like everything was going as planned when the gate dropped for the start of the first moto. Lackey jumped out in front, chased by privateer Rocket Rex Staten (Bassett Yamaha), five-time World Champion and Belgian hero Roger DeCoster (Suzuki), Rick "Lumberjack" Burgett (Yamaha), West Germany's Herbert Schmitz (Maico), Sweden's Hakan Andersson (Husqvarna), Mike Bell (Yamaha), Marty Smith (Honda), Belgium's Jaak van Velthoven (KTM), four-time USGP winner and Dutch dentist Gerrit Wolsink and Tommy Croft (Honda). Mikkola was mired back in 15th, working up from a bad start.

Lackey's lead lasted less than one lap. As Bad Brad slammed into a hard, adobe berm, the impact broke his Honda's chain guide mount. The loose guide derailed the chain, and Lackey lost more than a dozen positions. Another handful of laps and the



Lackey(2) takes the second-moto start, shadowed by Mikkola. Malherbe (7), Schmitz (9), Andersson (8), and Semics (behind Mikkola) follow. Note Bell (28) and Wolsink (4) at the first-turn apex.

chain fell off again, and Lackey headed for the pits.

Staten led next with the heaviest bike in the race, a 242-pound Yamaha. (That's 18 pounds heavier than Lackey's 224-pound Honda, and 26 pounds more than the 216-pound Suzukis of DeCoster and Wolsink.) DeCoster was second, and lanky Mike Bell—destined to finish as first American overall, and who just last year won the USGP 250cc Support event in his first race as a Team Yamaha member—had caught up to third-place Schmitz, a Maico factory rider.

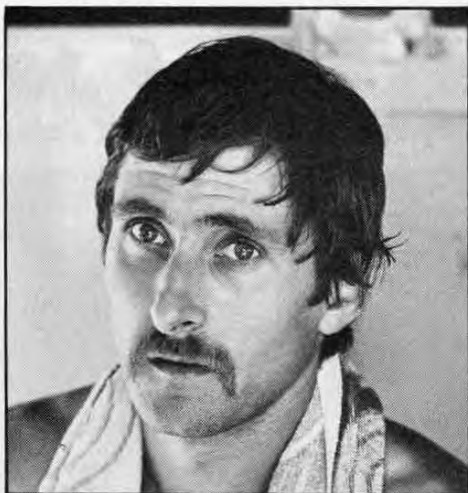
"I was trying to pass Schmitz and got

right behind him," said Bell later. "He missed a shift and I ran right into the back of him, kind of high-sided. I crashed, went from third to 15th and had to start all over again."

DeCoster crashed on the third lap, but was immediately up and moving in fifth. One lap later, Staten's bike had seized, and Schmitz had the moto lead for good. But while Schmitz's lead was to remain unchallenged, the next few positions weren't so secure. Burgett was second until the 11th lap, when DeCoster regained the spot and started closing on Schmitz, too late for a win. U.S. Suzuki-sponsored Danny



LaPorte leads Mikkola near the end of the first moto.



Herbert Schmitz rests inside a van and recommends Maicos: "... built very simply, primitive, but ... competitive and really strong."



Fans press against the fence, waving, shouting, urging on Lackey's pursuit of Mikkola.



Bad Brad Lackey, the great American hope: "... a close second, but no cigar."

LaPorte, up from a start out of the top 10, followed DeCoster past Burgett the next lap, and hard-charging Mikkola overtook Burgett one lap later. Early on the last lap, Mike Bell took away Burgett's fifth position; then, two turns from the finish line, LaPorte's bike's countershaft splines gave up, victims of a loose sprocket, and the Suzuki wouldn't move under its own power. LaPorte physically pushed the bike as fast as he could toward the finish, but Mikkola, Bell and Burgett all passed him before he crossed the line.

Thus the stage was set for moto two and the confrontation between Lackey and Mikkola. Meanwhile, Staten felt sure he could do second-moto business. "Rex, I gotta tell you," Staten's wrench had said breathlessly right after the first-moto seizure and retirement. "You're riding too hot. You're winding it out too much. The bike can't last like that."

"You just get the bike ready and I'll win that second moto," snapped Staten. "You just watch!"

Marty Smith had troubles of his own. "I cannot ride the motorcycle," he said to mechanic Dave Arnold. "That thing was bouncing around like crazy. I almost fell every time on the downhill."

Mike Bell was hurting from his first-moto crash, and held a chunk of ice to a bruised and cut lip. His shoulder hurt as well—a reminder that he had sideswiped a tree at a national motocross in Texas the previous weekend.

Herbert Schmitz sat impassively in the Maico van as Steve Stasiefski installed another rear wheel—with fresh Metzeler attached—on the bike. "The track was good, but it was hard, very rough," Schmitz said in German. "It would be better if they did not have schools here during the week and races all the time. The American riders are much better than before. Now they are exactly as good as the Europeans, maybe better, because there are more of them. Too bad there aren't many good tracks here."

When racetime came, Lackey again got

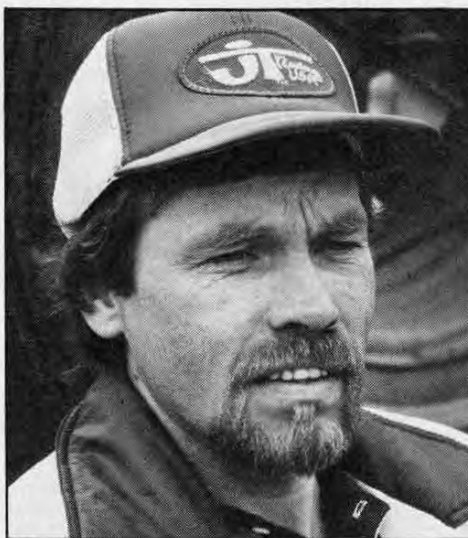
the holeshot, but this time Mikkola was right behind, not buried in mid-pack. The pair instantly left behind Schmitz, Belgian Andre Malherbe (KTM), Andersson and Gary Semics (Can-Am). "I felt good," Schmitz would say later, "but when Heikki and Brad passed me (at the start), I knew then that they were going too fast for me to keep up."

It was the same for everyone. The Mikkola-Lackey battle dominated the moto, even though Mikkola, after taking first place on the first lap, never let Brad by. Once Schmitz had passed Malherbe for third place on the third lap, the first four positions were set.

While the crowd cheered for Lackey up front, the race back in the pack was a triumph for some, an ordeal for others. LaPorte's bike had a new engine to solve the countershaft problem, but in the rush to change the motor, clutch adjustment was overlooked. Two laps from the finish, the slipping clutch would force LaPorte to give up. Until then, it simply slowed him >



Semics leads DeCoster (3) and LaPorte in the second moto.



The chrome-moly-man of motocross, World Champion Heikki Mikkola is a moto-toughened, 32-year-old GP veteran.



Schmitz tied with Mikkola in moto finishes, but lost the overall on the basis of elapsed time.



down drastically.

Roger DeCoster killed his engine in a turn while seventh and was hit from behind by Gerrit Wolsink. The crash re-injured Wolsink's left knee, which had been hurt at the first round in Switzerland. Both DeCoster and Wolsink crashed again, separately, DeCoster ramming a fence with a stuck throttle, Wolsink just "trying to go too fast, hit the fence and lost it." Both retired.

Mike Bell started 11th and passed his way into fifth. "Because everyone goes really fast, it wasn't an easy job passing them off," he would say after the race. When Bell first moved into fifth, he was 30 seconds behind Schmitz and Malherbe. By the finish, he would be within seven seconds of the pair.

By the last lap, it was Mikkola; Lackey; Schmitz; Malherbe; Bell; Terry Clark (Maico), who had stopped during the first moto to hand his bike's crash-broken front brake lever to his mechanic, Staten, whose bike had loaded up on the line and left him in last place off the start; Semics, Burgett and Croft. Andersson had slipped to 13th with a painfully-injured hand.

The crowd yells and screams. Mikkola seems to sense when Lackey is closest, and chooses those moments to somehow get his best drives, ride his hardest. The gap narrows, then lengthens, and it is certain that Mikkola will win this moto. Still, the people cheer Lackey on. . . .

Mikkola and Schmitz are tied in finishes: 1-3 to 3-1, but elapsed time gives Mikkola the overall win by a little more than one minute.

"Yeah, the second moto was a little different than the first," said Lackey after the race. "Heikki was just riding around in the first moto, probably going 10 seconds a lap slower than he did in the second. But if I hadn't lost that chain, I'm confident I could have won—a first and a second would have been good enough."

Can he still win the championship?

"Not with stuff like this happening," Lackey says. "In Sweden I broke down one moto, today I broke one moto, and Heikki is not breaking down. I'm losing points and most of the time he's first and I'm a close second, but no cigar. Pretty soon he can just cruise and get second behind me."

## 250 Support

The USGP 250cc Support event was closer to being a national race than it was to the usual support race. Honda teamster Jimmy "Captain Colbalt" Ellis won overall, with a third in the first moto and a win in the second. Ellis led the first moto at the halfway point, until his bike threw its chain. Ellis fixed the problem, remounted and passed teammate Warren Reid for second, but lost the chain again. That left Darrell Schultz on a privateer Maico out front at the finish, trailed by Reid and the again-moving Ellis.



Weinert and DeCoster roost in the second moto.



Jimmy Weinert and Tommy Croft were this close for the second half of the second moto. Croft passed Weinert, who wasn't scored because he holds a 250cc license.



Four-time USGP winner Gerrit Wolsink was plagued with a bad start and multiple crashes, ending up with a seventh and a DNF.

Ellis came from seventh to win the second moto. A last-lap try by Schultz to take second from Reid ended with Schultz down. By the time he remounted, Husqvarna's Chuck Sun had nabbed third place.



Burgett (20) finished fourth overall, second American. Here, Andersson and DeCoster trail.

## POINT STANDINGS

PLACE	RIDER	POINTS
1.	Heikki Mikkola	172
2.	Brad Lackey	138
3.	Roger DeCoster	101
4.	Herbert Schmitz	84
5.	Andre Malherbe	74
6.	Gerrit Wolsink	58

## RESULTS

PLACE	RIDER	FINISHES	BIKE
1.	Heikki Mikkola	3-1	Yamaha
2.	Herbert Schmitz	1-3	Maico
3.	Mike Bell	4-5	Yamaha
4.	Rick Burgett	5-9	Yamaha
5.	Gary Semics	10-8	Can-Am
6.	Tommy Croft	9-10	Honda
7.	Frank Stacy	12-11	KTM
8.	Hakan Andersson	13-13	Husqvarna
9.	Brad Lackey	25-2	Honda
10.	Roger DeCoster	2-25	Suzuki

## 250 RESULTS

PLACE	RIDER	FINISHES	BIKE
1.	Jimmy Ellis	3-1	Honda
2.	Warren Reid	2-2	Honda
3.	Darrell Schultz	1-4	Maico
4.	Jeff Jennings	5-6	Maico
5.	Mark Barnett	10-5	Suzuki
6.	Marty Moates	8-8	Honda
7.	Dennis Brand	9-10	Maico
8.	Mark Gregson	11-9	Suzuki
9.	Greg Theiss	13-11	Honda
10.	Goat Breker	12-12	Husqvarna