

# Danny LaPorte

## part two

Part One of this interview with Danny LaPorte centered around his disappointing loss of the 125cc National Championship to Yamaha's Broc Glover. In Part Two, we get deeper into Danny LaPorte, motocross racer and individual with some good things to say.

We pick up the interview just at the point where we asked Danny about his relatively recent past, when he began racing against the riders he's currently pitted against in National Championship competition.

Here we go...

**PC:** When do you remember riding against Bob Hannah?

**DLP:** I guess it was at Saddleback in about 1975, because he hasn't been racing that long. When I first actually raced against him, he was just learning about motocross, but it didn't take him long to start doing really good.

**PC:** What was your first seriously sponsored ride?

**DLP:** I rode for Kel Franks, one of the guys who runs the CMC, and who also builds bikes. I got to where I was doing pretty good on Kelvin's bikes, when one day, Suzuki called my house (in late '75). Kel had a pretty good relationship with Suzuki, because he was always getting parts for his bikes from them.

**PC:** Were you just doing the weekend CMC pro races, or the night circuit as well?

**DLP:** Just the weekend day races, I really don't like racing at night. It's just too much of a hassle and I'd rather sleep.

At first, that's why I didn't like the stadium races, but I guess I've gotten used to them now.

Anyway, while I was riding for Kel, I got that phone call from Suzuki and I didn't hesitate at all to hop on down there and start talking to them.

**PC:** You sure make it all sound easy. When you first talked to Suzuki, did you handle all your own contract talks, or did you have somebody to help and advise you?

**DLP:** I did it pretty much on my own. My parents helped me quite a bit with business advice and Kel had already told me that if a better deal came along, to go for it. I felt bad about leaving him in the lurch after I'd told him I'd ride his bikes, but he said that if it was a good offer, to go ahead with it. So, I started riding for Suzuki.

**PC:** What was it like when you first went out on the National circuit?

**DLP:** It was a rude awakening! I really thought it would be easier than it really was. The first national race I rode was in Florida, and it was a completely different scene from a CNC race. The courses were quite a bit different and the competition was much keener. That first

course was in Jacksonville and it seemed like half the course was whoop-de-dooos and sand. But I was sort of used to that kind of terrain from the desert riding I'd done.

**PC:** Did Suzuki put you on the 125s right from the beginning?

**DLP:** Right, their main point in signing me was for me to ride the 125cc class. They really wanted a rider to go after Marty Smith in that class. That's mainly what they wanted me for.

**PC:** Do you like riding 125s? Do you like them best?

**DLP:** Yeah, it's a really fun class. But I don't necessarily think more of them than the other classes.

**PC:** Do you think of yourself as primarily a 125cc rider? Or do you think yourself more versatile?

**DLP:** I think my ability is a little bit more unlimited in the 250 and 500cc classes. I'm a little heavy for a 125 rider, since I weigh 175 and there are a lot of 135 riders in that class.

That's a definite disadvantage for me, having to race all those lighter guys on the small bikes and still trying to go fast. But I like the feeling of a light machine; it's so much fun and exciting.

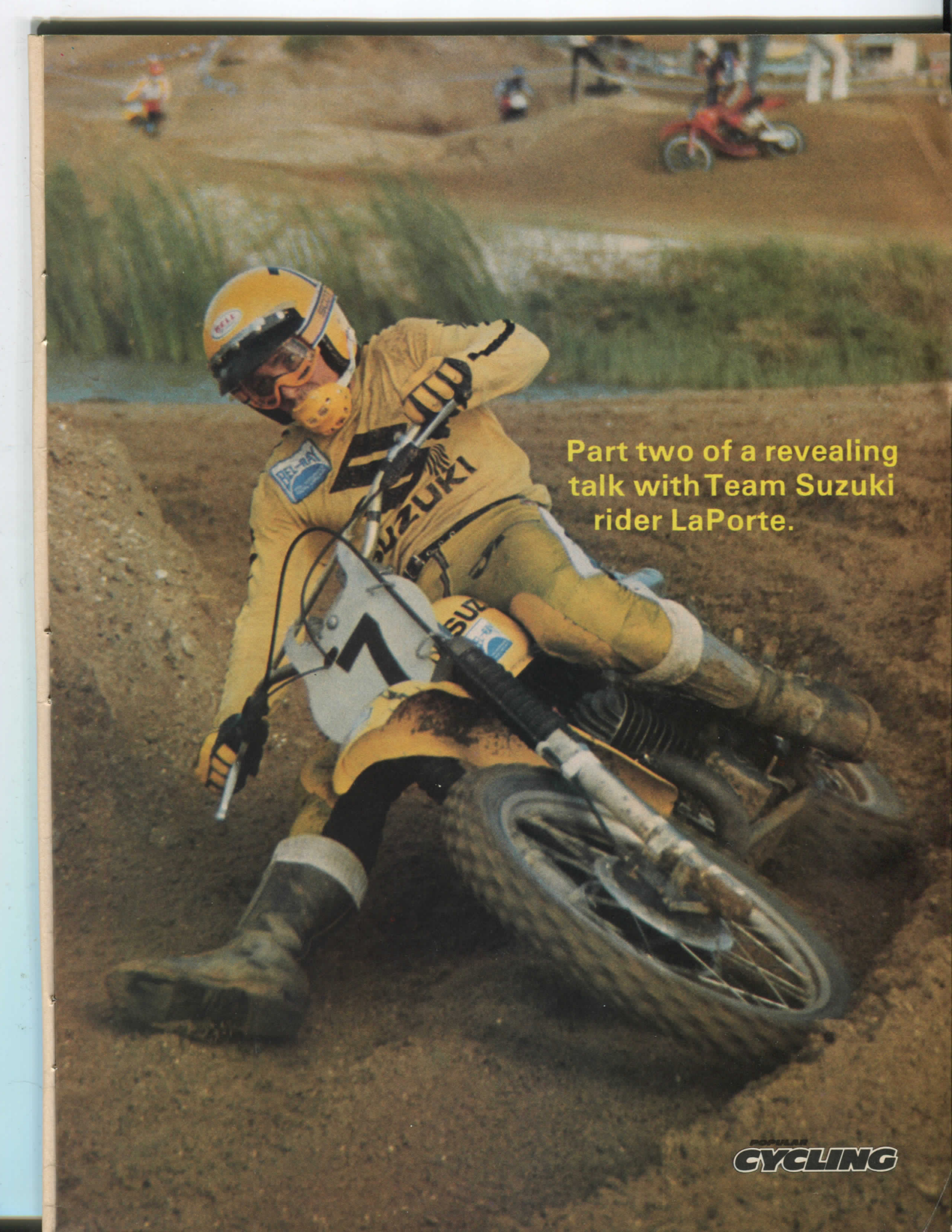
But then I like the feeling of power on a 250 or open class bike.

**PC:** Since we've just completed the 125cc National season and this is primarily a 125cc special issue, let's talk more about riding and racing 125s.

Are these bikes harder, easier or just different to ride than a bigger bore machine?

**DLP:** Comparing it to a bigger machine, like a 500, acceleration isn't nearly as brutal. The 125 doesn't pull your arms, so you don't have to strain just to hold on to the handlebars.

Since the acceleration isn't as powerful, you tend to just sit more on the bike and control it rather than having to hold on and control it at the same time. So in turn, on a 125, it's much easier to throw the bike into a turn and pull it back up and then change your line real quick. But on a 500, when you come into a turn you sit up and start rolling the throttle on and come out and there's a lot more



Part two of a revealing  
talk with Team Suzuki  
rider LaPorte.

power and it's a heavier machine, so your arms tend to get more tired on a big bike than a 125.

Through bumps, coming out of turns and over hills, up and down hills, a 250 or 500 is more difficult to control, so you have to slow down for such obstacles, but on a 125, you just leave it wide open all the time and it seems to track a lot better than the big bikes.

**PC:** What about starts?

**DLP:** Getting the holeshot is much more important on the 125s, because if somebody good is in front of you, you'll have a harder time catching up, because a good 125 rider gets the bike really tapped out on most courses. As far as technique, you've got to keep your weight off the rear wheel and lean forward, so that the tire is always spinning and you don't bog down the horsepower. You've got to sit way up on the gas tank and feather the clutch a lot. That's all more flexible and forgiving on a bigger bike, because you've got so much more horsepower.

**PC:** Do you move around on the bike much?

**DLP:** Not as much as some other riders. Maybe because I'm heavier, I can just move my shoulders and upper body to get the right amount of wheel spin or traction. Hannah, on the other hand, is a guy who moves all over the bike, shifting his weight. But he's quite a bit smaller than me.

You know, depending on the size of the course and how fast the turns are, and how long the straights are, you might very well get around as fast on a 125 as on anything else. Also, on many courses, you can ride a 125 to its absolute maximum, but nobody, even Roger (DeCoster) could ride a 500 flat out on that course.

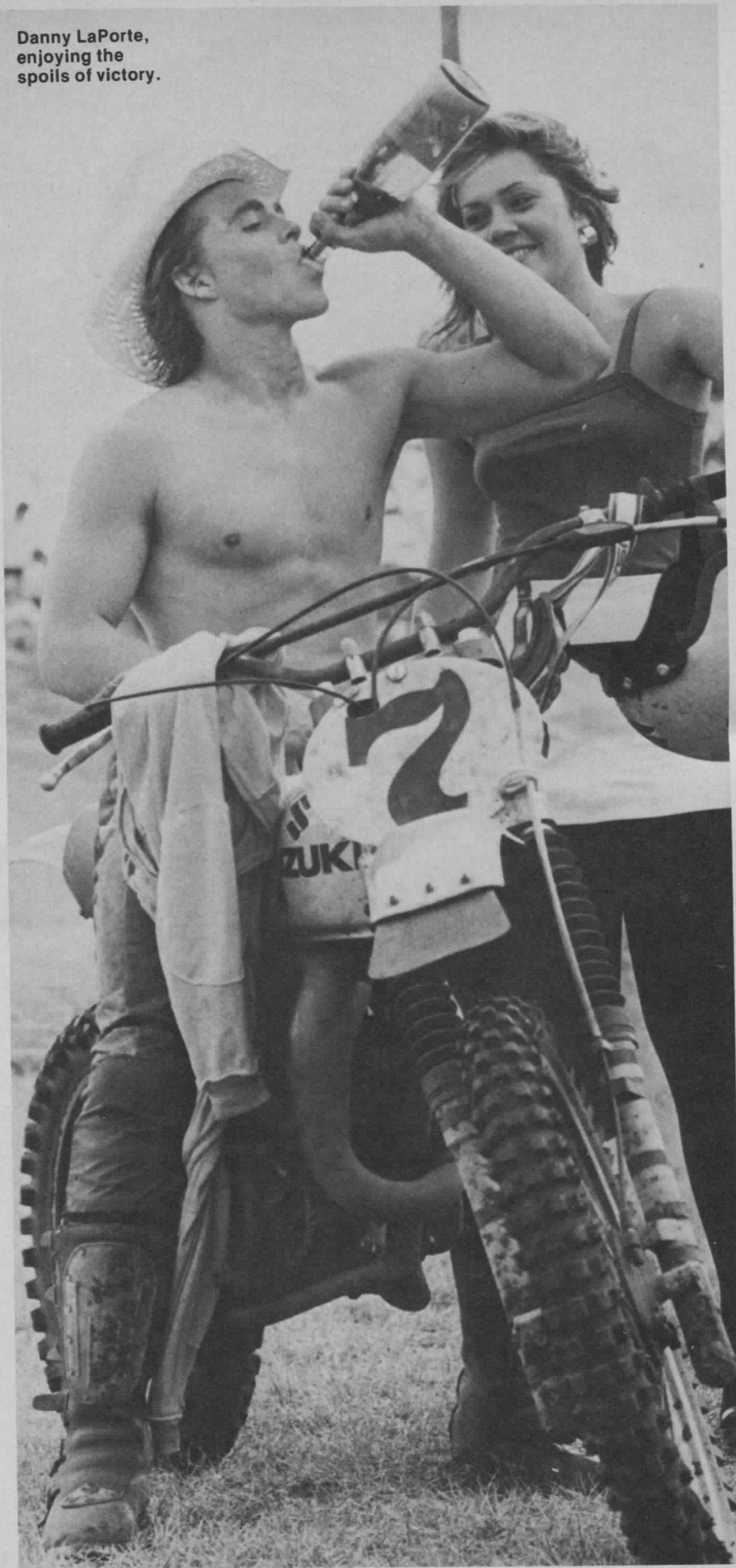
So, if on a 125 you get a bad start, you're already riding it to its maximum, and to try and catch somebody is really difficult.

But on a 500, if you get a bad start, it's easier to really ride hard and make up distance. In other words, it's much, much more difficult for me to make up an eight second gap and catch Bob Hannah on a 125 than it is on a 250 or 500. Because, if you have to, you can just hold the throttle on the 500 and berserk it for a few laps and make up that distance. You might scare yourself half to death, but you have that reserve of horsepower to draw on. On a 125, it just isn't there.

**PC:** What about the motorcycle you've been racing? Is that a trick works bike, or is it fairly standard?

**DLP:** The bike I rode on the national circuit this year has a stock RM engine and a special frame, with different suspension. We used a different exhaust pipe and specially tuned the carburetor of the RM-125 engine, but that's about all. It's a good stock engine.

Danny LaPorte,  
enjoying the  
spoils of victory.



The suspension was pretty different, but it wasn't anything radical. Mainly it was just set up to my individual specifications.

**PC:** Let's change the subject for a minute and talk about Danny LaPorte's goals and ambitions. What do you want, to be the World Champion? What?

**DLP:** For a long time, my ambition has been to be the World Champion, because that's the thing I've always looked up to and admired and read about. It's such a prestigious thing, that that's what I wanted to become. But now, motocross in the United States is so much more popular than what it was in the past, to become a national champion is becoming as important and vital as being World Champion.

The money in both categories is about the same now, so that's not a big factor. But the prestige and the difficulty of becoming the Champion is almost the same in both.



Much of Danny's Team Suzuki success has come through the efforts of his tuner, Pat Alexander.

I consider that to be either the World Champion or National Champion requires very high standards and it'd be super neat; to wear that number one plate in either would be something!

For me as a rider, to set a goal is one of the most important things there is. I think that before you can go on and do something you've got to set a goal and have an ambition.

Without a goal, you don't have anything to look forward to or work towards. A lot of people are like that though; they don't have high standards or goals.

In life, some people have high standards. They want social status or they want to become something special

or something higher than what they are. If they set those goals and strive towards them, eventually they come close or reach those goals. But if you don't have a high goal, then you probably won't ever go over it.

You're only as good as what you want to be, and that doesn't apply only to motocross.

You have both external and internal goals. On the outside, your goal might be something as clear cut as beating 40 riders in a moto. Everybody sees that and it's pretty obvious.

But then, you've also got an internal goal, which is what's inside your mind. What goes on in there. It might be something like maintaining your concentration for the duration of a 40-minute moto, or it might be something more esoteric that you personally want to achieve, like beating a certain rider, or reaching a certain championship level or something.

**DLP:** Let's say that you're starting to get tired. Well, your mind says, "Hey you're getting tired," so then you're gonna get tired. If you keep saying you're gonna get tired, then you're thinking too much about it and as a result, you will get extra fatigued. But if you're concentrating on racing, on which line, on hills, on passing people, or trying to catch Bob Hannah, you're keeping your mind busy and you shouldn't be getting as tired. Does that make sense?

**PC:** Yes it makes a lot of sense.

What about race track psychology?

**DLP:** Do you mean during the race, or the kind of thing that goes on before and between motos?

**PC:** Both.

**DLP:** The pre-race stuff doesn't bother me too much. I don't try it too much on other riders and when they do it to me, it doesn't bother me too much. When you're on the race track, you're too busy to play games.

The most important thing, I think, about racing psychology is when you're leading and about to be caught or when you're behind and are trying to catch up.

Automatically, when I'm behind and get a leading rider in sight, I really start going hard to catch him. I just drive harder and harder and put all my forces and energy into that direction.

**PC:** As soon as you can actually see him, it helps?

**DLP:** Right. As soon as I see him up there, I go for it. Once a lap, I look at him again and see that I'm getting closer, and then my adrenalin really starts pumping faster and faster. There's no way that I can stop, until the checkered flag falls.

**PC:** What about when somebody like Hannah or Marty Smith is behind you and closing the gap?

**DLP:** Now that's the advantage of being behind. There is a distinct advantage to being behind, as long as you have the ability and equipment to close up.

There's one thing that my father has always told me that really helps and that's that if you're in first place and there's no one to pace yourself against, then race against a guy you call "time." Pretend he's always just out of sight around the next corner. You're always trying to catch this imaginary rider.

**PC:** That's a neat idea.

**DLP:** It works really good. Unfortunately, I don't usually get good holeshots, so I'm always coming from behind, so I've got some very real riders to overtake.

One of the most important things is to set your mind so that you don't go to pieces if you make a mistake. You just say, "Oh, I made a mistake," and keep going. Don't give yourself a hard time, just because you make a mistake.

By the time you've made a mistake, it's all over. Just pass it and go on.

**PC:** No matter how much the mistake

cost, or to whatever degree the mistake was? Just shrug it off and carry on, huh?

**DLP:** Right. Just forget it and keep your cool.

**PC:** Say you'd been leading the second moto at San Antonio and made a mistake and crashed, blowing the whole thing yourself?

**DLP:** It wouldn't have done me any good to worry about it, would it? If I crash on the last lap and I'm thinking about it... "Why did I crash, why did I crash?" It isn't going to help and I'm sure not concentrating fully on racing. It's not going to work. Just get up, forget about it and go, you know.

The top guys in the sport, like Roger DeCoster, Heikki Mikkola, Gerrit (Wol-sink) and Gaston (Rahier) are all in the positions they have because they have an incredible degree of concentration. Sure, they have the ability to handle the motorcycle, but lots of riders have that ability. Those guys have something else, though, and that's the ability to keep a cool head under virtually any circumstances.

And you'll note that those guys are older. They're not 17- or 18-year-old kids.

**PC:** What do you mean by that statement. Maybe the younger guys have too much on their minds or something?

**DLP:** No, it's just that it takes time to learn how to concentrate.

There are a lot of guys who do have the natural ability to concentrate. Bob Hannah is one. Jimmy Weinert is the same way. He's got fantastic concentration, when he thinks of something, he's got it completely in his mind and he's going to do it. He's completely into it, and he never thinks of anything but the goal he sets for himself.

**PC:** How did you learn concentration, when you're so much younger than Roger DeCoster or Heikki Mikkola?

**DLP:** Well, about two or three years before I began racing motorcycles, I was really heavy into trap shooting; you know, clay pigeons and shotguns. Now that's a sport that requires a fairly high degree of concentration. I was California State Junior Trap Shooting Champion, so I guess I must have learned concentration pretty well.

**PC:** Do you get nervous before a race?

**DLP:** At times I do. If I start thinking about what might happen, or how important the outcome is, then I might get nervous. Usually, though, I'm able to keep pretty cool.

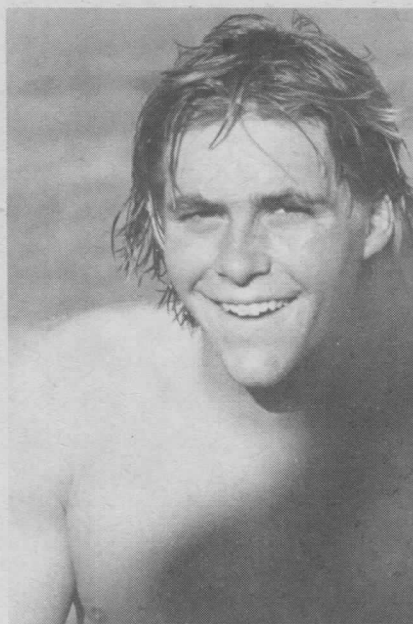
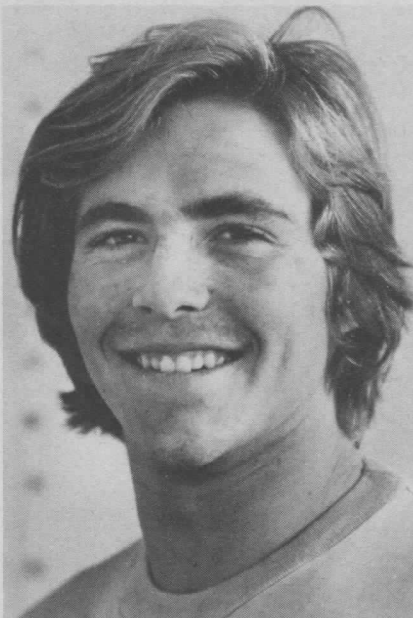
**PC:** How about training and physical conditioning?

**DLP:** Obviously that's important, just to be able to finish a long moto. And the better shape you're in, the less likely you are to get hurt. Just about every top rider on the national circuit is pretty religious about training. You have to be.

Motocross is becoming more and more of a training sport, which I think is good. Physical conditioning is very important



LaPorte shows concentration as he rounds a turn in the '77 Florida Winter Series.



in all sports, but especially in endurance sports like racing.

There's really no set way that somebody should train. For instance, if they have trouble with their legs tiring out, they should develop their legs.

I like different sports, and I'm very active in a variety of things, so I find that my best method of training is to participate in those sports a lot. I ride bicycles, water ski, play racquetball, tennis or soccer. That sort of thing.

**PC:** What about riding a motorcycle? A lot of the ISDT riders say that the best training for racing a motorcycle is racing a motorcycle.

**DLP:** I don't think so. If I practice a lot during the week, by the weekend I feel I'm burned out on riding. I don't want to sound like I'm such a good rider that I know everything, but I think it's more important for me to be in good shape and relaxed on race day than to keep practicing on riding techniques.

**PC:** Do you have a regular schedule that you follow?

**DLP:** Yes. On Monday after a race, I rest. On Tuesday I train, Wednesday I ride, Thursday I train and on Friday, I just find some sport to play, like racquetball, baseball, tennis. Lately, we've been playing soccer down at the high school.

**PC:** What about other forms of motorcycle racing? Have you ever considered anything besides motocross?

**DLP:** I rode trials a little bit, but I didn't really like it. I thought it was kind of boring. But I like to watch the good guys. It might be different if I knew I could handle some of the sections that those guys ride. I've just never gotten into the sport deeply enough to get really into it.

One thing I really like is enduros. There's a lot of calculations involved, besides riding, and I really enjoy that. In 1973, I rode enduros out here (SoCal) for Penton and had a good time. We rode some Nationals and the good district events. Enduros are a lot more interesting and challenging than a lot of motocross fans think. I've ridden some events in which it was a real feat just to finish the thing. There were rocky hills that you just had to carry your motorcycle up and speed averages that required you to go flat out down incredible trails, trying to stay on schedule all the time. Now tell me that that isn't challenging!

After I retire from motocross, I'd like to try going for the ISDT team. I think that I'd really enjoy that type of event.

**PC:** Since you like that type of riding so much, what do you think of most of the motocross courses around, that other guys have said were too artificial. And some of those guys didn't remotely like cross country type of riding.

**DLP:** That's a good point. Most of the motocross courses are too easy and don't

offer enough challenge to rider ability, other than just going fast.

Like that course at San Antonio, Texas... There weren't hardly any difficult obstacles on the whole track. On the other hand, the track at Unadilla, New York, my favorite circuit, has some real natural challenges like eroded places, a long hairy uphill and some serious whoops. It's a neat track and the type I like because I can show my own type of ability better on it.

**PC:** So would you like to see more courses like Unadilla?

**DLP:** For sure. See, when I was a kid and was reading about the guys who were sort of heroes to me, like DeCoster, Robert, Paul Friedrichs and Torsten Hallman, they were riding on natural terrain motocross courses and they were much better all-around riders because not only did they have to just go fast, but they had to go fast over adverse terrain as well. That was those guys' definition of real motocross, not the tracks they rode on when they first came here.

Getting around a track that requires a lot of skill and maneuvering and technique rather than just flat out racing is a lot more satisfying.

That's why I'd like to see more promoters really get more into natural terrain courses and track conditions. The original object of motocross was to get around a natural terrain course as quickly as possible, but here in the United States, they've started changing the idea, making courses which are way too easy.

**PC:** Is there a particular size bike you like racing more than any other?

**DLP:** Well, I'm involved in three different classes, the 125, 250 and 500cc bikes, in national, international and world competition. As far as I'm concerned, they're all equally important. It takes an equal amount of skill to ride any of the three, and no matter what class you're in, a champion is a champion.

**PC:** So you think you adapt equally well at all three sizes?

**DLP:** Right. I don't think it's entirely correct, or even fair, to typecast me as a 125cc, or open class specialist. I can ride all three.

**PC:** Point taken. We hereby apologize in full for calling you a 125cc specialist in part one of this interview last month.

**DLP:** I don't mean to say that it's easy to get off one size and right on to another. That's not true. In fact, that's one of the hard things about the current AMA scheduling, that they intermingle the championship series, so that it's hard to ride more than one.

This year, I rode all three classes, 125, 250 and 500. The only other rider who rode all three was Bob (Hannah). The 125 is much different from the 250 and 500 because of the horsepower and weight variation and change. The

schedule that the AMA has set up for us requires quite a bit of switching around of motorcycles, because of overlapping national schedules.

It's a little difficult to jump on a 125 one week, the next week ride a 250 and the third week a 500. I've done that, but it's very difficult. It's something that



In the Florida series earlier this year, LaPorte first came up against Broc Glover head-to-head. In this race, at Gainesville, Florida, the two battled side by side for the whole race.

takes a while to learn to do. In that last event of the 125cc series, I noticed a lot more difference than in other events. The week before I'd ridden a 500, and when I

**DLP:** For some reason, they stretch the 125cc series out over several months, with long gaps between races, but they run the 250 and 500cc series closer

the best job it can. One of the main things that's probably screwing them up is the rapid growth of the sport. They just can't handle that much data coming in



**LaPorte holds off rival Kent Howerton in the deep, goeey mud at Dallas' Texas Stadium Supercross race. In the very beginning, LaPorte wasn't overly fond of supercross racing, but like most of his contemporaries, has come to appreciate what the sport is doing for them and motorcycling in general.**

got on the 125 at San Antonio, the difference was a lot more noticeable to me, especially because of the pressure in that particular race. It wasn't as easy to make the switch as I thought it would be. I was trying to ride the 125 like a 500 at first and the next week I tried to ride the 500 like a 125.

Maybe by the end of the second moto, I'll be okay, but that's a little bit too late. If you're going to ride two or three different classes in one year, it should all be done in parts, instead of switching back and forth. I really think that this is bad organization and scheduling on the part of the AMA.

**PC:** They always get the 250cc National series over with before they start anything else, but they overlap the 125 and 500.



together. I don't fully understand their reasoning.

**PC:** What do you think of the idea going around to have the 250cc series in the stadium events, the 500s outdoors, on natural tracks and the 125s as a support class?

**DLP:** Well, that's just an idea that the AMA has come up with, so I don't know if they're going to do that for sure. They've got some other ideas they're trying to work out as well. It's only to the benefit of the racers to be able to compete in the type, class or series that they're best in.

**PC:** What do you think of the AMA in general?

**DLP:** The AMA is, as far as I know, the very first American association involved in motocross. They've sure come a long ways since the beginning of the sport in this country, so they've learned an awful lot. The AMA learns something every weekend, at every race that they run. You can't argue with that experience. It's just like what I was saying earlier about the racers themselves. You can't argue with DeCoster's experience, can you?

But the AMA... It takes awhile. You can't just come out with a perfect rule book right from the start. You can't instantly know everything there is to know whenever a new type of racing starts to get popular, such as the Supercross Series, or speedway or whatever.

So, I think the AMA is probably doing

so quickly.

**PC:** What do you really think of stadium racing?

**DLP:** I really like it! I think it's... at first my opinion of it was bad, because I was saying, "This isn't motocross, this isn't what I want to do." But by doing this type of racing, we're selling racing to a different part of the public, and that's what is making it grow and will keep on making it grow.

Stadium racing isn't any more difficult than the typical Sunday outdoor race; it's short, fast and really exciting, especially for the spectators. It's a lot of fun. I think that I'd like to see stadium racing get a whole lot bigger than it is now.

**PC:** You've probably never had the chance to sit in the grandstand and watch one, have you?

**DLP:** Yes, I have. In 1973, at the Superbowl, when Marty Tripes won. I was jumping out of my seat, you know. My dad almost had to force me to go, because I didn't want to go and watch other guys race, I wanted to be part of it.

I couldn't believe the excitement and electricity in the air, watching that race. It was really something.

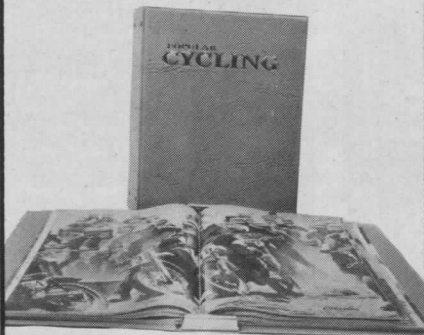
You have to take stadium racing as a somewhat different sport from outdoor motocross. It's not exactly motocross, but it's as close as they can get to it and have the general public get really interested in it.

One really good thing that stadium racing is doing, is drawing big outside

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**DANNY LaPORTE**

companies into motorcycle racing. Like Coca-Cola, Toyota, and others. Those kind of sponsors have never been attracted to any kind of motorcycle racing before, but they're almost battling each other to get involved with stadium racing. Sooner or later, that has to overlap and help out all kinds of motocross, not just stadium motocross. It's opening doors all over the place.

It's happening so fast, now, that it's really kind of neat to watch.

Another good thing about it is that people who might never go out to an outdoor race are going to the stadium events, and some of those are bound to get interested enough to either come out and watch an outdoor event, or buy a bike and start racing themselves.

If they do the latter, they're not going to start racing in Anaheim Stadium, they're going to go to Saddleback Park, or wherever. They're going to start out on a local, amateur level and shoot for the time when they are good enough to be riding in a supercross race. I think it'll work just like baseball, or any other big league sport, with a grass roots level and a big money professional other end of the scale. Of course, it's already like that with professional racing of any kind, but stadium racing is going to make bike racing as close to football or baseball as anything possibly can.

**PC:** What about the pre-teen kids? It's way too early for them to start racing as a serious professional, but should they race or not?

**DLP:** I feel that if I had a kid who was really interested in motorcycling, I'd keep him interested in motorcycling, by taking him riding and letting him enjoy the things about riding, like going to the desert, trail riding, riding in the mountains, things like that. Then I'd let him make a decision for himself, you know, whether he wanted to make it a profession or not.

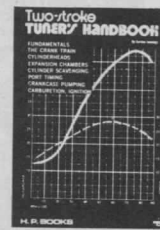
Kids racing at nine or younger is, I think, really worthless. Getting riding experience at that age is good, but just riding, not hard racing. Not at that age.

Young kids HAVE to be able to do the things they really want to do, not just motorcycles, motorcycles, motorcycles. They have to be somewhat free, to develop their own interests, whether that's racing motocross or being a concert pianist.

Some fathers really push their kids, and I can see why, because the father never could race, and the kid is doing it for them and they want to see the kid out there winning races, to please their own egos. It doesn't really matter for a kid that age whether or not he's actually racing competitively; he should be

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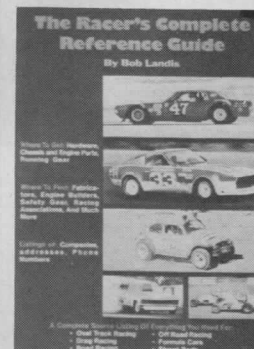
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City \_\_\_\_\_  
State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_