

Danny La Porte

A talk with Team
Suzuki's winning
125cc specialist.

Part One



Just two days after his disappointing loss of the 125cc National Championship to Yamaha's Broc Glover, Team Suzuki's Danny LaPorte stopped by the *Popular Cycling* office to sit for this interview.

After tape-recording two full 90-minute cassettes, we realized that we had on record an interview that's several notches above normal.

Danny LaPorte has a lot more to say than just how, why and when he got started in motocross and whether or not he wants to be the World Champion.

It's a very in-depth interview, revealing not only Danny LaPorte as a very talented motorcycle racer, but as a thoughtful and rather philosophical person as well.

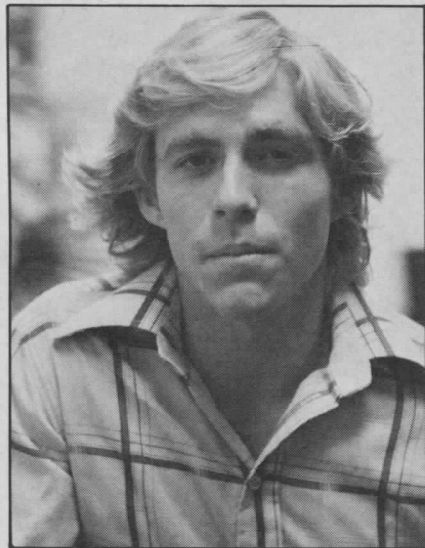
We won't demean Danny by saying that we were surprised, but it does seem like we've done an awful lot of racer interviews that involved little more than mumbled answers to inane questions.

Fortunately, this interview goes a whole lot deeper than that. Take a look at Danny LaPorte, motocross racer . . .

part one

PC: First of all, Danny, since the San Antonio finale to the National Championship series is so much on everybody's mind, let's ask you about that event.

DLP: Well, I'm obviously disappointed about the outcome. But I'm more disappointed with the way it all happened than with just losing the



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National Championship. That really doesn't matter that much, but the other thing really hurts me, you know.

PC: You mean when Bob Hannah got team orders to move over and let Broc Glover past to take the win and the Championship?

DLP: Well, see, Bob is a really good friend of mine, and I knew that he wanted to win the race, not so that I'd get the Championship, but so that he could prove that he's still the best rider. He wanted to show that he could still win.

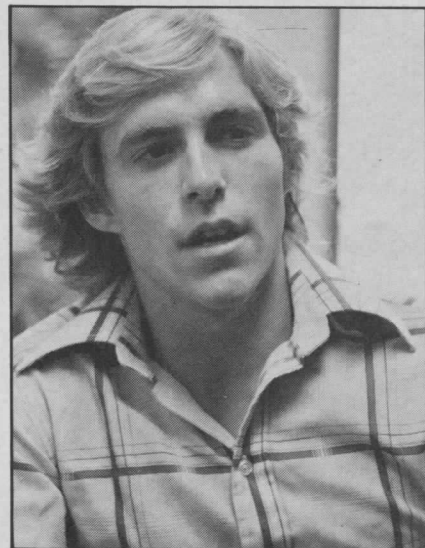
So obviously, there was nothing premeditated about the outcome of the race, like Yamaha asking Bob to block me or anything like that, so that Broc could win. Maybe three laps from the end of the second moto, the Yamaha team officials came out to Bob's tuner and told him to hold up this move-over sign. He didn't want to do it, but the team manager said he had to.

PC: You mean Keith McCarty didn't want to give the signal, but Kenny Clark (Yamaha team manager) told him he had to?

DLP: Yeah. Anyway, Hannah came around with a real good lead, and Keith was there holding this sign that said to let Broc by. Keith wasn't very happy about it, and I understand that Bob tried to look the other way and not see the board. After the race, he wouldn't even look at anybody, he was so ashamed. He didn't even come right into the pits, but rode off into the woods for a few minutes. When he did come back to the pits, he went straight into the team van and wouldn't talk to anybody.

PC: Did he, or anybody from Yamaha talk to you?

DLP: Well, Bob finally talked when I went over to him, but there wasn't much he could say. He was really bummed



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about the whole deal, but all I could say was that I knew it wasn't his own idea.

And one thing that sort of griped me was when these Yamaha guys came over to me. One was the team manager and I think the other was one of the PR guys. They came up and said, "Well, Dan, we hated to do that to you. You know, we needed a Championship and that's just the way we had to do it."

PC: What did you say back to them?

DLP: The only thing I felt I *could* say was that I'd rather see someone be able to win a race without having it given to them on a platter. And that I thought that Bob and Broc probably felt the same way.

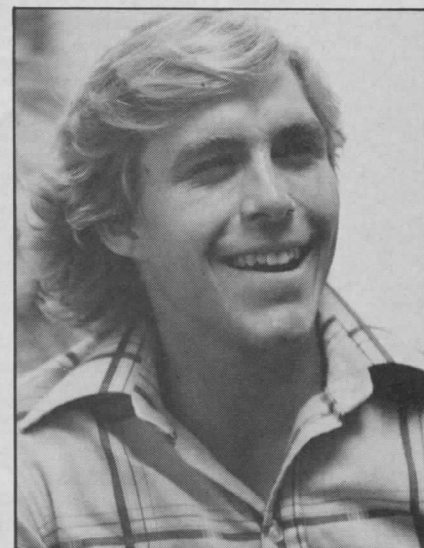
The thing is, what they did didn't have anything to do with racing. It was all business, and I can understand why they'd want a National Championship, for the advertising and all, but that's not the way to do it, I don't think.

They just made it so obvious, and it was degrading to them. You know what? After the race, people were coming up to me and saying how bad they thought the whole deal was. Honestly, there were more people around my pits than around the Yamaha pits.

I really felt bad for Bob, because he wanted to win, so that everybody would know that he's still the best, even though he didn't win the National Championship. And Broc, boy, if he can accept the title, and feel like he did it 100 percent himself, then it's bad for him. He just has to be aware of how it all happened.

I don't mean to take anything away from Broc Glover, because he won more races than I did, and he ended up with the National Championship. I just think that he'd much rather have won it all by himself.

PC: What do you think about the



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whole thing now, a few days after the race?

DLP: Well, it's maybe surprising, but I feel pretty good about it now. Going back for a moment, the reason why I was so disappointed at first is that I really believe in individual performance in sports. I think a guy should carry his own weight, make his own accomplishments. That's why I was so stunned when the Yamaha PR guys came out and made Keith hold out that sign to Bob. And I think that's partly why Bob was so bummed out by it all.

But now, I kind of think it's a good experience for me, that I've learned this. In the future, it's going to do a lot for me, I think.

PC: What if the situation were reversed, and you found that all of a sudden the shoe was on the other foot and you saw your tuner holding out a sign to move over so that somebody else could take the win?

DLP: Let's say that next year Billy

(Grossi) was in a position to take the series championship, but I was leading the race. First of all, I don't think that such a thing would happen, because I believe that Suzuki's team structure is different from Yamaha's, but even if it did, I really think I wouldn't be able to throw a race, even if it meant my job.

As I said before, I deeply believe in individual performance in sports, and that's the way I've always raced. And as far as Suzuki team efforts, I think that there's nothing in my contract that says I might have to do something like that. It says that we have to travel as a team, work as a team, but I'm sure that it doesn't say that we have to throw races away as a team. I, of course, wouldn't make any kind of move to block one of my own guys, especially if he was running for a championship which was out of my grasp, but if I was ahead of him and running competitively, you can bet that he'd have to righteously pass me if he wanted around.

PC: Back to that San Antonio race, what actually happened in the two motos? Everybody is talking about the last few laps and the subsequent actions, but hardly anybody has said much about the actual racing. What happened to you in the two motos?

DLP: In the first moto, the (starting) gate was messed up, and Bob and I both got away late. Half the gate was dropping before the other half, so by the time those of us on that end got away, the other half of the pack had about ten feet or so on us. Anyway, a bunch of people crashed in the first turn and we got out maybe 20th. Glover had gotten the hole shot and was gone. Bob and I worked our way up to second and third, and were catching Glover. Bob caught him and almost passed him. I got off the track while lapping a rider, so had to settle for third. So we finished 1-2-3 in the first moto.

In the second moto, I told myself that this was it. I had to go for it. The stupid



LaPorte wasn't always a supporter of Supercross racing, but he concedes the value of such races to the public. Here, he follows Jim Weinert and leads Gaylon Mosier in Houston's Astrodome.

gate still wasn't working right, so we had the same problem. I didn't want to take a chance on jumping the start, so I had to wait until the gate actually dropped.

This time, Hannah got the hole shot, because he wanted to show everybody he was the best. When he gets a good start, he gets really pumped up and he was really happy. He knew he was going to win the race, you know. He was going for it the whole way. I was pretty far back and Bob had about a 25-second lead on me and Broc. Finally, it was about three laps from the end of the moto, and I knew that was it! It was over. I was the National Champion and I just had to ride around and finish third behind Glover.

But I was still going for it. I think I was catching up maybe a second a lap at the finish, and I was really trying to catch Broc. I knew that I had the strength to go hard at the finish, and that was my plan. With two laps to go, I came around by the finish line and everybody was smiling, waving and cheering. Then the

next lap, nobody was doing anything and I knew that something was wrong. So then I was really going for it. I mean, in some places, I was totally out of control. I was going just as fast as I could. I wasn't even thinking of anything but racing just as fast as I could, because I just knew that they had done something. I knew that Hannah had been in first place and then I saw these Yamaha officials all standing there with Keith (McCarty) unwillingly holding up that signboard.

You know what all happened after that.

PC: Wow, that whole thing really sounds like a complete bummer for everybody concerned.

DLP: Yeah, it was!

PC: Well, what can we say. We're really sorry that it turned out the way it did, not only for you, but for everybody else as well. It's too bad that everybody has to have a sour taste in their mouth from the outcome of a National

Championship series.

DLP: I still feel the worst for Bob. I hope that he doesn't get a bunch of bad press for this whole thing. After all, it wasn't his fault, and in my estimation, he had shown before he received that pit signal that he was the best, by establishing a nearly 30-second lead over everybody else. I have to respect him a great deal for his feelings, because I don't think that there are too many people like that, who'd feel like he did.

PC: Motocross is such an individual sport anyway, even though there is the whole mystique about factory teams. I'd think that while you're hopefully proud to be winning on a Suzuki, you're especially glad to be winning for Danny LaPorte. It just seems like it would be really hard to operate as a team in motocross. Maybe in Grand National (flattrack) racing, it would be easier, but even then, you've got the same situation. If one racer is faster than the other, it's really hard to hold one back to benefit the other, which is what it looks like Yamaha did at San Antonio.

DLP: Right. We're not going to try and run into our own teammates or anything like that, but every rider has to ride his own race, just as good as he can. You can't, or shouldn't anyway, let politics enter into it.

Look what politics has done to the Olympics, after all.

PC: Look what happened last year in the Camel Pro Series with the Harley-Davidson factory team. Jay Springsteen had a good shot at winning the Championship and his teammate, Corky Keener, really didn't. When it came down to the last National of the year at Ascot, somebody asked team manager Dick O'Brien if he was sending Keener out to block for Springsteen. He said, "Heck no. Whoever's going to win this race is going to win it. I'm not going to mess with the outcome."

DLP: That's right! That's the way it is, you know? I mean, if Bob Hannah hadn't been at San Antonio, at all, then it would have been different. And if he hadn't ridden as well as he did, and been out in front, it would have been different. That's the rub, that the natural outcome of things was so changed and altered. It wasn't real, to me or anybody else. I just learned a big lesson.

PC: Whew . . . What an experience!

DLP: And, I have a different outlook on things now.

PC: Do you think that this might affect you later, like in the Trans-AMA series, or next year?

DLP: I think that I'll probably be a much better motorcycle rider and try harder to win, as an individual more than anything else.

I mean, about never wanting to quit, or thinking about slacking off or anything.

PC: That's interesting!



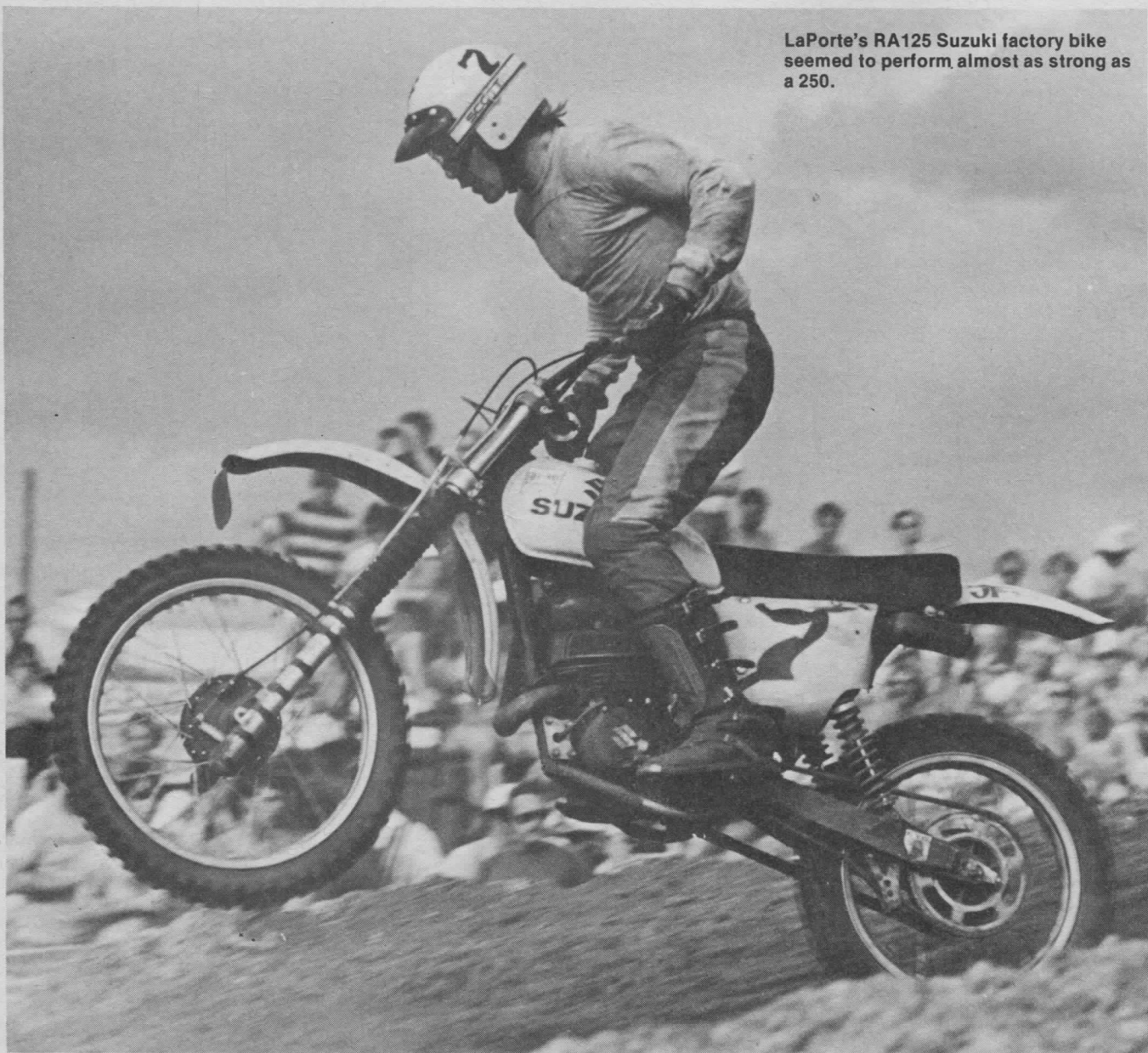


DLP: I think I'm stronger willed now than before, you know, about winning. The main thing is to remember that what's past is past and there is nothing that I can do about it now, so I can only look ahead to other races and other situations. I just have to discipline myself to remain competitive.

PC: Do you think that it would have all been different if you weren't such close friends with Hannah, or if he hadn't reacted to the whole San Antonio situation as he did? I mean, a lot of guys maybe aren't as sensitive as Hannah, or you, and might just say "That's too bad, fella."

DLP: Then I would probably have just thought less of him as a person. But the thing is, Bob Hannah had never in his life experienced that. I think that if the situation were reversed, I'd probably

A casual LaPorte poses with tuner Pat Alexander and the Suzuki RH machine the duo fielded in the 250cc AMA National series.



LaPorte's RA125 Suzuki factory bike seemed to perform almost as strong as a 250.

feel exactly the same way he did.

Of course, it was also a first time experience for me!

Here's another thing about it all . . . On the airplane on the way back from San Antonio, I was sitting next to a reporter from another bike publication, and he told me that this would probably be the most difficult article to write. He really didn't want to say why, but he finally told me that in the article he'd have to write, he wouldn't be able to tell it like it really was, because he's afraid of stepping on somebody's toes at Yamaha. So the public probably won't ever know what really happened there.

PC: Yes they will, because you're telling them, right now!

DLP: Yeah, I guess so, but I hope they won't think that I'm feeling sorry for myself, because that's not the case at all. I feel worse for Bob and Broc than for myself, if you can believe that.

PC: What about the race team versus the advertising department or the development part of the factory. After all, racing does sell motorcycles and a National Championship has to translate directly into sales figures.

DLP: Well, I do think that they should be separate. The advertising department at U.S. Suzuki, or Yamaha, should be quick to capitalize on race wins, but they sure shouldn't exercise control over the race team.

PC: I believe that that's exactly the case at Suzuki, isn't it?

DLP: Right. They (the ad guys) can only more or less follow us around and take advantage of our success. In return, we help them out with public appearances, press conferences and so on. Of course, we all work for Suzuki, and it's our job to get Suzuki out in front of the public so that they'll buy more of our bikes than Yamahas. That's the name of the game and everybody knows it, but it's just wrong for the ad department to wield power over the race team. Doesn't it make sense that that's no way to run a team?

PC: Seems like it.

DLP: Race teams come into a separate category, right in between advertising and development. But we have to remain a separate entity. If the sole objective of the whole game is to have bikes win and therefore sell bikes, why bother with the idea of racing? Just fix the races in the first place and completely dupe the public. Let Yamaha have the 125 class, Suzuki the 250 and somebody else the 500s. But that's a goofy theory, and nobody would go for that.

One of the reasons why I'd like to explain exactly what happened at San Antonio is to sort of clear Bob and myself. I know that Bob feels bad, and I think people should be aware that it wasn't his fault. And I suppose the same thing goes for myself. I just want people to know the true story.

PC: Well, you're certainly telling it

well. Just keep on.

DLP: I've got no guilty or angry feeling towards Yamaha or anybody.

PC: What about Broc? Did you get a chance to talk to him?

DLP: Well, I tried to talk to him, but there wasn't much to say. All he could say was, "Well, I won."

PC: Well, let's get away from San Antonio for a while. Guess this is as good a time as any to ask you your particulars; where you're from, about your first bike, race, and so on.

DLP: Well, let's see. I was born in Torrance, California, and lived there for 18 years. Then, about two years ago, my parents moved to Yucca Valley. I lived out there for a few months, then moved back to Torrance. So really, I'm not from Yucca Valley.

PC: When did you start riding bikes?

DLP: I was playing baseball at school one day and my dad came by with a motorcycle in the back of the truck. I was 11 or 12. I really hadn't been too interested in bikes before then.

PC: Was the bike for you?

DLP: No, it was really for himself, but I rode it too. It was a Bultaco 175, about a 1967 model. We used to go to the desert, riding all the time. We got a minibike and then a bike. My first bike was a 100cc Hodaka.

PC: Seems like everybody's first dirt bike was a 100cc Hodaka.

DLP: Yeah, probably. There sure were a lot of them in the desert in those days.

PC: What was your first race?

DLP: Guess it was in about 1969 at Carlsbad. At Saddleback, which was just getting going, there were races about once a month. They combined juniors, intermediates and experts all into one class, and came up with 18 riders.

My father has been interested in riding for a long time. He rides desert races still, but is mainly into enduros and things.

PC: Does he ride a Suzuki too?

DLP: (laugh) No, he has a Can-Am and a KTM.

PC: Did you start motocrossing on the Hodaka?

DLP: Yes, but it took quite a while before I was winning. I was finishing in the top ten usually, but only about fourth or fifth. I really enjoyed it, right from the very beginning.

PC: When did you decide, more or less, to go for the big-time?

DLP: Well, I was riding the CMC races at Saddleback and Carlsbad, and enjoying that, but I never was into it 100 percent. I really liked working on the bikes. It seemed like I spent 90 percent of my time in the garage working on the bikes. Then I got interested in girls, and quit riding for about a year. When I started riding again, I was more serious about it all.

CONTINUED NEXT MONTH . . . 

LaPorte got the 125cc National Championship season off to a good start with the win in both motos at the series opening Hangtown event.

