

# THE MID-OHIO 125 GRAND PRIX





PHOTOGRAPHY: ART FRIEDMAN

In their hair-raising demonstration of how exciting 125 motocross can be, Smith, Hannah and Grossi also proved that you don't have to be European to win.

by Art Friedman

"The time will come," motocross-watchers are fond of saying, "when the Americans will be as good as the European masters of the sport." In the 125 class, that often-repeated adage is out of date: Some Americans are capable of winning Grands Prix—regularly—right now.

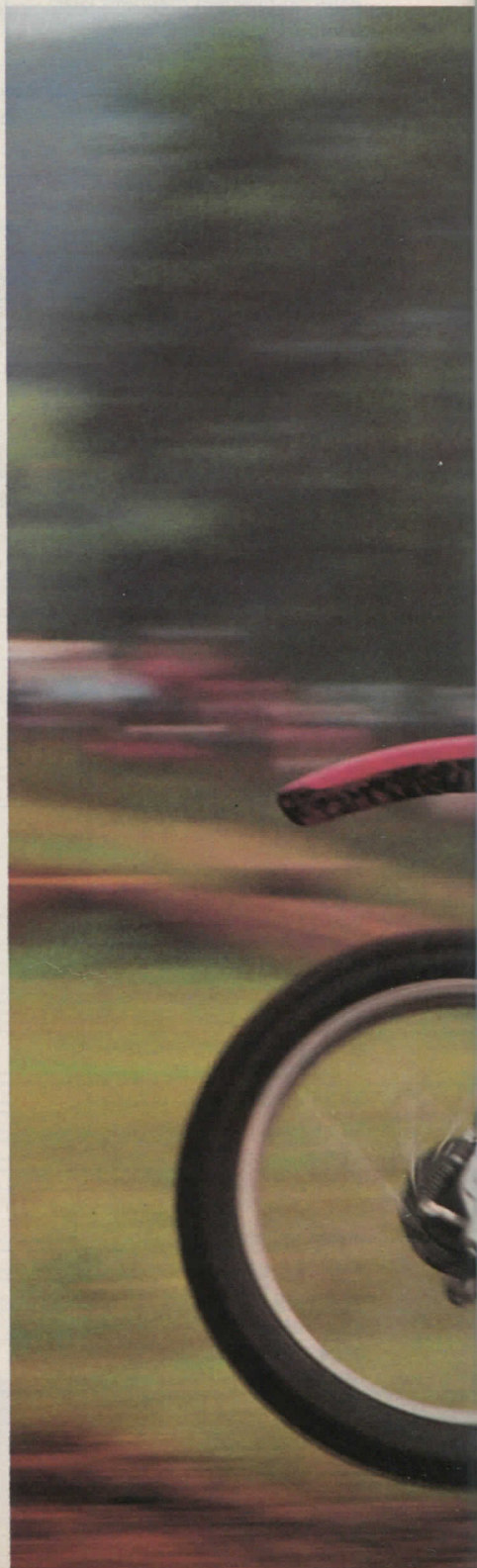
Marty Smith, twice United States 125 national champion, was the first Yank to score a 125cc Grand Prix (world championship) victory. When the 125 GP trail came to America last year, Smith and his Honda slapped World Champion Gaston Rahier in the face with an unprecedented two-moto defeat. This year Smith went to Europe and won another 125 GP event. When the 125 circuit returned to America for the USGP, Gaston Rahier and his fellow Europeans again had to face Smith on his home court. And oddsmakers weren't giving the Europeans much of a chance.

It wasn't always Marty Smith, however, who was picked to defeat the Europeans. Yamaha fans were paying close attention to Bob Hannah, a Yamaha team rider competing in his first international event. Hannah and Smith had clashed on Smith's turf—the 125 National class—and Hannah had come away with a long string of victories in the still-to-be-completed series. Insiders figured Hannah would beat Smith and Smith would beat the Europeans.

Hannah started the season aboard the OW27 water-cooled 125, and the two of them immediately developed a reputation for being unbeatable. But then a disgruntled privateer put a claim on the bike after one national, and Yamaha just barely kept possession of the machine when Hannah entered a counter-claim and his name was drawn out of the hat. Yamaha felt that the \$2000 claiming price represented too much of a "racer's discount" on that motorcycle (the cylinder or the fork assembly is probably worth that much), so Hannah raced last year's works machines in 125 nationals—and kept on winning. The USGP is an FIM international event, though, and there are no claiming rules in GP races, so Hannah was back on the water-pumper and Yamaha followers felt smug.

The setting for the 125cc USGP was the same as last time: Mid-Ohio Moto Park, nestled in rolling, grassy, tree-lined pastures near Lexington, Ohio. Last year's track was criticized as being too fast and featureless, but this year, with some advice from Roger DeCoster, the track was tightened up, re-routed, and twisted around more of the terrain. Now, except for the possible absence of huge uphill and god-awful downhill, Mid-Ohio ranks with any "real" European course.

Sunday morning's practice and qualifying runs produced no surprises, at least not





*Rick Burgett and his Yamaha 250 had a double-moto victory in the Support class.*

for those predicting a Hannah win. The Yamaha rider qualified with the fastest timed practice lap, and it seemed likely that the 19-year-old was about to win his first GP.

A good start counts heavily in 125 motocross because it's harder to make up time with a one-two-five than it is with a bigger bike. After the starting gate hit the ground, Marty Smith led the pack across the long grassy starting area and into the first turn. But Hannah was on him immediately, clinging to his rear fender and looking for an opening. Rahier had gotten a mediocre start—about twelfth—and was trying to pick his way through the Americans. However, with Smith and Hannah rapidly pulling away from the rest of the field and Billy Grossi moving his Suzuki into third, it looked like Rahier was already out of contention.

Jimmy Ellis, on a water-cooled Can-Am, was worse off than Rahier. He had been forced wide in the first turn and ended up in last place coming out of it. But he didn't discourage easily and passed three riders in the third turn.

Exactly one lap into the race Hannah found a way around the Honda rider to take the lead. The two riders struggled for several laps, always within two or three bike lengths of each other, always with Hannah holding the lead. But Smith was applying pressure and waiting.

Rahier had earlier asked a question that was on everyone's mind: "Can Hannah keep the pace?" Hannah rides hard and appears to be constantly out of shape, almost on the verge of disaster. And there

was more pressure than Hannah had ever been subjected to before: It was the 19-year-old's first GP, and he had the lead with his arch-rival breathing down his neck.

Hannah raced on, as out of shape as ever, but never over the line that separates haste and disaster. It seemed impossible that he could hold out for 45 minutes, especially with Smith, the veteran of two national championships and two GP wins, tightening the screws and waiting for a bobble.

But when the bobble came, it was Smith, not Hannah, who made it, and suddenly the Yamaha rider had a few seconds of relief from Smith's pressure. It wasn't a lot, but it allowed Hannah to relax just a little.

Behind those two, Billy Grossi maintained a comfortable distance from fourth-place Danny LaPorte, who soon found Gaston Rahier knocking on his back door. LaPorte lost it exiting a tight turn and fell down in front of Rahier, giving the Belgian fourth place. LaPorte eventually retired from the moto with a sore foot.

Jiri Churavy, a factory CZ rider, had steadily worked his way up to seventh, which became sixth when LaPorte retired. But Churavy was pushed back to eighth late in the moto when Jimmy Ellis and Yoshifumi Sugio cruised past his CZ. Sugio is a works Yamaha rider who had been mostly unnoticed, but was one of the fastest riders in the race.

Behind them, the Hondas of Don Kudalski and Warren Reid slowed way down, and Danny Turner had been

dropped to seventh by the come-from-behind rides of Rahier, Ellis and Sugio.

Smith began to close back up on Hannah, slowly at first, then suddenly catching and passing him. It looked like Hannah had pooped out, and a couple of turns after Smith passed him, Hannah rammed the Honda in a slow turn, then overshot the berm as Smith rode away unscathed. A few turns later, Hannah proceeded to fall down. He remounted immediately and never came close to losing second place, but he lost touch with Smith, who now had a comfortable lead.

The truth was that Hannah had kinked the front brake cable—a fairly common bugaboo on bikes with ultra-long-travel suspensions. Once the cable kinked, the OW27's front brake started to lock every time the front suspension compressed. That slowed him down enough to allow Smith to catch him, and Marty buzzed by when Hannah's brake locked the wheel in a fourth-gear corner. Hannah's brake problem eventually caused him to bump Smith, then fall down. After that, the Yamaha rider decided to cool it for a safe second.

For the three leaders, that was pretty much the race. Hannah couldn't catch Smith and Grossi couldn't catch Hannah. Behind Grossi, Rahier was having prob-



*Bob Hannah was picked by many observers for the victory, but Marty Smith didn't see it that way.*

lems with Ohio's summertime heat and humidity. Sugio passed the champ and it looked like Ellis would catch him by moto's end. Sugio kept charging, but there wasn't time to catch Grossi before the moto ended.

Smith's win in the first moto moved him into third in the world 125 standings. Hannah was a solid second in the moto, followed by Grossi and Sugio. Ellis just missed catching fifth-place Rahier at the flag. However, the race, heat and humidity had completely undone the world champion—he collapsed when he reached the pits and asked for an additional half-hour between motos. Behind Ellis, Turner was seventh, Churavy was eighth, followed by T&M Honda rider Steve Wise and Zdenek Velky, another factory CZ rider.

Between international motos, Rick Burgett repeated his win of the first 250 Support class moto with a win in the second moto. Burgett was riding the Yamaha 250 works machine in what may have been its last appearance in the U.S. The 250 class also has claiming rules, so Yamaha is only willing to enter the bike in special races—like this GP Support class—where it can't be claimed. Burgett had the most exotic machine in the 250 class and he also had the edge in talent, so there was never much doubt as to the outcome.

While the 250s were playing Follow-the-Yamaha, the 125 riders were preparing for their second skirmish. Smith napped under the Honda van. Rahier bathed himself in cold towels and tried to find more energy. Hannah sat in the shade of a tree drinking orange juice, contemplating the front brake cable that had spoiled his maiden voyage in GP competition.

After Burgett wrapped up the 250 class, the 125s were called back to the starting gate. Once again Smith led the opening lap, but this time Mickey Kessler on the factory Kawasaki was dogging him. Hannah quickly pushed passed Kessler, however, to take second and close in on Smith. Rahier had gotten another dismal start and wasn't making much headway. A few laps into the race he fell, which prompted him to retire for the day. Rahier had the world championship by the throat already, and a win at Mid-Ohio wasn't too important to him. Win, lose or draw in Ohio, he was assured of retaining his title for Suzuki.

When Hannah caught Smith, the Honda rider let him by without too much resistance. Smith was content to glue himself to Hannah's rear fender and wait for a mistake. "I didn't want to wear myself out," said Smith later.



*Yoshifumi Sugio was the surprise of the day. He ended up fourth overall, best foreigner.*



*Jiri Churavy continued to hold second place in the world 125cc point standings, but he was mathematically eliminated from a shot at the championship.*

Eventually Grossi passed Kessler and caught the two leaders, and for more than half of the moto's 40-some minutes the crowd was treated to some of the best GP motocross racing ever seen in this country. The three riders stayed so close it seemed inevitable that they would bump each other and end up in one heap. It seemed impossible that they could ride *that* close for so many laps; one of them just *had* to make the teeny little slip that would drop him back a second or two. It was hair-raising to watch, and the pressure on the riders must have been enormous.

Finally Grossi began to tire a little and dropped off the pace slightly. A few laps later Smith apparently figured Hannah wasn't going to make that mistake he had been waiting for, so the Honda rider made his move. Smith pulled up next to the water-pumper, but Hannah didn't relinquish his lead easily. They stayed side-by-side through several turns before Smith managed to edge ahead. One lap later, Hannah tipped over in a slow, tight corner,



This is the way things looked for most of the day. Smith (3) followed Hannah (6) and waited for a mistake. In the second moto, Grossi (8) got into the act, and the three engaged in some of the closest GP racing ever seen.



and Smith was on his way to his second USGP win.

Hannah regained his wheels quickly enough to secure second overall, and Grossi repeated his third-place finish. Danny LaPorte, Grossi's Suzuki team-mate, would have finished fourth in the second moto, but he mistook the white, one-lap-to-go flag for the checkered. His "cool-off" lap saw him drop from fourth to tenth in the moto.

That moved Steve Wise and his T&M Honda into fourth. The Czech CZ riders, Zdenek Velky and Jiri Churavy, had raced together for the entire moto and ended up fifth and sixth respectively. Churavy had been running second in the world championship standings, but his sixth-place finish made it mathematically impossible for him to catch Rahier. Therefore, Rahier and Suzuki had just won their second consecutive 125 world championship. The only question now remaining is whether or not Smith will return to Europe to try for second in the world standings.

Yoshifumi Sugio finished the second moto in seventh for fourth overall, earning him an unusual distinction: First non-American.

Besides putting him in third place in the 125 world championship standings, Smith's victory proved that he is still capable of beating Hannah—even when Hannah is riding the OW27. And Smith's victory came at their most important race of the year. Even if Hannah wins every other 125 race of the season, this one particular pinnacle will have eluded him.

But Hannah's performance at Mid-Ohio can't be dismissed easily. It was Hannah as much as Smith who proved to everyone present that 125-class motocross can be as thrilling as any kind or any displacement class of racing. And it was Hannah as much as Smith who made it plain that—in the 125 class, anyway—the Americans *have* arrived.

#### MID-OHIO 125CC GRAND PRIX: OFFICIAL RESULTS

1. Marty Smith (1st/1st)..... Honda
2. Bob Hannah (2nd/2nd) .... Yamaha
3. Billy Grossi (3rd/3rd)..... Suzuki
4. Yoshifumi Sugio (4th/7th) Yamaha
5. Steve Wise (9th/4th) ..... Honda
6. Jiri Churavy (8th/6th)..... CZ
7. Zdenek Velky (10th/5th) ..... CZ
8. Danny Turner (7th/12th) .. Yamaha
9. Masaru Ikeda (11th/9th) .... Suzuki
10. Jimmy Ellis (6th/16th) ..... Can-Am

Although he had a bad day, Rahier retained his world championship.

