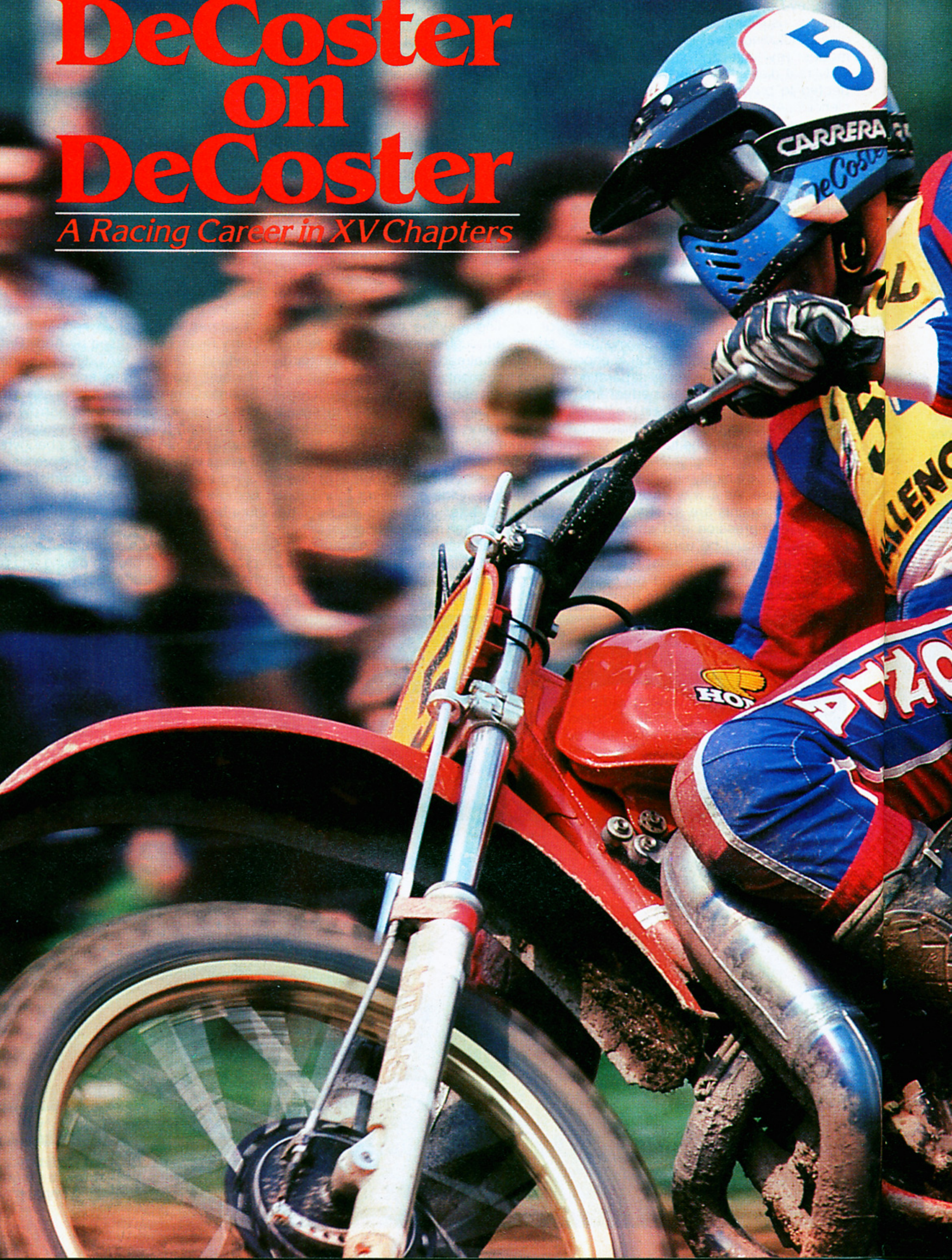


# DeCoster on DeCoster

*A Racing Career in XV Chapters*





PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVE HAWKINS

## I Beginnings

*"My first race was a small local race, but at the same time it was the biggest race in the world for me. My heart was pumping more than when I won my first Grand Prix."*

*"When I started racing I didn't even know how to get a license. I went to a few races and had to ask the riders how to get started."*

*"It was hard to save enough money to buy a decent race bike. When I finally got a bike I could race I didn't have transportation—my father didn't have a car."*

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"My first year I went racing with a bike I bought with money I earned after school. I rode the bike to the racetrack, raced and then rode the bike back home, about 60 miles in all."

"I never lost my first love for racing."



## II Early Factory Involvement

"When I started, most people just dreamed about a factory ride."

"Ten or 15 years ago there were only two factories involved in racing: CZ and Husqvarna. Usually each factory would hire one rider in the 500 class and one in the 250. They might help out a couple of other riders, but there would only be a couple of contracted riders. And with Husqvarna if you weren't Swedish you had very little chance."

"It was less expensive then. Fewer factories were involved and fewer racers were supported. Now the factories are involved internationally. The machines have become very expensive and it's also expensive to sponsor a rider."

"It's very different now."

## III The Best Riders

"Racing wasn't all fun. There have been some tough competitors. For me, the toughest was Heikki Mikkola. There have been guys who have had one good year, but in the long run Mikkola has been the most consistently fast."

"In the first years that I was running GPs, Bengt Aberg was tough. He was the champion before me and I took it

away from him. The races we had against each other were good, clean, fast races. We were racing to be the fastest, not just to stay ahead of the other."

"I think racing changes with the characters involved for that particular season. There have been years in the world championship where much worse tactics were used than what went on this last year between Brad Lackey and André Malherbe. When the Russians entered guys to block for Moisseev in the 250 GPs—that was the worst."

## IV The Best Ever

"Joel Robert was the most talented racer I have ever seen; he won six world championships."

"The difference between myself and Joel is that he would only race when he felt like it. Many races I saw Joel do a couple of laps and then pull off the track if he thought he couldn't win. I have never quit in a race. Even if I was doing badly, I would try until the end. In a certain way that worked against me—it showed that I could be beat on some days. Joel would just stop and say he had twisted his ankle, or the bike was not running right."



"But on a good day, when Joel was feeling right, he could do anything—on a 250 anyway. In the 500 class Joel never won a big race. He did not win on certain courses either. He could beat anybody on a grassy or muddy course, but he never beat the top sand racers on their own track. I think you can look through my racing results and see that I have won GPs on sand tracks, grass courses, muddy and hard, against the best riders of the times—Joel, Geboers, Tibblin, Friedrichs and Mikkola. I think I was a more complete rider than Joel, but Joel had more raw talent than I had."

## V Being on Top

"To climb to the top has its good sides and bad sides. If I go to a soccer game, I usually get invited into the nice box seats. If I forget to make a reservation at a race, there is usually someone who knows me and I get through. Those things are really nice, especially when you travel as much as I do."

"Then there is the other side. You have people calling you all the time asking favors. Your personal life becomes not so personal. You get more, but you give more as well. I think it's fair to get advantages as long as you put back in as much as you take out. I've gotten a lot out of racing—a lot of enjoyment, a lot of money, lots of friends, but I have also tried to put back my part."

"Today some riders give as much as they take. Some don't. I think that's been true all along. We always tend to think the past was better than it actually was. It's easy to forget the bad times."

## VI Fame

"In regard to fame, I can't speak for myself. You don't see the picture with yourself included. You see everyone else. It's very difficult to evaluate yourself fairly because you can't back away and look at the picture with yourself a part of it. If I had to say one way or the other, I would say yes, I am famous, but that is because I have put more into motocross than anyone else. I could be wrong; that's an opinion."

"One thing, though, is a fact: I have raced and won in more places than anyone else. Even outside of Europe racing for the five GP world championships. I have always raced to win, whether it's been in Japan, Australia or the United States. And as far as number of wins goes, I think I have won more races than anyone."

## VII Money

"I have not yet raced a race only for money."

"I don't think there are five races in my whole career that I approached with the thought, 'Boy, I'm going to make a lot of money.' I have negotiated contracts and appearance money, but racing was the most important thing in my life. It was always the most important thing—just to race."

"In the beginning I was in a situation where I had to make a living; I thought it was normal to get paid for racing. But on race day I have never been on a bike and thought about how much money I was going to make—never."

"I have always raced for a flat salary; I earned so much a year no matter how I did. I wanted the people I was working with to know that I always tried my best, that I was not trying for a bonus. I don't like the idea of a rider needing a bonus to try; I didn't start that way."

"I think there are too many people in sports today—not just in motorcycling but in every sport—who have entered their sport because they can make money on it. You can see it in tennis where parents push their kids really hard because they heard on the news that Bjorn Borg won \$100,000 in a weekend."

"When the choice doesn't come from deep within a person, when he has been guided or forced into a certain area, he might not enjoy the sport very much. Personally, I don't like the idea of racing classes for five-year-olds. It's a good idea to let a kid play with a little motorcycle because later on he will have attained some degree of common sense on a bike. It helps coordination. It's good for the kids if they enjoy it. They can have a lot of fun, and that is what it should be at five."

## VIII The Best Season

"The most fun season was '72."

"In '72 I could let the other guys start, wait awhile and win any race anyhow. I was feeling super good physically, the bike was fantastic and luck was with me."

"I had raced with Suzuki eight years then; I had five first places in the world championship, two seconds and a third. In all that time I started every Grand Prix, and if there wasn't a mechanical problem I took points in every Grand Prix."

## IX The Worst Season

"My worst GP year was my last season with Suzuki. I was not given the trust I thought I deserved."

"The bike should have been improved, and they should have admitted weak points in it. Also, there was a problem with the way they set up the 500 team. The team consisted of Gerrit Wolsink, myself and Gerard Rond. Suzuki wanted to hire some young riders, and they decided Rond was the one. My advice was to take Hakan Carlqvist. At that time they could have signed Carlqvist under better financial terms than they signed Rond. On top of that, the idea was to have Rond come over with his father, and his father would become the team manager—over Gerrit, me and everyone."

"I've never seen a good father-son working relationship, especially in racing. It's difficult enough for father and son to get along; if you have father, son and two other people from different nationalities on top of it, working for a third nationality—the Japanese—you can be sure it isn't going to work."

"I heard the rumor that this was happening. I asked Suzuki about it; they said it was only a rumor. Then I heard the same thing from other sources. I called Suzuki again, and asked if they were telling me some jokes or something, because from what I understood they were pretty much committed to Rond and his father. Then they said, 'Yes, we did make an agreement. It's not signed, but we made a verbal agreement.' It's not a personal thing against Gerard's father, but I told Suzuki they had a choice: they could take Rond and his father—and lose me—or they could take just Gerard—and keep me. Suzuki decided not to hire Rond's father."

"Then I suggested that Suzuki put Rond in the 250 class for one year, because he came from the 125 class—it seemed logical. Since Suzuki was not competing in the 250 GP class it would have been good to have a rider there. Rond would have had a good chance of winning the championship because the bike was superior. Judging from the previous season, I figured it was not unreasonable to think he had a good shot at the title. But Rond didn't like the idea, and then Suzuki didn't like the idea; they thought I was afraid of Rond as a competitor."

"Now, two years later, you can see that my reasoning would have been better than Suzuki's. They had Rond for two years and he didn't win one Grand Prix. He got hurt often and finally they had to get rid of him. Rond never finished in front of me in the championships, so I don't see how

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Suzuki gained from the relationship. And I still think if Rond had raced the 250 class he would have been first or second in the championship his first year out."

## X The Last Two Races

"In Belgium, I wanted to get away from the fight between Brad and André; the best way I could do that was to win the race and stay out of their way. I only had two choices: either I could be up front in the start and run away from them or I could stay behind them and watch."

"Brad took the start in both heats. In the first heat Malherbe was second and I was third. From third I could see that Malherbe was faster than Brad. Malherbe attacked Brad a couple of times and Brad closed the door. When Malherbe finally attacked and passed Brad, it was a pretty strong move; there

was a lot of contact. I just followed André past Brad into second. The track has only one fast line, and if you get off that line it's difficult to get around another rider without disturbing him. It was difficult for me to decide whether to attack Malherbe or not. In second I was faster, but I didn't think I could pass André without going inside of him and taking his line away. I was also confident that I could win the second heat and take the overall, which was what I really wanted. In the second heat, though, I had some problems with carburetion, and things didn't go the way I wanted."

"After Belgium, Brad and Malherbe were virtually tied."

"Maybe if Brad had been more aggressive and tried to win all the way, things would have been different. I know that Brad was thinking, 'Sure, if I win and André gets third, he wins the championship.' But it doesn't always work that way. There were other riders

behind Malherbe. He knew that the guy he had to beat was in front of him and that he couldn't lose any more positions; André might have become nervous and made some mistakes."

"But Brad practically stopped in a narrow part of the track and tried to mess André up by riding abnormally slow and taking abnormal lines. If you are going to win the world championship you have to go out there to win every single heat. Brad finished more races, but he didn't go all out for the win. I think that was his mistake. When you look at the entire championship you have to say André was the best."

"It was a bitter end because Brad has tried for so many years and he was second again. But I am sure that for André it was a great championship. I don't think the fighting was any tougher than in some of the other seasons. In a couple of years the season won't look much different from any other year."

"Anyway, I'm glad I won both heats of my last race."

## XI Relations With Brad Lackey

"Many people think I worked against Brad this year to the advantage of Malherbe. That's untrue. I have been fair to Brad the whole season and have done nothing abnormal to him."

"I like Brad—probably more than most of the other riders on the circuit. I have done more for him. He stayed with me in Belgium years ago. I've helped him get entries and appearance money. When I was with Suzuki, I tried to get him a ride on their GP team. That didn't work out, but I tried. I did many things for Brad that I didn't have to do just because I liked him."

"I admire the time Brad has put in on the GP circuit. But at the same time I'm disappointed in him sometimes. In the past, he has contracted to compete in two races on the same day and then said that his manager screwed up."

"I don't think he has kept a close eye on the important things."

## XII The Final Year

"I wasn't really disappointed not to win the championship because I knew I was 36. I had raced for Suzuki for nine years and then started all over again on a completely different bike."

"When I first started with the works Honda last winter I didn't like it very much. There were many things I thought were not the way they should be. So we tried many new things. We knew we were risking reliability, but we gained so much in development that it



was understood between Honda and myself that my job was development, and André's and Graham's job was to win the championship."

"I was happy with that arrangement. I finished fourth. If I had played everything safe and been more conservative with bike modifications I would surely have finished close in the championship. I would not have won, but I would have probably finished second or third."

### **XIII One Championship**

"As far as I'm concerned there should be one world championship in motocross—and that's it."

"That idea isn't very popular. If there are three classes, then there are 36 Grands Prix instead of 12. So the federation can make 36 clubs happy instead of only 12."

"But it's well known that riders would rather be 500 world champion than 125 or 250 champion. There is more publicity, more spectators. It's just the best class. That is where motocross started. That is the class where the first world championship title was granted. More great champions come from the 500cc class."

"Most of the good 125 and 250 riders eventually work up to the 500s."

### **XIV The Future**

"This is the end of the end. I'm really retiring this time."

"For the next two years I have an agreement with Honda to work with them—their Japanese Research and Development. I will be working directly under Mr. Miyakoshi, the overall motocross racing manager. My job is to help on development and the testing program of the factory motocross bikes. I will also advise the riders."

"I won't be involved that much in Europe. Most of my time will be spent in this country. Here on race day I won't have much to do except observe our bikes and riders. Then during the week I'll work on improving the machines; if we face any problems I'll try to solve them."

"I hope my influence and a lot of work will make production bikes that are better than today's GP bikes. The gap between the production bikes and the GP bikes is closing every year. I think our production Hondas this year are better than the '79 works bikes."

"I have been so busy lately I haven't had a chance to think too much about retirement. But when the first GP comes and I'm not on the entry list it will probably be more difficult."

"Just a few weeks ago I went to Unadilla and I really felt like racing. The track was so nice. I was sitting at practice and I saw certain riders and thought to myself, 'That was a good line. I wonder what the other line would be like? I would really like to try it if I were racing . . .' But that feeling was only momentary, and I enjoy the things I'm doing now. It's a new challenge."

### **XV The Best Days**

"Each time I started a race I would think about being the best or wanting to be the best or trying to be the best. Sometimes it worked out and sometimes it didn't. But on the days it worked out, on the days I won a Grand Prix—when I won because I was the best and not because of luck—I felt I was the best in the world."

"As soon as the race was over, though, I thought, 'Okay, today I was the best in the world, but next week is another race; I'd better think about that.' And then I'd prepare, because someone might beat me the next week."

"You are only the best in racing for one day at a time. You're always looking forward."

"I can't keep being happy telling everyone that back then I was the best. The record speaks for itself." ●