

IN 1976 an English guy named Chris Lavery uttered this priceless comment on the Grand Prix scene: "If I had to run a motocross team, it would not be called Team Britannia or Team Land of Hope and Glory. It would be called No B.S."

Lavery is a 42-year-old businessman who today earns his living importing and exporting components for off-road bikes. But he's also spent two decades in intimate contact with the GP motocross circus, and can count legendary riders such as Joel Robert, Torsten Hallman and Roger DeCoster as his personal friends. At the time he offered the "no B.S." observation, he was manager of Graham Noyce, Britain's brightest World Championship prospect in 10 years.

Now Noyce has become a full-fledged member of Honda's increasingly serious attack on the 500cc World title. Lavery is no longer his manager—he now guides the career of another British hope, 250cc GP rider Neil Hudson—but his classic "no B.S." comment would form an apt description of Honda's operation in the 500 class this year.

That's not to say that mighty Honda, a company with a glittering record of success in GP road racing, has deliberately adopted Lavery's philosophy into their motocross program. They're big enough and clever enough to work out their own solutions. But by an ironic coincidence, the key members of their assault team on the '78 500cc title use the kind of low-profile approach that Lavery ingrained into Graham Noyce's racing mentality.

For this, their fourth attempt at the 500cc World Championship, they've built what is virtually a brand-new motorcycle. Behind them they have the vast resources and technology of their renowned R and D department in Japan. And to pilot the bikes, they have two of the youngest and most aggressive riders in the 500cc class. So the odds are stacked pretty neatly in their favor. Yet no one on the team will make any rash promises about their performance.

Team coordinator Steve Whitelock comes out with a reserved, "I think both our riders can finish in the top four this year."

Brad Lackey, who's been persevering with the European scene since 1971, and has improved his results with every year, says simply, "It'll be hot!"

And despite his relative youth and his exuberance on the track, 21-year-old



Brad Lackey clicked into winning gear early in '78, taking England's Hants Grand International classic for the third successive year.

HONDA '78 ON THE GP SCENE

MIKE NICKS LOOKS AT THE BIGGEST BIKE MAKER'S LOW PROFILE YET DEADLY SERIOUS ASSAULT ON THE 500cc MOTOCROSS GPs.

By Mike Nicks

Noyce has the sense to commit himself only as far as saying, "I think I'm going to be in there at the finish."

The reason Chris Lavery came out with his "no B.S." adage in an article written for a British newspaper two years ago was that he'd seen too many British hopes ruined by hype. The voracious British motorcycling press, forgetting that they'd lost an empire and gained a massive balance of payments deficit, would latch onto the slightest success scored by some spotty-necked home rider and proclaim it in voluptuous headlines. Lavery's theory was that this kind of treatment gave the victims an inflated idea of their talents, numbed their ability to measure their performances against the truly great riders—and eventually left them on a scrapheap, wondering where the Mercedes cars, the flights around the world, and the fat factory contracts had gone.

So, at 19 years of age, already a contracted Maico rider and a definite GP prospect, Noyce would trundle into the paddocks of British motocross events in a plain yellow Ford van adorned only by a small "Team Maico" sticker on each door. Lavery even banned his rider from writing a column for one of the British motorcycle papers. He feared the effect that a bylined column would have on the level-headed thinking of his young prospect.

Well, Noyce has now gotten his contract, his worldwide trips, and his summer home in Belgium—where he's closer to the GP action than if he were based in England and had to make cross-Channel trips to the Continental races. But Honda's 1978 GP team is still very much concerned with achievement, not promenading.

Whump! That long travel suspension—by Fox at the rear, Showa at the front—ain't bad either, as Noyce finds out at Hawkstone.



Works Hondas in the lead: Brad Lackey (3) and Graham Noyce scored well in pre-GP shakedown races.





Noyce blasts the new GP Honda, with engine bored and stroked to 450cc, to two wins in the British Championship round at Hawkstone Park.



The opposition: Yamaha's tough Finn Heikki Mikkola is the man the Honda boys will have to beat this season.

Even mother Honda has to learn to walk before she can run. But it has now been four years since they first tested the 500cc GP waters. Pierre Karsmakers gave them tenth overall in their debut year in 1975. He rose to ninth overall in the 500cc standings in 1976.

It was in those years that Steve White-lock joined the Honda operation from Kawasaki, where he had been a familiar figure wrenching on the Green Meanie pavement racers at Daytona, Ontario, Talladega, and all the other big circuits. Of the early Honda 500-class bikes Steve recalls, "In the beginning we had something like a 450 or a 480, but it had too much power for that time—remember it's only recently that suspension technology has improved so much. Then we built a 360, then a long-stroke 400, a 400cc short-stroker, and even what you might call a 400 'medium stroke,' which was part-way between the other two 400s."



A hint of things to come: Graham Noyce, racing a factory Maico, leads Brad Lackey and the Honda in a 1977 GP tussle. Now the pair ride as team partners.

But while the R and D technicians in Japan were searching for the optimum combination of capacity, bore and stroke dimensions and porting arrangements, Karsmakers left the European scene for America, and for 1977 Lackey was drafted from Husqvarna.

In some ways, Lackey was an odd choice. True, his dedication to European-style racing had seen him rise to number five in the 500cc point standings by the end of the 1976 season. And, at 23 years of age when he transferred from Husky, Honda knew that Lackey had his best years ahead of him. (The late twenties and early thirties are the ages when riders tend to mature into World Champions on the grueling European circuits.) But there was a tradition that when Japanese factories came to Europe with open checkbooks hunting for GP rider talent, they bought Belgium or Scandinavian. It was almost as though everyone involved in international motocross at that time believed that the Belgians and Norsemen inherited some kind of genetic talent for motocross.

This faith was understandable, for riders from these countries had always

Honda's latest signing, Graham Noyce, looks serious about his new responsibilities.



dominated the World Championships, with only the occasional Briton or eastern European getting a look in. So Suzuki, pioneers of Japanese intervention in GP motocross, went for Swede Olle Pettersson, followed by Belgians Joel Robert, Sylvain Geboers and Roger DeCoster. Gerrit Wolsink, the Dutch dentist, represented their only deviation from this policy. Yamaha picked up Swedes Hakan Andersson and Ake Jonsson, Belgian Jaak Van Velthoven and Finn Heikki Mikkola, while Kawasaki sought out Swedes Torliel Hansen and Christer Hammargren.

So Honda went out on a limb when they took on Lackey. But he justified their faith when, in one of the most competitive seasons ever in 500cc GP racing, he lit into Suzuki and Yamaha with a vengeance in 1977. And as you must know, unless you've been on a heavy valium trip for 18 months, he almost made it into the top three. Mikkola gave Yamaha their first 500cc World title, DeCoster and Wolsink were second and third for Suzuki, but Lackey finished fourth, well clear of all the European factory bikes.

Then Honda continued to hold up a finger at tradition by chasing the English kid Noyce. They first talked to him in 1976, when he was in the process of securing fourth place in the 500cc World Series in his first full season of GP racing. Noyce again demonstrated his cool thinking by not falling into Honda's warm arms with a rush. He said he thought he should gain more experience with Maico, with whom he always enjoyed a good relationship before changing to one of the Japanese giants. But last year Steve Whitelock and officials from the factory talked again to Noyce, this time at the Canadian GP—and the deal was fixed. Ironically, although Graham clinched his second British motocross championship in 1977, he didn't have a happy time on the GP circuits. His Maico was out-powered by the three-pronged Yamaha-Suzuki-Honda Japanese onslaught, and an injury forced him to miss four GPs. He dropped to eighth place in the World standings. But Honda was happy to sign him—even though he had yet to win a GP!

And now, how are Honda's, Lackey's, and Noyce's GP prospects shaping up for '78? At the time of this writing, Heikki Mikkola has just pounded out a warning to everyone by winning both motos in the first GP of the season in Switzerland. But

Learning the lines: only 18 years of age, Graham Noyce keeps his Maico ahead of Chris Hammargren's factory Kawasaki in the 1975 500cc British GP. Hammargren and Kawasaki have now split from the 500cc GP scene—but Noyce forges on.



Team No B.S. takes a rare break for a press conference. Team coordinator Steve Whitelock (left) and Brad Lackey (second from right) sit with Honda factory officials.

first, let's back-track a little to the winter. Marty Smith and Jim Pomeroy were the two Honda riders selected to fly to Japan for pre-season test sessions on the new bikes. "Brad and Graham didn't go because we figured the tracks out there were so different from the GP circuits," explains Steve Whitelock. But by January, the team had received one of the new bikes in California, and was able to get in plenty of testing there.

Meanwhile, Noyce's initial Honda outings were not exactly flushed with overnight success. Leaving the British Championship scene, he traveled to America for his first rides on the Japanese bike, but knocked his right shoulder out of place in his first race at St. Louis. He fell and was hit by Tommy Croft. Later he was immensely impressive in his first stadium race at Anaheim, and would have finished much higher than 18th but for a collision with Tony DiStefano. Then he put his shoulder out again in the final Trans-AMA race at San Francisco. Lackey was able to finish fourth in the Trans-AMA series, while DeCoster won for the fourth consecutive year.

Back in Europe for the pre-GP internationals, both Lackey and Noyce performed well, their 1-2 in the Hants Grand International in England being typical of the kind of forceful riding they were laying on for the crowds. Then the

new GP bikes arrived in time for Noyce to use the 450 in the opening rounds of the British Championships.

The 450 has been bored and stroked from last year's 400 to give the riders more bottom-end power. Suspension and tire technology is now allowing the two-stroke manufacturers to increase engine sizes from the 360 to 380cc sizes they've held to for a couple of seasons. The RC450 also has a new frame with a square-section front downtube, and a half-inch more ground clearance over last year's model. The bike weighs 215.5 pounds, which is just five pounds over the FIM minimum weight limit for the 500cc GPs, and about six pounds lighter than last year's RC400. The weight saving has been made in the area of the engine—despite the increase in cubes—and the wheels. Only the screws holding the engine together are titanium. A five-speed gearbox and a 38mm Keihin carburetor are other features. Suspension movement remains the same as on last year's bike—11.8 inches from the Showa front forks, and 11.2 inches from the Fox shocks at the rear.

But there was total embarrassment when Noyce made his debut ride on the bike at the first 1978 British Championship round. With officials from the factory on hand to witness what was expected to be a complete Honda domination, Graham suffered the ignominy of





Brad Lackey raced the 1977 400cc Honda to fourth in the 500cc World series. This time he's shooting for Number One.

two DNFs. In the first moto he lasted only four laps before a small valve broke in one of the Fox shocks—a rare occurrence indeed on these top-rated components. Then in the second moto the gearbox seized and he was rammed by none other than John Banks, who was riding his prototype Honda four-stroke!

The week after, however, Noyce and the RC450 made amends. At the second National Championship round at tough Hawkstone Park, neither the rider nor the bike had any opposition, and the combination swept to two easy wins. Noyce was the only one of the top riders who had the ability—and the courage—to leap off the top of a ridge right into the well of a deep sand pit. Every other rider was braking almost to a walking pace at the lip of the ridge and rolling into the pit.

The first of the GPs was on the grassy Payerne circuit in Switzerland. The opposition was again expected to come from Mikkola on the Yamaha, and DeCoster and Wolsink on Suzukis. Mikkola had rested all winter in Finland, enjoying a huntin', shootin' and family-man existence, but both the Suzuki riders had had to cope with injuries. A definite question mark hung over DeCoster, who had crashed while practicing in February and lost almost a gallon of blood before surgeons were able to operate on him and remove his spleen.

Of the European factories, Maico was fielding Herbert Schmitz, who was best-placed rider behind the Japanese bikes last year with fifth position in the points table. Also riding for Maico were the Dutch sensation of the early-season in-

Graham Noyce digs the dirt on '78 prototype GP bike with 400cc engine.



ternationals, 21-year-old Peter Herlings and veteran Adolf Weil. KTM had new 420s for Jaak Van Velthoven and former 250cc GP runner Andre Maherbe, and Husqvarna's effort was reinforced by the winter signing of Hakan Andersson from Montesa.

But Heikki showed 'em all he intends to keep that title by winning both motos on the 420cc factory Yamaha. And with second and fourth places, DeCoster was the next-highest scorer and demolished any doubts about the state of his mental or physical fitness. Brad was third-highest scorer, taking fifth and third places in the two motos, but Graham was plagued by another day of falls and picked up only five points for a sixth place in the first race.

Lackey actually tussled for the lead with Mikkola on the first moto's opening lap, before the Finn broke away. Then DeCoster took over second place, while a crash cost Brad two further placings. He finished fifth, ahead of teammate Noyce.

After the RC had received attention to gearbox problems during the interval, Brad again lead the second moto before Mikkola blasted into the distance. Then Wolsink also passed the Honda. But Noyce was having a far worse time—he crashed heavily on the opening lap while lying third, then came off again on the sixth lap in a spectacular incident on a concrete jump. He slid along the concrete, taking skin off his arm, leg and chin and giving himself a colossal headache.

Team Honda retired after the weekend to their base in Frankfurt, West Germany to rethink—and to rebuild Noyce's shattered bike. For Lackey, the problem was how to defeat Mikkola, and how to hold off the vastly more experienced Suzuki duo of DeCoster and Wolsink. For Noyce, the problem was how to score consistently in GP races without crashing too regularly. The difficulties are not insurmountable.

And even if Honda doesn't reach the top this year, the publicity generated by their efforts will help the sales of their 500-class production bike—when it eventually appears. People were screaming for a production 250 Honda long before the CR appeared. It just took time for Honda's R and D men to agree on what was the best bike before they would hand it over to the production section and say, "Here, this is our best effort. Now copy it."

Now the demand is mounting for something close to a GP-replica 500 Honda. And Steve Whitelock has the good news. "Something is going to happen about a production Open Class bike soon. We don't know exactly when it will appear, but it's getting closer."

No matter what happens in the GPs this year, it looks like Honda is on to some kind of winner one way or another.