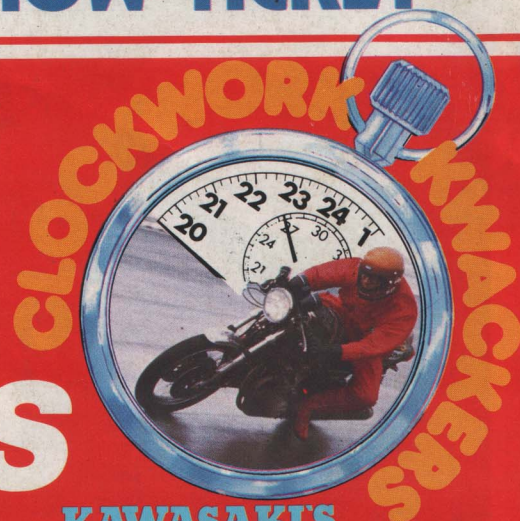


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# Introducing OUR NEXT WORLD CHAMP

Ranked fourth in the world, Graham Noyce is well on the way to the world moto-cross crown he so desperately seeks. At the ripe old age of 19 he looks to have the moto-cross world at his

feet but his mercurial rise to international stardom hasn't been as easy as some would like to suggest.

**REPORT BY FRANK MELLING**



**S**ATURDAY evening practice has come to an end for the final round of the 500cc World Championships at Ettelbruck, Luxembourg. The officials are closing up shop for the night and the world's finest moto cross riders are looking forward to a break from the hard slog which, beneath the facade of glamour, comprises a Grand Prix.

Willi Bauer shouts across the paddock: "Come on, it's time to eat," and Graham Noyce, professional moto cross rider and employee of the Maico factory, excuses himself and promises to finish our interview after the following day's racing.

January 1977



The ups and downs of Graham Noyce. Above; high flying on his works Maico. Below; disaster at the Luxembourg GP.

Noyce is confident and relaxed. Official timing has him fourth fastest but the Japanese mechanics with the Suzuki team place him equal fastest with De Coster, and on past experience, everyone knows the Orientals to be unerringly accurate. Fastest in practice, or equal fastest, it has been a familiar story all season and Graham savours the information as confirmation of his judgment of how training is progressing. Although no-one states the





# OUR NEXT WORLD CHAMP

topped by an unruly mop of blond hair but in a profession composed entirely of fine physical specimens he is not outstanding. What takes one's breath away is the tremendous self-confidence this young man possesses, a total belief in his own ability which has nothing to do with arrogance or conceit.

In fact, of all the many moto cross stars I have met, I have yet to encounter a more modest or relaxed one and I have yet to meet one with anything approaching his absolute belief in himself. His is the conviction of the prophet: an ability to see something lesser men cannot.

That 19-year-old Noyce would be a star in the world of moto cross was seen by Graham himself long before he achieved that status. He knew his future lay in being a Grand Prix rider and he could see this when older, and wiser heads, schooled into thinking in terms of normal riders, wanted to give him experience in British National events. Now, although he is reluctant to admit it, having become more worldly wise and anxious to avoid any taint of being thought a braggart, Noyce clearly sees himself as a future 500cc world champion — nothing more or less. All this after one and a half season's of G.P.s.

## RIDING AT SIX

There wasn't a start to Graham Noyce's motorcycling career — it had begun almost as soon as he was born. Encouraged by a father who was a motorcycling fanatic, Graham was competent on a 50cc NSU moped by the time he was six. Whenever Tom Noyce could find time, he would take Graham and his NSU across the road to his sister's farm and there they would play at racing.

Schoolboy scrambling was beginning to boom in England and it seemed a natural step to give Graham a chance to try his skills in competition and so the NSU was cut up to provide the budding star with his first racing machine.

Three years later, the fast improving Graham had a "real" racing bike on which to display his talents — a modified BSA Bantam road bike. It went well and so did its rider but reliability was not its forte. Occasional wins in heats followed but more often than not, the over-stressed machinery just gave up and died.

Real success came with the purchase of a 100cc Rickman, the hot machinery of the early 70s. This gave Graham a lot of success and it was followed by a 125cc Zundapp engined version on which he won the British Schoolboy Championships when he was 14. By this time, although still at school, Graham was looking for a career as a Grand Prix rider.

Unfortunately, not even the most talented 14-year-olds can go GP racing and the future Maico team rider was still ensconced in Wyvern County Secondary School where he spent the bulk of his time drawing moto cross bikes, writing about moto cross bikes or just dreaming about moto cross bikes. For the first three years, his teachers had vainly tried to dissuade him from devoting all his efforts to motorcycling and his school reports often had pointed remarks to this effect. However, apart from representing the school in every sport on the curriculum, Graham was not an outstanding scholar and things became more amicable for everyone when his teachers finally accepted this.

Leaving Wyvern at 15, Graham was taken on as an apprentice tool maker by the Rickman brothers, stars themselves and respected names in the frame building business. Not

only did his new employers offer him a job but a new 250cc Rickman Montesa.

Graham worked with Don Rickman, the half of the partnership which actually designs the frames, in the development shop and gained a good basic knowledge of engineering which was to be of much use to him when he became a professional rider.

However, there was another side to the job which is not generally appreciated by those who criticised him for leaving Rickman's care. Graham's day usually began at 6am with a 20 mile journey by train from his home to New Milton, where the Rickman factory is situated. Then he cycled from the station to get to work for 8am. By the time he reached home again in the evening, it was usually 6pm and twelve hour days become wearing even for the most enthusiastic employee.

What made things worse was that Graham, with modest tastes and frugal spending, was making a good living from moto cross without his wage from Rickmans and he was convinced that he had sufficient ability to make a career as a rider, not a development engineer. Grateful as he was for the Rickman's help,

**"IF A BLOKE IS FAST ENOUGH TO GET BY ME THEN HE DESERVES TO WIN AND I'M NOT GOING TO TRY AND STOP HIM BY DIRTY RIDING."**

particularly Don's, Graham wanted to race full time and after winning the supporting races of the 1974 British Grand Prix at Dodington Park, he received an offer from the Maico factory to do just that.

In August of 1974, he signed a two year contract to race the German bikes in Britain and to compete in "selected GPs" in 1975. In the moto cross world, "selected GPs" means all those which are within easy reach in Europe. It usually excludes Russia, Czechoslovakia, Finland and America — depending on whether the class is 250 or 500 — but a rider racing under such a contract can look forward to a good number of GP races in a season.

Unfortunately, when the 1975 season came along, Maico did not want the raw Noyce to go to the GP's and preferred him to gain more experience in Britain. No-one understood that he neither wanted nor needed more British experience — only Grand Prix racing was going to be of any use to him now.

British Husqvarna importer, Brian Leask, sensing the uneasiness in the relationship, offered Noyce a factory Husqvarna for the 125cc GPs and a 360cc for the British events. With no more thought for the matter, Noyce loaded up the van and hit the Championship trail.

With little support, Noyce did the first few 125 GPs the hard way, preparing his own bikes, arranging his own starts, living rough and learning fast. Meanwhile, back in England, Maico were about to sue Husky's latest acquisition for breach of contract. Lawyers were engaged and the legal fur flew, much to the anguish of Noyce and his family, who only wanted to go racing.

The climax was reached when Maico obtained a High Court injunction against Noyce a few days before the Maybug national meeting. The judge said that Noyce must race

fact openly, Noyce can win tomorrow and there is a strong feeling of expectancy in the air.

Race day is bright and dry with a strong wind clearing the track of any dust which escapes the copious watering. The first leg of the Grand Prix leaves the start line with CCM veteran, Vic Eastwood leading, having made a classic start. Noyce is tucked in behind and is well clear of the pile up which the mass of the pack are involved in on the third bend and which puts an end to Roger De Coster's hopes of victory.

As the two green helmets of the British riders appear out of the tunnel and on to the main straight for the start of the second lap, Noyce eases past Eastwood in an effortless fashion. The race is following its predicted pattern. Noyce looks relaxed and unflurried and the critics are nodding their heads appreciatively.

Then, a hundred yards after the start of lap three, an incident occurs which exemplifies world championship moto cross. Noyce hits a rut at an awkward angle and the handlebars flick to one side, as they do a hundred times a lap, but this time, instead of landing true, the front wheel hits another rut running in the opposite direction. The 'bars are snatched from the young rider's hands and when he lands for the third time, he parts company with the bike in a spectacular fashion. If he rides another ten thousand races, the same sequence of events won't happen again but the dice have rolled badly this time and the 1976 Grand Prix at Luxembourg is over for Graham Noyce. Bad luck it may be, but racing at this level requires not only skill and courage of the highest degree but also that vital slice of luck to oil the wheels of success.

The doctors at Ettelbruck's large and well equipped hospital diagnose a cracked vertebra but two days later, Noyce has discharged himself and returned home to Fair Oak, Hampshire. Later he will find out that his back is only badly bruised and in three weeks he will be competing in British National events and winning as convincingly as he has ever done.

Interviewing Noyce is a disturbing experience. Statistically, he was born on February 18, 1957, which makes him nineteen. In practice, he could well be ten years older. Noyce is a rangy 6 feet 2 inches of muscle,





Noyce now and as a ten-year-old back in 1967 when he was racing a Bantam.

the German bikes or nothing, but warned the factory that they must honour their contract and provide him with competitive machinery.

A Maico duly arrived, Noyce won every race and suddenly the clouds lifted. Maico knew that they must let Noyce race in the Grands Prix and did everything they could to help him.

For a rank newcomer to the toughest level of competition in the sport, Graham did well in the three GPs in which he competed. After steady rides in Britain and Luxembourg, he finished fourth and tenth in Germany, in front of the Maico factory officials. No-one was going to keep him out of world championship racing in 1976.

From providing a free bike in 1975, Maico now gave him two machines and a spare engine in 1976, paid for a full-time mechanic, a van, travelling and hotel expenses and merit bonuses for good rides. In addition, Graham also has "another contract running in parallel with British Maico importer, Bryan Goss, which covers the British Championships. As a final fillip, Graham is given his works bikes at the end of the season to dispose of as he thinks fit.

This year he has repaid all the confidence invested in him by not only winning his first GP in front of his home crowd at Dodington Park, but also by finishing fourth in the World Championships, only 35 points behind his ultra-experienced team mate, Adolf Weil. Now, with the British Championships firmly tied up — he totally dominated the series this year, winning almost every race — he looks forward with confidence to the Trans-Am series in America and also a new GP season as Maico's number one rider in the 500cc class.

Graham carries his success with an easy charm which is disarming. He appreciates that he is one of the few moto cross riders with an efficient fan club and he sees this as an important step towards pushing moto cross into the realms of respectability. He sees road racing superstar, Barry Sheene, as a good example of what can be done with motorcycle sport and feels that moto cross has the same potential.

Being a natural athlete, Graham doesn't have to train but puts great stress on finishing races. He insists that finishing 45 minute GP races is the best way on earth to train for 45 minute GP races. Racing every weekend leaves little time for becoming unfit.

A non-smoker, Graham is as relaxed in his life-style as he is in his ambitions. When he feels like a beer or a bottle of wine, then he has one and if the occasion calls for a mammoth high calorie meal then Graham can eat with the best. Similarly, although he has no regular girl friend, he likes female company whenever and wherever it can be found. But everything takes second place to racing.

Graham has strong and very individual views on racing. His relationship with his present mechanic, George Utting, is as cordial, as it has been with all his other previous spannermen. Graham prepared his own bikes for many years and has a clear idea of what he wants a bike to do. After telling George how he wants the bike set up, he leaves him to get on with the job. However, he is the first to acknowledge Utting's skill and experience and is often guided by the older man's suggestions.

## STANDARD BIKES

Noyce's bikes are amazingly standard. In fact, there are probably hundreds of Maicos in use by amateur racers which are just as quick as Graham's works bikes. The cylinder barrels for his Maicos — the key part on a racing two-stroke — are chosen from the production line as every engine is run on a dynamometer before it leaves the Stuttgart factory. When a particularly good motor comes down the line, it is put on one side for Noyce, Weil, or one of the other supported riders.

The major difference between the standard bikes and the factory ones is the use of magnesium for castings such as the fork yokes. This saves a few pounds on weight but it is of little interest to Noyce. He prefers to use standard production parts so that spares are easily and quickly available wherever he travels. And if anyone should think Graham is bending the truth regarding his bikes, careful comparison of his factory machine with a production model will show that Noyce's machines are the most standard ever to win a GP for many a year.

Noyce has an excellent record for finishing races and this is due in part to his riding style, which is easy on his machines. After a whole season's racing, he still has the same two bikes and spare engine with which he began with in March. He has had one new frame and several wheels but the bulk of his equipment has done a whole season's GP racing.

When he first decided to complete in the

GPs, Graham realised that he had to commit himself totally and this meant living and working on the Continent. This acceptance has meant that he has settled into GP racing far more quickly than many more experienced riders. The established GP stars took the young Hampshire rider to their hearts and gave him all the help they could and Noyce repaid them by becoming one of them; thinking, eating and riding nothing but world championship moto cross.

On the track, he knows the vital importance of getting good starts because in a race with the best 40 riders in the world, it is very difficult, though not impossible, to come from behind. And he likes to know which rider is behind him since he then knows where that particular opponent's strength lies — every rider and machine have a strong point on some part of the track — and Graham can be wary accordingly. What he refuses to do is block another rider's progress by "tactical" riding. This is confirmed by the fact that Graham virtually never looks behind him. "If a bloke is fast enough to get by me, then he deserves to win and I'm not going to try and stop him by dirty riding," says Graham. A statement which speaks volumes, not only about his sportsmanship, but also his total faith in his riding ability.

Concluding this interview is difficult, for one is conscious that the Graham Noyce story has only just begun. This year he wanted to finish in the first five of the World Championships and win the British Championships outright. He finished fourth in the world, annihilated the opposition in Britain to win the most overwhelming of victories and put the icing on the cake by winning a leg of the British GP, the first Grand Prix success by a British rider since 1968.

About his next step, Graham is reticent. Everyone knows what is on his mind, but no-one mentions it. The Trans-Am is going to be fun. America is one of Noyce's favourite countries and he likes the fans, the organisers and the tracks — but it will only be the light entertainment before the serious business of 1977. Either Graham wins the 500cc World Championships next year or he will be disappointed and there will be no second best to console him.

Without a trace of arrogance, Noyce believes that the World 500cc crown is his for the taking and given that vital element of luck, one can only agree with him.