

RIPPING YARN

The 1986 MXdN where O’Mara’s 125 ruled, Dack put himself on the international map and Australia’s riding gear brought the house down.

ANDY WIGAN & CRAIG DACK FORCEFIELD PROMOTIONS

BACK IN 1981, AN AMERICAN ‘B-TEAM’ ROCKED UP AT the Motocross des Nations (MXdN) in Belgium and surprised everybody by unceremoniously upstaging Europe’s motocross superpowers. It was the beginning of a remarkable 13-year win-streak for Team USA, the most dominant of which was Maggiora, Italy, in 1986. According to MX folklore, the ’86 event remains one of the best des Nations of all time; where Team USA’s Johnny O’Mara, David Bailey and Ricky Johnson posted perfect 1-2 results

in all three motos; where O’Mara showed the world what a 125cc was capable of; and where Team Australia’s custom-made gear set the precedent for MXdN riders wearing their national strip. The Australian team that year was made up of MXdN debutantes, Craig Dack (CR250) and Dave Armstrong (CR500), along with Glen Bell (YZ125). We asked Dack – a bloke who’s gone on to become Australia’s most successful race team manager – to reflect on that memorable 1986 event where he banged bars with the world’s best...

In 1986, Dave Armstrong and I were on the Honda team and we’d dominated the Australian series. I’d won the Mister Motocross title and Army had come second to me, so we were kind of automatic choices for the des Nations team. From what I remember, Belly replaced Jeff Leisk, who’d just busted his jaw in a supercross race in America. For me and Armstrong, it was our first des Nations (believe it or not, I missed out on the 1985 team on a coin-toss because selectors couldn’t choose between me and Bell), so we had a pretty inexperienced team. But in a way, I think that worked in our favour because we really didn’t know what we were in for and we all rode like we had nothing to lose.

My most vivid memories of Maggiora are of how amazingly good the track looked when we first rocked up. It was undulating, surrounded by lush green grass, and a section of it ran alongside the back fences of houses in the village. I’d never seen drop-offs on a track like that before in my life. It was insane. And with some 70,000 spectators, the atmosphere was sensational on race day. The place was just *on*, and simply being there gave me goose bumps. To this day, many people still single out Maggiora as the best Motocross des Nations of all time.

Remember also that the mid-1980s was a golden era for the sport – not only because the race bikes were genuine, full-blown factory machines, but also because the depth of talent was incredible. I know it’s hard to compare eras, but at that time you

had European greats such as Eric Geboers, Dave Thorpe, Kurt Nicoll, Georges Jobe, Jean-Michel Bayle, Michele Rinaldi and several other former and future world champs. And in 1986 at Maggiora, they were all up against one of the best American teams ever: O’Mara, RJ and Bailey.

Thanks to the initiative of Rat Racing’s Vince Tesoriero, the Aussie team wore custom-made Go The Rat gear in 1986. It’s true that the Americans ran matching helmets at that time, but our green and gold gear was a massive hit because it was the first time a team had incorporated their country’s colours into riding gear. Plus Monza Imports’ John Chiodo had organised Alpinestars to make special green and gold boots for us. Yeah, we won the uniform race by a mile in Italy, and it’s cool to see how many teams now run their national colours at the event.

The Americans absolutely dominated in 1986, with Johnny O’Mara the standout. He was part of the Yanks’ 1981 team that kicked off their 13-year win-streak, but what he did on a 125 at Maggiora was mind-blowing. I believe it was one of David Bailey’s last races before his spinal injury, too.

Starting in two rows in those days was a very strange thing, especially as I was never the best starter. In my first moto at Maggiora, I broke my rear brake lever off and finished kind of mid-pack. But in my second moto, it all clicked. I was just inside the top 10 around the first turn and then kept moving forward throughout the moto. O’Mara won on a 125. Ricky Johnson was

second on the 250. Dave Thorpe – who’d just been crowned world champion – finished third. And I ended up in fourth. I’ll look back on that moto as one of my best ever. Belly and Army also rode well and we took a seventh place Overall, which was pretty solid.

The support we got in Italy was fantastic and to this day, I can remember our team manager, Stephen Gall, and Geoff Ballard leading a chorus of incredibly passionate Aussie fans. The other thing that fired me up was what I saw written on Thorpe’s pit board with a few laps to go in the second moto. It said, ‘Dack Coming’.

A couple of years later, I teamed up with Leisk and Bell in France and ran equal-third (fourth on a count back) at the des Nations. That was Australia’s best result until 2011 – again in France – when Chad Reed, Brett Metcalfe and Matt Moss got third. People often ask me if I’m surprised that Australia hasn’t done better at the event over the years. I’m not – the reason being, you’ve got to remember that the European and American riders come into the MXdN just a week or two after the last round of their motocross series. For Aussies, however, the event takes place two or three months after our motocross finishes; when riders are preparing for the supercross series here.

Nonetheless, I’ll always have fond memories of Maggiora and the fact that my des Nations debut coincided with both a sensational event *and* one of my best performances ever. And our matching gold gear and boots ... priceless! 📸



REGULAR
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Team Australia:
David Armstrong (#4),
Craig Dack (#5), Glen Bell (#6).

CdN, TdN, MXdN or MXoN?

The Motocross des Nations has been staged since 1947. It’s an annual team motocross race between riders representing their country, which is why it’s often called the “Olympics of Motocross”. As it stands today, the event is an amalgamation of three separate events: the original Motocross des Nations (500cc bikes), the Trophée des Nations (250cc bikes) and the Coupe des Nations (125cc bikes). The three events used to be held in different locations on different weekends, but in 1984, they were combined into a single event with one rider per class. Since 2004, when Youthstream was awarded promotional rights for the Motocross World Championship, the event’s name has been officially anglicised into Motocross of Nations (“MXoN”), although the moniker “des Nations” or “MXdN” is still widely used.