

Smith Leads Team USA to Hillclimb World Trophy Victory

By Ken Faught

DECAZEVILLE, FRANCE, JULY 1st & 2nd, 2006

The world's fastest hillclimbers gathered in Europe to compete in the most-prestigious international event of the year. It's a two-day torture test of man and machine, all chasing after the coveted World Trophy and an impressive \$50,000 in prize money. North America sent eight riders from the N.A.H.A. Racer X/Suzuki Pro Hillclimb Series to represent the United States and Canada. The massive team was managed by five-time Hillclimb World Champ Kerry Peterson, and things couldn't have been more intense.

France held its National Championship during Saturday's events which determined which five riders would represent the host nation. None of the 40 riders managed to make it over the hill dubbed the Montee Impossible (Impossible Mountain) and it was easy to see why. It was so treacherous that the promoter reworked some of the course before Sunday to make it less dangerous and more thrilling for spectators. After all, this is a sport full of exotic 200-horsepower, nitro-burning multi-cylinder monsters, most of which use some sort of steel paddle tire or bolts sticking out of the rear wheel to provide increased traction. Oh yeah, some of the bike weighs over 700 pounds, so mistakes can be extremely costly.

Riders competing in the World Trophy were allowed five runs instead of the usual two on the American circuit. Twenty-year-old Jason Smith from Salt Lake City, Utah rode his 800cc nitro-burning Yamaha to win the event and the \$12,000 first place prize. He was one of four riders who actually conquered the 550-foot hill, and he did so in 21.40 seconds. Frenchman Stephane Pierrel came in second with an impressive 25.3 second time. The French and Americans actually use two completely different techniques and bike setups, and both suffered equally on what could best be described as an uphill supercross tracks with big-block Chevrolet-size boulders at the top. The Americans tend to go for skinnier rear wheels and arm jerking power, while the French actually use 14-18 inch-wide car tires at the rear so they can run carriage bolts sticking through. It's extremely odd, especially since they are run without any air, but they are very effective. Pierrel torqued his way to the top of the climb, and actually stopped for a few seconds on the 77-degree incline before resuming in trials-rider-like fashion.

American Jeff Thomas from Indianapolis claimed third after muscling his way over during his fourth attempt. Thomas actually had to borrow Smith's bike to make the run after his transmission failed on

his first run. That eliminated one of the five bikes that North American riders brought to share, and made things a little tense around the Team U.S.A. pits, especially with all of the bikes tumbling down the hill.

Frenchman Herve Poirot was the only other rider to make it over the top and stopped the clocks in 31.82 seconds. He edged out former champ Travis Whitlock who was fifth after climbing 159.12 meters on his KTM that was suffering problems with the NOS system. Whitlock, an American, is actually best known in France as the rider who scored the largest ever bounty in professional hillclimb competition. On his 21st birthday in 1990 Whitlock was the first to conquer a hill in Arrete that had not been topped in five years. Each year the promoter added money to the bounty, and Whitlock walked away with a cool \$60,100 on his last run of the day. Unfortunately Whitlock had no such luck in France this time, but he did contribute heavily to a Team U.S.A. victory. Aside from Smith and Whitlock, the American contingent included Robie Peterson (8th), Dave Watson (10th) and Bret Peterson (12th). Bret Peterson also topped the inaugural stock class, making it a clean sweep for the United States.

“This was a really good event,” said Smith of the biggest win of his career, “I’m actually surprised that a few of us got over the top. It was really ugly up there, and pictures don’t do it justice at all. There were something like 10,000 spectators, and I know we put on a really good show.”

“I’m really proud of the entire team,” said Team Manager Kerry Peterson. “They all worked incredibly well together, and supported one another the entire time. I think that events like this actually strengthen racing in the United States because several foreign riders have come to our events to improve their riding. They know that the United States has a lot of talent, and like Supercross, people will always seek out the most-prestigious titles.”

“Man it felt good to get over the top,” said Thomas. “It’s a lot different riding in a foreign country on someone else’s bike, but I will never forget this adventure. It was by far the roughest hill that I have ever seen and I hope I never have to climb anything like this again.”

“Luck always plays a big part in any racing, and it was my turn to have some bad luck,” said Whitlock. “I didn’t get the best pick for start position, and then I had a few bike problems. I really should have been able to get over the top, but I guess I’ll have to wait until next year.”

RESULTS

World Trophy Team: 1. U.S.A.; 2. France; 3. Canada; 4. Estonia; 5. Switzerland.

Individual: 1. Jason Smith (21.40 seconds); 2. Stephane Pierrel (25.30 seconds); 3. Jeff Thomas (26.86); 4. Herve Poirot (31.82); 5. Travis Whitlock (159.12 meters); 6. Ken Long (154.76 meters); 7. Patrick Brunier (154.48 meters); 8. Robie Peterson (154.13 meters); 9. Xavier Boutiton (152.75 meters); 10. Dave Watson (150.66 meters); 11. Riho Kollist (148.81 meters); 12. Bret Peterson (143.15 meters); 13. Marcel V.D. Akke (141.15 meters); 14. Eriki Salak (139.06 meters); 15. Don Beer (138.23); 16. Michel Wissen (138.1 meters); 17. Michael Resch (137.23 meters); 18. Lars Nonn (137.15 meters); 19. Josef Hofstetter (137.14 meters); 19. Vallo Poder (137.14 meters).

RIDER NUMBERS FOR REFERENCE

Jason Smith 59 - Stephane Pierrel 4 - Jeff Thomas 17 - Herve Poirot 2 - Travis Whitlock 56
 Ken Long 16 - Patrick Brunier 3 - Robie Peterson 57 - Xavier Boutiton 1 - Dave Watson 60
 Riho Kollist 23 - Bret Peterson 58 - Marcel V.D. Akke 38 - Eriki Salak 22 - Don Beer 20
 Michel Wissen 52 - Michael Resch 10 - Lars Nonn 9 - Josef Hofstetter 8 - Vallo Poder 12







