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McCormick eyes perfect superbike ending

Saskatoon superbike rider hopes to become youngest Canadian champion ever

By Kathryn Willms, The StarPhoenix August 25, 2009



Saskatoon's Brett McCormick is currently in second place in the Superbike Championship point standings

Photograph by: Gord Waldner, The StarPhoenix, The StarPhoenix

It's just more than a week before the Parts Canada Superbike championship in Shannonville, Ont., and the series is developing plot lines that could come straight from a classic Hollywood sports movie.

The main actors are two of the premier motorcycle riders in the country: Saskatoon's Brett "The Kid" McCormick and Jordan "Five-time-Canadian-champion" Szoke from Brantford, Ont. The former teammates turned rivals have traded the one-two positions all season in the hunt for a double prize: The Canadian championship and a page in the history books. For the 30-year-old Szoke, a record-breaking sixth national title is on the line. The barely 18-year-old McCormick would like to be the youngest to win.

With professional glory spurring them on, the campaign has turned personal. Perhaps it was inevitable. McCormick recalls how Szoke helped him out when he joined the Kawasaki team as a 15-year-old rookie.

"It was a good year," he said simply.

But as McCormick became more of a threat, he said Szoke began to keep his distance. When the Kid moved from Szoke's No. 2 to the only rider of Team Suzuki/Blackfoot/Picotte outfit this season, the clash seemed precipitous. During the third race of the year in Calgary, McCormick executed a daring inside pass on the second last turn of the race, clipping Szoke's bike on the way to a 0.08-second victory. In the post-game interview, Szoke called out his former teammate for dangerous driving.

"I guess I've gotta re-think the way I'm riding with Brett," he told the crowd, "and be more careful with him."

The race judges ruled against foul play but the next week in Toronto, McCormick suffered his own setback. He won both races, but accumulated so many penalties he threw his season into limbo.

In the 1000cc class, he picked up a five-second jump start penalty and lost another five positions for racing a bike 1.6 horsepower over regulation. He ended up eighth. In the 600cc, he hit the tail switch while trying to adjust his visor. He stalled out while going 250 km/h, nearly taking out four other competitors. That misstep left him fifth.

As a result, McCormick trails Szoke by 14 points in the 1000 cc superbike class and 16 in the 600cc pro sport bike class, despite splitting the season with Szoke with six wins apiece. Now, the Saskatoon rider needs a stellar performance and a little bit of luck to complete his comeback. McCormick not only needs to win each race next week, he must qualify in the pole position, lead the most laps and have Szoke place third. It's not out of the realm of possibility given the depth of the Canadian racing scene, but there's no Hollywood scriptwriter ensuring satisfaction.

"All (Szoke) has to do is finish second in everything," said McCormick, "which isn't an easy thing. There's a lot of pressure on me but the same with him. He can't just cruise around to win the championship. He's got to ride hard."

While the happy ending is still up for grabs, McCormick is quick to tear down many of the standard Hollywood assumptions. He is the underdog this time but that definition

doesn't extend to his career. McCormick is a rare thing, a Prairie racer making his name on a largely eastern Canadian circuit. He's raced for 15 years, although, ironically, only earning his motorcycle licence on Aug. 14. He also strikes down the idea that there are good guys and bad guys in this little epic, confessing to some sympathy for Szoke's position after the scuffle in Calgary. They were talking again by the press conferences for the next race.

"I think he was just heated up," McCormick said. "He was saying that he was a clean racer and he would never do that. I was like, 'C'mon man.' I know that he'd do the exact same thing in my position. (On the other hand) I probably would have been pretty mad in his position and said some stuff. It wasn't a huge deal. It's just funny."

Even the nickname "The Kid" is becoming less relevant as more young riders, such as

14-year-old Royce McLean of Alberta, arrive on the scene. McCormick points out in Europe, the mecca of superbike, everyone starts young and that's where he would love to end up. His contract with Suzuki Canada expires this year. From there, he could continue in Canada or move to the more-competitive United States circuit. Ultimately, the World Superbike circuit in Europe is the goal.

"I may never even come close," he said, "but you've got to have a goal."

A win at the championships, which run Sept. 3-6, just might change everything as he bargains for a new contract, his place in the annals of Canadian motorcycle racing and the perfect Hollywood ending. Then again, The Kid has plenty of time to get it right.

"Every weekend I go out and race and get a little bit faster," he says. "I'm not going to reach my peak at 18."

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