

Stewart sits at the top of his Supercross class

by Bill Center

Welcome to the James Stewart era of Supercross.

With seven-time series champion Jeremy McGrath and five-time champ Ricky Carmichael permanently retired, the 22-year-old Stewart goes into Saturday night's season opener in Anaheim, Calif., as the rider du jour.

Which means Stewart already is being compared with the gods of the sport, although he has just one Supercross title to his credit.

One of the first questions posed to Stewart during a recent conference call was: "Is your goal to be the all-time Supercross champion?"

Before we listen to Stewart's answer, a little background is necessary.

In addition to his seven Supercross championships, McGrath won 72 individual races in a span of a decade - or more than 40 percent of all the races staged during his career.

Carmichael won 12 Supercross/motocross championships and 150 individual races before completing the switch to stock cars last year.

Stewart thus far has won one Supercross title, although he captured that in electrifying fashion last season by winning 13 individual races.

So, James, about your place in history?

"I wouldn't say my goal right now is to be the all-time Supercross champion," said Stewart. "But if I win this year and win a bunch more races, you can look into that."

Stewart appears to have the talent to dominate the sport for the next four or five years - if he can stay healthy.

And that has been the biggest problem for the Kawasaki rider from Florida.

After winning the 2007 Supercross title, Stewart was also dominating the outdoor motocross season when his season was cut short by an injury. Stewart was also hurt in 2005 and 2006.

Since the end of last season, Stewart has started working out with Carmichael's former trainer, Aldin Baker.

As he prepares for the 2008 season, Stewart views himself as healthier and more mature.

"I don't have any problems," he said recently. "I probably feel twice as good as I ever have. I'm unbelievably fit."

Truth is, James Stewart could be at his best when the competition is not.

The biggest threat to Stewart is Australian Chad Reed, whose only Supercross title came in 2004 when Carmichael was sidelined with an injury and Stewart was still dominating the support class. Reed has finished second four times, including last year.

The venerable Tim Ferry finished third in the final standings last year with Kevin Windham fourth and Ivan Tedesco fifth.

Ferry will team with Stewart for Kawasaki this season while Reed and 2007 AMA Motocross champion Grant Langston will pace Yamaha's fortunes.

Tedesco and Windham will pace Honda's factory team, although the riders to watch there could be newcomers Ben Townley and Davy Millsaps. Suzuki also has a mix of old and new with veteran David Vuillemin teamed with 18-year-old Ryan Dungey.

Unfortunately, the rider seen by many as the next McGrath/Carmichael/Stewart will be spending another season riding in the Supercross Lites support class. He is 19-year-old Ryan Villopoto, who also rides for Kawasaki.

Saturday's race at Angel Stadium will be the first of three Anaheim stops on the 17-event tour that ends May 3.

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