



POR FIN

(at last...)

Catching the latest teenage sensation in MXGP as the milestones begin to fall

By Adam Wheeler, Photos by Ray Archer

Dammit Spain. Not content with the world's fastest/best motorcycle athletes in Road racing, Rally, Trial, Enduro (even honourable names in F1 and WRC) the Iberian Peninsula now have a motocrosser worthy to join the ranks.

Jorge Prado has been a large blip on the sport's radar for several years and long before his voice recently broke as a fresh-faced sixteen year old. Secured as a junior by KTM and fast-tracked Herlings/Roczen-style through a 125 programme, a year on a 250 and to the point where a Grand Prix debut resulted in a phenomenal podium finish in the sand of Assen, Holland last year, Prado recently became just the second Spanish Grand Prix winner in the history of the sport and the first in MX2. Last week the Pietramurata circuit in Trentino heard the

and his younger sister became trilingual and submerged in the Belgium school system. 65cc World and 125cc European Championships were bagged before EMX250 wins and MX2 beckoned by way of a stint in the USA in 2015 where Prado's capabilities on the KTM test tracks drew plenty of attention. New contract inked and #61 had a trajectory planned including one of the most coveted factory seats in MX2.

'He was always very open and very passionate,' Team Manager Dirk Gruebel says. 'He is naturally gifted and always seems to have fun and it is good to see: not every kid has that. They usually carry passion from their Dad or something of their surroundings. Jorge is not like that. He is a very special character.'

"I WAS RIDING A LOT OF TRIALS AND I THINK THIS HELPED WITH TECHNIQUE AND RIDING THE BIKE WELL BECAUSE IT IS LESS ABOUT POWER AND MORE HANDLING. I FIND IT HELPS ME NOW IN SITUATIONS WHERE I CAN MAKE A SMALL DIFFERENCE..."

Marcha Real national anthem for the first time this decade (the last was Jonathan Barragan on home soil in 2009, also on a KTM but in MXGP...then MX1).

The rise has been anticipated and eagerly awaited: Prado must have done more interviews than any of his MX2 peers before he was legally allowed to apply for a driver's licence such was his profile and level of hype surrounding his abilities. His entire family uprooted from his native Galicia to Belgium where his parents chased new jobs and Jorge

Prado made an emphatic statement at Assen last August (he actually attempted the Belgian Grand Prix a month earlier but could not get through practice due to a shoulder injury) and the winter of 2016 meant a serious step up the professional ladder by finding a trainer for the first time in the form of German Stephan Nuesser.

Jorge seems to fly around the paddock at 100mph and with the typical exuberance of an individual that still doesn't have to worry too much about shaving.

He has a demeanour that screams 'fun' and even a face that wants to wear a permanent smile. Watching his interactions with others it is clear his parents have brought him up with the right values and even if his childhood can be deemed unusual compared to many others, his life centres around a school timetable (he went straight from the Grand Prix of Europe at Valkenswaard to the classroom). This is not the first interview we've done but it is the first talk with Jorge where we both know – along with thousands of others – that the kid is going to travel quite far and stands on the precipice of genuine stardom...

It's your first GP year and – being honest – there have been moments of brilliance but others when we remember you're a rookie at this level...

Winning the Italian championship was a big thing for me in the pre-season and even things like at Ottobiano for the final round I made a holeshot against the 450s and battled against them for a top five. So I had a lot of confidence and had a good feeling going to Qatar but then I dipped mentally. I felt like I had to win and when I was fourth I wasn't happy. I needed some perspective but in Indonesia we had that crazy, muddy race. Finally Argentina was really good and to finish second was my best result so far, especially because I had been feeling sick and on Saturday I was pretty sore. In Mexico I didn't like the track or enjoy the ride. Overall I think it has been going pretty good.

How do you get confidence? Results or feeling?

I think it is more about feeling. The fastest guy doesn't always win and so far this year I've seen quite a few guys who are quick...but also out of control.





JORGE PRADO

Sometimes I have seen guys ahead of me in a race with their feet and legs everywhere. I always stay in control and never go over the limit. This is really important because injuries are such a setback. I did not expect the guys here to go so crazy. They want to win, so they give everything and more...I'm just trying to learn.

Is it hard to know your limit though? You can see Pauls or Jeremy or Benoit pushing and know you have to match them...

Yes! In Mexico for example I knew that if I pushed a bit more then there was a big chance of crashing. It is my in hand! Sometimes I want to go faster but it doesn't let me. There are times where you feel confident right away and you know you can do well – like in Argentina – so I went for it.

It must have been one of the busiest and most important off-season and winter periods for you...

Yes, although it wasn't really a big push for me because I have trained well before and I'm a good swimmer. My Dad and I did some things but I'd usually go cycling on my own and following my own programme. I started working with Stephan Nuesser for 2017 and I felt that the training was totally different. We always do different things. Before I'd always kept quite 'routine': I'd take the bicycle or swim and it'd always been for two-two and a half hours. Now we mix it up, involve more sprints and variations and I can feel it helping me on the track. So my fitness is much better and my intensity on the track. We also do bike specific exercises.

Do you feel like you are still growing? I guess you measure and record everything...

An example is my shoulders. I thought it was an area I needed to build up and be stronger and we could have done a big change but it was also something that has to happen slowly. I was made aware that the strength would come... and I can feel it if I compare myself to past months. I saw Stephan working with Bobby [Evgeny Bobryshev] and it looked professional. We had also heard some good things so we started talking and asked about his ideas. We really like him and his professionalism. There are some guys that make you do the same workouts as when they were racing! Stefan is always trying to improve and draw out the best of me. I like that he is always looking for new techniques.

Such as?

Different to say without giving away the work we are doing...

I know he's quite into his nutrition...

It is not an area we have touched too much. He says – and I'm with him on this – that for motocross you don't need to diet. You don't need to be a set weight. You just need to eat healthily – not French fries everyday! We use protein shakes for recovery and you really feel those. I hadn't used those before and I'd be pretty tired from one day to the next.

'Jorge was at a high level,' says Sport Scientist Nuesser; a man who has worked with Josh Coppins, Bobryshev, Stephen Sword and a number of other younger German riders. 'From an endurance point of view he was already pretty good; there was some space to improve but it was high. In aspects of strength we had to work on details because that was a weak point. When he was young he was

quite an ambitious swimmer and so putting the hours in is not an issue and hard work is normal. You never need to motivate him to train and at that age it is something unique; most up-and-coming riders don't see the need to do high quality physical training.'

'I think he has the aptitude for good endurance fitness. Some riders have that genetic disposition and it is a good base,' he adds.

It seems so far that your bike has been going faster than you: there was the step to the 125 and then on the 250 in less than a year and now MX2 after just one term at EMX. It is almost like your body has been playing catch-up. Were there any doubts about the training and the right way to do it?

Stephan is in Germany for a couple of days a week but then is in Valkenswaard for the rest of the time so it is really easy for me to do a gym or cycling session with him in Holland; only ten minutes from my house. The communication is great and we talk almost every day. He knows my feelings. About the training: I'm still in school so everything is taking time. I can only do one session a day when it should be two for progress. I feel a lot of difference every year when the summer starts and I suddenly have more time.

Nuesser is handling a different kind of athlete. The work with Coppins, Bobryshev, Paul Cooper and Sword were with riders hitting the peak of their form and fitness and now Prado represents a project on a different point of the scale; as you'd expect from a GP novice the work

is not only centred on conditioning. 'It's true that he was always quite small for the class he is riding and that formed his riding style, especially on hard-pack and now we're trying to change this,' Nuesser says. 'In the past he used a technique because he was not strong enough to control the bike in certain lines. That's why he has this very smooth and fluid style but sometimes he also needs to be a bit more aggressive into lines and sections and we've had problems on certain tracks: you can see that between Mexico and the win in Italy.'

This leads us into Prado's weaknesses. The kid is already an accomplished starter and the marriage with the works 250 SX-F is a devastating one out of the gate but there are still plenty of aspects to work on.



'I'd say Jorge's weakness at the moment is to fight,' opines Gruebel. 'If it is a hard, hard struggle – like he had some stomach cramps in Mexico – then we are reminded he is still a kid. He needs to grow more and learn to endure until the end, but it is a process.'

'When things are not going the way he wants then he needs more mental support,' offers Nuesser. 'It was difficult for the first two GPs because he'd had won the Italian Championship and beaten most of his competitors. He had high expectations going to Qatar and it didn't go the way he expected but I thought it was a learning process: I did not see him riding for the championship in his first season.'

that age this is kinda special,' comments Nuesser. 'He watches and wants and listens. There is a lot of communication and discussion and it is motivating.'

Like Seewer and Gajser previously, Prado is combining competition at the highest level of his sport with an obligation to the classroom. This brings about practical difficulties. Nuesser: 'He can only do one session a day and is in school until 3 or 4. If he has riding days then he can stop earlier. We cannot do as much as if he was a full-time professional but it's important he finishes school and it's good for him personally. Obviously it is also difficult to do that and I don't know how he can handle it next year depending on the goals for 2018 but I appreciate his reasoning because many others would take the easy road and say 'I'm a factory rider...' He chooses this by himself.'

“GRUEBEL: HE JUST HAS THAT GIFT, AND DOESN'T GET STRESSED OUT. HE KNOWS WHEN HE IS FOCUSSED THAT HE WILL TAKE THE HOLESHOT. HE IS PLANNING IT AND NOT EVERY KID CAN DO THAT.”

'He has the talent but at that age Jeffrey and Roczen were harder,' adds Gruebel. 'They were winning races at fifteen and every week in the top five. Jeffrey never really rode the 125 and went straight to the 250, Jorge is still a little up and down. He is getting there.'

'It is important to remember he is learning and from my side you can work with him on a high and professional level and I would compare it already in terms of intensity, the relationship and the type of training with Josh [Coppins] and at

So, how long left at school?

Three more years. There are sport schools that have different programmes and schedules but mine is quite normal!

That's going to be more and more tricky...nineteen GPs this year for example...

Yeah, more and more difficult. If you want to improve then you need to dedicate that time...and a lot of my hours go towards schooling. If I stopped next year then I'd still home study. It is good to have that knowledge [qualification].



JORGE'S GRAN TRIPLE: NO.1 STYLE

"I just ride my bike. I enjoy it! I watch videos of other riders – like Ken Roczen – and try to see the positive things they are doing with the bike and their position. I tried to imitate...but in my way. I like my style but I think you can also see a rider that doesn't like to go over that limit and someone who knows that he can do better in other sections of the track. Sometimes I'll think 'argh, I can give a little bit more gas there'. It is good to have that cushion for improvement. I think if you can ride the bike well then it is another way for people to like you: I think it is another way to bring people into the sport."

But you are not a ‘top ten guy’. OK, anything can happen in this sport, but you are a factory rider with the world at your feet...

Here, in this team, I don’t think they like results out of the top ten so you have to fight for your spot and justify your place. Making top fives is important. OK, for me it is a learning year but there is still that expectation to make it. I know that.

How much do you weigh?

65 kilos.

Is that easy to keep?

I don’t think the weight matters that much. Look at [Thomas Kjer] Olsen; he is very tall and always top five in the starts. A lot of people that cannot start well tend to say they are too heavy or too tall. I think it is more about confidence and the feeling you have with the engine and the bike. It is that whole relationship with the shifting, the clutch, the gas: there are so many things going on and not just reaction time. I start well, and not just because I am light. In fact in some other parts of the track I have problems because of my weight, as the suspension does not work the same. If I had ten more kilos then I’d be heavier, have more traction and the bike would be moving less.

Gruebel is best placed to have an opinion as to why Prado is so swift away from the line and having optimised the #61 race bike to help make those holeshots happen. ‘He just has that gift, and doesn’t get stressed out. He knows when he is focussed that he will take the holeshot. He is planning it and not every kid can do that. Max Nagl had that ability, Tony Cairoli does. There is some ‘programme’ running when they enter the

gate. There is a procedure and it clicks. Jorge just knows and believes he can make a top three start. When we began with tests in the winter it took him only a couple of starts to get it. In the Italian championship he won the starts against the 450s. He is always with the right torque, the bike accelerates and he is gone.’

Feeling seems to be such a vital asset to steering a

motorcycle as quickly as possible – you see that in MotoGP especially. Can you describe how you get that feeling? Is it just hours and hours of riding?

I think it is something you are born with. In terms of development then I was riding a lot of trials and I think this helped with technique and riding the bike well because it is less about power and more your handling. I find it helps me now in situations where I can make a small difference. You need to like sport a lot to get to the point where you take [onboard] everything and feel everything. That you enjoy it so much that you feel any little changes.

Any regrets that you didn’t pursue road racing a bit more? [Prado was earmarked by talent spotters for the asphalt after some tests]. You broke your leg and then had those injuries at Matterley Basin: some tough times. You could be in Moto3 right now...

There were times when I thought about it...but not from a racing perspective but more daydreaming about where I would be and what I’d be doing; how different my life would be. I would still be able to ride my motocross bike...[pauses]. No, I love motocross. I don’t want to say MotoGP riders cannot ride a motorcycle but when you see some of them on a dirt bike...! You look around you here in MXGP and think ‘these guys at this level of motocross should

be able to go there and win...’ but it is never that easy. A different sport, totally. In a way it seems that riders who think they won’t make it in motocross go to MotoGP!

What’s the next step?

Supercross. I would like to do another year here and maybe, hopefully, go there as world champion.

What if I could rip up your contract now and write a new one with KTM allowing you to choose exactly what you want to do for 2018: what would you say?

I think I would stay here. At least one more year. I want to see what my level is like at the end of 2017. It is not like I would go to the U.S. and get easy wins. This is all good experience for me.

JORGE’S GRAN TRIPLE: NO.2 BEING SPANISH

“Success came pretty quick; it was only three years ago I was riding 85s and people were talking about me back then. I like to go to Spain a lot now and I enjoy it more and more. The people at the races cheer me a lot and that gives you energy. I think the Spanish fans really respond when they see someone doing well.”



JORGE'S GRAN TRIPLE: NO.3 STARTS

"I actually began making good starts in my first year on the 85s. I got a lot of confidence then and developed a technique then that many other riders don't use or have. It helps a lot. I am pretty focussed on everything in the gate: it is not only about the reaction but also the feeling with the engine. I think you can make a lot of metres out of the gate like that. My reaction times are OK – not the best – but when my rear wheel touches the dirt that's where I start to make the difference. I'm a pretty good starter I would say but any over-confidence means that you lose that focus."

