

2005 Swiss sportsman of the year : Tom Lüthi: Golden bike

Autor(en): **Wey, Alain**

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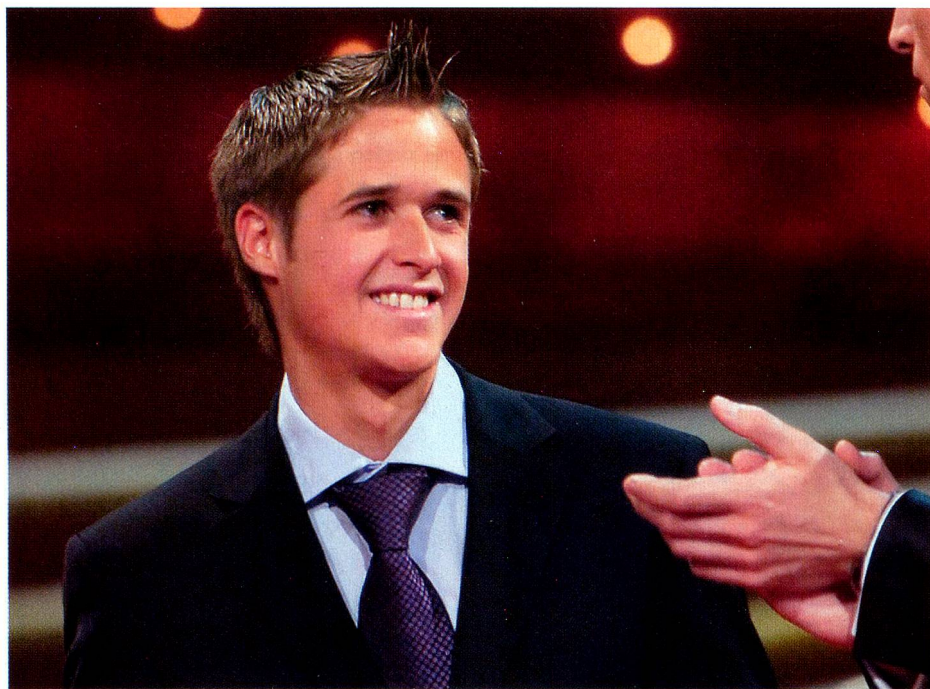
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Tom Lüthi: Golden bike

Speed addict and world motorcycling champion in the 125 ccm series with four Grand Prix victories: Thomas Lüthi was voted 2005 Sportsman of the Year by the Swiss public.

A portrait of a world-class racer who is still under 20.

By Alain Wey.



Tom Lüthi rapidly rose to become the public's favourite

TOM LÜTHI: THE FACTS

■ Vital statistics: Thomas Lüthi was born in Oberdiessbach/BE on 6 September, 1986 and lives with his family in Linden (situated between Berne and Thun). Height 1.71 m, weight 54 kg.

■ Comments on Grand Prix of Valencia. "That was the longest race of my life. The last five rounds seemed like they'd never end. I was a lot more nervous before the Grand Prix in Turkey. In Va-

lencia I stayed relatively cool and that seems to have made the difference."

■ Plans for the future. 125ccm in 2006 and 250ccm starting in 2007.

After keeping a cool head in a hot race, Thomas Lüthi of Berne was crowned 125cc World Motorcycle Champion at the Valencia circuit on November 6, 2005. At the tender age of nineteen, Lüthi earned the title in his third season: a season devoted entirely to international competitions. The popularity of this new racing star among the Swiss public has even exceeded the expectations of sports reporters, who had assumed that Roger Federer would be named Sportsman of the Year for the third time. In the end, however, it was Tom Lüthi who went home with 46% of the public's vote and the "Swiss Sports Awards" trophy. He has literally taken the fast track to join the world's elite.

Tom Lüthi's first Grand Prix victory in Le Mans last May was child's play, as he remained in the lead throughout the entire race. This

brilliant achievement was repeated in three further victories last season in Brünn (Czech Republic), Sepang (Malaysia) and on Phillip Island (Australia). As a member of the Honda stable, Lüthi is following in the footsteps of Jacques Cornu, the last Swiss motorcyclist to win the Grand Prix. Cornu won the title for the 250ccm class in Belgium in 1989. The last Swiss motorcyclist to win the 125ccm class Grand Prix was Bruno Kneubühler in Sweden in 1983. As world champion, this native of Berne will now go down in history with two other Swiss racers: Stefan Dörflinger, four-time world champion in the 50 and 80ccm classes for four consecutive years from 1982 to 1985, and Luigi Taveri, who won the 125ccm world championship title three times between 1982 and 1985. Even a sensational fall like the one he suffered at the Grand Prix of Japan, when he sustained

a foot injury, was not enough to break his iron will. The head-to-head race with his archrival, Mika Kallio of Finland, ended in a 3-point lead for Tom Lüthi that decided the outcome of the world championship. The Scandinavian is still hoping to come out on top in 2006... except then Tom Lüthi's bike will no longer bear the number 12, but instead the magic number 1.

"Little Tom," son of a farmer, mounted his first pocket bike at the tender age of 8. He started competing in pocket bike races in 1997 and, riding a 40ccm bike in the Kids category, won the title in both 1999 and 2000. He continued to gain experience by competing in the ADAC Junior Cup in Germany in 2001 where he came in sixth in the overall ratings. In the spring of 2002 the young man from the Emmental joined the Czech Republic's Elit Racing Team headed by Daniel Epp of Basle. He won three victories at the International German Championship (IDM) and, in July 2002, made his Grand Prix debut at the age of 15. Since then, Switzerland's youngest GP motorcyclist of all times – often compared to a purring cheetah – has been on the fast track to success. His first time on the winners' podium was June 2003 in Barcelona, where he ended the world championship season in 15th place for the 125ccm class. The year that followed, however, was one full of bitter disappointments and lessons learned the hard way. He plummeted to 25th place in the overall rankings. At the time he admitted "the best time to learn how to fight is when you're down." And this bad patch was undoubtedly essential for his great talent to shine through in 2005. He is a true champion who, like all heroes, had to cross a valley floor in order to reach the summit.

"You've proven that success is possible even if you're unable to practice your sport competitively in your home country," said Samuel Schmid, Swiss President in 2005 and Minister for Sport. The Federal Council also congratulated Tom Lüthi on the tactical intelligence he displayed in Valencia, when he decided to play it safe and crossed the finish line in ninth place. On his return from Spain, Tom Lüthi received an effusive welcome, and the festivities surrounding the presentation of the "Swiss Sports Awards" were proof positive that he had conquered the hearts of the Swiss. Not even twenty years old, and already world champion: his fighting spirit and confidence in his own abilities make him a popular role model for young Swiss, showing them that they should believe in their dreams and seek ways to make them come true!

www.thomasluethi.ch