

National, held the same weekend. Johnny Landers, father of and tuner for young guns Ryan, Brandon and Preston Landers, was recruited to handle the at-track work for Hopkins. Perry sent the Aprilia to Texas with the same jetting as used at Pocono, 240F/250R, but changed the gearing from 15/43 to 14/42.

Hopkins reported that the new pipes increased the mid-range and gave the bike more snap.

Hopkins knew he would have his hands full with Spies at this track; this was Hopkins' first time at the track, while Spies has raced there since 1994.

To learn the track, Hopkins followed Spies and Ryan Landers around in the first session, the 17-year-old Landers finally returning to competition after a lengthy recovery period from serious injuries. Hopkins went quicker in the second session after he had Johnny Landers drop a tooth on the rear sprocket—changing the gearing to 14/41—and began learning the lines.

Meanwhile, Spies was immediately quick on the track he knows well. Tuner Bill Himmelsbach fitted new pistons and rings for the Texas World event, and Spies was running about two seconds quicker than anybody else through practice.

Johnny Landers said Spies' bike was at least six mph faster down the straight than the Aprilias ridden by both Hopkins and Ryan Landers, as measured on Landers' radar gun. "That sonofabitch was fast," the elder Landers said about Spies' bike.

During Saturday's practice sessions, Hop-

Johnny Landers, "and it was spitting and sputtering a little bit." The loose plug electrode had damaged the piston and cylinder head, and Landers would have liked to install fresh pieces but there was not enough time to do the work. "These Aprilias are not easy to work on. They're not easy to freshen up—you just can't rip off in them like you can a regular 250. The top cylinder will take you an hour-and-a-half (to take off)."

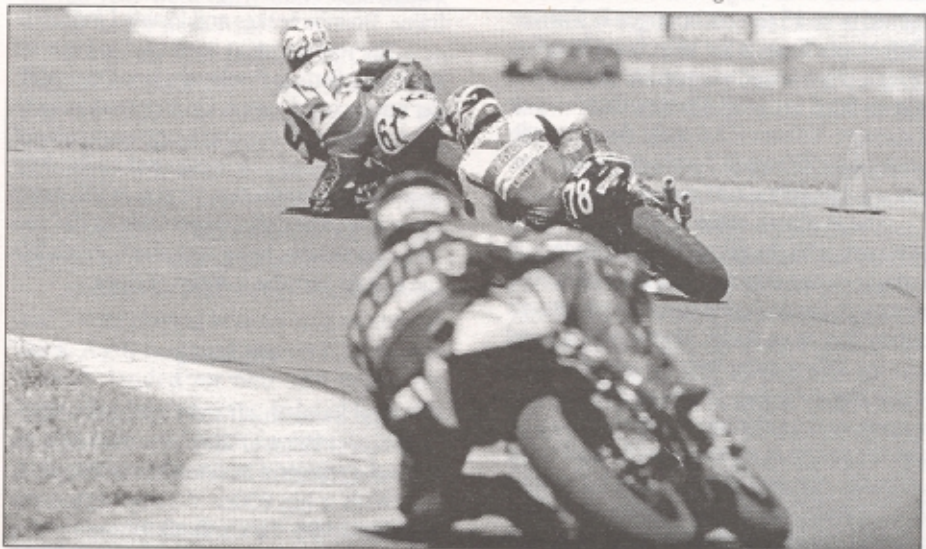
"As soon as that spark plug broke, they needed to take the head off it because they certainly had damage from the electrode bouncing around in the cylinder and from pre-ignition after that," said Perry. "It's a shame they didn't figure it out sooner and have time to fix it."

At the start of the race, Hopkins, Landers and Spies ran together until Spies pulled away down the back straight on the second lap. Hopkins' bike was running better with new plugs, but it wasn't as quick as it should have been, and Spies continued to pull away.

"Plus I wasn't riding 100 percent because I couldn't go down because of the points battle for the Championship," said Hopkins about race that would see him dicing with Ryan Landers. Andre Castanos was the only rider with a mathematical chance to spoil Hopkins' Championship run, and he was running in fourth place.

"I knew I could've rode harder, but I didn't want to push it too hard," Hopkins continued. "I guess I was being a little too cautious, and Andre came up the inside of both of us."

Castanos got by the duo, but he fell back behind on the next straight.



First lap of the Pocono Aprilia Cup race, Ben Spies leading John Hopkins and the field.

Photo by Brian J. Nelson.