

Supercross: World's best racers battle it out at the U.

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Deseret News

Published: Wednesday, April 22, 2009 8:10 p.m. MDT

The stakes couldn't be much higher. When the world's best motocross racers gather at Rice-Eccles Stadium on Saturday for the AMA Supercross series event, all eyes will be on Chad Reed and James Stewart.

The two biggest stars on the circuit have been battling it out for months, and with the series finale just a week away in Las Vegas, every whoop, holedrop and tabletop is critical.

Stewart, the reigning king of motocross, currently leads the season standings with 332 points. But Reed, a former champ eager to get back on top of things, is just three points back and can vault himself back into the series driver's seat by placing just one spot better than Stewart. There have been 14 races this year, and Stewart (10) or Reed (2) have wins in 12 of them. And though Stewart has an overwhelming lead in overall wins, Reed's steady consistency — he's finished worse than second only twice — has given him a load of points.

If Stewart keeps his bike upright, he's virtually impossible to beat.

As good as those two have been, something strange happened a week ago in Seattle. For the first time in 54 races, Stewart didn't win a race in which he didn't crash. Instead, Ryan Villapoto took the top honors in the race — and helped set up what will be a compelling final two races.

"I don't know what happened. We all almost went down, and we got the short end of the stick," Stewart, who stalled coming out of the gate but never actually crashed, said after battling all the way back to finish second. "I was so far in the back and saw Ryan and Mike (Alessi) out front and realized how far back I was. It's all about the championship though, and (last week) was good for that. The way Chad has been riding all year, it was definitely surprising to see how things played out."

Reed finished seventh — his worst finish of the year.

The event marks a return to Utah for Supercross. After first racing at Rice-Eccles in 2001, the series made annual stops in the Beehive State until 2004.

Typically competing in larger venues, the series is back to the stadium where it sold more than 42,000 tickets the last time it revved its engines for Utah.

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. — himself an avid motorcyclist — will be front and center for the races and plans to take a lap or two this week before the action really heats up.

"It's terrific that one of the premier motor-sports events in the world is coming back to Utah," Huntsman said. The event will "showcase our state to a nationally televised audience, (providing) an estimated \$9 million in economic impact and \$1 million in media value to Utah."

Ose, Stewart, Reed and Villapoto are far from the only athletes to keep an eye on.

Tour rookie Josh Grant won the first race of the 2009 season in Anaheim, Calif., back on January 3 and is currently fourth in the standings with 208 points. Andrew Short, riding a strong season with 14 top-10 finishes in 15 races, is third overall, with 241 points.

The real race, though, is between Stewart and Reed, as usual.

The big boys riding their four-stroke, 450cc engines will not be the only racers taking to the specially designed course, though.

The Supercross Lites features less powerful bikes for athletes either new to the series — such as South Jordan teenager Landen Powell — or just making their way up the charts. Riding bikes with a max 250cc powerhouse, the competitors in the Lites class race the same courses but a little slower and without quite as much big air.

They provide just as many thrills, though. Stewart, only a few seasons ago, raced in the Lites division and is a two-time winner in Salt Lake City when competing there.

Ryan Dungey leads the Lites season race with 160 points, but Rupert, Idaho's Jake Weimer is not far behind with 151 points, while Ryan Morais is also within shouting distance at 146 points. The final two races of the Lites season will see some furious battles between the three as they fight for points.

Having the event return to Utah after its five-year absence is seen as a feather in the state's action-sports cap.

"Having ... Supercross back at Rice-Eccles Stadium is another major accomplishment for us," Utah Sports Commission Chief Executive Officer Jeff Robbins said, "as we continue to establish Utah as one of the top action and extreme sport destinations in the world."

Gates open Saturday at 12:30 p.m., when qualifying rounds begin ripping the dirt. The evening session and main event races begin at 7 p.m.

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