

Five-rider logjam puts monster energy in Supercross

By [Nate Ryan](#), USA TODAY
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[Ryan Villopoto](#) is racing with five plates and 12 screws in his right ankle and leg. [James Stewart](#) is returning from his career's most frustrating season and admittedly riding more cautiously than he did in the past. [Chad Reed](#) is on a bike fielded by a team that didn't exist three months ago.



By Will Lester, US Presswire

Ivan Tedesco, left, fights to stay ahead of James Stewart, right, and Ryan Villopoto in a race in California last month. Supercross is enjoying its tightest midseason five-rider race in memory.

The top three riders in the Monster Energy [Supercross](#) standings have overcome adversity with as much speed as ever. And with the emergence of Trey Canard (a first-time winner in Houston) and defending series champion [Ryan Dungey](#), the circuit has what's thought to be the tightest five-rider race at a season midpoint in its history.

"It's very unpredictable," Speed analyst and 1997 champion [Jeff Emig](#) says. "At this point in the season, that we don't have a two-horse race or one guy out front is big. Everyone's had all these transitions, so it's pretty ... interesting."

Supercross championship battles generally have featured a two-man show, the most recent being Reed and Stewart dueling to the finale in 2009.

Though Stewart notched 11 wins that season, he says his Yamaha is faster now. Yet a deeper field and challenging track layouts make it harder to gain positions. "If you fell then, you could just come back and pass everybody and get second," he says. "Now you have to battle to even get third. That's the gnarly part about it."

As Supercross heads Saturday to Florida's Daytona International Speedway, 26 points separate Villopoto from fifth-ranked Dungey. Through eight of 17 races last year, the margin from first to fifth was 49. Over the last eight seasons dating to 2003, the average gap has been 66 points among the top five after the eighth race.

Last week's event in Atlanta reinforced parity as this year's theme as the top five in the standings occupied the top five finishing positions. Villopoto left the Georgia Dome with a 10-point lead, but that margin isn't viewed as safe as in recent years.

"If you had a 10-point lead, it was a good one, because the only guy who could beat you was always going to finish second," says Reed, who hastily formed his own independent [Honda](#) operation during the offseason. "So you were only trading off three points at most every weekend. Now it takes big swings from first to fifth. You can gain 10 points on someone easily. This year, the guy who wins is going to have to be there at the start and go. You can't just want to be top five, because moving forward will be tough with five guys this fast."

That would seem to favor Stewart, who tops Supercross with 69 laps led and three holeshots (a statistic awarded to the rider who leads into the first corner). But the two-time champion says he is learning to temper the aggressiveness that sometimes has led to crashes while wildly chasing the lead.

At a Feb. 19 event in San Diego, Stewart, 25, said he took what his bike gave him (a third) rather than ride over his head in pursuit of a victory (he cut six points off Villopoto's lead anyway).

"It was realizing that I don't have to win everything I set foot in," said Stewart, who missed the bulk of 2010 with a wrist injury. "I'm going to do whatever I feel like is the best ride instead of trying to take risks."

"My fans were stunned, too, because they've never seen this side of James. But it was worth coming to Jesus for me. I let my guard down and said, 'I'm going to be kind of human and see what happens.' I probably could have won that race if I'd really tried. I just didn't want to lay on the mat. That race was critical, and any slip-up, I could have given Ryan a two-digit lead. I knew I needed to close that gap."

Leading when a last-lap collision with Reed cost him a win in Atlanta last weekend, Stewart posted on [Twitter](#) this week: "Never saw it comin', otherwise I would've let him get those 3 points and took 2nd. Just trying my best."

Says Emig: "Never in his career have we seen James ride like (he did in San Diego). He seems mellower, more mature." Villopoto, meanwhile, is in the best shape of his life since hiring Stewart's former physical trainer. After breaking his fibula, tibia and ankle in a crash in St. Louis in April, he was on crutches for three months and didn't return to his Kawasaki until August.

The pain took six weeks to subside after he returned to riding during the offseason, and Villopoto, 22, also shed 20 pounds while adding muscle to his 5-8, 150-pound frame.

"I came in really prepared," he says. "I was a little underprepared last year, and the level has been raised this year to where I probably wouldn't have a chance against these guys."

Emig says Villopoto will need to prove he can finish every race — which he didn't accomplish in his first two seasons in Supercross' premier 450 division — because, "unless he does, he won't be champion."

To repeat his rookie-season title, Dungey will need to overcome a DNF (did not finish) after a broken chain in Anaheim, Calif., and improve his starts.

"I feel physically and mentally better," the Suzuki rider says. "But you put yourself in a 10th-place start, and the top three are putting time on you while you waste time in the back of the pack. That's where you lose. It's just a deep field of talent."

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