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Italians smitten by the Max factor

By Gideon Long

MUGELLO, Italy, May 19 (Reuters) - For a man who usually travels at speed, Max Biaggi takes a long time to ride the short distance to the pit lane from his trailer.

There are autographs to sign, friends to chat to and hundreds of supporters begging him to squeeze the brakes on his Honda and pose with them for snapshots.

A young man pushes a mobile phone to the rider's lips and urges him to shout "Ciao" to friends watching the Italian Grand Prix on television in nearby Florence.

Amid the red, white and green tricolours draped over the perimeter fences, a huge banner reads: "Max, you're on bike number six - but show them you're number one."

Max Biaggi was big news in Italy before this year but his spectacular start to his debut season on 500cc bikes has given his celebrity status a huge boost.

His angular face and dainty frame are used in TV adverts. His large brown eyes stare out from billboard posters. His image is as carefully cultivated as his designer moustache and beard.

After Biaggi finished second in Sunday's Grand Prix, Biaggi's supporters swamped the Mugello track.

"They were all over the place," the reigning 250cc world champion said. "It was more difficult than the race."

"Eventually they stopped me and tried to take bits off the bike. I think they damaged the tank and they even took my knee-sliders. It's amazing. I didn't even win."

While more reticent idols might have resented such an exuberant show of affection, "Mad Max" thrives on it.

"In some ways I appreciate this," he said in his rapidly improving English. "They are the ones who come here and allow us to race. Anyhow, I'm happy."

Biaggi, 26, was not an early convert to motorcycling.

As a boy in Rome he aspired to playing soccer for AS Roma and, until he was 17, the only motorbikes which interested him were the scooters and 125s he rode through the chaotic streets of the Italian capital.

But in 1988 he went with a friend to the city's Vallelunga circuit, took a bike for a spin and was hooked.

By 1992 he was riding Grand Prix full time and by 1994, just six years after his first experimental race, he claimed the first of four back-to-back 250cc world titles.

This season he made the step up to the 500cc category, dominated by Australia's Michael Doohan, who won Sunday's race and has roared to the world title for the past four seasons.

"After winning everything possible with 250s I think my switch to 500s was inevitable," Biaggi says.

"It's also partly thanks to Doohan's support that I moved into 500s. Sometime last year he told me: 'Max, the fans will find the 500 class much more exciting if you join us!'"

Biaggi's switch to bigger bikes forced him into the gym.

"If you want to compete on a 500 you have to be physically stronger, especially in the upper body and arms," he said. "I've been working hard. Over the last four months I've increased my muscle mass by around four kilos."

He has also teamed up again with engineer and team manager Erv Kanemoto, with whom he worked for a season on 250s in 1993.

Kanemoto says Doohan is still in a class of his own but Biaggi has the potential to become the first European to win the world championship since Italy's Franco Uncini in 1982.

"Mick (Doohan) is the only guy who can race on the limit week after week," Kanemoto says. "When a track changes character he can pick up on it but it gives the other guys trouble.

"Hopefully in a year or two Max will be at the level where he can race on the limit every week."

After a break in Italy or maybe at his second home in Monte Carlo, Biaggi travels to the French Grand Prix seeking a fifth consecutive podium finish since the start of the year.

Meanwhile, the 250cc riders who have lived in his shadow for four years are clearly revelling in his absence.

"Yesterday someone said I could win today because Biaggi is no longer racing 250s. I was thinking about that on the last lap," said Marcellino Lucchi, winner of Sunday's 250cc contest.

"When the Pope dies, there's always another one. Today God made me the new Pope."

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