

Deflowering the 2003 GSXR-1000!!!

Well, another month has past and this one had my racing back side on the unfamiliar seat of the new 2003 GSXR-1000 race bike I had crashed just a few weeks earlier. The bike now had just over 400 miles of street engine torture under its belt, yet it yearned for more miles on a closer to perfect riding surface. I made the hungry Japanese race bike as happy as I was by practicing all Valentine's Day Saturday on the Big Track at Willow Springs International Raceway.

The morning was not to be as perfect as the afternoon, or even the next day of racing, as DRAMA entered the new bike's life just as soon as she awoke. I had fabricated an exhaust hanger for the slightly modified stock exhaust can from the previous months off track pirouette. This design was hailed safe and acceptable the month prior, but completely hazardous this month. Also, since the bike had encountered a small amount of blunt force trauma in its prior life as a street bike, the rear brake never really worked properly. This small oversight also passed technical inspection last time just before the bike became a tumble weed on the desert floor of Willow Springs Race Track. Not this month.

I took my bike back to her stable to decide what to do to get her on the track, and who would be able to help me. A huge double THANK YOU goes out to Kelly Baker of Kelly Baker's Performance Unlimited. He not only bled the back brake, but also fabricated a rear exhaust hanger, all for the mere price of a McDonald's Happy Meal. Thank you again Kelly.

Now came the first moment of truth. After removing the tire warmers from the front and rear tires, I took my bike for her maiden voyage completely around the "FASTEST ROAD IN THE WEST". After one circumnavigation of the track, I had the confidence to shift out of first gear and let the bike ride the track the way she was meant to, at my speed. I looked down at my lap timer after the first few laps and saw times that brought back memories of my first time out on the track, a 1:33 something. Now I'm not that fast, but these laps definitely had me thinking I was. A new bike on the track after an accident such as the one I had caused one month prior, made me more than a little weary. After a few practice sessions and a dramatic climb in ambient temperature, I was pushing my new bike into the 29's.

I know most of you know that up until now I had been running in the mid 26's on my 2001 GSXR-1000, but this came after 8 months of bonding with the bike. Just to let the cat out of the bag, by the end of the weekend, on a completely "stock", stock suspension, stock exhaust (slightly damaged and leaky), and stock gearing (definitely the weakest link), I turned a fastest lap of a 1:27:75!!! One day of riding a new bike in stock trim, I was only one (1) second off of my fastest lap of 8 months on the old bike. Good things will happen on the new 2003 GSXR-1000 this year, I promise!!!

Now on to the actual racing action. After a slightly augmented Valentine's Day dinner, we ate out with the kids, Jodie being 8 months and a week pregnant, and having my pit mate, Clayton accompany us, and I joined the 2004 race season on my new ride.

Sunday morning's races would start with Open Super Stock. Since the month before had me finishing in a fairly good position, my grid spot was secured as number 3, on the front row. I knew I didn't have the necessary experience to launch my new

missile to a great starting place, but being gridded in the front row tends to make one learn quick. I dropped the hammer and the race was on. I made a bee line for the middle of the pack to position myself in a great spot to enter and get a great drive out of turn 1. It worked fairly well and I only lost a couple of places from my superior starting place of 3rd on the grid. I was running up front with some of last year's fast guys and that made me very excited. I made my way around a couple of slower guys that had managed to get a better start than I did, and was now following my old buddy #114, Anthony Lanzara. He had handling issues last year, but now his R1 seemed to settle in nicely through most of the 9 turn circuit. His proper gearing and acclimation to his bike made it difficult to keep him in my sight, but as the carrot dangles, so the rabbits chase. I finished the first race in a very respectable 6th place. Unfortunately just out of the money place for Dunlop contingency, but well into the Suzuki backed places, which pay halfway through the 19 rider field. My confidence was high, but unbeknownst to me, my worst race was about to occur.

The second race now had me gridding in the 7th spot in a group of 23 Open Super Bike competitors. My start was absolutely horrendous. I didn't make it to turn 1 faster than almost anyone. I may have even been last, although, I think I was in about 20th. I tried not to let the beginning of the race dictate the entire sequence of events, but as the laps continued, so did my lack of greatness. Humility builds character, but I have had plenty of construction in the past few weeks, and didn't need this kind of negativity now. I followed a new racer I hadn't seen before, #148, Kevin Burgess. I talked with him later and found out he had just moved down from Seattle, and was new to the area. In CCS, another racing club, he was the king of kings, but at Willow, he was the pauper. After following him for about two laps, I saw his weakness, turn 8. My favorite place to take people is going into 8 and just leaving the throttle open a split second longer than the next guy. Kevin always rolled off a hair entering turn 8 and I knew I could pass him. I waited for the second to the last lap to put the move on him. We had fun dicing with each other for 1 lap, until I pulled the trigger on the last lap and gapped him at the finish line. At least I made my worst race fun and enjoyable for someone else, if not even just a little enjoyable for myself also. We fought for, and I won the coveted 17th place out of 23. Two great things came from this race, one, and I met Kevin, and two, I now know what my worst race feels like. I will take the friendship I made as the positive and judge all other races to this one, and know that I can always do better, until I win again.

The third race of the day was what I will call RED FLAG MANIA!!! Just because we have a little sticker on our bikes that says "PRO" doesn't mean that our race will be the least carnage filled by any means. And, just because Open Novice is the race with the most powerful bikes and least experienced riders, doesn't mean it will be filled with the most crashes per lap. This day, we would both endure the same fate of the racing Gods, a whole mess of broken bikes and broken bodies. Luckily, no one was terribly hurt, but the Emergency vehicles definitely earned their keep this day.

I had decided to pony up the big dollars to try out the new 17" Dunlop Racing Slicks, with a spectacular rear tire measuring 195/70-17. I raced almost twenty (20) laps in the 29, 28, and 27's and the tire still looks brand new. It only slid slightly once, when I got over enthusiastic with my right wrist coming out of turn 2, which is a turn you inevitably slide out of anyway. These tires are almost perfect, and I hope to test out the lower 20's with them in the near future.

Alright, back to the action. I was in grid position 15 of 29 due to my placing in last

month's race. We grid depending on points and since I placed in the 15th most points that was my grid position. I knew that the start would be crucial to a good finishing place in this race, so I remembered how to launch like I did in the first race of the day. The start was pretty good. Normally I would shoot to the outside of turn 1 to out drive those diving to get to the apex of the turn 1. That was the plan and I executed it well. I followed the really fast guys as they drove out of turn 1 and into turn 2, but noticed that my lack of correct gearing was impeding my forward progress to some degree. I made the best of the situation by following those that I knew would tow me to a faster speed, but as we crested the outside of turn 2 I saw the impending doom of turn 3. Someone had tangled together and a bike was making it's way strangely to the outside of turn 3 on it's frame sliders and plastic, rather than the normal method of rubber meeting asphalt. I made for the inside of turn 3 quickly to avoid a minor hold up of others that may rubber-neck the accident as an innocent bystander / commuter on the 405 North. As we, the pack of now much smaller proportions, made our way up the hill to turn 4, another doom filled incident was unfolding in the coming corner. As we exited turn 5 we were met with another bike and asphalt meeting, except this time there were more than one rider and bike doing the magical break dance of a crash on the track. Immediately a red flag was brought out by all the corner workers.

One half of a lap into the 12 lap event had us returning to our pits to clean up a few fallen soldiers of the race track battle field. A restart was inevitable.

The restart had another great beginning for number 767, as I was becoming more familiar with the intricacies of launching my new bike. We now had a shortened 10 lap event, due to the time necessary to clean up bodies, bikes, parts, and race track. The race made it to the cross flags, before another red flag incident occurred and the race was stopped with only 6 laps completed. I had made some valiant efforts to catch those in front of me and I had passed a few riders on my way to a finishing place equal to that at which I had started, 15th. I was now very excited to race the last event of the day with a renewed feeling of greatness on my 2003 GSXR-1000 with less than 3 days of use under my belt.

The final race of the day was Open Modified Production. Since my bike didn't even meet the criteria for Open Super Stock, which allows upgrades to suspension, brakes, and exhaust, I had been fighting an uphill battle all day long. I entered the final race with everything to gain and nothing to lose. I was in grid position 29 of 40. This race had us starting second wave behind the 750 Super Bike Class. I was in the 8th place among 21 racers. My start had me shooting to the middle of turn 1, as opposed to the outside or inside of turn 1. Luckily, I made my way to the middle of the turn, because as the pack shot into turn 1, the caterpillar effect occurred. One guy blew the turn and went wide, which in turn made three other guys have to slam on their brakes to avoid a turn 1 massacre. Then the entire pack was split. I made a quick decision to shoot to the apex of turn 1 as all of this happened and I was now racing in the lead pack of about 10 guys. Now came the best race of the day. I had a great battle with #191, Ruben. Ruben also had a new 2003 GSXR-1000, but his was set up perfectly for his riding ability and the track, unlike my stocker. We scrapped with each other for 4 of the 6 laps. He would out drive me going down the front straight and I would blow past him as he over shot turn 1. We would trade places no less than twice every lap. I knew he would mess up going into turn 1 every time, so I made a plan early on to make my pass on the final lap going into turn one and hold him off until the finish line.

Plans are great, but as Jodie and I both know, plans almost always change. As the race progressed, we came upon lappers from the 750 Super Bike wave. I followed one guy going into turn 5. I watched his speed and estimated a pass around the outside of him exiting turn 5. Unfortunately, he stopped, well slowed considerably, just before entering turn 5. Ruben was just about close enough to me to scratch my back, that when the guy on the 750 slowed, and I was forced to do a stoppie Wickedspeed would be proud of, Ruben then had to slow dramatically also. I then proceeded to roll on with about 11/10ths of my throttle, just to keep up with the guy on the 750, who didn't even know we were right behind him. Since I never look back when racing, I didn't know that Ruben had not had the same reaction to driving out of turn 5 as I had, and was now fading backwards. He caught me on the front straight, just as he had on the previous three laps. I knew Ruben would go into turn 1 too fast and counted on it. He did, and left the door wide open. I took my normal line through turn 1 and out drove him to the line to finish in a very event filled final race position of 9th.

We talked after the race about his turn 1 technique, and I thanked him for his generosity. We will fight again soon, hopefully April, since Jodie and I have a small family event planned for the month of March, and I won't be able to break away from the maternity ward quite that fast. Ruben and all the riders wished Jodie and I the best of luck with our newest member of the Graeber family who should be joining us on the planned date of March 16th. Since we know how plans go, he or she may come early, but definitely no later than the 16th.

I need to through our some extremely large Thank You's this month, as Jodie and the kids sacrificed much to come out to the track not only on Valentine's Day, but also since Jodie is o far along with the pregnancy. Jodie, Josephine, Sebastian, and number 3, THANK YOU, I LOVE YOU ALL!!!

Secondly, thanks to all my sponsors for the superior help to get me on the track and racing with my new 2003 GSXR-1000. Thanks;

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I want to also thank Stuart, who was able to teach from the sidelines this month due to an injury caused by the other type of motorcycling, dirt. He critiqued my ability to enter, turn, and exit turn 1 in the most efficient way possible. Thanks for the great words of instruction; I plan on practicing our conversed topic on each and every turn on every race track I race on from now on.

Thanks to everyone who came to the races and cheered us on. I know my co-worker Mike and his girlfriend Barbara made it to their first event and I am sure it will not be there last. Thanks.

Hope to see some of you in the coming months not only to watch racing but to meet our newest family member. Thanks for reading and commenting.

Marcel