

To Podium or Not to Podium!!!

Well, I have now raced for one year and one month. I have accomplished more than I had ever hoped. Goals were set and met almost as expected each and every time.

This weekend I ventured into the realm of a fully supported Super Stock 2003 GSXR-1000. I got my race suspension set up the week prior by my buddy and sponsor Ray Engelhardt of Engineered Racing Products. At the end of last year I tested two different manufacture's products and came away with a true appreciation of great suspension and how the interaction of springs and rubber make or break a race bike. This year I introduced my ride to the wonders of a full front and rear suspension rebuild with Race Tech products. Did it make me faster, no, the wind had a lot to say in that regards, but my new suspension added confidence to my already fully capable bike.

Saturday had me riding my newly suspended bike tentatively, as I had to assimilate to the tighter more responsive race prepped shock absorbers. I rode the bike as if it was on a sheet of ice coated with eggshells. After a few early morning sessions, I found my groove and started to wick it up a bit. The steeper steer tube angle and stiffer rear shock made my bike react almost before I gave the handle bar inputs. That is an awesome feeling to know your bike will do what you want it to almost before you want it to. Thanks Ray.

The only negatives of Saturday were two incidents that didn't happen to me but to my fellow racers. One accident was when my buddy Tony crashed in turn 5 and totaled his R6. He had just won the last novice race he entered the month prior, but unfortunately, he tried to follow in my footsteps and went a bit too fast on the first lap of the second practice of the day. His weekend was over before it even started.

The second and more concerning incident was at the end of the day. The wind had increased to an almost hurricane-ish level. A new racer was enjoying the beauty of the track for the first time and had the unlucky fortune to meet with the track in turn 9, violently crashing and having the life flight helicopter dispatched to his aid. My pit mate Clayton made a great point as the helicopter landed on the track, he said it was a good sign that the helicopter actually landed after being called. If the helicopter had made the flight to the track and didn't land then our fellow racer's life might have actually been over there and then. Not a great way to end any day at the track, but the reality of the fact that someone could die doing battle with others and the asphalt demon made the weekend more special to those of us that continued to do battle the following day. We wish our fallen brother a speedy recovery, and hope he makes a return to follow his own personal attack on Willow Springs International Raceway.

Sunday morning began just as any other race day, go tech your bike, set tire pressure, suit up to ride the majestic twists of the crushed rock and tar, and finally enter the race track to challenge others to the ultimate competition of man and machine.

I chose to take one morning practice and get ready to race the four day's events, the second race of the day: Open Modified Production, the fifth race: Open Super Stock, the eleventh race: Formula 1 Pro, and the seventeenth race of the eighteen race day: Open Super Bike.

The first race had me starting from the 6th spot of 23 competitors. I knew my bike was set up better than the previous month, so I told myself; I must do better than last month. The start has always been a lack luster attribute to my racing career so far. This month that would all change. I got a phenomenal start and by the first corner I was sitting two spots behind the leader, 6th to 3rd in a mere few seconds. I proceeded to use my skill and freshly revived bike to propel myself into the last podium spot for 5 laps of the six-lap race. As we crossed the finish line for the penultimate lap I had the sinking feeling someone was shadowing my line through the first turn. I saw number 20 sneak up next to me as we made the transition from turn one to turn two. He made his intentions perfectly clear as he began and finished his pass of me as we exited turn 2. I followed him for the last half of a lap and tried to make my own move on him coming out of turn 9 onto the front straight. Needless to say, he had a better drive out of turn 9 than I did. I pushed my 1000 to redline as I shifted into 6th gear just before the stripe. My intentions of catching number 20 were dashed, and just as I made my final push to the line, my buddy number 9, Clinton made his move on my and nipped me at the line by about half a wheel.

The disappointment of dropping two places in the last lap made me a little upset, but I knew these bikes were out classing my bike just a bit. Come to find out later, Clinton's bike is just as stock as mine; he just has about 15 years more experience and is a better rider than I. I took the lesson learned and made up for it later in the day. As I always say, show me a mistake and I will show you the same one from a different perspective.

Now to qualify the title to this race write-up: To Podium or Not to Podium. As we crossed the finish line and made our way around turn one for our warm down lap, red flags came out quicker than poop after drinking tap water in Taiwan. Normally, a red flag means that a race is immediately stopped, but this one had already concluded. Also, when a red flag is thrown after half a race is completed, the finishing positions are determined to be from the previous lap's positions. The lap prior to the last lap is when I had a commanding podium finishing position of third; therefore, even though we had finished our race, the final positions were to be from the last lap completed prior to the red flag. Another podium in an Expert race!!! The only goal left this year to accomplish is the ultimate one, a finishing position of number one. I will achieve it, I guarantee it.

The second race of the day had me in grid position number 2, since I am second in the point's race for Open Super Stock, behind number 3 plate holder: Stoney Landers, California Super Bike School instructor, with 22 others behind us. I had made up my mind that I knew how to launch my bike now and would only have great starts from this day forwards.

The start was again a good one and I flew forwards like the space shuttle from its launch pad. I made my way up the track and had to negotiate the 9 turns of Willow Springs on the knowledge that I had just been beat by two guys on the last lap of the previous race, since I didn't know what had actually transpired due to the red flag of that race until the end of the race day. I followed a few faster guys that had come from the AMA to race with our little club called WSMC. One racer was a guy I had raced with last year that made his way to the AMA to better his skills, which apparently number 73 most certainly did. The other guy, number 109 was just a hair faster than I but we had never raced each other. He was pushing extremely hard on this Sunday Battle Royal. Number 109 and I had a few close calls as he would try to stuff me into a turn and I would show him a wheel now and then. Just as in any

race, the more you fight with a competitor, those behind you have the chance to exploit you and your competitor in your time of power mismanagement. This was the case as we fought with each other; again, Clinton number 9 made his move on me and relegated me out of the top five putting me in the undesirable position of 6th. I had beat those riders that were behind me in the points battle for the top three spots in Open Super Stock, so I was content in knowing that I still had a decent shot at keeping my second place in this class championship.

About this time, I noticed visitors in my pits. Steve (Hawkman) and Aki, Brian and Stella, and Cary, had all made their way to my pits at the critical time when I needed to change tires for the next race, Formula 1. I acknowledged all of them and in a brief moment went about the business of stripping the DOT race tires from my bike and replacing them with a set of completely bald Dunlop Slicks. Thank you all for attending the races, we truly appreciate the support of any and all spectators. I hope you all had as great a time as I had racing.

After a short break from talking with my guests, I managed to eat a small lunch and get ready to make the enormous effort to race the fastest racers on the fastest bikes in the third race of the day, 12 laps we call Formula 1.

I was gridded 7th in a field of 23. This race had me reaching for the stars again. I got another great start and made my way into turn one in about fifth position. As the leaders started to accelerate into turn two I noticed my Super Stock bike and lack of talent, compared to the fastest riders in WSMC, had my bike and I slowly going backwards. Luckily, I still had my skill, riding my under classed bike to almost it's potential, to keep the leaders in sight. The chase was on. As I made my way around the track corner by corner, I noticed only a very small handful of bikes make their way past me, and when they did get around me they never ran away from me. I had the desire to catch the four riders directly in front of me; numbers 28, 9, 62, and 109. I knew the chances of making a pass stick on this crowd would be difficult, but without the effort this wouldn't be racing. I kept on their heels for about three or four laps, inching my way closer each 2-1/2 miles. On the second to the last lap I decided it was time to make my move on number 28. He was the weakest of this strong group of riders and I had learned not to wait until the end of the race to make a move if at all possible. I passed number 28 and made it stick, just before my buddy number 191 crashed out of the race in turn eight, at about 160 mph, and causing a race ending red flag. I made the pass at the right time and ended up finishing in 9th place, since I made the pass on the lap prior to the red flag. Another entrance into the give away for a new Toyota truck at the end of the race year.

The final race of this past weekend was the Open Super Bike race. I was in the 6th spot on the grid of 15 racers. I finished in the same position in which I started but the race had many intriguing adventures intertwined as the 6 laps transpired. The first lap had me flying from my starting position up the ladder to about 4th by turn 1, I have finally figured out how to make my bike accelerate at an unbelievable speed. I barely wheelie it and the clutch is hooking up better than any contestant on Blind Date. I knew this race would be similar to the past race with the one exception of being half as long. I got to dice with number 109 again and number 20 coming down to a last lap avoidance of a terrible tank slapping number 20 and second from the last lap nearly disastrous low side in turn eight by number 109.

As the race started to heat up, number 109 tried to pass me with the now extremely high velocity wind gusts blowing at about 35-40 mph. He made a pass coming out of

turn 6 and tried to lead me into turn eight, my favorite high-speed turn. Since he had followed me for several laps, he gauged how fast he would have to go to make a pass stick against me in that area of the racetrack. He under estimated how fast we were actually going in the gusty conditions late in the afternoon and as he entered turn eight on this second from the last lap, his rear wheel decided it was time to put a little fear into his heart. I watched the bike step out a good couple of feet and number 109's passenger collect it just before breaching the white line that separates dirt from asphalt. Not a great place to have such a moment, but if you save it, well worth the entrance fee to that amusement park ride. I congratulated him later on the miraculous save. Needless to say, he finished behind me in this race.

Now came my assault on number 20, my other archenemy of this race weekend. I saw the rear wheel of his bike drawing me closer. I stuck to him like glue for the final lap and decided it was an all or nothing effort for the final finishing position of this day's races. I drafted him into turn eight and set him up for the final drag race to the stripe. Unfortunately, the drafting didn't last long. We both drove out of turn 9 at a feverous pace. I sat on his rear wheel looking to the finishing line with only thought in my mind; beat him to that white line. Just as we pushed our bikes to their acceleration limits, his broke into a vicious tank-slapper. Before he knew it, I was blasting past him about 40 mph faster than he had just been traveling down the front straight. I managed not to target fixate on his rear wheel once I caught him, and that fact saved us both from almost certain pain in the wallet as well as from serious injury.

All in all a great new beginning to the rest of this race year with a completely set up Super Stock GSXR-1000.

First, I will thank my wife, and children for their undying support. I know they enjoy coming out to the track, but a huge Thank You is always in order, since they sacrifice some of their personal time to be with Dad, and his personal interests. Thanks you Jodie, Josephine, Sebastian, and Valentino.

Secondly, I want to thank all of my race sponsors, for without my family and their support, I would be in even more debt. I appreciate all of your personal as well as company's help. Thank you.

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Since I will be racing this coming weekend in Las Vegas with WERA WEST, look for another one of these in a week or so. I am very interested in racing with another club and at another track, or tracks. Next month will be California Speedway, and hopefully some of you will be able to come out and see the new WERA WEST series first hand.

Thank you all for reading and supporting my racing endeavors.

Marcel
WSMC & WERA WEST #767