

Perfect Weather Builds Podium Confidence!!!

First, let me say sorry for not reporting last month's race report. Two words can describe the weekend's short ending, SNOWED OUT!!!

The Saturday practice of November's race weekend had the temperature hovering in the mid 70's, no wind, and only slightly sore ankles. I made my way onto the track for 4 practice sessions, netting a best lap time of just over the magical Pro practice cutoff time of 1 minute 30 seconds. I was happy to ride after having my doubts the prior 5 weeks after my 120 MPH get off in turn 1. I had made the progress of at least walking without the aid of my air cast and only having to ace bandage wrap my left, more damaged ankle. Also, I was pleased to have a fully functioning race bike again, after minor cosmetic repairs done while my body was not in 100% perfect working order itself.

Sunday brought out the worst weather we had seen in the desert to date. When the races were cancelled, it was literally snowing, then as the flakes hit the ground they turned wet and liquidy. Three races transpired and were just finishing up at 12:30 pm, too late to finish the full day of racing, and with those three races came three red flags. The weekend was not supposed to happen for one reason or another. Since my feet weren't perfect and I hadn't become quite competitive enough to challenge for my class championships, I just accepted the fate of four more weeks of recovery and one final weekend of battle for the coveted class championships I had been battling for the past 11 months.

Now we jump ahead 4 weeks to this past weekend.

Another fantastic Saturday, weather was perfect, mid to high 60's, no wind, slightly more healed ankles, and a positive outlook to the entire race weekend. I made my way out to the first practice of the weekend, patiently awaiting my first entrance into the now dreaded turn 1. I made my way around the track gingerly; making sure my body was ready for the first encounter with the track in a truly long time off, and making sure my crashed race vehicle was also up to the task of flying around the 9 turns of Willow Springs International Racetrack.

After a couple of sessions on the track, I saw that my lap timer was interestingly stuck on a 1:34 lap time; almost on every lap I performed. I also was unable to drag a knee in any turn at any speed. My body was rejecting the idea of going fast by not allowing it to fully hang off the bike. As I had told myself the month prior, I would go as fast as my body would allow, and only push it if it felt accepting of the added stresses and strains. I had wrapped my left ankle and was glad to have the added support, as the cornering forces brutally forced my body into positions it hadn't been in for over two month's time.

By the end of the day, I had only managed to get my lap times down to almost a 1:34 flat. I was not very happy with my day's work, but I couldn't do anything my body wouldn't allow, and I definitely wanted to race the following day, as I had the opportunity to podium in at least two classes, Open Super Stock, and Open Modified Production. In Open Super Stock, I was three points up on fourth place, and only four points behind second place. In Open Modified Production, I was a few finishing places behind third in the class's championship hunt.

Unfortunately, near the end of practice on Saturday, Clinton, number 9, crashed. He

was the competitor just 4 points in front of me in Open Super Stock. Now I would only have to battle one rider for the second spot on the podium for the overall class Championship, John Chen, number 73. We have had some great races in the past, but I knew this day would be our greatest battle, as my times were going to be hard to put up against his much faster times. I went to his pit to find out how he was riding to get my mind in the right frame of mind to compete with John, this final race day in late December. He was riding strong and fast, just the opposite of my battered, beat down race body and bike. I mentally charged myself up to the challenge, even though our war wouldn't be fought until late in the afternoon, race 16 out of 18 total races.

Sunday morning brought with it another awesome day to compete on the track. The weather was again mid to high 60's with almost no wind, totally a 180° turn from the past month's day of reckoning. I made my first practice session count, but came off the track with just a slightly faster lap time of 1:30. I knew I could go faster, and knew I would have to just to be competitive with all of my past and future racing buddies.

The first race of the day would be Open Super Bike. I was poised to break into the top five with the race ending playing out as I had dreamt it just hours earlier as I slept off Saturday's practice. I was gridded 5th of the 14 competitors, and needed to finish a few positions ahead of a select few riders to make up the necessary points to jump ahead of the fifth place class Championship rider. I made a valiant effort as the green flag dropped and shot my race bike towards the front of the pack into turn 1. I was feeling ecstatic to be competing to this high level again while still not being 100% healed. As I followed Jeremy Toye, number 57, and last year's number 1 plate holder up into turn 4 a, I witnessed his R1 take him for a little high sided launch. To my amazement, as well as Jeremy's, he saved it. I saw at least two feet of daylight between him and his bike as it tried to spit him off. Later in this same race, number 74, John Ashker, made his way around me and began to show us behind him what a true rear wheel slide should look like. Unfortunately, he let the tire go a bit too far out from under him in turn 9. He rode off into the dirt at about 110 MPH and proceeded to stay upright. I was amazed to see him jump the pit lane entrance and then ride back onto the front straight as if nothing had even gone horribly wrong. This excitement was quenched quickly and my dreams were slowly shot down, as most of the field made their way past my aching body, yet strong mind. I told myself, as I slipped to a finishing position of 9th; I knew I could do better, but that the class that truly mattered this day would be at the end of my first full racing year. I could feel muscles being used that hadn't been put into stress and strain in the past 9 weeks anywhere near what they were being tested at this first race of the day.

When I exited the track after the cool down lap, I finally noticed my lap timer glaring at me with a low 1:28 lap time. I knew I had gone faster than any of the practices up to this point, since I had finally been able to drag a knee into a few of my favorite corners. My body was screaming with the pain I was causing it, but since I had ammunition, in the form of Ibuprofen, I knew my body would be okay later in the day, as long as I didn't crash before I gave it an opportunity to shine.

The second race of this final race weekend was Open Modified Production. I had my first true chance to stand on the final rung of the podium simply by getting a few finishing positions ahead of racer number 20, Howard Lynngard. I was gridded third in the class field of 18 racers. I knew a front row starting position in this race would

give me added confidence to dominate the other competitors. After the number one board turned sideways, the green flag waved, and I dropped the clutch as if a carpenter slammed my knuckles with a 20 ounce framing hammer. As soon as the clutch grabbed, I climbed up onto my tank to prevent the bike from shooting skyward as if it was a NASA shuttle launching. I made my way into turn one again with the front-runners. This race I would test my body to see if I had what I needed at the end of the day to get my best finish of the season. I rode hard and hung my body off the bike as far as I could without causing so much pain as to detract from my racing focus. I ran up front as best I could, but just as in the first race of the day, riders made their way past me. I was riding stronger, and didn't see number 20 in front of me yet. As I circled the track for the second time, I could feel the breath of Howard's R1 on the hair nicely trimmed just above my collar, under my neatly braided ponytail. Right after we made it to turn 2 there were a few accidents and we were sent to the pits to be re-gridded. On the restart, I didn't get the same result when I let out the clutch and number 20 passed me, along with number 74, John Ashker, before we even entered turn 1. I now had to target fixate on a position just in front of both of them to get that spot back. As I tried to catch them on this four lap restarted race, time escaped me to get the job done. As we crossed the finish line for the third and last lap of the restarted race, I was just about to make my move to get around Howard. I followed him with the intention of making the pass before the last lap ended, but he and his R1 were just a tad bit too far in front of me to get the job of passing him done with only 4 laps. I finished that race in 6th place, a very gratifying feeling, knowing full well that my body was limiting me from being as good as I once had been earlier in the racing season.

The third race of the day was Formula 1. I was competing in this class severely under biked and this day body hampered. I would roll from the 8th grid position in a field of 21 racers. In this class, a top 10 finish gets you an entry into the truck giveaway at the awards banquet, and a 11th-20th position puts your name into the hat for a running chance at winning a 125 dirt bike, also given away at the awards banquet. I had amassed 4 top tens and 6 eleventh through twentieth finishing positions. I knew with only one person to beat to get in the top 20, I could attain this minor goal. My start from the outside of row three had me completely going backwards, as I played incorrectly around with my clutch. As I finally got my bike to move forwards, I then made the mistake of shifting into neutral instead of second as I entered turn 1. My mental errors would make it difficult to attain the minor goal I had set for myself before the race began. Physically, I watched the field drop me like a slowly fading hill climber in the Tour de France, but mentally I decided to challenge myself to the task of making up as many places as I could in the remaining 12 laps of racing. I pushed my body again to further pain, but managed to get past a few riders and finish strongly in 16th place. I felt completely pissed off at myself for making such a dumb mental error and looked forwards to the final race of the day, Open Super Stock.

I made my way to the pits after a dismal showing in the Formula 1 race to change tires to DOT's, to attack the final 6 laps of the 2004 race season. Since Clinton had crashed the day prior to this race day, I would now inherit the pole position starting place. My confidence was shaky at best after the last 12 laps of torture I had mentally and physically put myself through.

After changing tires, I popped a few more pills to subdue the pain I was now feeling in both ankles as well as my wrists, from lack of racing and overall use at this competitive level. I slowly moved towards the hot pit lane after hearing the final,

final call to grid for the 2004 race season. I had anticipation almost equal to the first time I entered the race track ever, just one and a half years prior, but this time there was a bit more on the line. I saw John Chen, #73, and knew; he would make or break my entire first full year of racing, but not without a small input from me and my 2003 GSXR-1000, now much more damaged than when I first brought it to the track.

The warm up lap would be a complete foreshadowing of the entire last race. John led me around to the grid where he would line up in a spot just to my left numbered with a silver number 2. I made sure I filled my karma bag with all the goodies by wishing all my fellow competitors good luck in our final battle of 2004. The green flag dropped and I persuaded my 140+ horsepower two-wheeled machine to lung forwards with blinding speed. Unfortunately, I had the company of not only the other riders I usually race against each month, but also a professional racer, Jason Perez. He took charge on the opening lap and led not only myself, but John Chen also into turn 1. I made up my mind at the very instant that I exited turn 1 that I would do everything in my power to take the second place on the podium for the Open Super Stock class Championship. As the first lap lapsed, and the three of us, Jason, John, and I crossed the start finish line, I watched my friend Premek, number 798, pass me. I thought to myself of the exact point totals needed to achieve the goal only a short minute and a half prior to this pass that I needed to end my season on the second best position attainable in this category of racing. I watched as Premek made his move to pass John on the third lap. I urged him with all my ESP senses to make the pass stick, as I needed to finish the race only one spot behind John, allowing him to only gain 2 of the three points needed for his victory over mine for the second podium spot. As the fourth lap began, I started to yell at myself under my helmet in a full and authoritative voice to keep my actions smooth, as not to let any rider behind me even the slightest chance to make a pass on my now almost fully destroyed young ankles.

The fifth and final lap was one in which I almost lost control of all of my emotions. I passed the waving white flag, with one eye on John Chen's rear wheel, just ahead of me, and one eye holding back the tears of pure joy of a full year's experiences of racing against all my fellow WSMC members. I took every opportunity to scream at myself to do the right thing, make sure you brake, but not too much, lean and make sure you support your body weight as not to fall off the bike and loose all that I had worked towards up to this point in time. As I made my way towards turn 9 on the last lap, I made sure to execute the two necessary down shifts into 4th gear as to prepare my bike for the hardest drive to the line I had every pushed my bike and self to date. Only later did I find out what was happening directly behind my emotion filled final drive to the line as John Ashker and I made our way into and out of turn 9. John told me of how he resisted the urge to dive up the inside of my final corner of the 2004 race season out of pure respect for me as a racer and friend.

He had managed to get a great drive out of turn 8 and was getting ready to drive up the inside of me in turn 9, only problem would have been that I would have been pushed out wide coming onto the front straight. John, I can only say "thank you", now that I know what you didn't do to me in that final corner of the last race. We made our dash to the line but my two down shifts gave me the slightest advantage as John tried to draft up behind me to the line. No disrespect intended but thank you Clinton, John, John, and Premek. Luck, bad or good, and some skill made the last race of the year the sweetest for me.

I crossed the finish line, knowing that since I had made the last lap finishing position of 4th, just one spot behind John Chen stick, I would receive 2nd place in the class Championship hunt in Open Super Stock. Tears ran down my cheeks as I passed my family cheering for me just to the inside of turn 1. I shook my fist in the air as I made the pass of our RV and throughout the entire warm down lap. Never had 4th place in a race felt so rewarding.

So now, the 2004 race season is over and I am looking forwards to racing at the next level, with the AMA in the Super Stock class. I hope to see some of you out at the big events here in California. If it is not an attainable goal for some of you to come watch the races, I promise to send out a race report of my adventures of running with the big dogs of the AMA each month.

Now I come to the most important part of all my race write ups, my THANK YOU'S!!!

Jodie; my completely supportive, most inspiring, best friend, wife, and almost perfect mother to our three beautiful children, THANK YOU for everything you have given, taken, shared, inspired, supported, and done in the past and will do in the future. I LOVE YOU!!!

Josephine, Sebastian, and Valentino; as my three wonderful, yet more than a handful children, I want to say thank you for supporting your daddy in his life goals. I hope to support all of your endeavors wherever they take our great family. Also, for every time I went on the track and you all told me, "Don't crash, Daddy!!!" I promise to do the best not to each time I go out to do battle, and when I do fall, thank you for supporting me. I love you three with all my heart.

I want to thank all of my race sponsors for helping make this season as great as it was. I hope to work with and for you next year with even better and more rewarding results. Thank You,

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Lastly, Thank you to all the people that made even the slightest effort to wish me well, get well, good luck, or even just to acknowledge that they enjoyed reading about my racing endeavors. I hope to see some of you either in person or on the net in the very near future.

THANK YOU ALL!!!

MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY NEW YEAR ALL!!!

Here's to next year's racing, writing, reading, and hopefully no crashing.

Marcel
(Soon to be AMA #767)