

Unfamiliar Sensations

TWO TRACK INTROS were scheduled back to back, first with KTM at Laguna Seca, the next week, BMW's S1000RR launch at Portimão.

Besides a chance to get the scoop on some fascinating new technology and experience first-hand its effect on performance, this seemed like a great opportunity to polish my track technique at a familiar course and then apply those freshly honed skills to the unfamiliar Portuguese venue known for its roller-coaster elevation changes and high-speed blind turns.

I tried to discount an odd feeling of foreboding by telling myself that a certain amount of nervousness was understandable and that it should remind me to concentrate on preparation; so I made sure to get some extra riding time in on weekends and added extra meditation and yoga exercises to my daily routine, in order to achieve a finer level of balance and focus.

After several press events at Laguna, I finally felt that I had something of a handle on its layout and didn't stress about providing the hired photographers with the requisite knee-down images, at least in turns two through five.

And despite concerns about the weather, which had been ominous just days before our departure, when we finally arrived trackside, the day was perfect, clear of the infamous Monterey fog and near 70°. Things were looking good.

Of the various models at the launch, the most exotic would be KTM's new \$20,000 1190 RC8R supersport, built to beat Ducati's best. The presence of Jeff Haney and his Skip Barber riding school instructors was an unexpected plus. His team included such luminaries as Jason DiSalvo, former factory racer, and Michael Czysz, creator of the innovative MotoCzysz MotoGP racer. Each instructor would lead three motojournalists in rotating order to show us the lines and offer individual instruction. Before leaving the pits, we were instructed on track etiquette and repeatedly told not to use the rear brakes. This caution made sense as it avoided a potential highside hazard, especially as the "student" group's experience level was so wide.

Our first ride was on the 990 Super Duke R, the latest model of the machine that won MCN's Super Naked Shootout last summer. I was a big fan of that bike and even when ridden on a racetrack, it made me wonder why anyone buys a race replica. Low stubby handlebars don't improve control feel, just looks. But since it was wearing tires that didn't show any



graining, I exercised due caution with the lean angles. However, I couldn't help notice our instructor, Mr. Czysz, entering turn two perhaps 20 mph faster than I would, always smoking his rear tire. I teased him about it when we came in.

Taking advantage of the break between sessions to visit the portapotty, I returned to find our group gone. I was pointed to a white RC8 and told I could go. I studied the control layout first, noting excessive slack in the throttle cable. I asked if it could be adjusted, but was told it needed that much—odd. Accelerating alone onto a long section of the track, I concentrated on the signals the bike was sending me. The motor pulled fiercely as the rpm climbed, but the power delivery was linear and it had lots of low and mid-range torque, so I picked a high gear figuring I could circulate quickly with very little shifting and not have to worry about losing the rear tire under hard acceleration. And although we had been assured that the bike's monobloc Brembos were not so hair-trigger as the Ducati Streetfighter's, I found the difference was slight. One finger was all I dared to use. Although the finest touch sensitivity is usually in one's first finger, due to the lever design I had to use my middle finger. So I left extra room for braking, to be on the safe side.

Like MCN's Super Duke, the RC8 had a control layout that fit me well, and its handling felt natural, inviting me to use the generous side grip of its Pirelli Supercorsa tires. However, it gave me some unusual signals, too. The reason: To avoid the expense of fitting a slipper clutch to its

high compression twin to eliminate rear wheel lockup during rapid deceleration, the engine management had a novel feature; an air bleed system that would add 800 rpm to the engine's already high 1400 rpm idle speed. As a consequence, when the throttle is completely shut, the bike is still driving forward. The effect was hardly noticeable entering fast turns, as you don't shut the throttle completely, but gave the feeling it wanted to run wide in slower turns, and because it reduced fork dive as well, made you think you weren't braking as hard as you actually were. Despite feeling very good on much of the course, this odd behavior was disconcerting enough that I decided I should pull in and analyze what was happening. Unfortunately, this decision didn't come to me until I'd just missed the pit road. "Okay, one more lap," I said to myself.

Less than a half-mile later, approaching turn two off the front straight, I began to brake, but feeling insufficient slowing, I squeezed just a tiny bit harder. Down I went, at around 60–70 mph, slamming my extended left knee into the track first, followed by my left side. My helmet only grazed the track so there was no lapse in my slow-motion memory of the events.

It took several weeks of replaying every lap in my head to realize how strongly the bike's motor had been fighting my efforts to slow for turns two, eight and eleven. Using the rear brake would have been the only way to counteract this and, ironically, by cautiously relying on higher gears, I had raised its idle-driven entry speed. And I had to wonder if, in fact, the idle hadn't gone even higher, like our Super Duke's had done last summer, when it intermittently refused to idle below 3000 rpm.

Healing from a shattered scapula, two broken ribs and a smashed knee has been painful and a lot of added responsibility for my sweet wife, Sandy, although she takes it all in stride. And I sure had a lot of kind doctors and nurses to be thankful for at Thanksgiving. It will probably keep me out of the saddle for a bit longer, but I was back at work just a week later. The worst part has been missing out on riding some great new machines.

In the end, I was very lucky to be properly dressed for a crash, fully conscious and with an ambulance two minutes away.

Think about it.

—Dave Searle
Editor