

## Faster, Slowly

I'D HAD A good two months to get myself mentally prepared for the world intro of the new Honda CBR1000RR. My trackday was scheduled for December 12th. And I knew that date was exactly one day short of the third anniversary of my crash aboard the Honda CBR600F4i at Las Vegas. But there was no use dwelling on that, it wouldn't help me relax. And I knew I needed to be relaxed and focused.

Rotating groups of motojournalists would converge on Phoenix from all over the world over nearly two weeks in early December, and the CBR1000RR was almost certain to be an intimidating ride, as any bike built to humble the mighty Suzuki GSX-R1000 would need to be, I imagined.

Believe it or not, I don't actually get that much track time, just several days a year. But each time I do, I always learn a lot, despite the experience of more decades of street riding than I want to count.

I'd actually been hoping the intro would be in Las Vegas again, like so many Honda intros before, as it is the home track of the Freddie Spencer school, and Freddie and his instructors, Nick Ienatsch and Jeff Haney, had given me a pretty good idea how to get around that track at a decent pace. When I heard it would be Phoenix, I wondered if we might be going to Phoenix International Raceway, the big stock car oval with the infield road course. Much like Daytona, it is the sort of place where factory racers would probably see nearly 200 miles an hour on the banking. *Yikes!*

But, instead, we learned the venue was Arizona Motorsports Park, a just-months-old facility that had barely been broken in. Its 2.2 miles of pavement was said to be wide and smooth. But perhaps Honda's main reason for choosing southern Arizona in winter is that it's claimed to have 359 days of sunshine every year. Of course, wouldn't you know, with statistics like that, that it had to rain on the day we arrived? Prevailing temperatures were unseasonably cool, too. (Ever since I got my vented Kuschitani leathers, I can't remember going to a hot track day. At least it is good to know that Murphy's Law is truly immutable.)

To give myself the best chance of being relaxed, I arranged for a massage at the hotel's health club the night before. That and 20 minutes of meditation in the morning helped a lot. I felt ready.

Despite the wet, Honda had no time for delay. Our session was to begin at 8:00 a.m. Divided into six 20-minute sessions, we'd have 20 minutes of rest in between, with a 40 minute break in the middle, when the stock Battlax BT014 tires, specially cre-



ated for the bike, would be spooned off and replaced by new-for-'04, DOT race-spec BT002 rubber in the softest compound. Our riding day would end promptly at noon, as a group of German journalists would use the track in the afternoon.

It was chilly, in the low 40s when we arrived, the clouds were low, steel gray and threatening and the track was still plenty wet. A jet drier was wheeled around to get the worst of it off the surface. We changed into our leathers inside a tent as we tried to stay warm around a propane heater.

Perhaps 20 project engineers from Japan had flown in, too, to see how we liked their new baby. And as the US contingent of journalists would have just five US-spec bikes to use, we had been scheduled in groups of just four (with one machine held in reserve...just in case.) Stopwatches were a given. If you were prone to performance anxiety, this would be the time.

Doug Toland, former World Endurance Champion and American Honda's chief tester, had set up the bikes and scrubbed in the tires. Of course, I knew he could ride the course faster blindfolded than I'd ever go on my best day, but when he took the four of us out for some fast sighting laps, I had too much respect for the wet parts to keep up, and was promptly passed by those behind me, left to ride around on my own.

But the weather gods smiled, the clouds broke and the sun began to appear. Little by little the track got drier. And little by little, I got quicker as I felt more comfortable.

I have learned not to rush, contrary to the whole image of the racetrack. I build my pace a little at a time, as I determine that I can safely go faster.

However, photographers add another dimension. As all our readers will ever see of our efforts at these intros are the frozen moments snapped by pro photographers, whenever I see a guy armed with a big white telephoto lens standing beside the track, I know I have a chance to look as good as I can. One left-hander was nearly my undoing. Twice before at its exit I had sensed the front tire beginning to slip, and had quickly lifted my lean angle to avoid any problem. But this time, as the track seemed nearly dry, I gave it the old college try. Luckily, he missed my front end trying to tuck under, but I saved it, and sure didn't want to make that mistake again. Easy boy.

The next time in the pits, I asked Doug's advice on how to get better front end bite, and because the problem was on the exit, he advised another click of rear preload and a ¼-turn less compression damping. That made a big difference and suddenly I had hundreds more rpm in hand out of each turn.

Finally, after our 40-minute snack break, the gumball rubber had been installed and the track was finally dry enough not to be a concern. I thought the stock tires had been excellent, but these were amazing!

Soon, I had my knee down in seven of the ten corners—including the problem turn—and was diving in deeper and deeper and gassing it harder and harder. The bike was unflappable, and later, when I was complimented on my smoothness, I had to confess the active steering damper deserved a lot of the credit. It not only removed all the shake and wiggle that would have otherwise sapped my confidence, it kept the chassis composed as you moved from side to side.

And because I had started slowly, I never hit the wall of fatigue that affected a couple of the other guys before it all ended. I kept getting quicker, left the track on a high note, and ended the day with a big grin.

The next day, when we flew home, my back and legs were on fire from over-exertion of the muscles I only use when hanging off, and I walked like Chester from Gunsmoke, but I glowed with satisfaction, and could replay the track in my mind like a video game. And it didn't register until days later that the odd sensation of moving sideways in a couple of the corners was actually *sliding*, something I thought I'd never do.

By taking it slowly, I got a lot faster that day. Wow, what tires! Wow, what a bike!

*DAVE SEARLE*

—Dave Searle  
Editor-In-Chief