

## *Supermoto from an off-roader's point of view!*

To say I was nervous was an understatement. I hadn't ridden a bike with "proper" tyres on the road since I sat my bike test on an MZ125 in 1988. Ahead of me was a 2 hour endurance Supermoto, swapping with other team members Stephen Lafferty (Ride On Glasgow) and Dougie McNab (Scottish 400cc Road Race Champion) throughout the event. My few experiences of riding dirt bikes on the road have been at the ISDE, usually for short distances and usually in the p\*\*\*ing rain! Knobbles and wet tarmac don't mix as I have found out to my cost and Mr Acerbis' and Mr Renthals' benefit!

Here I was, on the start line at Round 4 of the Clews Leisure Supermoto Team Challenge, straddling a Yamaha WR450F with small wheels and slick tyres and hugely oversized discs. The weather had been unkind – torrential rain all morning led on to some huge heavy hail storms and later eased into a steady downpour. It was wet. Very wet. Good!

I may have been anxious about the tarmac section, but I could see the horror on the faces of my competitors. The prospect of sliding around on the mud (and possibly their backside) made for some pretty scared road-racer faces. That evens things up a bit then!

On my first ever lap of practice, I pottered around the tarmac, being very gentle with the throttle and trying to keep both wheels pointing in the right direction. Gingerly does it. Onto the off-road section and suddenly I'm giving it big licks, grabbing big handfuls of throttle, banging off huge berms, tail sliding into corners and power-sliding out. Magic – much more like what I'm used to! Back onto the tarmac and I was riding like a big blouse again for another half lap. Not enough berms on these road sections.....



Although I ride with a fair degree of confidence and self-belief, there is something very alien to me about leaning a bike over that far or wanting to slide the back end into a corner on tarmac. Even more alien is sliding it out of the corner in a powerslide. Now I can do that with zero grip on a dew-covered grassy field all day and almost never get out of control, but I guarantee the first time I try it on tarmac, I'll experience the dreaded zero-warning pitch of a classic high-side! I'm getting too old to try stuff like that now.

Photos all thanks from Paul Craigen

To me it was quite astounding to see the speed difference between the two areas of the circuit. I couldn't believe how quick some riders were around wet hairpins on the road and how incredibly slow they were on the dirt! I passed guys off the racing line then slid with both wheels into the berms, whilst they were mucking about with both feet out like stabilisers! I guess I'm not used to having grip, so have developed a style and technique suitable for that. Only problem is, when I do get grip, I don't know how to use it.

I even kept getting encouragement from my team mates - "Get your arse down on the seat Little!" or "I'm gonna buy some f\*\*\*ing Velcro for your seat" went their subtle calls of support. This was a reference to my off-road riding style of hovering my butt 1/2" off the rear fender whilst braking – you know, so I could absorb all the braking bumps and kickers. It took me until about lap 50 to realise you don't get them on tarmac!

See, the thing is I know my road orientated colleagues will be giving me a slagging for riding the tarmac like it was a MX circuit – all elbows up, foot forward, weight to the front and fingers on the brake and clutch. None of this namby pamby sticking knees out and "tucking" in the elbows. I mean honestly, what difference will that make over the length of this circuit? Probably about as much as standing up for the braking bumps!

Back to the race – I was elected / volunteered / bullied into doing the first stint for the team, to try to stay as close to the "fast guy" as possible. No pressure then.... At the flag start we're off! I'm in second position, but get edged out and can't make a pass at the first corner for the lead. "Stay close" were my instructions, so I did. I was using all my Enduro and MX experience to find a way past the leader on the opening greasy off-road lap, but there really was no way through. When we got onto the road section, I dropped about 3 seconds behind – on one corner!! Can't get used to this grippy flat black stuff. By lap 5 I was about 12 seconds behind the leader and was still feeling my way around the tarmac. It started to get really slippery when the muddy water got carried onto the road, all the way through the first chicane! Nice! On lap 6 I stalled coming out a slow corner and that allowed the road racer behind me to get past. I had get in front of this guy to stay in contention, so I had to be more ballsy on the road. I'll just follow this rider then. Sort of. He would pull out about 2 seconds on the road and I would close 2 seconds on the mud. Good close racing! Lap 9 and we both did our fastest lap yet, but we were pushing ourselves right to the edge. On lap 10 my race partner dropped it in a berm and I was through. Time to chase down the leader, but he wasn't even in sight! I was still pushing hard on the tarmac, and the sun had come out to dry the track. A little. On about lap 12 I came into the chicane a bit hot, and when I turned in, the front wheel washed out. Oh S\*\*t! I saved it with a severe dab, but was way past the point of making the next corner. I was heading straight for an ominous looking tyre wall. The image of a burning £20 note (the fine for having a crash) and a huge endo flashed before me. Bracing, I hit the tyres and....went straight through them! A little grass tracking later and I was back on the road losing a total of 2-3 seconds at most. Nice escape! "Keep pushing but be careful" I kept telling myself – "Don't drop it!". What I didn't know was that the leader had a tail slide at the same corner a lap earlier and had high-sided when he hit the tyres. He was in the pits having his

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bike checked over when I was doing my stunt driving! We were in the lead – Yee Haa! A short time later I handed over to Dougie McNab at the first stop and we had a three lap cushion! Time for a Ferrari-esque change of tactics to go for a steady finish and just maintain our lead. Which is exactly what Dougie and Stevie did, with quite some style!



Stephen Lafferty (left) demonstrates his hooligan roots whilst Dougie McNab (right) shows he isn't scared to lay the power down!

An exchange of handshakes and back slaps culminated in an inspection of the Yamaha WR450 for any signs of wear and tear over the gruelling 2 hours of torture. Dougie's keen mechanical eye noticed the spring link on the chain had come adrift and could have fallen out at any moment!! A stunned look fell across the teams faces as the realisation how close the team was to not winning hit home. All that mattered however was the chain had stayed put and the victory had been secured. 'Aussie' John received some mechanical advice on chain maintenance!!

I'd have to say a big thanks to all those who make our experience possible and such fun. Firstly I have to thank Alistair and Carole of Ride-On Motorcycles who enabled us all to compete. My team mates Stephen Lafferty and Dougie McNab who managed to slither their way round the "dubby" parts of the circuit and rocket round the tyre-lined tarmac – I'm glad they enjoyed it too. I'd also have to thank wee Alan Reid, who unfortunately due to injury was unable to ride, but came along to offer vocal support and commanded the pit change-overs, as well as entertain everyone with his stories and drinking of beer. The visual input for the day has been provided by Paul Craigen, who again came along for a giggle to see what all the fuss was about. Next time I'm sure he'll be riding and one of us will be behind the shutter! The photos were great Paul – thanks. Lastly, we'd all have to thank Karl Crompton for his extraordinary generosity. Stevie's Van went bang on the motorway near Preston and with no AA members anywhere to be seen, Karl allowed Stevie to store the van at his home until he can arrange repairs.



There was always something to see in the pits or take your mind off the

racing. Sometimes the view of the pits was quite nice too.....

Carlsberg don't do Supermoto, but if they did, it would probably be like the Clews Leisure Supermoto Challenge. And it would probably be the best in the world.

**The Ride On team secured a fantastic victory on the day and wish to thank the following:-**

**Clews Leisure for supplying Yamaha WR450**

**Alastair and Carol of Ride On Motorcycles**

**Alan Reid - Team Manager**

**Paul Craigen - Team Photographer**

**Fruit Shoot - suppliers of team hydration**

**DID Chains - For allowing us to finish!!**

**Other competitors - from England!!**

**And finally for all the congratulations we didn't receive!!!!**

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