

## Race Report 01 | Snetterton 26th-28th March 2010

New season. New bike. New Leathers. New lid. New riders. New hopes....Unfortunately the sound of my bike scraping along the tarmac was surprisingly similar to last year.

After originally intending to do just one season in order to say that I'd at least tried this racing thing, I find myself once again crammed in amongst the hundreds of other caravans and motorhomes in the paddock at Snetterton.

My Instructor 'Phil 'the whelk' Polden' told me last year that he'd been retiring from bike racing since 2003 and as I'd just unloaded mine and James' bike into the garage next to his familiar green number 42 It was confirmed that he was also doing 'just one more' it seemed... Last year Phil had finished up second in the championship to a young, talented Danny Buchan who had now moved on to BSB stocksport, this year Phil had to be one of the main contenders especially as Kev Neal wasn't competing this year having leant his bike to last year's rookie winner, me.

The other main contenders for the championship title has to be last year's 'rider of the year' Steve 'Smurph' Murphy who finished 3rd overall despite racing for much of the season with a broken wrist, Simon Braby who was consistently quick, but who's engine last year was consistently inconsistent.

Colin Martin had apparently found some extra horses in his previously underpowered CBR and was proven to be quick enough before the horses were found.

Previous championship winner Greville Ball is also more than capable of winning the championship if he was racing and fit after last year's accident.

My rookie nemesis Dale Bingle is also capable of running at the front (as long as he can actually stay on the bike) and that's without the usual replenishments of youngsters moving up from superteens and the unknown rookie element...with a modest prediction Steve Hogben had also declared that he was going to win the championship so surely he was also one of the 'ahem' odds-on favourites?



Smurph shows us effective pre-race stretching...

© Lisa Marie-Amess

Last year my main intended rival was to be my teammate James, but after various mechanical issues followed by a big crash at Brands GP (where arguably the heaviest 400 rider Stuart Gill) ran him over we never really had a proper battle all season. Instead the rookie championship went down to the final round after a long battle with Dale Bingle, a rider intent on 'winning or binning' and after 13 crashes during the season the later element of his philosophy shone through.

My rookie year was an eventful and truly enjoyable one. The 2009 'rookie rabble' consisting of me, James, Josh and Steve Hogben had become good friends and enjoyed the off-track banter nearly as much as the on-track battles.

Testament to how much fun we had in the F400 class we are all back for another season.

Steve and Josh have different ideas relating to pre-season organization. Josh tends to go for the 'leave the bike in the van after the last round and hope it's fixed itself' whilst Steve opted for the 'have loads of ideas and plans and then 2 days before the season realise that the new engine doesn't work'.

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I had been meticulous in planning a strategy, and paid particular attention to bike preparation and personally ensured that my bike (that wasn't mine) was completely ready for the season. When I say 'personally' I actually mean in terms of pure delegation obviously.

Kev Neal had supplied the bike and prepared the engine along with Dynotech, my long-suffering friend and appointed race mechanic 'Ollie-OCD-Tabram' had stripped the bike and given me a list of components to buy then spent hours working way past his bedtime (7PM) fitting them to the bike and double checking every nut and bolt, well... apart from non-essential items such as the handlebar clip-ons ;-)

My 'hands on' contribution actually just meant applying the vinyl's (supplied by tpsdisplay.com) to the newly sprayed fairings (supplied by octopos.co.uk).



Snotty nose & Bling (It's in!)

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Whoever decided that the main sponsors graphics should be cut from mirrored vinyl deserved to be shot, unfortunately that person was me so I had to bite my tongue for the 4 hours it took me to (badly) apply the graphics....

Lining up the bike in the garage, I had to say it looked pretty good, ...the superteens did insist that 2010 'iz all about da bling'?

Last year after spending far too much time and money on making my CBR look good I soon realised (after the second trip into the gravel) that race bikes only need to look good from a distance, and that distance should increase proportionally with the racing season.

Phil emerged from his caravan (after no doubt devouring two portions of whatever his race cuisine technician prepared him) to have a look at the bike that plagued him last season especially at the last round, Lydden where the bike (minus the rider) caused Phil to jump off his own bike and then perform the now critically acclaimed 'froggie-quick step' to avoid the 20 odd bikes that were bearing down on him... I'm sure he was happier with me riding it, as I'm less likely to cause him as much trouble as Kev last season.

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Our ex-rookie mate Steve 'Hoggy' Hogben arrived shortly after with his newly built ZXR that was up until 2 days prior to be entered into the standard '60BHP' class but now due to the engine not working was now back in the tuned class although he ran out of time to set it up properly.... he's only had 6 months after all.

Our constant form of entertainment Charlie 'Pit-Monkey-Monk' was also present and it was good to see him again, I've never seen someone so excited at the prospect of a race weekend even though they're not actually racing. I have to admit, I was pretty excited – after my son had been born a few months ago I was really looking forward this weekend. Finally a good three nights sleep.

Steve Murphy (Smurph) was also in the garage with his two bikes, he'd purchased a full 1mm overbore ZXR after continuously blaming the 0.5mm overbore he had on his 2009 bike as the reason he didn't do as well as he should have, so now I guess he'll have to stop whining and start winning!?

There were two more bikes to arrive in our Garage, Andy Gill and Paul Neal. Paul (Kev's son) did extremely well last year, but was plagued by mechanical issues and the fact that when he was running up front he thought he'd give the others a chance by hitting the kill switch and pulling over for a minute or so...

Andy is a Teacher who had contacted me during last season for advice as he was contemplating starting racing and thought that I as a rookie I could advise, I'm not entirely sure he listened though as I informed him of the vast amounts of cash the sport consumes, the inevitable crashing, the mechanicals, the poor cramped living conditions, the all too obvious dangers and ultimately the realisation that you'll probably never run at the front...and even if you do you'll only win a plastic pot. Despite my best efforts he'd arrived ready to prove me wrong....



Is anybody watching?

© Linda Wilson

I'd met Andy a few weeks Prior on a track day here where I'd shown him round. He crashed at the essess right hander (where I crashed last year) so it was good to see that he was listening to my advice after all.

Friday morning arrived far too soon for my liking; however I was keen to get out and back on the bike. I'd only ridden it once since picking it up from Kev and still wasn't completely at home with the race shift pattern (opposite from what I'm used to) and I hadn't been on it since it's overhaul, new bodywork and prep from Oli.

I was literally coasting round just making sure the bike was ok, glancing over my shoulder on a frequent basis ready to move out of the way if an MZ rider wanted to get past.. (yes that's how slow I was riding round) On the second lap I trundled into Russells and noticed Amanda's bike was on the grass (her partner Rich has come out of retirement to race it this year) and before I could think 'What an Idiot – dropping it on the first test session' I too was having a little lie down on the track.

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It appears number 14 had dropped some oil and subsequently slid off on it, subsequently I then slid off on it .

Rich came over to see how I was and I thanked him for helping me check my new EDAsia leathers were doing their job of protecting me.

Thankfully I, the leathers and bike managed to survive the fast 15mph crash relatively unscathed. Our fellow ex-rookie 'Hoggy' Hogben managed to better my crash, and dropped his bike at the Bombhole on the third lap of the session. His bike suffered somewhat worse damage than mine and it turned out those three laps were all he managed at the first round of the 2010 campaign... Both myself and James didn't feel the urge to tell him how much those laps had cost him (much).

The following sessions were a little better for me, it was dry(ish) but with some stubborn damp patches so I couldn't really push it and I was still trying to get used to the gears. The other main issue I had was the front brake, it was getting progressively spongier – so much so that on the last session it was coming all the way to the bar. Oli had put in new brake pads and bled the system but there was obviously something still not right and I couldn't 'two-finger' brake as I had to take my whole hand off the throttle.

On the last session I found myself behind my mate 'Smurph' so followed him round for a bit, he was obviously taking it easy as well so I went past him and we began to just have a bit of fun, passing and re-passing one another.

As I came out of my favourite right hander (at the esses) Smurph was right behind me and we were catching an MZ rider really fast, I thought I'd just nip past on the inside at the bombhole but as I clipped the apex the MZ rider really closed in and upon exiting the corner I felt a bump and the back of the bike moved about a bit... glancing over my shoulder I saw the unfortunate MZ rider somersaulting in unison with his bike. I put my hand up to apologies, but as his head was buried in the ground I don't think he saw me. I never did manage to find out who it was, otherwise I would have found him in the paddock to apologise properly (well, if he was smaller than me at least)

After that the bike went for scrutineering, Charlie and I then did an Oil change and took both sets of wheels over to A&R for some new rubber. Apart from losing my bank card (later found underneath the caravan) and having to borrow some money off James to pay for the tyres (makes a nice change!) the bike would be ready for the morning come rain or shine, and I settled down for a second night of uninterrupted blissful sleep.

An hour later and Colin Martin was knocking at the door having left his phone in my car and needing to get it back.

Once again the morning arrived far too quickly, and customary with Snetterton it was raining. Kev Neal had arrived and walked through the garage to the pit lane.

Whilst ambling through the garage he changed Paul (his son) wheels, set up the suspension, changed my/his brake's master cylinder, bled the system and put a new fuel pump on Andy Gills bike to get it running right all with less tools than I have and less time than it takes me to get the petrol cap open.



Can you fix it?

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It occurred to me that perhaps I should have written a clause into our agreement so that his mechanical services came with the bike for the entire season?

By the time the F400's were due to qualify the track was dry-ish and in hindsight dry tyres would have been the choice, but I had my brand new wets on to destroy so went out to do just that. I had done a few warm up laps when Paul Neal came past me, I tagged onto the back of him and witnessed his rather wild style close up! Still, I managed to qualify just in front of him in 9th position and a time of 124.8 James qualified 21st with a time of 133.03.

For the first time my dad had come to watch, he had been able to avoid all of last year but a persistent uncle of mine had managed to put him on the back of his bike and get him there. I was hoping to have a reasonable start to the season, but at the same time had the mentality that I would treat the Saturday as a bit of an extended test session as I was still getting used to the bike and back into the swing of things....plus, I really didn't want to bin it in front of my old man who was worried (and grey haired) enough as it was without any help from me.

The familiar nerves lining up on the grid weren't that noticeable, perhaps I'm becoming a seasoned racer after a full season behind me!? Still, as the lights went out I suddenly realised that I actually hadn't practiced a race start on this bike yet and was subsequently swallowed up a bit at the start but began to work my way back up.

Dale (why is it always Dale?) was in front of me but I managed to get past him before he re-passed me into the fast left-hander at the end of the Revitt straight. This was repeated a two more times after I got back past him. He was much quicker than me into the esses (something I'd have to work on) so I got past him on the start/finish straight after getting a better drive out of Russell's and managed to put enough space between us by the end of the Revitt straight so he couldn't repeat his manoeuvre.



Wet...Dry...Wet....Grrr..

© racingline photography

I was a few seconds behind a quick youngster – Alex Vella and crossed the line after him in my original qualifying position of 9th with a fastest time of 1:21.5, James managed to finish 14th so made up 7 places and was grinning from ear to ear when we got back to the garage. He later told me that he hadn't thanked me enough for getting him into this 'racing business' as so many of his friends had talked about it for years, yet never actually took the step to actually make it onto the grid, I was just glad he was now enjoying it after last year when he was just hoping his bike would make it onto the start line without packing up, or go round a corner without him having to worry about running his own foot over or getting run over himself.

I wasn't overly Impressed with my first race on the ZXR but was taking it fairly easy, trying to build my pace up slowly and get used to the bike. The Honda in comparison felt solid mid-corner, with no real movement whilst the ZXR moved around a lot and required a bit more effort to turn in. Of course, It might be just the way Kev has it set up (I haven't changed it) as Mr Polden remarked that Kev does ride a bit 'Chris Walker' but with my lack of suspension set-up knowledge I'd rather adjust my riding style than alter the bike and make it worse... after all, If Kev can ride it then so can I... can't I!?

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My old Honda had done well in qualifying, 15th on the grid with it's new pilot, Dales brother Liam. I did 8 rounds on that bike, and not including test days meant I had completed around 256 'racing' laps. I had crashed three times and the biggest damage to the bike was a split radiator and broken screen, the bike still refused to break down and my only 'nearly' DNF through a (sort of) mechanical issue was a complete schoolboy error when I forgot to put the fuel onto reserve at Brands GP.... In Liams hands however; the bike looked distinctly second-hand after just four laps when he managed to crash at the Bombhole trying to go round the outside of Richard Arnold. I'm not sure how, but he actually managed to get the bike through scrutineering in order to make it onto the grid the following day.



Pre-Bingle

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Post Bingle...

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The 2nd race came round fairly quickly, and this time I was a bit better off the line, at least maintaining my position. I thought I had managed to sort out my Issues with the essess, but mainly the left hander at the end of the straight.

On the Honda I wasn't actually going as fast by the end of the straight so I was braking less initially and because the bike felt so stable mid-corner I was able to brake hard all the way to the apex, I was gradually trusting the front end more and more on the ZXR but still wasn't as committed and young Reece Baldwin made it abundantly clear that I was still rubbish by riding around the outside of me....

Still, I managed to get back past him and brake deeper into the corners lap by lap managing a best time of 1:20.5 and finished in 8th position which meant that on Sunday I would be starting from the 2nd row and was determined to push a lot harder in order to see what times I could get down to, Phil was in the 1:18's and I was sure I could go 2 seconds faster with a little more aggression.

After a quick shower, we headed over to the bar for a pint to reflect on the first days racing. My dad brought the first round of drinks and I was surprised at how much he seemed to enjoy the day. I'm not sure he really knew what to expect, but was quite amazed at how much 'went on' in the paddock, how much time and effort people put into this sport and how fast some of the riders actually were. He left before the sun completely disappeared and got too cold as my Uncle was taking him back on his bike, I'm sure the three double whisky's kept him warm for the ride home though.

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We stayed for a couple more, witnessing and congratulating a rather smug Polden pick up his winners trophy's. We also witnessed a rather happy and euphoric Andy Gill who had just completed his first two races ever, and doing very well in the process. It still seems odd that James, Steve and myself were answering Andy's questions with apparent knowledge on the subject, it's a sudden realisation of how much we all did actually learn during our first year, it was perhaps more amazing that Andy believed most of it.

Myself and James who share a common chronic syndrome known as 'recent parent tiredness' crept back to the caravan for another rare chance to seize the opportunity of uninterrupted sleep. Unknown to us at the time Charlie had declared that he could lap Snetterton in the dark, in under two minutes on a pushbike. Unfortunately on his first attempt (with no lights) he failed to notice the shut gate leading onto the circuit and highsided over the handlebars before even reaching the track itself.

On Sunday morning the weather looked promising, with bright skies and even a hint of sun. I had a few people coming to watch, my friends parents and assorted kids, Ashley Johnson (and his family) from OctoPOS (to see if I'd put the graphics on right) and my long-suffering mechanic 'Oli OCD Tabram'.

I didn't go out for the 'three-lap-dash' practice session as the bike was all working fine; it was just the rider that needed to find the right gear.

As I was busy talking to everyone and trying to get all my kit together I wasn't watching any of the races, but soon became aware that the circuit had gone rather quiet and even the tannoy had ceased to make a sound. I wandered out into the pitlane and saw a few worried faces looking in the direction of the start line, I looked over and noticed ambulances, the medical car and marshals dealing with a rather horrific looking Incident. I didn't go any nearer, but walked back through the garages and knew from the many faces that the Incident was a serious one.

The news came back, that Simon Exton had been involved and had lost his life. Simon was a F400 rider that was also competing in the thunderbikes on a Ducati this year.

Simon had been particularly influential in the decision for myself and James to race. I had met him 'OnLine' through the motoforum in 2008 when I was thinking of joining BEMSEE and the F400 clan.

He quickly became a wealth of information to a complete novice and no matter how stupid the questions, he still answered them in complete honesty, making the decision to race and how to get on the grid that much easier. I met him and Max in person at the rookie evening before the 2009 season and once again he offered his advice and experience without expecting anything in return. During my rookie season he continued to help out with advice on bike preparation, training regimes and racing lines, even allowing me to follow him for a few laps to learn some lines and braking points.

I managed to get the better of him at Cadwell for three of the four races and thoroughly enjoyed our on track battle. Afterwards when he congratulated me I'm pretty certain that despite me finishing in front of him he was quite proud that I'd listened to his advice and put it into practice (well, at least I hope so!)



Me & Simon #8 at Cadwell in 2009

© racingline photography

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To be completely honest, after that sad and shocking news I didn't want get on the bike at all. It was fairly clear that everyone else was reflecting on the news but removing it from their minds until the racing was over, I tried but still couldn't concentrate on what I should have been. Charlie had done my tyre pressures and measured out the fuel, I hadn't even looked at the bike before the F400's were called to the grid and made my way to the second row of the grid.

When the lights went out I actually managed a reasonable start and coming into Russell's on the first lap I was running 5th behind Tom Ward and was closing in on him, the front group weren't that far ahead either. As we came out of Russell's the common combination of 'cold side of tyre + power' resulted in Tom going off right in front of me. I had three choices and about 0.3 seconds to make the correct one.

1. Run over him and fall off
2. Run over his bike and fall off
3. Go onto the grass and fall off

I chose option 3, although thankfully I managed to stay on, however I crossed the line back in 12th position as a result. As I'd just been through the gravel, dirt, grass etc.. I took the next two corners easy(ish) as I knew my tyres would probably have picked up all sorts of debris on them, but once they gave sufficient feedback relating to grip I got my head down and managed to start working my way back up the field. I posted my best lap time so far of 1:19.077 (SO Nearly into the 1:18's) and although I was closing in on Colin Martin and Reece in front of me I ran out of laps and crossed the line in 8th, back where I had started from on the grid.



...Bugger, Missed 'im!

© Linda Wilson

When I pulled up in the garage, I saw a friend of mine (Darren Sharpe) an ex-bemsee 600 rider who had lost an arm in a road accident a long time ago yet still raced (and beat) many other riders despite his limb deficit. He saw my avoidance tactics at the chicane and commented that I should have run him over to get better grip and drive onto the straight... I actually think he was serious too!

The final race of the weekend arrived and I still wasn't really 'in the zone' (whatever that is) however I'd decided to push it a little bit more and see if I could indeed get into the 1:18's which should have straightforward enough as I's already improved by nearly 5 seconds a lap since qualifying.

However, after sitting in the assembly area for what seems an eternity whilst the marshals cleaned up a river of oil at Russell's my enthusiasm dissipated at the same rate as the heat from my tyres. Despite being given two warm up laps to put some heat back into them, I knew they still wouldn't be up to temperature.

It didn't help much when the wheel's bike stalled on the grid and had to be bumpstarted either, so when the lights went out I think I was probably over cautious as I lost about 5 places going into Riches. Dale was well up there, never one to worry about cold tyres he disappeared into the distance and I played catch up with Reece again.

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On the second lap I thought the tyres would have enough heat in them so upped the pace, but out of sears (whether it was cold tyres or me getting the line wrong) the back stepped out and I lost drive onto the straight, all 80 BHP and 8 stone of Reece disappeared into the distance after Colin Martin. It took me a few laps but I was closing, in my head I thought I'd be right with them on the back straight by the final lap, and knowing my bike was faster than Colin's in a straight line was thinking of outdragging him to the line (this was all whilst they were holding one another up a bit)

On the penultimate lap I came into Russells about half a second back, but as I changed down (which is up) I got one of those annoying 'in-between gears' and for a split second couldn't remember if I needed to stamp the gear lever up or down.... I coasted through the chicane before getting into the correct gear, losing all my drive up onto the start/finish straight.

I glanced behind me and saw number 21 (Tom Ward) not that far behind, I knew I wouldn't catch Colin or Reece but also knew I wasn't going to let Tom past me after I'd kindly avoided running him over.

I crossed the line 7th position, my best finish to date but hopefully won't be the best of the season. I didn't get into the 1:18's so I will have a goal to achieve when I come back to Snetterton later in the year.

In conclusion, it was a mixed start to the season – elation and anticipation on arrival, realization and recognition on Saturday followed by shock and sadness on Sunday.

Racing never ceases to attack your emotions, and often on an hourly basis. As a racer we know that bike racing produces amazing highs, but all too often it produces incredible lows.

We all accept the risks, in order to achieve those high's and It's been said many times that Simon died doing what he loved, and hopefully there is at least some consolation in knowing that he died living his dream, the majority of people never even get that opportunity. To Max, Suzi and the rest of the Exton family, I offer my deepest sympathy and my thoughts are with you.

Oulton park is next up on the calendar and will hopefully prove to be a better weekend, I'm planning on pushing a bit harder despite the fact that I have only been there once before.

### Finally, a big thanks to...

Oli 'OCD' Tabram for pre-season bike preparation (again) and continued support throughout the season. I will just double check those clip-on bolts though eh? ;-)

James for continued generosity and selfishness in letting me beat him.

Kev Neal for the loan of the bike, and his speedy mechanical skills.

Phil 'the whelk' Polden for continuous updates regarding the weather forecasting.

Charlie for providing much needed amusement all weekend (I hope you recover from your Injuries in time for Oulton)



Me & Dale...again!

© Gary Billson

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Steve 'Hoggy' Hogben for not racing all weekend, therefore gifting me a position in all four races. Dale for not crashing into me.

Gary, for dragging my dad down to watch and saying categorically that I'd never beat Phil Polden in a race, it's only my second season, second time on the bike and first race on a ZXR. I improved my lap times by 5 seconds in a day, there's 7 more rounds to go... ;-)

David, Georgina, Gary and the kids for braving the cold wind and the excellent photography. Ash and family for not telling me the vinyl's were rubbish too often.

Big John at EDIasia for his continued support within the F400 clan and not letting a minor thing like a heart attack get in the way of our sport!

A big thanks to my wife, Nic for her continued support. This will be my last season, promise!



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