

Friday March 6th | Test Day.

Having completed 20-30 track days It was perhaps unusual that I'd never been in the gravel trap before and now I was in it - the Gravel was much deeper than I thought!

Coming down paddock Hill and braking for Druids I knocked down one too many gears and locked the rear up, fearing a high side If I leant the bike over I just thought I'd 'skip' across the gravel to safety.

As I flew over the handlebars and the ground was fast approaching my face I quickly tucked my head in and managed a semi-elegant roll onto my feet that the Marshalls all applauded (I'm sure one held up a board with 9.0 on it?)

Things hadn't gone exactly to plan all day. Scrutineering had suggested my rear sets were too sharp (as I'd ground them off slightly) so I had to steal a set from my mates bike and I just couldn't find a comfortable position for them that enabled me to actually change gear without a great deal of effort! My new leathers were adding to my uncomfortable experience as cramped onto the 400 I really didn't feel happy!

An Oil leak from a defective oil cooler seal made me miss a session and I was becoming increasingly frustrated ...the day wasn't going to my master plan of setting the fastest 400 lap record in the BMCRC 100 Year History! – The crash just confirmed my problems, I have no idea what times I was doing but I think I may have been quicker running round on foot!



On a brighter note, It was great to get talking to fellow competitors and meet up with the Rookie's that I did the CTC Course with. It's always comforting to know that I wasn't the only one experiencing a few 'Issues' and as I left Luke Denham, one of the ZXR400 Riders at 11PM in the garage with his engine in component parts I felt a little better... (Sorry Luke!)

Saturday morning : **Qualifying**

New Day. New Tyres. New Rearset position. New Hopes!

After being so uncomfortable on the previous day I took the brave decision to remove my additional back protector for the qualifying, It was making the already tight leathers even tighter and moving around on the bike nearly Impossible.

After a few laps just scrubbing in the new tyres I dropped back from a group of 400's that were bunched In front of me and by about lap 5 I upped the pace slowly, trying to get quicker and quicker as I went. I felt much better on the bike, I could move around a lot more and I didn't have any 'moments' at all – I felt I was getting quicker and quicker as my confidence Improved so was a little gutted as I passed the flag signalling the end of qualifying.

My fastest lap was Indeed the last Lap of the session timed at 56.825. I qualified 13th on the grid (out of 24) and 1st Rookie. I was fairly happy, and I felt I could go quicker in the race.



Saturday **Race 1**

My leathers were still too tight. Thankfully another competitor (A friend of Paul Hinton's) kindly leant me his back protector that he wasn't using that weekend – a smaller 'race fit' variant that was a big improvement from my own.



Lining up mid-pack on the grid the moisture in my mouth suddenly disappeared, even trying to regulate my breathing became a conscious decision! By Druids I'd slipped back to about 16th, I got a good start but I backed off going into paddock as bikes were 3 Inches to my left, right and in front!

Eventually I crossed the line in 18th - I was lapping in the 56's comfortably but I lacked the confidence to stuff it up the Inside and my underpowered Honda lacked the BHP to get passed on the exit. Mid-Corner I think I could hold more speed, but not quite enough to ride around the outside..It didn't really help when 2nd Placed Rookie (Dale) passed me exiting Clark and stuck his

finger up either! (Cocky young kid!)

My friend watching was a little deflated that I'd slipped back through the pack but I was just happy to make it round in one piece, after all it was my first race and for most of it I was just trying to stay out of the way! – I still managed to finish 2nd Rookie though and felt I could go much quicker in the second race.

Race 02.

Starting from 18th I got a good start and felt a little less nervous entering Paddock three abreast! I still lacked the confidence to really get 'stuck in' with the other racers though and tended to trundle round well within my comfort zone following riders that I thought I could be quicker than. For some reason, probably nerves I guess I was seriously lacking my 'Race head' – usually on track days I'm fairly ruthless at cutting through the field - but whether it was my minor spill on Friday, nerves on the day or tiredness through continued concentration I just didn't get that 'racers' head that I used to get when Karting! – I managed to finish where I started (18th) and 2nd Rookie behind Dale Bingle (again) !

That night I was awarded a medallion and a trophy for my 2nd place Rookie finish, but to be honest I didn't feel that I deserved it as I hadn't really got going all day! After a drink I felt that tomorrow I'd push it a little harder!



Sunday Race 01

After just a 3-lap 'practice' session I took the bike back to the caravan to get the tyre warmers on for the next race. I had my wife and friends arriving to watch me so I wanted to at least try and improve on my 18th grid position and was keen to get out there!

On the first call for the race I was on the bike, tyre warmers off and lining up in the assembly area . . . I was a little too keen as the marshals were still clearing up an accident from the previous MZ race and I was pretty much the only one in the assembly area with my tyres rapidly losing heat!

I quickly learnt that the riders at the pointy end of the grid wait for the final call before arriving quickly at the assembly area thus minimizing the time the tyre warmers are off! Although the sun was out I was subsequently told that the track temperature was merely 4 degrees!

As the lights went out I gunned it! – I managed to get passed 3 or 4 people round paddock and by Druids I was about 13th or 14th More Importantly, I was ahead of Dale! I knew that I had to keep a good pace up otherwise I'd lose positions on the start/finish straight as my bike isn't the quickest in a straight line so exiting Clark curve I got on the gas early, unfortunately I think the rear tyre was still not up to full temperature and decided to try and overtake me !

I didn't exactly high side but I held onto the bike as it went sideways, then just about managed to get it upright although heading in the wrong direction! – I nearly managed to turn it back onto the tarmac but as the gravel approached I knew I was going for another play in the kitty litter! Jumping off the bike (a bit quicker than the previous off) I rolled over as I hit the gravel and managed to pick myself up. I think I'd caught my finger in the gravel and dislocated it, It clicked back into position when I took my gloves off and hurt less! The marshalls picked the bike up and thankfully it looked ok too (now with matching gravel rashes each side). Sunday's Race 2 was over after I didn't even complete a lap!

On the plus side, I was running really well – managed to overtake a few bikes and think It was merely due to a cold tyre that I crashed. I felt really sorry watching the first place rookie (Dale) run out of fuel on the last corner of the last lap . . . ;-)

Sunday Race 02

My finger was swelling up from the crash and It was hard to clasp my hand, braking was going to be a little difficult then!

Around half an hour before race 02 began and I'd managed to clear all the gravel debris from my bike .

. It then began to hail. I'd never tried wet tyres before, and now I had 30 mins before a race and it wasn't raining, but Hailing hard! There was a voice in my head telling me that I'd perhaps pushed my luck enough this weekend . . but another voice said that I'm here to race – so get out there!



Thankfully I was at least starting from the back of the grid due to my inability to finish the previous race, I therefore thought I'd just wobble around at the back and try these wets out rather than actually try and race with them. For a couple of laps I did exactly that, and I was just using one finger to brake – However, I was becoming more and more confident in the tyres and after a few laps I thought I'd try and up the pace. I managed to lap in the 103's and overtake 5 other competitors finishing 14th Overall and 2nd rookie (Bloody Dale again!) – If I'd have 'gone for it' at the start I think I'd have certainly Improved on that! I was extremely impressed at the grip available from wet tyres, knee down antics were easy and general feedback was really good, at least It was another thing to add to my list of experiences for the weekend!

Conclusion.

I thoroughly enjoyed the weekend despite not feeling I'd performed at my best, I have at least learnt a lot! – Mainly :-

- Wait for the second call before getting to the assembly area
- How much grip you can get with wets
- Ensure my tyres are really hot before getting on the gas
- How deep the gravel traps are!
- How much quicker I need to be before I can be at the sharper end of the grid
- How friendly and helpful everyone is around the paddock

I'm really looking forward to the next meeting now. I'll hopefully be less nervous and more prepared in terms of expectations and the ability to work my way through the field if possible! Having James join me at the next meeting will also be a huge bonus as it gives both of us a realistic target to chase (the bikes being near identical) – he's banter also has the added benefit of winding me up enough to ride quicker too ;-) !!

Results are therefore :-

18th | 18th | DNF | 14th

**In the rookie
championship**

2nd | 2nd | DNF | 2nd

