



JAMES SMITH

THE QUIET ASSASSIN

Words: Glen Williams Pics: Glen Williams and Andrew Bright

The TripleR racing team has been behind one of the most successful recent Superbike riders in New Zealand in the form of Robbie Bugden, they have also been supporting local lad James Smith for the past few years. We sent Glen Williams to get the latest on one of this year's hottest prospects to take the 600cc NZ Supersport title.

If you lined ten riders up in identical racing leathers and asked a stranger to pick the one that they thought could punt a bike around a race track as fast as anyone in the country – It's unlikely that they would pick James Smith. James is one of the most unassuming road racers you might ever happen to come across. His quietly spoken and his typically laid back style around the pits is contradicted by his natural talent for speed and consistency when out on track.

The early years

Motorcycles and racing runs in the family with Smith - his dad (Albert) being an avid and respected motorcycle competitor himself with road race titles and land speed records to his name. James came to road racing after sampling both motocross and speedway. His motocross career was cut short after an accident on the bike which had the side-effect of causing him continued bad headaches from the jumps whenever he rode an off-road machine. His first foray on a road race bike was on a 125GP machine in 2001, which he hated. "I never really got on with the 125 bike, as it required a very different style of riding to what I had grown up with and it was a pain



Racer On Racer

- JAMES SMITH



trying to keep it in perfect tune as well." He noticed quickly that the riders and teams that had the knowledge to accurately set them up and tune them to the specific race-day weather had a real advantage and he found it difficult to learn that side of the sport as well as how to ride the littlest of race bikes.

A mate of his and local road racer (Brendon Gare) then let him have a ride on his 2002 model Suzuki GSX-R600 – and he immediately felt

at home. "The production bike was completely different to the 125 in the way it moved around on the track when on the brakes or on the gas, I was much more comfortable on this style of machine." He made the decision to purchase that very bike and go Supersport racing. "I competed in the South Island rounds of the 2003 national championship and had some respectable top five results. It was great mixing it up on occasions with Jarred Love, Shaun Harris, Craig Shirriffs and Dennis Charlette – and

I knew then that this was what I wanted to continue to do."

The cost of racing

Like many young racers starting out, he found the expense of racing was extremely prohibitive, however he scraped enough money together to compete in the full national series the following year on the same bike. "It was quite an eye opener for me and I quickly realised that I was basically wasting my time trying to compete with a budget that only allowed me one set of tyres for the entire weekend." James more often than not ran

the same tyres that he had practised on the Friday with right through the race weekend – with the occasional extra rear tyre used if he was unlucky enough to tear one up with a poor suspension set up. "It was pretty depressing trying to race at that level with no money and on top of that I still knew nothing about setting a bike up." James raced the entire season without ever adjusting the suspension clickers or things like geometry or spring rate. "Looking back I really didn't have a clue what I was doing – so I just went out and rode the then outdated bike as hard as I could." That year he finished tenth overall in the series and he wasn't too hopeful of being able to afford to do another...

Alby Smith long jump 45ft 1937 Addington showgrounds, Christchurch



Hepburn's green olive branch

In a twist of fate, the following year well known road racer John Hepburn was to campaign a newer model Kawasaki 600, but unfortunately he was involved in a bad four-wheeler accident which severely damaged his foot. Unable to ride, John offered the opportunity to James to ride the bike. "It was an opportunity too good to miss, Johnny had the bike set up, the tyre deals were all in place and he knew how to dial the bike in quickly to each track." It was just what James was looking for.

"We had a bit of a rough start on the bike and I crashed it the first time I raced it at Timaru! Luckily I wasn't injured and we got on with the job of competing in the 2006 nationals



where we finished in a respectable seventh position overall." It was a season that had its ups and downs but some flashes of speed were shown with top five finishes at a couple of the rounds. "We only spent the one year on the Kawasaki as the deal was for the single season only, so I was again on the lookout for another ride." It came along not too much later in the form of Red Fenton's TripleR race team. "Red and I knew each other from being around the race tracks and as we both live in Christchurch we used to bump into each other pretty regularly." A phone call from Red one day resulted in a deal being brokered to ride a K6 model GSX-R600 to run in the 2007 championship. "It was like a lease deal arrangement and it suited me and my budget at the time down to the ground," says James.

Under the TripleR wing

Fenton recalls hooking up with James. "In the beginning I had been keeping an eye on James when he was on the Kawasaki and whilst he would run a bit hot and cold results-

wise, it was obvious that he had the ability to go fast. The trick as always with a rider like this is getting them set up so that they can go consistently quick." The result of James and TripleR in their first year together was another seventh placed finish in the 2007 600cc national road race championship. Followed by a second placing in the 2008 series for which they used the same bike. In 2009 he finished in second position again behind Australian hotshot Gareth Jones "My second year of finishing second behind Gareth was disappointing as I really took it to him in many of the races and I thought I would be in with a chance, but I couldn't quite string it all together." Upon reflection the recent excellent performances this year on the international scene that Gareth Jones has had – indicates that James's riding must have been at a very high level indeed.

This coming season will be the fourth year that James has been with the TripleR team. Red had in fact hoped to include some overseas racing during this year's winter break "We were wanting to take James across to Australia for a race or two

in their Superstock 1000 championship, but it wasn't possible to do in the end, maybe we will try for this again next year – or possibly look at the AMA championship in the States as well, for now though we really want James to concentrate on the 2010 600 a production title."

This year he will have the added challenge of riding a Superbike alongside the 600 machine. James comments, "I have had a few test runs on the GSX-R1000 and I really liked it, the way the bike handles in the middle of the corner and gets out of them seems to suit my style." I suspect that James's speedway experience in which he is a national level competitor will be holding him in good stead for the big bike as their penchant for exiting corners sideways when hard on the throttle holds a lot of similarities with the speedway machines style.

"After very little time on the Superbike I am already within 1 second per lap of where I need to be when lapping at tracks like Ruapuna and Manfeild – so I hope to be able to run at the pointy end of the field in Superbikes." His main focus though is on the 600 class, he says, "I really want to win the 600 championship series this year and sign that one off, and that is where I will be putting my main efforts. I will be looking to treat the Superbikes as a learning year and will just see how things develop."

Fortunately, he gets on really well with his fellow Superbike team-mate and three-time NZ champ Australian Robbie Bugden. "Me and Robbie have never had a problem sharing information, I only need to ask and he is always willing to help. Actually, Red, Robbie and myself all get on pretty well and we all seem to enjoy each other's company."

Currently he is the only rider in the upcoming championship to be racing a machine in both premier 600 and 1000cc classes and says he has been working hard on his fitness to meet the extra endurance that riding two classes requires. "I combine mountain bike riding, trials bike riding and some gym work to help keep me on top of things fitness-wise." (I think he's gonna need it!)

The team at BRM wish James Smith and the TripleR crew all the best for the season and we all look forward to a Kiwi getting their hands back on a 600 sports production title, and who knows – maybe even the Superbike title. You can check out James Smith and his team at www.jamesmith.co.nz

BRM



QUICK FIRE STATS:

Nickname: Jimmy

Weight height: 67kg / 176cm

First Bike owned: Honda XR80
(at 6 years old)

Home Town: Christchurch

Marital Status: Married to Jenny

Occupation: Qualified Printer

Other Hobbies: Off road mountain bike riding, speedway, trails riding

Favourite Movie: Talladega Nights

Favourite Music: Offspring

Favourite Track: Ruapuna

Most respected riders:

Robbie Bugden, John Hepburn and Craig Shirriffs

Dream Dolly Brolly:

The wife of course

Best race advice given:

Never give up

Best race advice to give:

Keep it fun