

SPEED SMITH

Words: Glen Williams, Pics: Glen Williams / CDFoto

Glen Williams continues his series of racer-on-racer interviews, this month it's 2007 600cc Sports Production Champion, Sam Smith who gets a grilling.

Sam Smith has become household name on the NZ road-racing scene despite being only 20 years old. The Pukekohe Yamaha rider is actually a bit of a veteran really as Smith has been riding bikes since the age of four, took to motocross at the age of seven and began road racing at the ripe old age of 13. Since then his career highlights to date include winning the 2007 600cc Sports Production title, NZ TT and GP titles in Sports Production and Classic racing, along with topping the podium in classic races in Australia. He was also named New Zealand's Most Promising Road-Race

Newcomer, before switching to the superbike class last season. Unfortunately, he spent much of the year sidelined with injury, but he's now injury-free and after a successful Victoria Motorcycle Club's Winter Series, he's fighting hard through this summer's national road-race series, which sees him return to the 600cc class. Here's how Sam got where he is today.

How did you first get into road racing?

My introduction to road racing was through classic racing which provided a friendly and helpful atmosphere to learn from.

Did you have the full support of your parents?

Yes absolutely! They still try and help me to this day. But in the early days they made huge commitments to their everyday life so they could take time off, travelling and helping me race.

Was racing something you immediately enjoyed from the beginning?

I enjoyed it right from the start, and it was great to have my heart set on something at the age of around 14.

You have a background riding 125 GP bikes - what were the highs and lows of that era?

125 racing were the most eventful years of my career to date! They are a great motorcycle to work on and most enjoyable to ride. We had various podiums at nationals, and got second overall at the MotoGP support race at Phillip Island.

Some riders struggle move up to the 600cc supersport class from 125s - why do you think that is?

I think the bikes are chalk and cheese. The power, weight, brakes, and geometry are all different. When I started on the 600 I tried to focus on one thing at a time and not let it all get too much.

You made the move up look pretty easy yourself?

The main reason I think I adapted well was that I had ridden so many different bikes before that, starting at motocross, moving to classics, then to 150 street stock and so on. This gave me the ability to learn individual bikes' characteristic reasonably quickly.

You had a lot of success in 600s - what were the key highlights?

My first NZ championship on a 600 started with a NZTT win at Pukekohe and a new lap record. The following year, after a great learning season in Australia I came back to win the 2007 NZ championship, and also the NZGP and NZTT titles.

You managed to squeeze in a fair bit of riding in Australia - how does the level of competition compare from here to there?





Aussies are fast! And they have big budget teams; even the privateer teams are well run. There is a great difference in the depth of the competition. The top ten riders in Australia are the equivalent to our top four. At the end of the day the riders are just hungry for success and do anything it takes to be leading privateer or top factory rider.

How did you handle flying in to the Australian events and trying to race against guys that already had their bikes well set up

It was good for me because it made me value every lap on the track. Friday practice was always nerve-racking learning the track, sorting gearing, suspension etc. By Saturday qualifying you knew where you stood on the grid and it was great to tag onto the back of the faster guys.

Dave Cole travelled a lot with you to Australia - how valuable has Dave's mentoring been to you?
I wouldn't be anywhere if it weren't for Davey. I was lucky enough to

meet Dave back in my 125cc racing days, when he used to watch me push broken bikes through the pits! Since then we have built up a great working relationship. He is a master of all trades and our riding styles are also similar and I think that's why he has been so valuable to my riding.

Dave is no slouch on a bike - but I seem to recall you giving him a run for his money in a classic event in Australia?
Dave and I have some great battles

on the classic bikes. Some of my best racing is on the old bangers here and in Aussie, racing Dave. Dave has set numerous lap records all around Australia, with me holding on to my Pukekohe record at 1:06.6.

Do you think it is still possible for a young NZ based rider to come through and get onto the world stage of racing?

It is possible, but it is very tough. I really hope we can have a NZ fern up there soon (hopefully me!). I think the popular path of late has been the superstock 600 and 1000. It seems a very popular field with guys moving to the WSBK paddock after success in superstock.

You've been a long term Yamaha supported rider, is this set to continue for the 2009 season?

Yes for sure. Yamaha and me have had a great relationship over the past three years. Yamaha are very enthusiastic about the sportsbike scene and they put a lot back into racing which is fantastic.

Would you classify yourself as a privateer racer for this 2009 season?

Unless you are getting paid to race I think we are all privateers to an extent. I'm very lucky to have the backing of Yamaha Motor NZ. We all race for the love and enjoyment of it at the end of the day.

How healthy do you think the road-racing scene is in New

Zealand currently?

Its great having guys like Brian Bernard and Peter Fenton running teams with overseas riders. It makes the NZ riders work harder and also have a great benchmark. Also TV coverage is great for our sport. We just somehow need to fill the stands and fences with people!

What brand of tyres are you running on this year?

This season I am running Pirelli Tyres. The team at Pirelli is great and they know what racers need to be comfortable with tyres. They are an excellent tyre and have the choice of different compounds for different tracks. The tyres also respond really well once they start wearing which is a real bonus. I am looking forward to a successful season with an aim to winning Pirelli a New Zealand 600 championship.



QUICK FIRE STATS

Age: 20
Marital status: Girlfriend - Carrie
Location: Pukekohe
Occupation: Self-employed carpet layer
Age first rode a bike: 4 years old
Favorite race circuit NZ: Pukekohe
Favorite Street circuit: Wanganui
Least favorite track: None
Favorite band: Love all genres of music
Favorite Movie: Travis Pastrana Nirta Circus series
Other hobbies: Downhill mtb, BMX racing
Most respected local rival: Craig Shirriffs
Most idolized rider: Anyone that puts in hard work and succeeds
Dream dolly brolly: Craig Shirriffs
Dream Job: Racing a motorcycle

2009 sees you going back to a 600 from the Superbike class of 2008 - why is that?

I really enjoyed racing the superbike, and want to hop on one again soon. I did get knocked around a bit on them though and after a break I have decided to give the 600 another shot this season, mainly to build confidence.

In three words wrap up the feelings when racing a superbike:
HOLD ON TIGHT!

How are your recent injuries healing up?

I am on top of my injuries thank god. In the space of a year I broke my ankle and both wrists but luckily with

great people around me it has kept me enthusiastic and determined. It is a sport where you have to expect injuries to happen, it's never nice but it does make you appreciate the highs of racing.

Do you enjoy racing on the street circuits?

I enjoy the street racing a lot. I have only ridden at Wanganui but the thrill of so many people being so close to you is exciting. They make your brain and body think hard though, knowing your limits is probably the most important part of street racing.

How hard will the 600 title be to win this year?

There will be a few guys out there making it very difficult for me. Gareth Jones will be on fire after a solid season in Europe. Also Dennis Charlett and James Smith on Suzukis will be frontrunners. There will be five guys capable of a race win and it will all come down to consistency.

As we go to press, Sam is currently sitting in 5th spot in the 600 Sport Production class with two of five rounds left to run.

BRM



Sam and mentor Dave Cole - NZ's record-breaking classic racer