

When The Flag Drops

The Bullshit Stops (Part II)

First Lap Frenzy

Words: **Glen Williams** Pics: **fotoCD / Red Bull Photofiles / BRM**

In last month's "How To" item we looked at a road racer's build-up to heading out on track for a race, right up to the all-important moment when the green flag drops. Now in part two Glen Williams explains what to expect in that frenzied first lap...

As the saying goes "when the flag drops the bullshit stops." The first lap of a motorcycle race is often exhilarating for both the rider and spectators; it can also be the most risky whilst at the same time the most rewarding. The sheer intensity of the first lap is a true test of ones ability to remain focused as well as be able to make quick

decisive tactical decisions about where you want to position your bike on the track. A field of riders might get stretched out by as much as 300meters during the course of the first lap, so a fast and 'mistake free' first lap can make a huge difference to your on-track position and eventual race result.

The dash to turn one:

On reading part one of this article, you should have already planned out your pre-race routine and have your warm-up lap and starting technique decided. With this done and the race started hopefully you have managed

to get away from the start-line with at least an equal reaction speed to your fellow competitors (or preferably slightly better). The next challenge then is the sprint to the first corner!



This is a time to minimize errors, with the common ones being things like avoiding impromptu wheelies caused by poor gear changes, ham-fisted clutch or throttle control or a poor body position (sitting too far back). Missed gears is another error – typically caused by rushed gear changes with eager feet/toes placing pressure on gear levers and not allowing gearbox return springs/selectors to work properly. Holding the engine in one gear too long and hitting the engine's rev-limiter is another common mistake and is another obvious acceleration killer.

The drive to the first corner will require close attention to what is unfolding directly in front of you as well as in your peripheral vision - pay no attention to noises occurring behind you - they are of no concern (easy for you to say – Ed). Try to position your machine slightly to one side or the other of the bike in front and avoid staring at his rear wheel - the old saying of 'you steer to where you are looking' very much applies.

If you were lucky enough to have a grid position near to the front then your best plan for turn one might be to brake a little later than usual and 'steal the race line' from the others. This may not be an option if you start

further back in the pack as other riders will no doubt already be in the first corner before you and if you take the risk of braking extra late (especially if on an inside line) you may then run the risk of running into other rider's bikes.

Alternatively there may be a fast line available around the outside, as riders who are on the inside line often get slowed down as they become 'backed up' by getting in each others way. Much of this will depend on where you are starting from on the grid, as this will dictate the amount of competitors to each side or in front of you.

As with any maneuver early in a race, it pays to keep in mind that 'to finish first - first you must finish', so by all means consider all opportunities that present themselves but try to avoid taking yourself out of the race and others at the same time!

The shape of things to come

The shape of the first turn also has an affect on things. If the corner is a 'dead stop style' like turn one at the Wanganui Boxing Day street circuit, or a tight and narrow hairpin – then for sure the field is going to get very tightly bunched together. If on the other hand the corner is a fast entry and wide layout (like Teratonga in Invercargill), then a larger choice of entry lines will present themselves. Once again your grid position and how well you have made the dash



to the first turn will largely dictate the opportunities available to you. If for instance you end up pinned in on the inside behind a line of bikes with riders on the outside of you – then your options are pretty much limited!

"Houston we have contact..."

Personally it is my preference (and my recommendation) that you avoid any physical contact with other riders during a race - however in turn one/lap one of a race, it is just a fact of racing



that when you are trying to fit 20-30 bikes into one corner 'it happens'. Ideally this will be simply elbows or knees, or the sides of front tyres touching fairings or rear tyres of others. The trick here is not to panic and to hold your cornering line with the other rider that you are in close contact with. If either of you chose to 'bail out' or 'run wide' in the corner when contact is made, it can have unpleasant results... not only for you, but for others around you. Try to avoid direct handlebar contact as bars can easily become locked into another rider or their bike and this will quickly stifle your steering abilities. Brake levers can also get accidentally applied (or snapped off) during contact with others, just when you don't want them to be – which can make things rapidly turn to custard also. One trick is don't be afraid to stick your elbows and knees out to make surrounding riders aware of your presence.

Opportunity knocks

Very often the riders in front of you will be jostling for position and will be on non-conventional lines. The result of all this is that some riders will be running wide, some will be making contact with each other, whilst other more tentative riders might be looking for a bit of space. Any one or all of these could be happening at any given moment upon the entry into the first corner – and each of these may provide you with your opportunity to pounce and gain a position. The trick



is to predict where that gap is about to appear before it appears...

One common thing is that many riders will brake earlier or go through turn one slower than they normally would during a race. This is often simply because they don't have the confidence in the weather conditions or maybe the temperature of their tyres. They might also be uncomfortable going as fast when amongst a group or are unsure of their own or their machine's ability when not on their usual race line. Either way, the first turn of a race should be viewed as a place where the opportunity can present itself and positions can be gained or lost very quickly. After navigating turn one, then turn two

and three on most tracks will loom up smartly. These turns will yet again present more opportunities to make passing maneuvers as the field of riders is often still sorting themselves out into some sort of single line order. Thinking quickly and taking these opportunities whilst others may be gathering their thoughts and trying to get settled into their usual race mode can be very worthwhile. Opportunistic chances like these will continue to present themselves for most of the first lap, as competitors settle into their race rhythm. Just a reminder though – there is a fine line between forcing passes and taking excessive risks for yourself and your fellow competitors...



This is what not to do

Confidence

Needless to say – it takes confidence to go barreling into the first few turns of a race at a pace that matches your usual race pace. Often tyres, brake pads, and sometimes suspension settings will be new to you and these can play a part in eroding confidence and stealing a little bit of speed. That's why in certain situations (as discussed in part one of this article – see last month's issue) it pays to test these things out on the warm-up lap and get it clear in your head how much grip you have actually got. This can be particularly important in wet or patchy conditions – where visually things might 'look bad' but in reality you may have pretty good grip available. The short sprint race format which is common in New Zealand means you can't afford the time to assess grip for the first few laps - the front runners will be long gone by the time you get up to pace!

There's a lot more to road racing than simply getting a good start and putting in a hot first lap – but it is one of the key parts of a race and if not done as well as possible, it can make the remaining laps a lot more difficult. It's worth working on your technique and keeping a clear and calculating mind. It is not a time for the 'red mist' to descend, as that will usually work against you over time.

BRM

“The trick is to predict where that gap is about to appear before it appears...”

