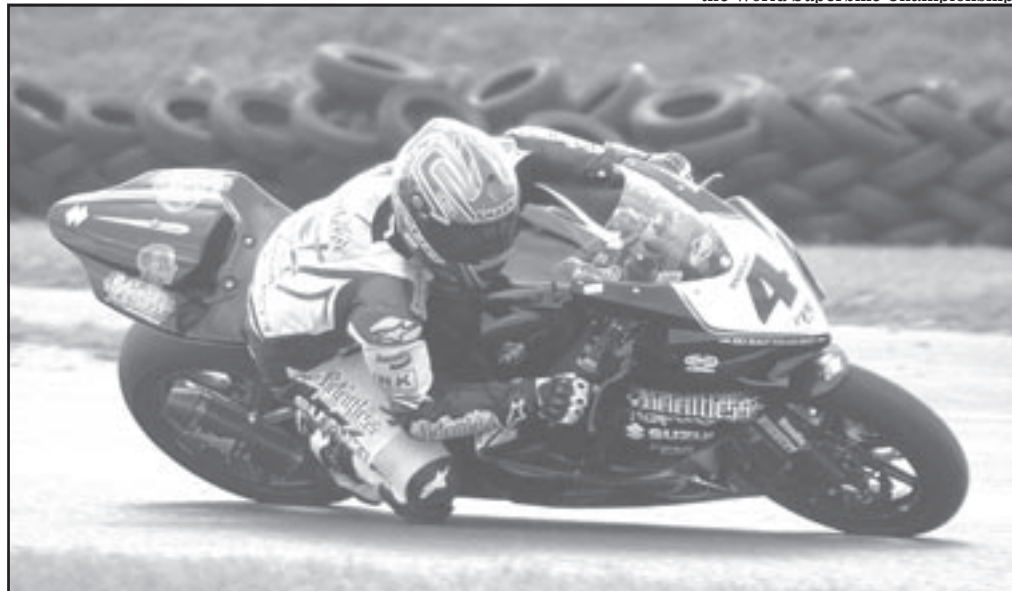


Motorcycling with John Savage

BSB GETS UNDERWAY AT BRANDS



Michael Rutter aboard the NW200 Ducati during Easter testing at Snetterton. Photo by R. P. Watkinson



Michael Laverty returns to the British Superbike Championship this weekend, astride the Relentless TAS Suzuki GSX-R1000. Photo by Gordon Williams

The Bennetts British Superbike Championship (BSB) gets underway at Brands Hatch in Kent this weekend, with Ulster interest in the various championships again high, particularly following the welcome return of Michael Laverty to the premier Superbike Championship.

Laverty returns to BSB with unfinished business, following two years in the series with Cumbrian Paul Bird's Honda team in 2005 and '06, and after he dominated and won last year's British Supersport Championship for Hector and Philip Neill's Moneymore-based Relentless TAS Suzuki team.

The 26 year old Toomebridge rider has already impressed on the Relentless TAS Suzuki GSX-R1000 during testing in Spain, and notched a hat-trick of wins at Bishopscourt on Easter Saturday.

HM Plant Honda's Leon Haslam is the popular choice to win the 12 rounds/24 races, championship, with a tough act to follow, after Japanese star Ryuichi Kiyonari scored a title winning double in 2006 and last year, when Ballyclare's Jonathan Rea was runner-up in the series — both former HM Plant Honda riders have, of course, moved up to world championship racing, with Kiyo in the World Superbike Championship

series. Haslam and team-mate Cal Crutchlow will be aboard the new Honda Fireblade CBR1000RR and, for the first time, the BSB series has a control tyre, with all teams and riders using Pirelli rubber.

Haslam, who joined Honda from Airwaves Ducati, enthused: "I'm so looking forward to this year. For me, the biggest thing is to be back with Honda, as they've been part of my family and gave me my first big break. I need to take the title this year. I should have had it for the last couple of years, but it proved a little too hard to beat the Hondas on the Ducati."

He continued: "The opposition is going well and are going to be tough to beat, but in testing we've been quickest pretty much everywhere and that's been a massive confidence booster before the start of the season. The best thing is that since testing, the bikes have been in the workshop for the last two weeks and the boys are still finding more from the bike."

He added: "I've worked with Pirelli in the past in World Superbikes and I know that set-up of the bike is going to be important, but I've got the experience now to do what it takes to win the title."

Crutchlow stepped up to BSB last year with Rizla Suzuki, after he won the British Supersport Championship the previous year, and the Coventry rider is keen to impress.

He said: "I know I need to win races this year and the HM Plant Honda squad is the dream team to do it with. When you look at their results over the last few seasons, including last year's one-two with Kiyo and Rea, they want success and nothing less."

Cal continued: "Leon will help push me hard, as he's been a title contender for the last few years. I'm looking forward to that challenge."

Crutchlow was injured during testing at Guadix in Spain, nevertheless, he is happy with how pre-season testing went, and can't wait for racing to begin: "I had a three year plan in British Supersport and won the title in my third year and I have a two year plan in British Superbike, before I win it, and this is my second year. The Bennetts British Superbike Championship is the best domestic series in the world and I want to win it before going onto the world scene."

HM Plant Honda are also targeting the British Supersport and British Superstock Championships, with Merseysider Steve Brogan launching a twin

pronged attack on a Honda CBR600RR in the former and a Honda Fireblade CBR1000RR in the latter, in which he finished runner-up to Yamaha-mounted Australian Glen Richards last season.

Neil Tuxworth, manager of UK racing for Honda, said: "2007 was the most successful domestic season we've ever had in British racing and for 2008 we're looking to meet that level, if not better it. We've won the Superbike title and we obviously want to win that again, along with the manufacturers' title. On top of that we want to win both Supersport and Superstock titles. It's a tough task, but we wouldn't be going for it if we didn't think it was achievable."

Tom Sykes was top BSB rookie last season, after his promotion to the Paul Bird Motorsport team, after he finished runner-up to Cal Crutchlow for TAS Suzuki in the 2006 British Supersport Championship, and the Huddersfield man has switched camps to partner double Japanese champion Atushi Watanabe in an all new line-up at Rizla Suzuki.

It's also all change at Airwaves Ducati, where Shane Byrne joins former British Supersport and British 125cc champion Leon Camier, while Steve Plater is the lone AIM Yamaha rider and Scott Smart and James Haydon form an experienced partnership at Hawk Kawasaki.

James Ellison returns from contesting the American Superbike series, after two years as a MotoGP privateer, to head up the Hydrex Honda team, alongside road race specialist Guy Martin, while the MSS Discovery Kawasaki equip runs former Supersport specialists Billy McConnell and Stuart Easton, and Karl Harris is the sole official Yamaha UK rider, after a number of years with Honda.

There will also be considerable interest in the North West 200 Ducati, run by North West 200 sponsors, Kennedy Group and Coventry-based JHP Ducati Racing, with factory support, and Michael Rutter at the helm.

Michael Laverty's elder brother, John, was scheduled to ride a NW200/Buildbase Ducati 1098 RS08 in Buildbase/NW200 livery in the British National Superstock Championship, but as the Ducati has failed the homologation criteria for the series, John will now race in the BSB Cup series.

Ballinderry's Ian Lowry is amongst the favourites for the Fuchs-Silkolene British Supersport Championship title, after the 21 year

old finished runner-up in last year's series to Michael Laverty.

Astride the Relentless TAS Suzuki GSX-R600, Lowry has good form under his belt already, with successful testing in Spain, followed by three wins at Bishopscourt and Kirkistown over the Easter holiday, which means he currently leads the Irish Supersport Championship.

Omagh's B. J. Toal won the Virgin Media Cup last season and has been rewarded with a ride with Rob McElna's Yamaha team in this season's British Supersport series, while Castlerock's Marty Nutt takes in the Supersport series in favour of the BSB Privateers' Cup, which he has contested for the past few years.

Other Supersport front-runners should be Isle of Man TT maestro John McGuinness, experienced Dennis Hobbs and another former BSB Privateers' Cup runner, Chris Martin, who raced in the main BSB series last term.

In the Metzeler British National Superstock Championship, Ulster interest will be on Carrickfergus man Alistair Seelye and Portadown's Marshall Neill.

The Henderson Yamaha R1 Cup replaces the Virgin Media Yamaha R6 Cup, and will feature Marty Nutt and Dubliner Jack Kennedy, who has been a Supersport campaigner for the past two seasons.

Belfast's Nikki Coates won at Mondello Park, en route to finishing equal fifth in last season's British 125cc Championship, and returns hoping for an improved overall finish this year, while Omagh schoolgirl Nicole McAleer is aiming to be the first female to stand on a British National Championship podium, already having had the distinction of being the first Irish female to score points in a British Championship tarmac event.

Nicole has been taken under the wing of former 125cc grand prix rider Steve Patrickson's SP125 Racing team, and despite a fall during testing in Spain, was happy with her continental run out. However, she was disappointed not to get more track time during the official BSB tests at Snetterton during the Easter holiday, when snow put the show off the road.

Nicole got limited testing time in arctic conditions at the Norfolk circuit on Easter Saturday, but was already on her way home by the time testing got going on Sunday, following heavy overnight snow.

Practice and qualifying begins at Brands Hatch tomorrow (Friday) and continues on Saturday, with racing taking place over the 2.3 miles grands prix circuit on Sunday.



Nicole McAleer's British 125cc Championship campaign commences at Brands Hatch this weekend — hopefully the weather will be better than during official BSB testing at Snetterton in Norfolk over the Easter weekend. Photo by R. P. Watkinson



Leon Haslam with the HM Plant Honda Fireblade CBR1000RR on which he hopes to land the British Superbike Championship crown. Photo by HM Plant Honda Racing

Letter... Carry on reporting...

Dear Editor, As someone with family members involved in the preparation and running of Easter Monday racing at Kirkistown, I was extremely angry and disappointed to read John Savage's article, 'Carry on' racing... (Chronicle, March 27).

As a regular reader of the Chronicle, I have noticed in the past that other events, such as those at Bishopscourt, get a lot more coverage from Mr Savage than B&D events run locally. Yet, when problems occur due to unforeseen circumstance, he is very quick to jump in and disparage the club.

The manner in which he described the event, as 'Carry on racing...', was an insult to riders, club members and all volunteers involved with it. Poetic licence? I don't think so, just quite frankly a cheap shot.

As a self-proclaimed supporter of the Irish Superbike Championship, would Mr Savage not be better getting behind local motorcycle racing events? These take place because of many volunteers, who do not get paid for their time and efforts all year round, but do it for the love of the sport. Without these people there would not be any racing at all.

It is very easy to sit in judgement, instead of supporting a local event in the Ards Peninsula, which I had presumed the Chronicle would have been behind. This is my right of reply to an article that I feel was entirely uncalled for. If Mr Savage was intending to be funny, he was not.

Yours etc, S. McClure, Ballyhalbert.

John replies: I won't detail how much work and countless hours I have volunteered to riders, clubs (including Belfast & District), (rider charities, and race promoters over some 30 years. I don't accept I am prejudiced against B&D events. Perhaps the writer could clarify and specify? Perhaps two pages of motorcycle coverage in the Chronicle each week is not supportive of local motorcycle sport?

"Oil" be alright this season': Jamison

Newtownards rider Kirk Jamison admits the start of this season's Irish Superbike Championship, hasn't quite gone according to plan.

However, with two new machines in his stable, having retained his faithful sponsors, and having added several other prestigious backers to his racing effort, Jamison's message is: "Oil be alright this season!" — a nod and a wink to one of his new supporters.

Having come up through the racing ranks, and following two years contesting the Irish Supersport Championship, in 2006 Kirk finished runner-up to Carrickfergus man Alistair Seelye in the Irish Superbike Championship and last year, in the closest finish to the series for years, Kirk ended up fourth, on his Suzuki GSX-R1000.

Now, for the first time, he is targeting both the Superbike and Supersport Championships, with two new machines: a Honda Fireblade CBR1000RR, for the former, and a Yamaha YZF-600R, for the latter.

Kirk explained: "After two years on a 600, followed by two years on a Superbike, I couldn't decide which class I enjoyed more. I also borrowed a 600 for the tail end of 2008 and raced both machines on a few occasions to try and come to a decision.

"To be honest I enjoy riding a 600 more, but the Superbike class is where the prestige is and I am

determined not to retire without being able to say I was Irish Superbike Champion. So, like a spoilt child being asked which toy they want, the answer was simple: 'both!'"

He added: "The only problem with that answer was obvious — I couldn't afford it. I have always been the kind of person who figures out how to pay for what you want, rather than figuring out what you can get for the money you have, so one phone call later and I had ordered two new bikes, with three months to come up with £30,000.

"After a lot of discussions towards the end of '07, my dad [Norman] decided the bikes to have in 2008 would be the new R6 Yamaha for the Supersport class and the new Honda Fireblade for the Superbike class. The question of where to buy the bikes offered endless answers — the question of 'who do we get to build them into race bikes', however, proved more difficult.

"We relied very heavily on the late John Donnan for advice, engine work, and parts. He is still greatly missed — a massive void has been left in Irish motorcycling since his accident, one which quite simply cannot be filled. Fortunately Amelia [Fowles — John's partner] has taken up the reins and we continue to acquire parts and tyres from her, which is a major help, but that didn't answer the question on the bike building.

"After a lot of phone calls and consideration, we decided we needed to head to the mainland — then the decision was simple:

Padgett's. Over the next few months Clive [Padgett] worked closely with us, building two race bikes to our requirements. Both bikes are being left standard, in that they won't be tuned, but that didn't stop the acquisition of parts being a complete disaster.

"Since both bikes are completely re-developed models from last year, parts simply didn't arrive in the UK in time for people to start racing. With 10 days to go until the start of the season, we still had no bikes. Thanks to Clive's determination, we managed to collect the bikes with a massive three days to spare! As has already been noted in previous press reports, neither bike is finished yet, and to be honest are pretty much road bikes.

"Most people who have purchased the same bikes as me left them in the garage and opted to ride their '07 machinery over Easter, such was the lack of parts. That was not an option for us. I will have a few more parts for round three of the Irish Superbike Championship [at Mondello Park on April 12/13] but my bikes will not be fully on power until at least round four, in May. But, I cannot complain — three months of stress have resulted in a list of excellent sponsors, a great club, a couple of IOUs, an overdraft, but most importantly, two new bikes."

Kirk elaborated: "These bikes are a two year project and I knew it would be difficult to stay in touch with my title rivals, whilst awaiting my race parts for the first few rounds. As expected, I struggled over Easter, with power

on the R6 and handling on the 'Blade. For Mondello, we will have the Superbike handling cured, but we will not have any additional parts to make the R6 come out of a corner. All I can do is persevere and hope I can gather enough points to stay in contention on the R6 — I will definitely be going for it on the Superbike though."

The Greyabbey-based rider's chief sponsor remains Jim Angus Contracts, together with Shane Braniff's Portaferry-based Feckin Irish Whiskey; Kirk's employers, H&J Martin; Alan Finlay's Ballywalter-based Nice Bike Paintshop; together with Sew-Biz, Rodney Brown Gardening Services, Stephen Baillie Estate Agents and Pressford Shutters.

He has also added new backers to his portfolio: Newtownards oil distributors, Hugh Ritchie & Sons (Kevin and Colin Ritchie); plus Colin Wilson and Mervyn Mackay's Crawfordsburn Road, Newtownards-based Abacus Print House; and Dundonald-based Irish Racer Magazine.

In addition to that, the Kirk Jamison Racing Supporters' Club, formed towards the end of last year, has proved extremely successful in a short space of time. Kirk confessed: "I wasn't sure how successful a club would be and I have to say I am astounded so far. I cannot thank everyone involved enough and hope they understand just how vital their contribution is."

Kirk continued: "I am happy to say that all my long term sponsors have 're-signed' for 2008 — they are all very loyal and dedicated and without them I would not be racing, it's as simple as that.

"Most of my sponsors are now well known names around the paddock, which is what we were aiming for. Everyone refers to the 'Feckin' sponsorship when I speak to them! The first question I was asked at the official Irish Superbike Championship launch was whether they were still on board. As for Jim Angus, sometimes I think he is better known than me in the racing world!

"Hopefully this trend will continue, as I welcome two Newtownards companies on board — Hugh Ritchie & Sons and Abacus Print House. Both companies have been involved in smaller capacities for a number of years, so their transition to full blown sponsors is welcome. Ritchie's sponsorship is a fantastic deal, stretching beyond 2008, and I am looking forward to our new association.

"Finally, I have acquired support from Paul Lindsay's Irish Racer Magazine. Paul is an intelligent guy, who has made his



Kirk Jamison thanks Kevin Ritchie, of Hugh Ritchie & Sons, Newtownards, after sealing a sponsorship deal. J9-3/4/08

magazine the most prestigious in the country, backed up by his annual star studded black tie awards in The Ramada Hotel. His contacts and knowledge in the racing world are proving invaluable in ensuring I have the right deals for the year ahead."

What are Jamison's targets for this year?

"To win!" he grins. "Everyone's target is the same, and whilst I am under no illusions as to how difficult it will be, I have as good a chance as anyone.

"The Superbike class will be ferocious, with defending champion Michael Pearson more focused than ever; Brian McCormack out to exorcise the demons of losing by 1.5 points in '07; and James Dickson, who came close to 'stealing' the championship last time round, a real threat.

"Declan Swanton is always up there, whilst Gerard Kingham has been steadily improving and Mar-Train's Denver Robb is also set to do a full year. Any of these guys could win, and that does not even count those BSB stars, like Marshall Neill and Alistair Seelye, who can conceivably take part in

almost every round this year, due to a lack of date clashes.

"The 600 class is a little more open, with Dickson again one of my biggest threats. Derek Shiels, Gary Jeffers and Alastair Kirk are all potential winners — we will have to wait and see."

Kirk reflected: "2007 was a bad year for me, for one reason or another, including damaging a disc in my back, ahead of round one. Thankfully, my focus is back and I am enjoying racing again. I feel a lot more relaxed on the bikes and hopefully this is a sign of good things to come."

In addition to the Irish Superbike and Supersport Championships, Jamison is again planning selected trips to race in Britain, including the opening round of the Scottish Championships at East Fortune, on April 19/20; the Ken Redfern Memorial Trophy and Laird of Croft Trophy at the Yorkshire circuit in August — he has previously won both; and the Steve Hislop Memorial Trophy meeting, another Scottish Championship round, at East Fortune in September.

Kirk went on: "It will again be a

real family affair this year. We have an excellent, close knit team, which makes racing very enjoyable. Dad again will be looking after the bikes, along with everything on race weekend, including helping with the bikes — his job description would be a long one. My mum will also be involved — whilst everyone else looks after the bikes, I need someone to look after me!"

He said: "It is hard to give everyone the full credit they deserve, but I would like to mention Alan Finlay. He has already been indirectly mentioned through his company, Nice Bike Paintshop, and as one of the main guys behind the Supporters' Club, but that does no justice to how involved he is with my racing, and the effort he has put in."

Kirk concluded: "With the added incentive of a presentation at the Irish Racer awards up for grabs, thanks to the ISB series acquiring sponsorship from Irish Racer Magazine, it is going to be an exciting year, and one I am really looking forward to.

"I have spent the last four months talking about the championship, getting involved with trying to improve the promotion and efficiency of the series, amongst other things, so finally getting the chance to get off my soapbox and onto a bike has been great!"

Kirk Jamison Racing Supporters' Club

The Kirk Jamison Racing Supporters' Club is holding a disco in Conliff Orange Hall on Saturday evening, April 5, from 8pm.

The Club, which is based in Greyabbey's Wildfowler Inn, will also be staging a novelty 'Camel Race' at the same venue on Saturday, May 31.

Kirk's next outing will be in the third round of the Irish Superbike Championship, in association with Irish Racer Magazine, at Mondello Park in Co Kildare on Saturday/Sunday, April 12/13, which also incorporates the opening round of the new big money Mondello Masters series.