

Motorcycling with John Savage

'D Day' for Kirk

For Ardsman Kirk Jamison, it's 'D Day' at Bishopscourt on Saturday, when the Downpatrick circuit hosts the final round of the Irish Superbike Championship, the prestigious International Sunflower Trophy meeting.

The 31 year old Greyabbey based rider has already pocketed the Irish Superstock, Ulster Superbike and Mondello Masters titles, but his sights are firmly set on the crown he most covets - the Irish Superbike Championship - to complete a clean sweep of all four domestic superbike titles.

With the final two ISB races to be played out at Bishopscourt, the title is Jamison's to lose, as he enjoys a healthy 36 points advantage over Matthew Percy from Randalstown, but Kirk is all too aware there is many 'a slip between cup and lip'.

The opposition will be the toughest of the season, with a number of British Championship regulars making the trip to the Ulster short circuit showpiece of the year, but Jamison knows he has to concentrate on landing the big prize.

Fresh from winning the British Supersport Championship for the Moneymore based Relentless TAS Suzuki team, Carrickfergus man Alastair Seeley will be favourite to win the ISB races and the Sunflower Trophy, astride the Relentless TAS Suzuki GSX-R1000, which Ards based Australian Josh Brookes took to fifth position in the British Superbike Championship.

Jamison and Seeley have 'previous', but Kirk knows he will have to put 'history' behind him in his quest for the ISB title.

He recalled: "I first started on the big bikes in 2006 and have never been outside the top six in the championship. The closest I have come to winning it was when I was pipped by Alastair in 2006, so I know how it feels to lose out at the final round of the year.

"Things are a bit different this time around. In 2006 I managed to crash twice at the penultimate round, meaning I went to the Sunflower with a deficit of over 30 points, a sore

head and a dislocated shoulder. This time I am fully fit, on a high after winning three titles already and have a 36 points advantage."

Despite his already successful season, Jamison, commercial manager with Belfast based H&J Martin Ltd, makes no bones about the fact that the Irish Superbike Championship is his 'holy grail'.

He explained: "I've got my name on a few things over the



Kirk Jamison aims to wrap up the ISB title at Bishopscourt.

years. "I won the Nantwich and Cheshire Superbike and Supersport Championships in 2005 and 2006; I was Laird of Croft in 2007 and scored two Ken Redfern Trophy wins in 2006 and 2008; I won the John Wallace Memorial Trophy in 2006; was part of the Irish 2005 Celtic Match Race winning Irish team; and proudly captained Northern Ireland to their 2009 Six Nations Match Race victory.

"I have finished in the top six of Irish or Ulster Championships 15 times before this year, despite never winning one; hold a number of lap records and have amassed 252 top sixes, 141 podiums and 67 wins out of 317 races, since I started keeping a tally in 2004.

"But," he pointedly adds,

"the one I really want is the Irish Superbike title."

After clinching the Mondello Masters title astride his Jim Angus Contracts BMW S1000RR several weeks ago at Mondello Park in Co Kildare, Jamison is looking forward to this weekend's showdown.

He grinned: "It's the big finale! Fingers crossed, we can bring it home and round off a perfect year.

"Out of eight races at Bishopscourt this year, I have won four and finished second three times. The only time I was outside the top two is when I high-sided at Easter, ran off the track and rejoined to finish seventh. I couldn't have asked for a better place to have my ISB title decider."

Kirk continued: "I love the Sunflower meeting. I always seem to raise my game and claim a few BSB scalps. Last year, on the Mar-Train Supersport bike, I dived with World Supersport riders Sam Lowes and James Ellison, as well as this year's British Supersport Championship runner-up Ben Wilson, and I beat the likes of James Westmoreland and Billy McConnell.

"There are not as many big names this year, so it would be nice to say 'disengage brain and have a bash at a podium', but I have a more important job to do. Anything can happen in racing, so I will be riding with my head to ensure I am the 2011 ISB champion. Ideally a solid result in race one would secure that and allow me to enjoy myself in the last two races, but we'll take it as it comes."

Jamison smiled: "Fingers crossed, I can finish the job off and give my team, supporters and sponsors a year to remember."

Timed practice gets underway at Bishopscourt tomorrow (Friday) at 9am, with warm up on Saturday from 9am and racing due to get underway at around 10.30am.

Lavery signs for Aprilia

Following Yamaha's withdrawal of factory support from next year's World Superbike Championship, Toomebridge man Eugene Lavery has confirmed a deal with Aprilia to contest the WSBK series for the next two seasons.

Eugene tested one of this year's exotic Aprilia RSV4 superbikes at Portimao on Tuesday, but it has not yet been confirmed whether he will join last year's WSBK kingpin, Italian Max Biaggi, in the official Alitalia Aprilia factory team next term, or whether he will compete aboard a factory specification machine in the satellite PATA Aprilia equipe, which was fronted by Japanese ace Noriyuki Haga this year.

Lavery opted to sign for Aprilia, after he turned down an offer to ride for the BMW Motorrad Italia team, which ran former double WSBK champion James Toseland and Italian Ayrton Badovini in this year's championship, until Sheffield man Toseland was forced to retire from the sport due to injury.

Englishman Leon Camier, who has partnered Biaggi in the Alitalia Aprilia team for the past two years, after he won the British Superbike Championship in 2009, has not been retained by the official factory team, but could join Lavery in a satellite team, as Haga's future remains unclear.

Camier, who scored three podium finishes last year and a further four this season, en route to seventh in the overall standings, admits he hasn't shown his full potential.

After leaving the Alitalia Aprilia garage for the last time at Portimao on Sunday, the Dorset rider said: "Unfortunately we weren't able to demonstrate our true potential this year. I'd like to thank everybody anyway - my team for their constant support and Aprilia Racing for giving me the opportunity to race in World Superbike."

Lavery is the first Ulster rider to ride for Aprilia, since Ballyclare's Jeremy McWilliams rode for the Italian factory in both the 500cc and 250cc World Championship Grands Prix titles.

Former quadruple 250cc world champion Biaggi gave Aprilia its first WSBK title last year, but this year surrendered the crown to Aprilia's great Italian rival, Ducati, when Spaniard Carlos Checa dominated the series.

Lavery's Yamaha team-mate this year, former 250cc world champion Marco Melandri, will join Derbyshire's Leon Haslam in the factory BMW Motorrad Motorsport team next season, following the retirement from racing of double WSBK champion, Australian Troy Corser, who played a major role in developing the BMW S1000RR and raced in WSBK for 16 seasons, while Badovini has also been retained by BMW.

Having already confirmed he will stay with the factory Castrol Honda team next year, Ballyclare's Jonathan Rea will be joined in the Dutch based team by 29 year old Hiroshi Aoyama, who will replace Spaniard Ruben Xaus, who has been plagued by a combination of injury and disappointing results this year, and for whom Australian Karl Muggeridge deputised last weekend at Portimao.

Additionally, Rea will have a new crew chief next year, when he will renew his relationship with Kris Pike, who was Shane Byrne's right hand man in this season's HM Plant Honda British Superbike Championship team.

Aoyama, who won the last ever 250cc World Championship in 2009 and scored a total of nine wins and 18 podium finishes following his debut in the series in 2004, has ridden on Honda machinery for most of his career, which began racing pocket bikes in his native Japan at the age of five.



Hiroshi Aoyama joins Jonathan Rea in the Castrol Honda team next season.

For the past two years he has competed in the blue riband MotoGP Championship with former 125cc world champion Fausto Gresini's San Carlo Honda team.

Aoyama said: "I have raced in MotoGP for the last couple of years and it has really been a great experience for me. Now I have the opportunity to go to World Superbike with Honda and Ten Kate Racing and I'm very excited about this new challenge.

"I don't know very much about Superbike, but I really hope to make a good job together with my new team."

Castrol Honda team manager, Ronald ten Kate, enthused: "We are all thrilled about Hiroshi Aoyama joining us for what promised

to be a really exciting 2012 World Superbike Championship.

"He's coming to SBK at still quite a young age and the speed he has shown in the last couple of years in MotoGP is beyond question."

It is no secret that Rea has been pushing Honda to secure him a competitive team-mate and Carlo Fiorani, Superbike Racing Manager of Honda Motor Europe, added: "Honda Motor Europe has been looking for a dynamic and fast partner for Jonathan Rea and we are convinced that this combination is the best way to take us forward as we develop the new CBR1000RR Fireblade for 2012."

Rea tested the new Honda Fireblade at Portimao on Tuesday.

Speculation surrounding the future of new champion Carlos Checa was ended at Portimao, when agreement for him to continue with Althea Ducati was reached on Sunday afternoon.

Ducati took the coveted WSBK manufacturers' title, and Checa, who celebrated his 39th birthday last Saturday, admitted: "Before race one it looked like there was no way that I could stay with Althea Racing in 2012 and I was very upset about this, but now it seems that Althea Racing and Ducati have come to an agreement and I am over the moon to hear that I can stay with my team and with my bike again next year.

"We have build something special here and to leave would have been heartbreaking."

He beamed: "In the space of two days I have lost and thankfully regained my team."

Genesio Bevilacqua, General Manager of Althea Racing, was thrilled: "We remained hopeful, but it was a complicated issue, especially on an economic level.

"In the end we were able to convince everyone to find an agreement that would keep the team together and this was, of course, the greatest news for me.

"Carlos stated a while ago that he wanted to stay with us and we, of course, wanted the same outcome, so this positive agreement has been reached with Ducati and he'll be with us again next year - faster than before!"

Ducati Project Director, Ernesto Marinelli, added: "I am extremely happy that this agreement, which we never stopped working towards, has led to the confirmation of Carlos in the Althea team for 2012. Ducati has had to make a big effort in order for this to happen - a sign of the affection we have for Carlos."

There will be further British and Ducati interest in next year's World Superbike Championship, as Welshman Chaz Davies, this year's World Supersport champion, will race a ParkinGo Ducati in WSBK next season.



Kirk Jamison splashes through the puddles to clinch the Mondello Masters title last month.

Derek Clegg