

Put your wheels where your mouth is

There was only one thing I was really dreading. Rain. Any kind of rain. Especially the Brands Hatch Special Brew—a half-hearted drizzle (or over-burdened mist, if you prefer) that doesn't actually fall but doesn't actually lift either, and coats track surface, visors and the inside of your clothing with dank droplets.

I suppose it had to be. Racing in South Africa (where I dabbled irregularly) has problems all of its own. Engines—even tyres—overheating, melting tar, heat haze, dust . . . that sort of thing. It was only fitting that my debut on British tracks should be in exactly the opposite, and typically British, conditions.

Were you at the ACU Clubman's Championship meeting at Brands on 30 September? I was the one wearing a novice jacket. Which one, you ask? Not the one who fell off.

The occasion was an end-of-season gallop aboard our sponsored bike for the year, the Hastings Motorcycles Dresda Honda 880 which started the season with the intention of sweeping the Formula One teams to their knees on a budget about one-twenty-fifth the size of the rest. Ambitious, eh? Alas, too ambitious. Low budget bikes just didn't cut it once people like Sports Motorcycles and Mocheck started rolling out their cheque books (as the Honda GB team discovered to their dismay).

Team Manager Charlie Horton, wrench Joe O'Hara and riders Roger Winfield and Dave Camier are in racing purely for fun, and getting F-One entries turned down at heavily over-subscribed meetings wasn't much fun at all. So they made a mid-season switch to international endurance racing instead. Where they had lots and lots of fun, and achieved respectable results, considering the calibre of the competition.

The machine is the usual racing hybrid. A Dresda frame embodies the top chassis technology of the time. The time it was built, that is, 1974, not today. It's a basic cradle frame with conventional rear suspension via a Piper square-section swinging arm and Girling gas shockers. A good frame; but not quite a match for the Pecketts and McNabs of this world.

Engine comes from various sources. Crankcases are Honda 750 F-Two, with the alternator stripped out for cornering clearance (it runs on a total-loss battery system, of which more later). The barrels have been resleeved and bored out to 888cc to make room for a few more horses, and fitted with high-comp pistons. The kit used is American, made by MTC. The head is F-Two, with the biggest valves Honda have ever fitted as standard. Gas flowed, of course, by Weslakes. Cams are Yoshimura full race, carburation is Honda F-Two (Keihin pumps), and the exhaust is a modified Dresda four-into-one.

The final touch is Lucas Rita electronic ignition, which lets the Honda rev freely to more than 10 000rpm. Or should do.

So the scene is set. The Honda is resplendent in red, white and blue. Charlie Horton is resplendent in a red anorak as he blips the throttle to warm it up. I am certainly the most resplendent of all, in black boots, billious green-and-yellow leathers, and a sick orange novice jacket, indicating that I am riding for the first time on a British licence. And practice is about to begin.

The big Honda thoroughly warm, I join a small throng of 500cc to 1000cc bikes in the pit lane. I'm part of a pack of highly varied machinery, ranging from a near-standard Trident, a Suzi GS1000, a Kawa Z900 and several Nortons to TZ Yamahas, four-cylinder full-scale racing bikes. Blimey, I thought. Hope there aren't any TZs in my race. There were.

Then it starts to rain again.

Frankly, the first couple of laps were a teensy bit embarrassing, for I had decided to approach wet racing without my usual impetuous folly and to gather speed slowly, and other bikes were whizzing past constantly,

Heroic Exploits and a Good Excuse as Mike Scott goes through the motions at Brands

Never mind, thought I, in ten laps I'll be with you. Ten laps? Hell: after three laps practice is over! What a joke.

Charlie Horton introduces me to the first racers' dodge. "Just go back out again, and say you've changed a tyre. Then you'll get another session." This time round, I managed to squeeze four laps into the allotted time. Must be going fast.

At least I had achieved a measure of confidence, so when we drew up to the starting line for my heat—first race of the meeting—I was barely nervous. According to the programme, I had to avoid coming in the last three to make the final. In fact, there were eleven and not 17 bikes on the grid, so I only had to finish.

Racers' dodge number two. A push-start is compulsory, but Charlie Horton has refitted the Honda's starter motor. "Just take a couple of steps to show willing, then press the starter and you'll get away near the front."

The flag dropped, patter patter of tiny feet, then I pressed the button. "Queequeequee-quee," it went, and the motor would have fired had I not become embarrassed at the flagrancy of it all. I decided to wait another second or two. Foolishly, for it allowed most of the rest to get away ahead. There's no room for embarrassment in racing. I went off about ninth.

Perhaps it was as well. I rounded the first bend with a pack of bikes ahead of me. Only one of them didn't have a rider. It was sliding and spinning on its side, the rider thrashing his limbs as he slid along the tar behind. Scary, that human frailty amid the heavyweight iron. But he slid safely off the track, and we saw no more of him.

Don't even ask how many people passed me on that first lap, nor how many I passed, but I was in around sixth place and very soon riding completely alone. Every so often on the straight, I'd catch a glimpse of some bikes ahead: when I found time to glance behind, the track was invariably empty.

Then I lapped someone on an old banger, his baggy blue wet suit flapping inelegantly. The sweet taste of success, at least I'm not coming last.

It was round about lap five that I noticed a curious phenomenon. I was beginning to see the riders ahead more and more frequently, and each time they were closer. Quite suddenly, at the entrance to Clearways, I was on the tail of a group of two. Hindmost, I recognised the asymmetric tail pipes of a TZ, and the zappy two-stroke power was quite patently making the twitchy bike something of a handful in the wet, while the smooth flow of my Honda was far easier to manage. And it showed, because I was leaving corners faster than Phil Hobbs on the Yamaha.

Next time through Clearways, both I and the Yamaha took the bike ahead. Then on the exit I started to exploit my smoother power. The Yamaha took a wide exit line, I hung on accelerating inside him, and the bikes sang on to the straight almost side by side.

Then he was gone. The Honda was quick, but nothing like a full-race two-stroke. The Yam disposed of its gears in short order.

On the last lap, I fancied I even had a wheel ahead. But it sure wasn't that way when we

crossed the line. He secured fourth place, I got fifth.

My fifth place secured me second row of the grid for the final. Great stuff. Mind you, if I'd come last, I'd still have qualified. But that's not the point, man.

The rain had stopped by the time the final came round. And started again and stopped.

This time round, I'd resolved that no amount of embarrassment would prevent me from using the starter motor on the line. Had to get some edge on the two-strokes. The flat battery prevented me instead. The flag dropped, people started running, and I pressed the button to be greeted with . . . nothing. A bad omen, I thought, as I bump-started and set off once more well down the pack of 18.

Bad omen was correct. We'd changed the battery before the race, but the replacement was a touch dud. Pressing the starter button had without doubt been the coup de grace for the tired plates.

The first sign of a dull race came on the pull up to Druids. The bike just wouldn't rev, popping instead on to three cylinders, then chiming back briefly, then just going flat. In my optimism, as more and more people accelerated past me, I suspected a fouled plug that would soon clear. It was not to be.

Instead, the Honda just carried on getting worse. I plodded on, in eighth place, seeming to be forever changing up in search of power when instead the Honda should have been soaring up its considerable rev range.

Not that the race was devoid of excitement.

The dodgiest part of the circuit was the brief but surprisingly difficult left-hand kink entering Clearways. There, the breadth of the dry strip of tar was shrunken hideously to little more than the width of a wheel-track. Miss the line there, and you are suddenly travelling at nearly dry speeds on a wet surface. I only did it once really badly, when I'd been put off line lapping a back-marker. The front broke away suddenly and completely. I don't know why I didn't fall, but I'd like to thank Mr Dunlop, for his tyres are excellent.

One other incident. Some guy on a Yamaha TZ came storming past me under braking for Paddock. I thought I was being lapped, but it was a slow starter making for the front. Up the hill to Druids I followed, losing ground all the way. Then when he braked for the hairpin, his front wheel twitched badly. He seemed to recover, then he was down. Again, I steered round the inside of the flailing, sparking mass of machine and rider, thankful it was him and not me.

By the end of the race, the battery was so drained that I began to doubt whether I'd make the rise up to Druids at all. I did, though, to retain my eighth place. First (and last) novice jacket home.

Small beer indeed. But so exciting that I found my enthusiasm for racing—which I thought to be completely jaded—was fiercely rekindled. I can hardly wait to do it again. Anyone want to lend me a nice fast bike?

Winner of the first heat was Nigel Hunt at 60.21mph (my speed was 58.17mph). He also took the final, with Phil Hobbs (who had headed me home in the heat) second. There was an astonishing variety of machinery on the track: showing what happens to old racing bikes. They don't die, they end up in club racing. When it was raining in my heat, two Nortons had split the TZ Yamahas by coming second and third, showing the advantage of light weight, precise handling and smooth torque power in bad conditions. In the drier final, the TZs came first and second, so it is obvious what you need to buy to win.

Winning isn't what it's all about at that level, though, save for some of the young and hungry riders. It's simply fun, and a chance to ride flat out without being either arrested or knocked off by an Allegro.

