Play by the

Too many bike races are just not interesting, says Mike Norman, who looks at how things should be changed for the better. And fast!

As a race enthusiast, I am always up for a good race. But, what exactly defines a good race? If you're the manufacturer, or the team owner, leaving the competition in the distance could represent a good race, showing the extreme dominance of your product. If you're the rider, a good race may be when you've led from pole to checkered-flag with minimum resistance, showing your extreme talent as a racer. However, when you are a spectator, a good race is one where you can't predict the outcome of the race until the very end. A good race has you holding your breath when three bikes enter a turn side-by-side, tensing your entire body as someone is about to make a tricky pass, holding your hands over your mouth or shouting out in excitement as he makes that incredible pass. A really good race will have you completely captured from the green lights to the finish-line. An amazing race will have you trying to catch your breath for a long while after the race is over, and talking about it for days to come.

Unfortunately, we don't always get a good race, as defined above. For example, I've found some of this year's MotoGP races to be

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downright boring. It gets tiring seeing the same rider, or couple of riders run away, while the rest of the pack dwindles off in the background without challenge. You can count the potential race winners on one hand and if you were a gambler, you might win a good number of bets just by picking one rider the entire season. In the U.S. there has been another perfect example of this 'racing' for the last several years when Matt Mladin and Ben Spies were dominating the AMA Superbike series and their only challenge was each-other! Although it was very exciting to see them push each-other, it was hard to stay interested in watching every race. I found myself fast-forwarding my recorded races (I didn't even bother watching live) and watching for the exciting moments, usually walking away unimpressed.

In contrast, recent World Superbike has witnessed some of the most fun racing I have ever watched. Each and every race has seen the unpredictable happen and you have to keep your eyes open and your attention focused to see every exciting moment. Many times this year I thought I knew what was going to happen, only to be completely shocked in a blink of an eye. Ironically, that same guy, Ben Spies, who was in the somewhat boring AMA racing, has been at the forefront of most of these exciting World Superbike races this year. But not just Ben Spies, it has been a whole slew of other riders that have been in the mix as well. That's what makes the racing interesting. The reality is; Spies and Mladin were in a class of their own in the U.S., but are on-par with the rest of the top racers in the World Superbike arena. Is it just the talent of the riders that makes a great race?

Bigger is not always better

Considered as the top level of motorcycle racing, MotoGP has some of the most talented riders in the world but, sometimes, the racing does not meet the same standards. The 125cc and 250cc support classes have mostly up-and-comers trying to earn rights to compete in the premier MotoGP class one day. In contrast to MotoGP, the duels on smaller capacity bikes have provided some of the closest, hardest-fought racing out there. You can see where the current Champions get their fight. FIM support classes such as World Supersport and Superstock, as well as the U.S. support classes also have some very close, competitive racing with great edge-of-your seat action. As these riders are still learning, their talent is not fully developed, so I am not convinced that it is purely talent that makes a good race. In fact, I believe that, in some races, someone with much greater talent than the rest can make for a dull race.

So, is it the types of bikes used that makes good racing? What about the class specifications? Do those specifications make the races more exciting? Depending on who you asked, you would get a wide variety of answers. So, nobody is really clear on what makes good racing are they? There have been a number of rule changes in practically every racing class across the world in order to try and provide better racing to all. In many cases, these rule changes have been controversial and in some cases they have been counter-productive. There should be no argument that rules are necessary to help level the competition, for example: a 125cc two-stroke would have no chance at winning a MotoGP race against the 800cc four-strokes, so clearly there needs to be rules that match the performance of each vehicle. But, how far do the rule makers need to go to keep things level?

In the U.S., the AMA (American Motorcycle Association) recently sold the rights and management of the AMA Pro Racing to the DMG (Daytona Motors Group). The hope was that the DMG could resurrect the series' spectatorship and profitability to match that of the NASCAR racing series they had been so successful with. With this, they also wanted to create exciting racing again and bring the rest of the pack up to the front, intending to end what was the "Spies & Mladin Show" of prior years. Unfortunately, the DMG's idea of what motorcycle roadracing should be like didn't meet with either the manufacturers' or competitors' viewpoint. So much was this dislike for the new rules propositions that most of the manufacturers threatened to pull their race teams if the rules weren't altered. The debates took so long that most teams didn't know if they were racing until literally weeks before the season began. Most manufacturers dropped their involvement either completely, or by

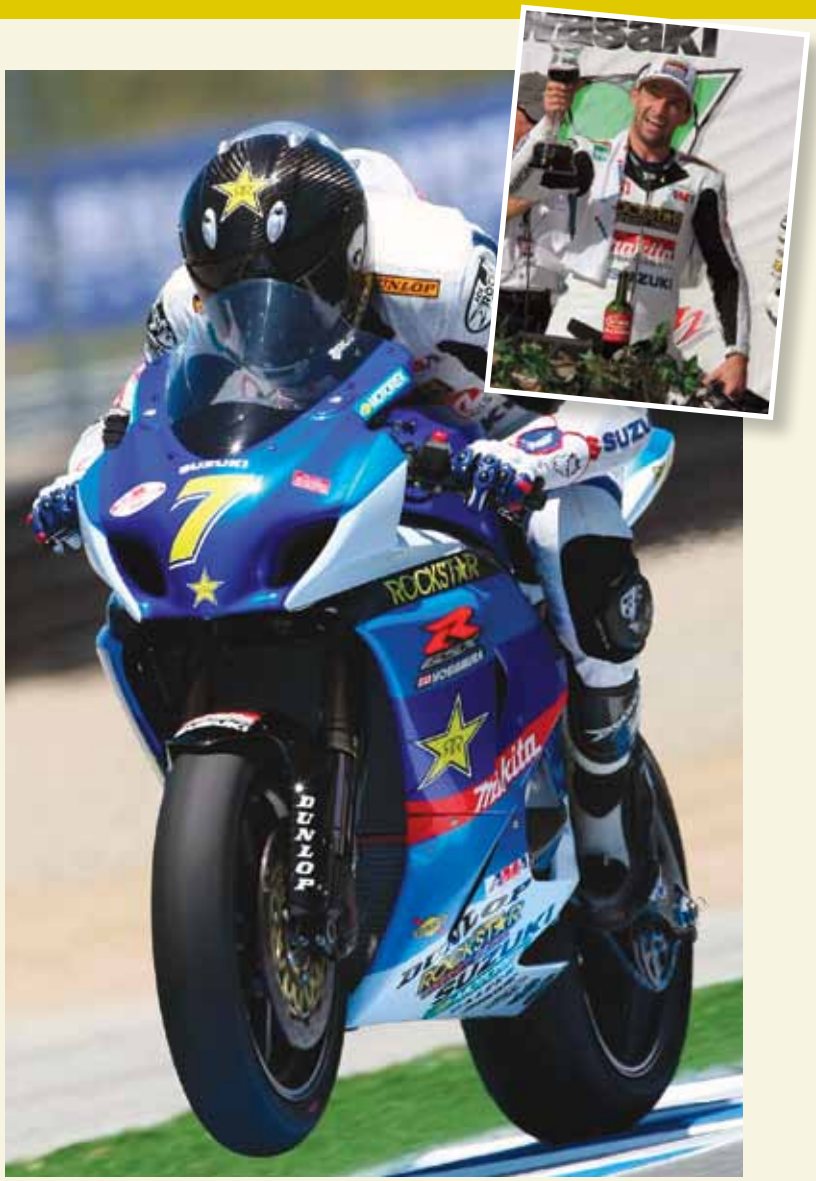
significant reductions. I was at one manufacturer's race headquarters at the end of December where the team had all the chassis lined up, waiting to hear what engines or chassis components they could install, and were standing around cleaning the barbeque and race trailers since there was nothing else to do. This team was one of many that eventually withdrew from direct factory involvement because of the delays and controversy.

Taking new directions

Once the racing got underway in the U.S., some riders continued to voice their disappointment to the degree of being fined or even disqualified. Many of the die-hard race fans stopped following the series because they could no longer follow the classes with their restructured names and rules. Those who used to watch the racing live on TV had to wait weeks for the only broadcast of the races, which were often poorly covered. By the time the race was televised, the results and discussions of the races had already been long posted on the internet and even out in some printed publications as well. In my opinion, the new approach was a failure to attract more of a following and try to bring racing to the forefront of the American sports-enthusiasts. Ironically, the level of racing has been touted as some of the best racing the U.S. has seen in years. But why did such a successful racing enterprise fail to give a boost to the attraction of motorcycle roadracing?

Let's take a look at World Superbike. Several years back, World Superbike was dubbed "The Ducati Cup", because if you wanted to win at World Superbike, you had to be on a Ducati. In fact, Ducati has won the World Superbike Championship 15 of the last 21 years with a clean sweep from 1998 to 2004, then 2006 and 2008. Many of the other manufacturers complained about the prowess of the Italian V-Twins and several of them reduced their involvement or pulled out altogether. In an effort to regain manufacturer involvement, the powers-that-be began examining the rules to see what they could do to even the playing field. In 2003, they increased the maximum displacement for inline-four motorcycles from 750cc to 1000cc. Initially, it was thought the new larger multi-cylinder bikes were going to dominate the class, but Ducati still prevailed. Then, in 2004, the FIM announced even more rule changes, the most significant being the "spec tyres". This decision again caused major controversy with the manufacturers to which all but Ducati again pulled their direct factory involvement in the series. So that plan didn't seem to work either.

Some of the manufacturers returned in 2005 and Suzuki finally broke Ducati's reign and won the World Superbike Championship with Troy Corser aboard. In response, Ducati brought Troy Bayliss back from MotoGP to contend in the 2006 World Superbike Championship. The battles between current World Superbike contenders Corser, Haga and Toseland with the return of Bayliss became the heated, nail-biter racing that constitutes "good racing" once again. With this, the Superbike World Championship seemed to be back as one of the premier spectator sports in the world. By 2007, every major manufacturer returned to the World Superbike series with a factory effort. Another former MotoGP rider, Max Biaggi had returned to World Superbike as well, this time riding



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for Suzuki. With some of the top riders in the world, and full factory involvement, World Superbike now had good racing that drew the crowds and had everyone talking again.

Meanwhile in MotoGP, the racing was definitely interesting. Technology was driving the new 990cc four-strokes faster and faster. Looking back to when the two-strokes were still racing, they were being criticized for how hard to ride they were. It was said that "only a Super-Human" could truly ride one of these machines to its full potential. Now, the 990cc four-stroke machines were reaching speeds of over 210mph (340km/h) and even with their smoother power deliveries they were still considered monsters to ride. We were back to needing to be "Super-Human" to ride these bikes to their full potential. Even then, the speeds and power output were overcoming the current tyre technology which was also a concern for rider safety. So, again, in 2007 the rules were changed reducing the engine capacity to 800cc in hopes to slow things down.

Aim for the top

MotoGP, as a prototype-based class, is the pinnacle driver for advancements in technology and performance that

eventually trickles down to the production bikes we see sometime later. With prototype R&D and racing come huge expenses. With the economy noticeably suffering, the smaller, less well-funded teams are having troubles keeping up with the more financially-stable outfits. The field was starting to spread out and the racing seeming unexciting at times. There were clearly dominant teams, and struggling teams and the grid size was dropping. Something needed to be done to help level the playing field and retain all the players possible.

One big expense for a race team is tyres. The top teams were using more tyres to test with, practice with, qualify with and race with than the smaller teams. In many cases the top teams could have similar budgets, but maybe received more contribution from the tyre manufacturers because of the R&D partnership gained running at the front. To try and help level the costs MotoGP instigated a new rule for 2007 limiting the number of tyres a team could use per season. This new rule actually hurt Dunlop and Michelin greatly, and Bridgestone prevailed as the dominant tyre manufacturer that year. By 2008, Dunlop was no longer involved in MotoGP and by the end of 2008 many of the top teams had switched from Michelin to Bridgestone. By the start of the 2009 season, MotoGP (like World Superbike a few years before) have switched to a "spec-tyre" rule that has now eliminated Michelin all together. In addition to the brand and compound of tyres allowed, there are new limits to how many tyres a team can use per event and per season. This was done in an attempt to level the playing field in performance and also in costs.

The still-declining economy delivered its first big shock to Formula-One automobile race fans when Honda withdrew its involvement at the end of last season. A similar shock to the motorcycle community took its toll when Kawasaki announced its withdrawal from MotoGP for the 2009 season. This was a huge blow to MotoGP and it called for urgent actions to take place. In an effort to try and convince Kawasaki to stay in the game, the sanctioning bodies and the manufacturers all collaborated to devise as many cost-reducing strategies as possible. Although not everyone agreed with the path, they all agreed that costs needed to be cut. For Kawasaki, it was still too late.

On the right track?

One rule recently introduced to cut costs in MotoGP was to restrict the maximum number of engines a team could use to 5 engines for the remaining 7 rounds, beginning with the 11th round of the 2009 Championship at Brno. In implementing this rule, there was much discussion that the racing would be toned down, and the riders conserving their engines as much as possible. Riders such as Valentino Rossi speculated this would reduce the output of the engines and slow things down some. However, racers are racers, and when the fight is on, they only know one thing – "race as hard as possible". That was evident as the Brno race was actually, by my earlier definition, a good race. Rossi and Lorenzo were battling as hard as ever for the lead, with each rider taking turns to break the lap record over and over during the course of the race – until Lorenzo pitched it, that is. By reducing the number of engines used for the remainder of the season, this rule definitely fixes costs, and as evident by the level of racing in its inaugural race, it won't seem to affect the spectators.

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What's really going on?

With all of these rule changes it's sometimes hard to tell what exactly is going on in motorbike racing. In many cases, I find myself asking, "What were they thinking"? Sometimes the new rules don't make sense at first; sometimes they backfire and sometimes they work. How do you predict the outcome of a rule-change without trying it? But, a more prominent question is, why change the rules at all? As I have said before, racing drives R&D and advancement in technology. Some things advance more than others. Some people (or companies) have advantages that others may not. So, the rules are there to keep things in balance. They are intended to help the underdogs keep up with the heroes. They can be used to maintain levels of safety. They can also be used to help direct the path of technology advancements (such as KERS in Formula-One, or battery development in TTXGP). Rules are there to try and maintain "good racing" by keeping the machinery more equal. Because of this, rules must change with each advance in technology to maintain the balance. In many of the cases I described above, although met with great resistance initially, the changes did bring about a more level field.

But here's the real reason: If the racing is good, it means there is a good "show", and a show is what the audience wants. With a good show, comes a bigger attraction. With a bigger attraction comes a growth in the industry. By this, I mean the full-circle of people involved. This includes the motorcycle manufacturers, the tyre manufacturers, the fuel companies, the oil companies, the sponsors for the race teams (even non-motorcycle companies) and trackside sales of food and memorabilia. Let's not forget the towns surrounding each race. They also get an infusion of tourist income for things like hotels, restaurants, gas stations and other necessities. All this helps restore the economy and bring back balance. So, as far as I am concerned, we all need a good race, so bring on the show.