

EVERYTHING IS BIGGER IN TEXAS

{Words: Stephen English} Images: Stephen English

Interview



2012 was the last time that you were fully fit and racing, how much do you miss it?

I miss it a lot, it's a big change in lifestyle for me because I've been racing since I was eight and basically on a professional schedule since I was 13. So it's hard not being there because you have a lot of friends that become like a family. Also in the same way at the end of 2012 I had a really bad injury in Malaysia and I tried to come back in '13 and it never worked and then I got hurt again. I was never able to get my right shoulder fit again.

How bad is your shoulder now? From a normal day to day level does it affect you?

It depends, if I'm swinging a golf club or throwing a baseball it's not OK, but lifting normal things it's OK. But it still bugs me and even last week I woke up and my shoulder was out of my socket so it's not good!

I was always the type that people said was quiet or an introvert, and that's true, but it was because I was so focused on doing what I needed to do. Basically anything that I needed to control, whether it was training, diet or my motorcycle, to make my racing better I did. That's a lot of things to control and I did them as best as I could and now no matter how much I rehab or how hard I try my shoulder will never be healthy enough to race again. Is it healthy enough to ride around? Possibly but to ride at that level, no it isn't and all I can see is more injuries coming as a result. If I can't operate at what mentally I know is 100% than I'm not a guy that is going to be

just out there to fill in the numbers. The way my shoulder is now is that it's nowhere close to racing and if I hit the ground again it's going to be a full shoulder replacement. So it's just not worth it, the doctor told me that I can't do it and that it's just not safe to be out there.

I had a lot of good luck when I was racing but the last season and a half it was bad. When I look at my whole career though I was pretty fortunate with not too many injuries and I was able to do a lot of good things. I basically came to Europe a little too late to be able to do more things but I can look back and not be upset with anything. I definitely miss it but knowing for sure that there's nothing that I can do to come back and be better. I'm not upset about it and I still love watching it on TV and I'm still involved in it. But knowing that I can't be there because it's out of my control makes it easier for me.

You said that you should have gone to Europe earlier, was that after your first AMA Superbike title?

I was probably ready to go at the end of 2006 and definitely at the end of 2007. I went to WSBK and really enjoyed it, it was really fun, and then I went to MotoGP. I went to Europe after AMA but I never really had ambitions of going to Europe, I was just racing in America. But after I won AMA three times everyone said that I needed to go to Europe, so I went to Europe and I was able to win in 2009. After that I was on the fence of going to GP or not. Everyone else was like you need to go to GP's so I went and did GP's. I can say that I never clicked

STEVE ENGLISH CATCHES UP WITH BEN SPIES

on the bike in GP's and never got the most out of myself there but I also know that when I look at Jorge, Casey and Marc-those fastest guys-that on my day I could beat them. I did it at Assen and I was up there a couple of times going for a win but I also know that when it came to it I didn't have it to win a championship and I can say that. Maybe if I was there a couple of years I could have had that one year chance-like Gibernau or Nicky. But I wasn't a guy that could line up every year and go for the championship and I can admit that.

Do you think was some of that because you never had the internal drive saying, 'I have to get to MotoGP', but rather you went to Europe to race WSBK and GP's because it was expected of you?

Quite possibly, and that's the thing, I always loved MotoGP and watched it and I was a huge fan but I never had that drive of having to be there and it's a dream of mine. I enjoyed MotoGP for sure but it was a different lifestyle to AMA and WSBK but I know that if I didn't do it I'd have looked back in the present day and I'd say, 'Shit I should have done it,' and had lots of what if's. So now I don't have any of that. I won in WSBK and I won in AMA, I didn't win a GP championship but not a lot of people do. I rode for a factory, won a race and finished on a few podiums so I can't look back and be upset about anything. The only thing that might be a what if would be, should I have done this longer in WSBK or gone to GP's earlier, but there's not many things that I can look back on and second guess about. I did everything, maybe not in the right order, but it's like that with any racing and I think that we did the right choices most of the time and at the end of the day speed wise I know that even if I went two years earlier the only thing that I missed was maybe one title in the right time at the right place but I know that speedwise I wasn't fast enough to be a two or three time champion. I wasn't fast enough but top five or six in the world I can see that for sure but fastest guy in the world? That's hard to do and me knowing that wasn't quite possible and deep down I know that. That's important and that's why I can live with it.

It's commendable to admit to that you can recognise that you weren't good enough to be at that level. It's rare for an athlete to admit that while they were good enough to be at the top level of competition that they weren't able to be a consistent champion.

Yeah and I can do that. The reason that I can do that is that I've seen so many riders after they retire say that if they'd done this or that differently that they could have won that. It pissed me off so much when I was a kid of 16 or 18 years old so that's why I said that anything that I can control I'd do and it would mean that I wouldn't have any regrets. If anyone followed me in my career, starting from when I was 15 until last year, I didn't dominate in anything. The only season I dominated was 2009 in WSBK. I had to fight to find ways to win every year. I was never the guy setting the pace. I didn't have the most natural talent, like Casey did or Marc, and I had to work my ass off to do it. That's why I can understand that after going to GP that I gave it everything that I had. 2010 was a good year, 2011 was a decent year and I won a race and then in 2012 I think that we had a lot of speed but we had a lot of bad luck. I made some mistakes for sure but we had a lot of problems with the bike that were just ridiculous. We'd try and do something and the bike would brake and then you'd try and make up for it and you'd make a mistake so it was bad year and then the injury happened. I know that I gave GP's as much as I could for a couple of seasons and I know what I can do and that's why I can live with knowing that on the right day I could win. We did that and at Valencia we could have won too with Casey and I know that when things were right, like at Assen, that I could win. Casey didn't have to win that race in Assen because of the championship but it was one of those days, and all the top riders know those days, where it didn't matter what happened. If Casey had have tried to go faster I could have gone faster and on that day I wasn't going to be beaten. It's good to know that on those days that I could beat the fastest but it wasn't like that week in and week out. I'm big enough to know that and that's why I'm content with all the stuff that we did and it was a pretty good career.

How much does Assen mean to you?

It was huge for me because it was a race that I fell in love with when I was a kid. I was eight or nine years old watching review tapes from 90-94 with Kevin [Schwartz] and it was him being crazy on the brakes at the final chicane to pass Wayne and Wayne running off onto the grass and Kevin passing him back! I

remember great races in the 250s as well with Cadalora and Romboni. I remember Doohan when he ate shit there really hard at the fast left-hander and hit the fence. I remember all that stuff so Assen was a huge race for me and it was really important in Superbikes to win there and if it was the only GP race that I could have won I'm glad that it was that one because it's the most historic race on the calendar. That's what makes it even better because if I could only win one race that it was that one. That's the coolest race of the year and being able to come into that stadium after you win the race and everyone is going crazy is a good feeling. At that race all the fans have their favourite riders but all the fans love all the racers. They love racing and even in WSBK I noticed it. I know that I had a lot of fans there but I noticed that it was the same for every racer. At some tracks in different countries the fans only cheer for one dude but in Assen they love everybody.

You were in AMA Superbikes for four years and obviously that time was dominated by your rivalry with Matt Mladin. Last year when you retired he obviously called you a pussy, you didn't respond but looking at him as a racer how do you view him?

He was one of the most talented racers that I ever raced against and I know that he'd say the same about me. If you asked him who was the fastest guy that he ever raced against he'd say me. I've raced against some other riders, like Marc and whoever, and I'd say that he was one of the most talented racers that I ever raced against. He was the most talented Superbike racer that I raced against, period. One of the biggest assholes in the world? Yeah, he was a complete dickhead but as a racer we both stepped up each other's games more than anyone. Unless you raced against us in those years you couldn't understand it. We were both on a good bike but we pushed each other so hard and our gaps just went out to everybody else. I can honestly say that winning those races, beside Assen or the last race in WSBK, gave me the best feeling. Winning at Laguna Seca in 2007, when I won the title by one point. Whoever won that race was going to win the championship. We had such...an almost hate rivalry that it wasn't about winning the race it was about crossing the line and [looking over your shoulder] and saying 'I beat his ass!' Knowing that you had beaten him fuelled me and him, for the biggest rivalry that honestly motorcycle racing has seen. I know that Kevin and Wayne had a big rivalry but me and him it went deep! When he says a comment like that I laugh because if people had known the crap that we did when we were racing it was nonsense! He was good at mind games and he's one of those guys that does everything for a reason. When he says something like that it's just to get attention to him. I always knew that and for him to say something like that the only thing that I can come back and say is that if he calls me a pussy I beat him three out of four times and I was the only guy to beat him on the same motorcycle. That speaks for itself and I was never much for going back and forth with him but whatever comes out of his mouth isn't surprising. It's still funny in a way because he can make a comment about my injuries or say I'm a pussy for stopping but he has no clue about how bad my injuries are. I'm not saying that he needs to understand or know but that kind of comment is hard to say when you don't know. Did it surprise me though? No.

Looking back to 2008 it was your last year in AMA but you came into Suzuki as a replacement rider for Loris. Did you expect that to lead to something permanent for 2009?

Honestly with Suzuki, yeah, and I think that everybody did. Loris was coming to the end of his career, and he was one of my favourite riders growing up because when I was watching GP's it would be him and Romboni and all those cats in 250s so it was a big honour to race. I got thrown into the deep end at Donington because it was raining.

Tough track to make your debut on at the best of times!

A horrible track for it! I'd never even ridden a GP bike before so this was the first time ever and I'm trying to learn the track and it learned the whole weekend. So I qualified in eighth and then on Sunday morning it was dry! I'd no clue about gearing or tyres or anything in the dry but I finished up 14th but by the end of the race by lap times were as quick as Vermuelen so I turned onto it pretty quick. The next weekend was Assen and I flew there and Capirossi was wanting to race again and everyone pretty much knew that he wanted to race because I had done fairly

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well. It was pretty much the talk of Assen that I had come in and done decent, it wasn't spectacular but it was news. Loris was still hurt and he wanted to race and I was fine with that, it's his decision, but I told Paul Denning and a friend of mine at Suzuki Japan, Sahara, not to come to me on Thursday afternoon [after the first day of practice] and tell me that he's not OK to race. I've got to look out for me and it looks bad for me to show up on Friday, not knowing the track, and trying to do something. I want to come over and race and have a good showing. Lo and behold he crashed on Thursday afternoon and got hurt again and was out. They came to me on Thursday night and Paul Denning was asking would I ride? Sahara didn't come and ask me because he already knew what I had said. So I said that you're putting me in a position where you're trying to get me to ride the bike but it's not a good situation for me unless you're saying that you want me on the team next year. So I said no because I didn't want to get hurt, not knowing the track and doing something stupid. It just wasn't a good situation but then Paul went around and told everybody that I had refused and turned down the ride and that I had been saying this and that. Basically he was pointing all the fingers at me so I was getting pretty pissed off because I was like, I told you two days ago that you should have put me on his backup bike and let me learn the track. I would have raced but they put me in a situation where I wasn't going to take it and that happened and we went from there and I raced at Indy and qualified in the dry as the first Suzuki and finished sixth in the rain. I had good pace in the wet and in the dry and we started talking a little bit about the next year. I remember that they were doing Capirossi's contract and I said that I wanted to ride for them and this is how much that I want. They said that it was too much money when honestly it was the exact same as what I got paid in the US. I said that I won't take a payout, some riders would, but I said that I'll take what I'm getting paid now by Suzuki and won't ask for any more or less but it's triple the race calendar. So then I went to Yamaha.

When you approached Yamaha was it for a MotoGP ride or was it SBK?

Yamaha came to me for WSBK and I said that it was going to be a one year deal, it wouldn't be for two, and it wasn't going to be a way to get into MotoGP it was strictly for WSBK. They said that they wanted me to come over to Italy and sign the contract but I said that it's Monday and I have to race this weekend at Laguna Seca. But they said that we want to see you in person to sign the contract in person so if you now we can do a signing bonus and other stuff. So they flew three of us first class to Milan and I think I was there for 12 hours before flying back to Laguna Seca to race! We got it all sorted and after the first test I told Maio Meregalli after the first day, on a stock motorcycle, that we could win the title. We need a bit of luck but we can do it and he was like, 'do you think?' I said that I promise [we can win] I won't say anything but we can do it. Even though I was a rookie I knew that having done AMA and done some GP's that I was being touted to win it and I tried to keep the pressure off as much as possible. I signed with three races to go in WSBK a two year deal with Yamaha for MotoGP, the second year was open, but the first year was with Tech3. It was a really hard contract to sign because they wanted me to win a WSBK title because I didn't know at that time that they had never won one. I remember when we took the points lead at Magny Cours that they were jumping up and down as if we won the title. I was like, what are you doing? Have you guys never won a championship? They told me that they had never led the championship! Then I knew the magnitude of the situation of being a rookie.

How much fun was that year? You won 14 of 28 races.

It was fun but it was stressful as well! I crashed once that was my fault and then we had a smoke burnout one race, a shift linkage break, Fabrizio took me out and then we ran out of fuel one race. We had five DNFs from mechanical stuff and at one point I was down something like 84 points so to be able to win it and win all the races, have pole positions was really cool. When I was talking with Lin [Jarvis] about the GP contract he was saying that we want you in GPs and you need to be in GP but you have to win the WSBK title. I was saying that I wish that I had a bit more of a points gap, I was only leading by about four points, to make that happen. I signed the contract and luckily I won the title and it all worked out.

Was it a stipulation that you had to win the title or the contract would be void?

No, it was just going to be a letdown not to win it. It was pressure on me, not just from Yamaha but from myself, because I didn't want to be in WSBK one year and not win it and then move to GP. I wanted to tick that box and go into GPs. It wasn't a stipulation but it was one of those things where it was 'just win it.' I think that I tried to put that clause into the contract but they wouldn't let me! At that point they kind of needed me in GP's now because people were leaving. Toseland was out of Tech3 so they basically had to have me.

In 2009 you had the wild card at Valencia and finished sixth how big a difference did it make for you to be able to get used to the M1 before the start of the 2010 season?

It was big and we worked with the test team, it was a good weekend, and we had one of the coolest paint schemes that I ever got to use! It was good and there was some pressure that weekend that people built on. I was replacing Toseland at Tech3 and he was in that team and he had a big carrot to beat me. Everyone was using it in the buildup but I wasn't worried about it. He had said a few things about getting replaced, and I had respect for him but I didn't really know him, and it turned into this side thing that was going on. Everyone was watching but I didn't have too much pressure on me personally because I knew that I'd ride for the next year. I did want to prove though that I deserved to be there and the race was pretty good. I actually ended up being able to beat Dovizioso and those guys so Colin could finish fourth in the championship and Dovizioso fifth so I played a good teammate!

The next year it was you and Colin together, how did that work out?

That was probably one of the coolest years of racing for me.

It's amazing how often Colin's teammate's say that!

He's definitely crazy! But I was a fan of Colin when I started racing back in '92 at Texas World Speedway. I was always a fan of his and him doing the WSBK thing and I kind of followed in steps a little bit. Being his teammate was an honour even though that year I was a little bit faster than him. It was an honour being with him. It was kind of cool because, as everyone knows, it's kind of a democracy in MotoGP. It's always different nationalities of teammates-English and Spanish, Spanish and Italian-and Dorna don't really like having teammates from the same country. But me and him Americans, never mind Texans, as teammates. I don't think that will ever happen again so that was pretty cool and we were able to make some pretty cool videos and have some fun. It was a fun year.

What's the talent level like in Texas at the moment?

“Last week I woke up and my shoulder was out of my socket”

It's not really good. It's hard to say though because the money in the series means they're racing basically street bikes and no other country is doing that. I'd say that there's one kid over here that I know 100% that he could cut it. I don't know how good he can be but he can be a top 15 rider in the world, he's got that potential.

Who is he?

Cameron Beaubier. He's good and I've followed him since he started racing and he got hurt the year after, and his teammate was Marquez. The kid has got massive amounts of talent and I always notice that no matter where he is and what class he is racing in if someone goes faster he finds a way to go faster. He's only slowed down by who he's racing against. Beside him...there's not really anyone present day that is a top 15 rider on the world stage but for sure he is. I know that he is.

How much is racing being hurt by AMA being down to five rounds, limited TV exposure and the other restrictions?

It's huge. I'm a little bit irked by it because the economy is bad, and it was really bad, but look how many Spanish riders there are and look at their economy. How is that possible? It's possible because the series gets their own riders in and giving them chances, I'm not saying about their talent because they're great riders, but if you look at how big America is and if we had a good organisation with how many riders and how many people live here. Do you not think that there's five guys that deserve to be over there? We don't have the series or the infrastructure to get them to go over there in a good way. When you look at the economies it's not like we're the worst. I think that Dorna needs to start a series over here because then it can funnel more American's over there and also give some of the European's that can't quite cut it over there a chance over here. It would give that diversity that we need and more riders. We need to look at different ways to do this but definitely the economy has held back racing series here. There's definitely been some kids that will never make it because of that and then I hope that guys like Buabier got the chance to go over. He'd be the fastest American to go over there hands down.

Is flat track racing still successful here or is it only in road racing that's struggling?

It never was huge but it's definitely smaller than it had been for sure. I did it for fun but it's struggling the most it ever has.

Looking to 2011 when you moved into the factory team alongside Jorge. Where did you see your biggest strengths relative to him and also the biggest weaknesses?

He definitely had more strengths than I did. I think raw talent and putting it all together for one lap we were pretty similar but he did things a lot more consistent than me. The way that a GP has to ridden, especially the Yamaha, I think that I'd suit the Honda more than the Yamaha. The way that you can brake late and the bike can move around a little bit would suit me more. In the Yamaha you have to keep in line and I'd brake so hard that at times the rear wheel would come off the ground and then when it sits back down it snaps. That bike just didn't suit me but he definitely has the most corner speed out of anyone in GP. His consistency was second to none and he could knock out runs better than anyone. When it came to bike setup and knowledge I don't think that was his strong suit at all. You could put him on a bike with a different part on it or where you change 10mm front and rear and he just goes out and goes fast. That's a strength of his too though because he doesn't get lost in it but if he improved his bike setup a little bit he could be really dangerous. Braking I don't think that many people were stronger than me, that was something that came from Superbikes, but in GP I had to work around it. I think that I set the records for Brembo on the bars of pressure on the brakes! I think, even no, that Lorenzo is probably the most complete rider out there, Marquez has more talent but when you look at being strong for the championship, speed, can keep his head in races, be smooth I think that he's the best racer. Marquez isn't far off and when he gets more race knowledge and tactics, he's definitely not afraid to put it in there, but when you look at how he really sees a race Marc goes more on impulse whereas Jorge is more of a thinker. In saying that though in a year or two Marquez will have it all figured out and it will be crushing for everyone. Still right now even though the Honda is better I still think that Jorge is the most complete racer out there.

In 2012 it seemed that any bad luck you could have you did have. At Laguna the

swingarm fell off, you had engine failures, everything what wrong. How tough was that for you to deal with? It was mostly stuff that you couldn't control but for it to consistently happen must have been very difficult.

It was huge and it all started in Qatar. We had a decent weekend in practice and practice was quite good. That was the first season of the 1000cc rules and everyone was saying that it would suit me and that I could battle for that championship and stuff like that. We were doing the best that we could but we crashed one of the nights before the race, I think it was Saturday, and the subframe and the seat are a single unit on that bike and when I crashed I broke the inside of the carbon but you couldn't see it and on Sunday I had this crazy vibration and the bike wouldn't handle. I was telling the guys in warmup that something was broken. We didn't change bikes but we changed a lot of parts and on the warmup lap for the race it was bad and I told them and I don't remember where we finished but it was really far back. We didn't figure out what it was until Jerez and that race was in the wet and I was having a decent race and was in second place but I had worn my tyre completely and crashed. It was my fault and one of those things where you try to make up for the previous weekend and get too ambitious and crash.

Then you went to Le Mans and had the problem with the visor.

Yeah, there was water everywhere and it was dangerous and just shit luck. Then we went to Assen and I chunked a tyre and had a huge hole in it. I had chunked a tyre back in 2003 at Daytona and lost a lot of skin so that freaked me out pretty bad. The same thing happened to Valentino and he pulled in, I stayed out and finished fourth but that was a race that we should have been on the podium. After that Brno the clutch fried and I had to go back to last place to let it cool and then I pushed like hell to catch up to everybody and crashed. In Indy I had a huge crash in qualifying, I ended up second, but in the engine blew. It was the race after Laguna when the swingarm broke. Everything happened that year and I'll hold my hand up and admit that I made some mistakes but they were compounded because of other problems and I was trying to fix everything by trying to get a better results. I remember at Brno after the clutch fried we had a test the next day and I went out on Monday morning and something happened with the electronics and the throttle hung wide open. No bullshit, it really happened and I just parked the bike and was ready to quit. I came into the pits and I was like, 'this thing is trying to kill me.'

You went to Ducati and were never fit on the bike. What made you come back at Indy? Was it just because it was your home race or did you feel that you were ready to race again?

I was never ready. I came back too soon after Sepang and crashed at Austin and messed up my shoulder. I was always trying to delay it and get healthy but everyone was always asking me, 'Are you fit yet? Are you ready to go?' and I'd say that it was getting better but it never really was. I was just hoping that it would get better but I was at the point where I had to come back because I didn't have a choice.

Did it feel to you that you were the old gunslinger who'd taken a lot of hits and that you came back because this is what a racer does?

Yeah, for sure. I came back because it's what you're supposed to do. I was gone for so long that people were saying that he doesn't want to come back. I just wasn't ready and came back at Indy and the crash happened. What happened was an electronic glitch but it was my fault. When you leave pitlane on the Yamaha you use launch control and have no Traction Control until you hit second gear whereas the Ducati is like that until you go to second gear when you're on the pit limiter. It was one of those things that if I was on the bike all year I would have known but I came out of pitlane riding normally and then found out there was no traction control. It wasn't anybody's fault but I should have known. I wasn't mad with anyone.

Did you know instantly that this was the end for your career?

I didn't know instantly. I knew that I had separated my shoulder! I stared rehab and going to the doctor and he said that as a doctor he thought it was dangerous for me and that I could hurt myself or someone else. He said that the shoulder would never be right again and that if I hit it again I'd need a replacement, that

“I’ve hit my head pretty damn hard in some of the best helmets in the world.”



was enough for me to know. There hasn't been a day that I've woken up since Malaysia that I haven't woken up without an issue with my shoulder. Hopefully I'll be able to get back and ride a dirt bike for fun but I'm not close to doing that yet.

This weekend you're doing TV. I think that you surprised everyone saying you'd do a TV gig, what brought it on?

It's not going to be a full time thing but I enjoy watching racing and I know that how I feel physically I can't race anymore but I want to be involved still. I like breaking down what's happening on track for the people that don't quite understand everything, or better yet for the people that understand most of it, but then they really understand it from someone who's been there. It's different and for someone that doesn't know anything they still won't know much but for people that have been watching it for a long time when they get that expert view it can help them understand it more. I won't do every race but I'll definitely look to do some of the American races in the future.

You've gotten more and more involved on Twitter as well.

Yeah, and I'm able to say what I want now as well. I'm not held down by any one factory, I've got nothing against any factory, but I can now shoot straight.

Looking at the rest of the year and doing some TV gigs, how important is it for you to be involved and help give back to the motorcycling community?

I want to take a bit of time off and still be involved with the sport. I've started working with the Texas state authorities to promote motorcycle road safety. I'm trying to give back in different ways but not just with racing. I want to be a part of

racing but I also want to step away for a little bit.

In light of road safety here in Texas what do you think when you see people riding around here without wearing a helmet? Is that something that you think needs to change if they are to improve their road safety?

As an ambassador for it you don't want to say that 'you should do this or that' but personally I encourage wearing a helmet on the street. It's not worth not doing it but it is a law and you have to respect that too. I always encourage wearing a helmet but I can understand people not wanting to wear one when they're jumping on their scooter to ride half a mile to Starbucks when they're going 20 mph. I get that they want that freedom but I get that there's a time and a place for that too and riding on the highway isn't the place. I can understand [not wearing one] and I'd do it too if I was just riding to the park or down the block but I do think that there's a time and a place for it. I encourage it because I've hit my head pretty damn hard in some of the best helmets in the world.

What other charitable work are you doing?

I work with Love for Kids where we take in a bunch of kids that basically don't have anything. Some don't have families, some don't have money and we bring them together at Christmas and Thanksgiving. It's a charity that my grandfather started in the late seventies and there's a lot of US sports stars, cowboys, Texas Rangers - that do the same thing. There's a couple of thousand kids that come together for these and I've talked to them, signed autographs and passed out food to them. It's pretty amazing to be around those kids and you realise how fortunate you are.

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