

Strength To Strength

{Words: Stephen English} Images: Stephen English

INTERVIEW



STEVE TALKS TO EUGENE LAVERTY THIS MONTH

After being with Yamaha and Aprilia in WSBK, apart from Philip Island, how big of a jump was it to go to this bike? It had been almost 100 races without a win so is there still that big gap between the Suzuki and the likes of Aprilia and Kawasaki?
Yeah there was but the main thing that this bike lacks over the Aprilia is in the engine. That's what the Aprilia is; it's an engine. This bike, chassis wise, is fundamentally correct and as we saw in Philip Island it works. But we're down on power and it makes it tough especially when you qualify bad. On the Aprilia it wouldn't matter if I qualified on the fourth row because if I made a good start I always thought that I could overtake a few when everyone is together at the start, that doesn't happen anymore. There's a lot of changes between the bikes, not just in character, but also in how I've got to race the bike. I've been getting caught out by getting frustrated and having to overtake because I don't have that horsepower.

How much pressure have you been putting on yourself in races lately? You've obviously had some tough races before

Singapore and it seemed that when you had one crash that you started to chase harder and it led to more mistakes.

We did definitely. At the time it felt like the championship was slipping away early on and I had to push. We were strong everywhere except for at Imola. We had podium pace everywhere except at Imola. Even at Aragon we were unfortunately and then at Assen I had little problems with the bike over the weekend and it's been costing us. The clutch is bad and we can't get off the line and at Assen I had a shit start from a bad qualifying and I was fighting to get through and I crashed. That's happened too many times, Donington was another with a shit qualifying and having to come through and I crashed again. You put a lot of pressure on yourself because you want to do the best that you can do.

Looking at the rest of the year what's your goals? Is it just to get back into being able to battle at the front?

Yeah it is. The championship is gone now, I'm 120 odd points off the lead so it's gone. I want to get back into a rhythm

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where we can be on the podium because we haven’t been on it since Philip Island. We’ve had the pace to be on the podium at every round bar Imola so that’s got to be the aim. It would be nice to win again.

You had the Suzuki MotoGP tests since the last race. Obviously the test in Japan went well but in Philip Island the weather made it very difficult for you to do anything valuable there.

Yeah and that’s what hurt us. It was supposed to be four hours on track in Japan but it turned into three hours and I had expected them to be just about getting comfortable on the bike and getting everything in position for Philip Island. But by the end of it I was pushing on and putting the soft tyre in and getting a feeling for it. The front tyre was a bit too soft so we used the hard tyre and after such a short time on the bike I was pushing to the limits pretty soon on it. I was looking forward to Philip Island but winter Down Under was always going to be tough. I got launched off the bike after three flying laps and that put an end to the test.

What did you think of the bike?

In Japan I was really impressed by it and it was working well. I would have liked to have some more time at Philip Island because that was a track that would have highlighted some problems with the bike. I’m keen to get a chance on the bike again to work through those problems because the base of the bike is good and it’s just that the rider setup of the electronics needs fine tuning I think.

Has there been any discussions about additional tests later in the year?

No, we just took it that we’d do Japan and Philip Island. I flew through the night [to get] here for this weekend so we haven’t really had the chance to discuss it any further.

What did you think when you went into the garage and saw your own MotoGP bike?

It was nice to see the number 50 on it because I’ve been waiting a long time to ride one of those bikes. You can always, if you’re a smart enough rider, work out what bikes are going to be strong for your style and what tracks would be strong for the bike. From what I knew about MotoGP I always knew that bike and tyres would suit me. Having ridden it, even after three hours, I thought that it really did suit my style and that it’s what I need to ride. It’s about getting the opportunity to do it right.

What do you need in a bike to take advantage of your riding strengths?

My style is that I like to brake hard and stop it and then gas it upright. I don’t spend much time in the corner, so that’s my style. I’d not like to give too much more away!

Was Michael able to give you any tips on a MotoGP bike or the tyres?

Yeah, he gave me some advice on the tyres because I was scared before riding them, especially with the winter Down Under. He said that they aren’t as scary as what people make out. We’ve all heard the tales where it used to be a lot tougher a few years but now the crashes aren’t as big as they used to be. There wasn’t as big a fear before going to Philip Island, because it was cold. Even with the track temperature of 15 degrees when I was going out on the tyres I could push quite soon and it gave me a little bit of confidence to do that.

You’ve said to me before that there’s nothing set in stone but that MotoGP was the goal for why you went to Suzuki for this year. Have you seen anything from working with Suzuki this year that would make you think that you wouldn’t like to be involved with them in MotoGP next year?

No, if the opportunity was there and probably even more so after visiting the factory in Japan. There was a family feel there and it was so nice with it being a factory team and lots of different things over there. The bosses are quite friendly and that’s a nice feeling. It’s always about finding a balance between sport and

business and I think that Suzuki has that perfect.

The Ducati discussions last year seemed that you got very close to joining Pramac. It was going to be on the Open bike but they didn’t give any assurances that the works team would also be in the Open class. Was that the only thing that stopped you joining?

Yeah it was. It was a concern that Andrea Iannone was there, and I know that he’s a fast rider, but that we’d be racing in the same colours but have different bikes underneath. I’d that before when I was racing in 250’s. In the end all the bikes went Open and Factory spec but my concern was that if they stayed official and I was on the Open bike.

Was there any issue with Gigi seeing that he hadn’t really confirmed that he was leaving Aprilia and joining Ducati?

No, it effected things with the Aspar seat because that was where I was going when Melandri was coming in to replace me. It was kind of like I was getting kicked out of here [in WSBK] but that we’ll put you here [in MotoGP] but it was all kept low key. Suddenly though when Gigi moved Aspar didn’t want to go with Aprilia so that closed that door. It was all a bit of a soap opera for me last year but Gigi was keen for me to go to Ducati. I had a good working relationship with him and maybe it’s still an option in the future.

Looking at what you did last year on the Aprilia it seemed that in the second half of the season anytime you finished you were able to challenge for the win. How tough is it to come to Suzuki and not be able to challenge like that. How difficult it is to adjust your mindset?

It’s not been easy. From the first test on the Suzuki I realised that we had some work to do and I didn’t really get to test it before Philip Island because I had to ride around and just get things to function so I didn’t get to really test the bike until the Jerez test after round one. The bike worked at Philip Island but with the front/rear there it would have won anyway but then we went to the Jerez test in March and we had to start working on the issues. We could have done with a test rider in the winter to do a lot of the work that I was doing over the winter.

When you were coming up through the ranks in your racing career yourself, John and Michael were obviously all racing Motocross and then circuit racing. What do you look at as being the big advantages of coming from a ‘racing family’?

The biggest advantage of them racing was that they opened doors for me. It happens in racing where people realise that if that guy is fast that maybe these other guys are fast too. You just have to look at BSB and the influx that came here to WSBK. One guy came and was fast so then you looked at who used to battle with him so it was Crutchlow, Rea and everybody that moved from BSB to here. That happens in racing and it was helpful for me coming through because John and Michael had to work harder and ride pieces of crap and not really knowing the way. Once people realised that they could ride they thought that maybe they could give their little brother a chance so I got some doors opened for me a lot easier than they did.

Obviously now John has stopped racing and is working in your corner. He goes out on track and he can look at what they other bikes are doing on track and he knows what to look for and what your experiencing. How big a value is that to you compared to your engineers who can look at data but not really know what it feels like on the bike?

It’s a big advantage because data can be very misleading in bike racing. In car racing it’s pretty much a sure thing because the driver is in a fixed position whereas often I have to speak with the engineers and they say that they can’t see the problem that I’m explaining but that’s because I’ve reacted and moved by position to compensate for the problem. That usually happens because the rider will move around and compensate so having someone out on trackside that sees it in real time is a benefit.