

## Yarra Ranges

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> September 2011

Tony Stegmar	Honda CBR1000	Kevin Walmsley (1 <sup>st</sup> ride)	Suzuki GSXR1300
Damir Djikic	Honda CBR1000	Dean Bonthorne (1 <sup>st</sup> ride)	Suzuki GSXR750
Ian Payne (1/2 rear)	Honda CBR1000	Byron Morrison (1 <sup>st</sup> ride)	Suzuki GSXR600
Paul Southwell	Honda CBR1000	Mark Copeland	Kawasaki ZX10
Paul Simonson	Honda CBR1000	Marc Marais	Kawasaki ZX10
Mick Canny	Honda CBR1000	Michael Zrb	Kawasaki ZX10
Ron Johnston (1/2 rear)	Honda CB400	John Willis (leader)	Kawasaki Z1000
Ben Warden	Honda CBR954	Roland Anthony (1 <sup>st</sup> ride)	Kawasaki Z1000
Pina Garasi	Honda CBR600	Jason Wilson	Kawasaki ZX9
Leo Zhang (1 <sup>st</sup> ride)	Honda CBR600	Rob Langer	KTM 990
Kathryn Sket (1 <sup>st</sup> ride)	Honda CBR600	Frank Hutchinson (1 <sup>st</sup> )	Yamaha R1
Pierre Ong	Ducati 1098	Nick Webb (1 <sup>st</sup> ride)	Triumph 675
Ken Goederee	Ducati 1098		<i>25 bikes, 25 people</i>

Whilst its meaning is known well, I have no idea where the phrase “popped my cherry” came from. Not sure it makes sense if relating to the finishing touch on an ice-cream sundae. Nor represents any part of the physical anatomy (the closest being that seemingly mythical female one...). Indeed, I confess to not knowing much about fruit, cherries included. But what I do know is that my first adventure with MSR on Sunday was an absolute cracker

With beloved GSX-R750K4 prepped and eager, I excitedly arrived in my regular hill-thrash departure point of Yarra Glen to a throng of some 25 two-wheeled steeds and their owners. Quickly mingling amongst the faces that I memorised from the MSR site, I went from ruing my flashy race leathers (forced attire after my 2-piece zip burst that morning) to being appreciative of the giant yellow “DEANO” lettering emblazoned on the back. It sure made introductions easier!

In the spirit of professionalism that carried throughout the day, rider and emergency contact details were taken, the route touched on and a request for ride article raised. Before I knew it my hand was in the air, mumbling something about virgins. Whilst those with daughters delivered sideways glances, the MSR regulars had an instant appreciation with several “Who’s this yahoo in fluro leathers?” faces evolving into “Good on him – now let’s have some fun”.

We mounted up and set off on what would become a day of attrition for the particularly large group. With many new roads ahead, I was immediately thankful for the corner-marking system, though initially dismayed at being behind a BMW for the first leg through my regular Christmas Hills route. “Thought this was about sportsbikes, not BMWs... and what was that KTM thing?!” I thought to myself momentarily. But as we turned into a personal fave tight section, this immediately changed to “Whoa!! This dude can ride!” as the bratwurst-mobile was piloted with impressive agility and confidence that would leave all but the quickest of riders far behind. Not long after, the same lesson was learned as the giant orange Swede was punted with equally impressive skill, belying its design brief.

After my first corner-marking stop there was quite a distance between the lead group and those bringing up the rear. So as I passed through Pantan Hill and St Andrews I could ride at my own pace with open roads ahead. Upon reaching the super-tight go-kart track section near Kinglake, I caught up to a dozen bikes negotiating the perilously narrow ribbon of bitumen. But with decades spent on the

road, and the Gixxer set up perfectly I worked my way through the gang with exuberance... albeit safely of course. No way am I going to endanger another for my own selfish adrenaline fix.

Passing through Kinglake I found myself behind our leader for the day. Most referred to the black Kwaka rider as John, but as our mountain decent over sketchy bitumen ensued, I realised I was trailing a new Roger Hargreaves character – ‘Mr Smooth’. The two of us set off on what would become a pleasurable reoccurrence throughout the day. With loose gravel in patches and a curious lack of bite from my ride’s Tokicos, I was thankful to trace our pointman’s lines and flowing style for direction on the unfamiliar twists and turns.

At least one other cherry-popper for the day was not as fortunate, succumbing to the surface and showing others what ‘Repsol’ looks like written upside-down. But leathers dusted off and ‘Blade taped-up he headed home safely as the rest of us pointed toward Healesville. Despite being another regular path for yours truly, it began with the unfamiliar sight of an eager 80’s small-bore CB Honda in my mirrors at speed. With day-long buffeting, I swear Ron’s neck muscles would see a vampire retire with shattered fangs!

In the final stretch down the hill though another long-time favourite road, I took the lead of my small pack, put the head down and reached deep into my bag of skills honed from several years of racing in the national series. I prepared myself for extra margin (with still suspect brakes), any unexpected road debris and potential oncoming traffic. What I didn’t account for was an eventuality in my mirrors – The blazing lights of a yellow Fireblade. “Where’ the hell’d he come from?! I’m actually having a go here..!”. Quick to realise this was no fluke, I waved our banana-bladed buddy past and jumped on his tail. But I was rattled and could barely hang on to his blistering pace. Fine by me and full credit to him (a racer as well apparently).

On arrival in Healesville some enjoyed the offerings in the bakery, whilst I discovered another recipe that had been effecting my braking – A delightful Motul honey glaze on the left disc courtesy of a massively blown fork seal. Hmmm. Do I turn home now and count my blessings? No way – Not with weather and company like this. So I adorned the inner fork stantion with a fashionable rag-bandana to try and absorb the leaking fluid before it reached my brakes and off we headed again.

The next set of roads was completely new to me, but I loved every minute of our back-road navigation to Monbulk for lunch and friendly chats over an assortment of baked goods. But my aftershave mustn’t have appealed to the masses, with several bikers heading home as the dozen remainder prepared for the squirt to Warburton. Over lunch I’d heard this road was a corker, so I rejoin based on the number of intersections before the twisties, thus cunningly positioning myself behind Mr Smooth for 20kms of heavenly deserted tarmac. Great stuff indeed. And the fun didn’t stop there, as Mt Donna Buang beckoned with smooth curves and the added challenge of tree bark debris and damp patches to keep it interesting.

Celebrating the ‘high’ in applicable fashion, I followed Guru Ben, John Smooth and Pina Colada up the zillion metal steps of the lookout tower. Seemed like a great idea until my Alpinestars quickly reminded me they are boots designed for half-hours race bursts, not trekking in Sherpa country. Was worth the blisters though, with sensational views across Mt Dandenong to Melbourne and beyond. Nice one.

One would think the attrition factor would have diminished by that stage in the day, but it was not to be. After corner marking with Ben mid-way down the mountain he was firmly in my mirrors... so I again put the hammer down. His lights disappeared in fewer corners than expected, but I (mistakenly)

put it down to the confident riding pace I was enjoying all day and pushed on. Knowing that Reefton was next on the menu, I held position behind two other riders to avoid a corner-marking stop at the base of the Spur (cunning little bugger, eh..). Cheeky, maybe. But worth it, definitely. As the next half hour was about the most fun I've had with my pants on in years.

With the dynamic duo reformed, Mr Smooth and I enveloped ourselves in the countless turns of the magically resurfaced (and amazingly deserted) Reefton Spur. With what was now zero oil left in one fork leg, I thought to one of the most inspirational characters of our day, who conquered all despite a similar lop-sided affliction. So with my Lance Armstrong-esque style and Yoshi tri-oval cackling in the afternoon sunshine we lapped up corner after corner, delivering one of those rare occasions where everything goes perfectly and an incredible euphoria sweeps over you. And I have the day's skipper to thank, as it was an absolute delight to follow his lead due to the impressive pace and effortless style.

I wish I could say the same for myself – Climbing all over the Gixxer whilst it bounced off the limiter, I felt like one of those circus monkeys on a trick pony. Meanwhile, John barely flexed a buttock ahead of me and looked as relaxed as a velvet-jacketed Buddhist.

On arrival at the top we waited. And waited some more. Finally only a handful of the troupe arrived with word that Ben's first tits-up experience in over ten years and 400,000kms had befallen him shortly after our Donna departure. He was plenty sore, but able to make it home. After a bit of back and forth deciding the best course of action, the final half dozen or so regrouped and pushed on with a great squirt to Marysville for a coffee, before disbanding after the Black Spur and heading our separate ways.

On my final stretch home through Christmas Hills I still had the giant day long-grin plastered on my mug. Much like the one all young blokes must have after losing their innocence in the back of a Sandman. Whilst I may not know the origin of the term, I do know that I've popped my MSR cherry and it was one of the most memorable and enjoyable experiences I could wish for. And to me that's what the phrase's meaning is all about.

**Dean Bonthorne**