

Motorcycling with John Savage

Kevin Briggs fund-raiser

A fund-raising evening in support of Bangor short circuit racer Kevin Briggs will be held in Bangor's Imperial Bar on Saturday, April 19, to which all motorcycling enthusiasts are invited.

Backed by Millisle-based Steve Baker Motorcycles, Kevin moves up to the Irish National Supersport Championship this coming season, after he finished fourth in last year's Bridgestone Irish Clubmans' Supersport Championship.

Kevin had his first outings of the year on his new Suzuki GSX-R600 at Bishopscourt last Saturday and at Kirkistown on Sunday.

The fund-raiser will feature a quiz, ballots, disco and 'loads of fun' — admission will be by ticket only (£5) and tickets are available from Kevin on 07772 405587, or from Steve Baker Motorcycles, Abbey Road, Millisle.

Ballymoney Motorcycle Show

The annual Ballymoney Motorcycle Show will be staged in the town's Joey Dunlop Leisure Centre tomorrow (Friday) and on Saturday, March 7/8, with this year's chosen charity being the Northern Ireland Chest, Heart and Stroke Organisation.

This will be the ninth year of the show, organised by Davy Loudon, and in addition to a large display of both racing and road bikes, there will be stalls selling clothing, helmets and other accessories. There will also be a large display of leathers, photos and memorabilia.

Top riders, past and present, will be in attendance for question and answer sessions, including Ray McCullough, Adrian Craig, Con Law, Paul Robinson, Nicole McAleer, William and Michael Dunlop and Matthew and Nigel Percy.

Admission will be £6, with senior citizens and under-12s admitted for just £2.

For further information, contact Davy Loudon on 07922 060107 or 2766 2264.

REA BOUNCES BACK 'DOWN UNDER'

Following his disastrous debut in the World Supersport Championship in Qatar the previous weekend, Larne's Jonathan Rea bounced back to claim a fighting fifth position in the second round of the 15 leg series, in front of a 65,500 strong crowd in Australia on Sunday.

21 year old Rea was running second on the second lap of the opening round of the championship at Losail, until he was spectacularly highside from his Hannspree Ten Kate Honda CBR600RR, and his team-mate, Andrew Pitt, who was following close behind, couldn't avoid Rea's stricken machine and also crashed out of the race.

Pitt, who partnered Rea's fellow Ulsterman Jeremy McWilliams in last season's ill-fated Ilmor MotoGP team, struggled to qualify his Hannspree Ten Kate Honda on the third row of the grid in Qatar, but he was immediately on the pace on his home tarmac, at Phillip Island, on the southern Australian coast, close to Melbourne.

The Aussie took provisional pole position, using a dry tyre on a slightly wet track, which provided little grip, while Rea was happy with seventh position in the first qualifying session, despite being hampered by an ankle injury, sustained in a spill during the final qualifying session in Qatar, and a painful right ring finger, which was almost severed in his Losail race crash.

Jonathan admitted: "The first session conditions weren't very nice. After the early morning rain we went out on a wet tyre on a medium dry track. Early on in the second session I experienced some problems with the machine, which we managed to sort out throughout the session.

"Irrespective of that, the lap times are there, or thereabouts, and I feeling quite confident on the bike, despite my hand injury, so that shouldn't hold me back.

I'm just looking forward to finding a good set-up tomorrow and achieve a front row qualifying for race day."

In the final qualifying session, Rea lost fourth position and the final slot on the front row of the grid by fractions of a second to 2002 World Supersport champion Fabien Foret, who was robbed of victory at Qatar, when his factory Yamaha YZF-R6 ran out of petrol and he gifted victory to his team-mate Broc Parkes on the final lap.

Rea reflected: "I feel my race pace is quite consistent and I'm looking forward to tomorrow's race. I really enjoy the circuit here. I think it's going to be a dogfight to be up the front tomorrow, but I would like nothing better than to spoil the Australian party on their home soil and get a good result for the team."

Manx-based Pitt maintained his fine form, as three Aussie riders lined up alongside each other on the front row of the grid, with 2001 World Supersport champion Pitt in pole position, for only the second time in his World Supersport career, ahead of Josh Brookes, Broc Parkes and French ace Foret.

Hannspree Ten Kate team manager Ronald ten Kate admitted: "It's a well deserved bounce back from the Supersport disaster we went through last week. It proves our riders are both very competitive. Andrew Pitt has had a great weekend so far — let's hope he can continue doing so on race day. Jonathan looked set for a front row start today — considering his injury it would have been well deserved, but fifth is a good performance as well."

Despite a hotly competitive race, during which there were four different leaders during the 21 laps of the demanding 4.445km Phillip Island circuit, the optimism of team boss ten Kate wasn't dampened, as Pitt took a brilliant victory, and Rea rode with admirable maturity to claim fifth position.

32 year old Pitt set the early pace, with Parkes giving chase, ahead of Brookes and Danish rider Robbin Harms and Rea, but series leader Parkes bit the

dust on the second lap, when he lost the front end of his Yamaha at the first gear MG Corner.

Harms briefly took over at the front, before Pitt regained the initiative, as the leading trio of Pitt, Harms and Brookes began to break clear of the pursuing pack, which was headed by Foret and Rea.

Within a couple of laps, Foret had closed on the leading trio, which was again headed by Harms, hotly pursued by Pitt and Brookes, as Rea scrapped for fifth place with former grand prix winner Garry McCoy, rising Spanish star Joan Lascorz, and experienced World Supersport Championship campaigners, Italian duo Massimo Roccoli and Gianluca Nannelli.

Pitt and Harms continued to exchange the lead, until Pitt began to stamp his authority on the proceedings with half a dozen laps remaining, by which stage Harms, Brooks, McCoy and Foret had opened a gap on Rea and Foret.

But Rea began to reel in the leading quintet, and by the penultimate lap he was right on their tails, and on the final lap he nipped past Triumph-mounted McCoy to snatch an excellent fifth place.

Rea's end of race pace was such that had there been a few more laps, a podium finish was within his reach, but in the final analysis the victory went to home hero Pitt, ahead of Brookes and Harms, on their Hannspree Stiggy Motors Hondas, with Foret fourth.

With his dad, Johnny, proudly looking on, having made the trip 'down under', Rea smiled: "I am happy enough. I rode very hard, but still struggle to understand the tyre, when it's brand new.

"[In] The last ten laps I can be as fast as the front guys, but in the opening laps, when the tyre is new, I still have to learn to push it harder. That was my biggest mistake, as I lost so much time at the start of the race."

Ronald ten Kate analysed: "Johnny was a bit in a bad shape this weekend, not only encountering problems with his hand, but also some technical problems with his CBR600RR throughout the practice days.



Andrew Pitt put the Hannspree Ten Kate Honda team back on top of the World Supersport Championship podium in his native Australia.

"The first part of the race, he was riding too cautious, but in the second part he showed what kind of racer he really is, and almost made it to the podium. I'm very confident after this race and am sure we'll be having a really nice Supersport season."

Pitt beamed: "We came here very determined after the first race in Qatar. We had to bounce back and we've done so in the best possible way. It was a tough race, with a big group of guys battling at the front, but I was confident I could work it out in the last laps. I'm very happy with the result."

Ronald ten Kate described Pitt's performance as 'fantastic', adding: "He really did well on his home soil, which will hopefully prepare us for the forthcoming races."

Brookes leads the championship by four points from Lascorz, who placed seventh, with Pitt and Parkes a further four points behind, while Rea's first world championship points puts him ninth in the overall standings, ahead of the next round in Spain on April 6.

Jonathan smiled: "I am really looking forward now to going to Valencia. I know the track and should be able to fight back and score some points."

After he was gifted third position in Qatar, when the unfortunate Foret forfeited the race after he ran out of fuel with a comfortable lead on the final lap, great English hope Chris Jones struggled throughout the weekend at Phillip Island and finished out of the points in a disappointing 16th position on his Honda.

Northumbrian Graeme Gowland made amends for failing to finish in Qatar by placing 13th and pocketing three points, one place ahead of his vastly more experienced Nottingham rival Chris Walker, as the former World Superbike Championship race winner picked up two points for 14th place on his GIL Motorsport Kawasaki ZX6R.

World Superbike Championship

Having announced he will retire from racing at the end of the season, home hero Troy Bayliss made the most of his Phillip Island swansong by dominating both World Superbike Championship races, astride his Xerox Ducati 1098.

The double World Superbike champion won the first race by four seconds, from fellow Aussie Troy Corser, on his factory Yamaha Motor Italia YZF-R1, with Bayliss' Xerox Ducati team-mate Michel Fabrizio not far behind in third, despite sustaining an injured right ankle when his Ducati stalled on the line at the start of the race and was hit by Ivan Iannuzzo, causing the race to be red flagged.

Pedercini Kawasaki rider Iannuzzo sustained a broken wrist, in what could have been a much more serious incident, and before the race came to a premature halt, Aussie Russell Holland and Spaniard Carlos Checa both went down heavily at the first corner.

Despite his get-off, in which he damaged muscles in his right leg, former MotoGP ace Checa, in his maiden World Superbike Championship season, finished sixth in the first race on his Ten Kate Honda Fireblade CBR1000RR, behind Ruben Xaus on his Sterilgarda Ducati, and surprise second race winner at Qatar, Fonsi Nieto, who took over the injured Yukio Kagayama's factory Alstare Suzuki GSX-R1000, after Kagayama fractured a collarbone when he crashed in the second race at Qatar.

Corser crashed while leading on the fourth lap of the 22 laps second race, leaving Bayliss with a commanding lead, while behind the Aussie there was an all Spanish battle for second, at the conclusion of which Checa emerged on top, ahead of Nieto and Xaus.

It was an horrendous day for Max Biaggi, who slid out of second place in the first race, while closing on leader Bayliss, then spectacularly crashed out of the second race while contesting second place and suffered a broken wrist, although the Italian was fortunate not to sustain more serious injuries, when his cartwheeling Sterilgarda Ducati missed landing on top of him by

mere inches.

Bayliss beamed: "It's something you dream of, to have a double win on your last time here. I knew this weekend was going to be very difficult. Everybody's riding well and there's a lot of good bikes out there. I have a great team behind me and I'm happy with the result."

"After the first race I was struggling the last few laps and was worried it was going to be a duel with Max [Biaggi], but he managed to crash and then he did so again in the second race. The times were a bit slower in the second race, but I felt better on the bike. It was more consistent throughout and a pleasure to ride."

After a miserable World Superbike Championship baptism in Qatar, double British Superbike champion Ryuichi Kiyonari was on the pace in Australia and placed ninth in the first race and sixth in the second, astride his Hannspree Ten Kate Honda.

After his confidence boosting first race, and his top six finish in race two, the Japanese rider's familiar smile returned: "I am very happy with my results, but not happy with the beginning of the [second] race. I am still too slow at the start. I will have to improve my qualifying in order to get a better position at the start, but I will continue to work hard. The feeling with the bike is

getting better. The machine feels good and the set up was fine. I just need to go faster."

Still awaiting delivery of parts for his 2008 Honda Fireblade, 2006 British Superbike champion Gregorio Lavilla was again aboard Cumbrian millionaire businessman Paul Bird's '07 specification Vent Axia/VK Honda Fireblade, and the Spaniard improved from 11th position in the first race to an impressive eighth in the second.

Bayliss takes a useful 27 points lead over Nieto to the next round in Valencia, with Xaus 12 points in arrears of Nieto, but 14 points clear of Corser and Checa.

Spanish ups and downs for Nicole



Nicole McAleer: Ireland's 'first lady' of racing, aboard mum and dad's Splash Racing RS125 Honda at Cadwell Park last August. Photo by R. P. Watkinson

Omagh schoolgirl Nicole McAleer had an up and down first test for her new British 125cc Championship team, when she took to the track for the first time this year, at the Cartagena circuit in Spain last week.

15 year old Nicole has signed to ride in this season's British 125cc Championship for the West Yorkshire-based team which won the corresponding title last year.

English rider Luke Jones won the 2007 British 125cc crown for Shipley-based SP125Racing, owned by former British 125cc champion and former 125cc World Championship grands prix rider, Steve Patrickson — who himself was a teenage racing prodigy.

GCSE student Nicole swapped her school books and wet and windy February for the sunnier climes of Cartagena, however, her opening day of testing last Thursday was prematurely halted, when Nicole had to make a trip to the local hospital, following a mid-morning crash.

Nicole can't remember anything about the spill, but joked: "It was actually not my fault, but I will take responsibility for it!"

"The Aspar 125cc MotoGP team were there testing and I was tailing one of their riders for part of the session, and on the last lap I just got the wrong line on a really fast right hander. There was a ramp into the gravel trap and I hit it, and I can't remember anything after that."

"They x-rayed my arm twice and it wasn't broken — thankfully it was my left arm, because I'm right-handed," Nicole chuckled.

Despite her bruised arm, and a bruised leg, both 'tensing up' during the next two days of testing, Nicole slashed her track time by three seconds.

She smiled: "I'm really happy with how its going, after such a bad year last year. No one else in the 125s, apart from the Aspar Grand Prix team, was quicker. It was very good, knowing my times were right up there on such a big track."

Daughter of former road racer Paul McAleer, Nicole began competing as an eight year old in the Irish Mini Moto Championship in 2000, before she progressed to the British Mini Moto Championship in 2002.

She made her short circuit racing debut in the Irish 125cc Clubmans' Championship in 2005 and contested

half of the Irish 125cc National Championship the following year, before she concentrated on the British 125cc Championship for the remainder of that season.

Nicole made history during 2006, when she became the first Irish female to score points in a British short circuit championship event, when she finished 15th in the British 125cc Championship race at Snetterton in Norfolk, and she subsequently bettered that with an excellent tenth position in the British 125cc Championship race at Knockhill in Scotland.

That year, she was also awarded the prestigious *Irish Racer Magazine* Short Circuit Merit Award.

Known as 'Bratface', and a diminutive 5ft 4in and 58kg — wearing leathers, helmet, boots and gloves — Nicole had a disappointing 2007 British 125cc Championship season aboard her Splash Racing Honda, largely due to mechanical gremlins, and at the end of last year she qualified for the Red Bull Rookies selection finals at the Paul Ricard circuit in France, but failed to gain a coveted Red Bull Rookies scholarship.

Nicole joins Matthew Hoyle, who she dubs her most respected rival, together with Ben Barrett, Jordan Malton and Luke Hinton in the SP125Racing team, with 16 year old Hoyle to concentrate on contesting the Red Bull MotoGP Rookies Cup, which will be staged at seven European MotoGP venues — a series in which Ballinamallard youngster Josh Elliott will also compete.

Nicole's next outing on her SP125Racing Honda will be in the official British Superbike Championship tests at Snetterton in Norfolk during the Easter holidays, before the British Championships get underway at Brands Hatch in Kent on April 6.

Her Spanish tests have left the Tyrone youngster championing at the bit for more action.

She laughed: "I don't want to wait until Snetterton! I can't wait to get back on the bike!"

Her aim for this season in the hotly competitive British 125cc Championship?

"The target is to finish in the top six and to be the first female rider to stand on a British Championship podium — that would be something special. My dream is to race in MotoGP and the only way I can ever get noticed is to do well in the British Championship and eventually do the Spanish 125cc Championship."

If ambition can stimulate success, Nicole has all the ingredients to achieve her dream.

For the moment, she is the 'first lady' of Irish motorcycle racing — and for a 15 year old schoolgirl, that is no mean achievement.

TAS duo impress in Spanish tests

Ulster duo Michael Laverty and Ian Lowry, Relentless by TAS Suzuki's racing hotshots, produced impressive performances, during their first pre-season tests of the year, at Almeria, on the Mediterranean coast of Spain, last week.

First time out on the new Relentless TAS Suzuki GSX-R1000, Toomebridge man Laverty showed excellent form, as he prepares for his return to the Bennetts British Superbike Championship (BSB), after his title winning year in the British Supersport series.

Lowry was one of the first riders in the world afforded the opportunity to track test the all new K8 Suzuki GSX-R600, and the rising young star from Moira gave every indication that he can go one place better than last season, when he finished runner-up to more experienced team-mate Laverty in the British Supersport Championship.

The Moneymore-based Relentless by TAS Suzuki team, owned by the irrepressible Hector Neill and managed by his son Phillip, arrived in Spain expecting to make a number of changes during the test, but together with the Showa Suspension packages for 2008, Lowry left Almeria with the fastest Supersport time, which was impressively close to times set by a number of World Supersport Championship riders earlier last month at the same track.

Laverty spent the first couple of days re-acquainting himself with a superbike after his season in the Supersport class, putting in as many laps as possible. The team made a host of changes, both with suspension and electronics, to help Michael learn more about the bike.

On the final day of three days testing, Michael posted the fifth

fastest superbike time, fractionally slower than Rizla Suzuki BSB rival Tom Sykes, the top rookie in last season's British Superbike Championship.

Laverty beamed: "It was good to get back on the Suzuki superbike and I must say I was pretty impressed with the BSB Pirelli control tyre. I was just dialling myself in on days one and two, then on the third day we had a bit of a go and wound it up. Both the bike and myself are probably only at 95%, so to be in the ball park straight away is encouraging."

The Irish short circuit racing season kickstarts at Bishopscourt,

with the Dundrod Club's non-championship meeting on May 15, and Laverty will be the main attraction.

In his last visit to the Co Down former RAF base, last October, Michael won the Sunflower Trophy, and Welsh-based Laverty admitted: "I can't wait for the season to start, and also to give a good show at Bishopscourt."

Lowry will also have his first competitive outing of the year at Bishopscourt, where the Relentless by TAS Suzuki team will also give Australian ace Cameron Donald his racing debut in the team's livery.



Michael Laverty puts the new Relentless by TAS Suzuki GSX-R1000 superbike through its paces at Almeria in Spain last week.